



## ResPOnsE COVID-19 Workshop

Two years of COVID-19 in Italy: Values, attitudes and behaviours in the pandemic period 2020-21  
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Organised by: spsTREND Lab, University of Milan, [www.spsrend.it](http://www.spsrend.it)

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### CONTEXTUAL DISTRIBUTIVE PREFERENCES

# The role of COVID-19 pandemic on individual beliefs towards inequality and welfare in Italy

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## 01 INTRODUCTION

- The COVID-19 pandemic is a critical social experience, capable of influencing people's beliefs.

- The context in which people are embedded (Franetovic & Castillo, 2022; Mijls, 2018; Schmidt-Catran, 2016), as well as their socio-economic position and exposure to risk (Alesina & Giuliano, 2009; Rehm et al., 2012), play an essential role in shaping preferences regarding inequality and welfare.

- However, the effects of COVID 19 in this field are still unclear. This research seeks to address it precisely by taking the case of Italy, one of the countries hardest hit by the pandemic.

### Research questions

- What explains individual beliefs towards inequality and welfare in Italy?
- To what extent does COVID-19 a) symptoms, b) spread perception, and c) province infection rates represent a determinant of individual distributional preferences in Italy?
- With respect to which sociodemographic characteristics of Italians does the COVID-19 symptoms play a moderating role on their beliefs towards inequality and welfare?

## MAIN FINDINGS

### INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL PHENOMENA

The variation in beliefs toward inequality and welfare in Italy is explained almost entirely at the individual level. Provinces and regions explain only a minimal part.

### COVID-19 LIMITED INFLUENCE

COVID-19 symptoms, perceptions and infection rates are associated with no changes in inequality beliefs or attenuated effects in attitudes towards welfare.

### EMPLOYMENT STATUS RELEVANCE

Significant differences between the unemployed, retired and self-employed compared to employed persons

## 02 WHICH BELIEFS?

### Beliefs towards inequality

- Strong belief for equality (Equality):** "Society, to be 'just', should provide for the elimination of large income inequalities between citizens" (1="Very important")
- Support for redistribution (Redistribution):** "It is essential for democracy that the state taxes the rich and subsidises the poor" (1-10).
- Altruism (Altruism):** "In a community, the individual must sacrifice his or her self-interest in favour of the collective interest" (0-10).

### Beliefs towards welfare

- Strong belief for social rights (Social rights):** "Society, to be 'just', should provide guaranteed satisfaction of basic needs for all inhabitants: food, housing, clothing, education, health" (1="Very important")
- Attitudes towards responsibilities of national government (Government):** "The state should take more responsibility for providing for each of its citizens" (1-10).
- Attitudes towards unemployment benefits (Unemployment):** "It is essential for democracy that the state provides unemployment benefits" (1-10).

## 03 METHODS

### Data and variables

#### A. ResPOnsE COVID-19 Survey - Wave 1 (April – July 2020).

- Beliefs towards inequality and welfare
- COVID-19 symptoms (0/1)
- COVID-19 spread perception (difference between subjective and objective COVID-19 cases intervals in the country): Underperception; Correct; Overperception.
- Employment status: Employed, Retired, Self-employed, Short-time work, Unemployed, Other.
- Individual controls (sex, age group, and educational level).

#### B. Italian Civil Protection Department (Protezione Civile).

- COVID-19 province infection rates (COVID-19 cases until July 9<sup>th</sup> 2020 -end of Wave 1 data collection-, per 100,000 inhabitants): Low (>100), Medium (100-500), High (>500).

#### C. Italian National Statistics Institute (Istat).

- Quarterly regional unemployment rates (April–June 2020, in percent).

### Sample

2566 individuals, from 107 provinces and 20 regions of Italy.

### Analysis

#### Multilevel regression models (Individuals / Provinces / Regions).

Logistic regression models for dummy dependent variables (Equality and Social rights) and linear regression models for continuous dependent variables (Altruism, Redistribution, Government and Unemployment).

## 05 CONCLUSIONS

- Beliefs about inequality and welfare in Italy are mainly explained by individual characteristics, rather than provincial or regional ones.
- The presence of COVID-19 symptoms does not generate significant differences in people's distributional beliefs. The only exception is with the government's responsibility to provide for each of its citizens, where symptoms are associated with greater support for it.
- A correct or over perception of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country tends to be associated with higher levels of beliefs regarding inequality and welfare, with respect to those who underestimate it.
- While provincial characteristics do not explain much of the phenomenon, higher levels of COVID-19 infection in the provinces tend to be associated with lower levels of agreement with welfare, particularly unemployment benefits.
- The employment status of individuals is established as an important determinant of their beliefs about inequality and welfare in Italy. Unemployed, retired and self-employed individuals show differences with respect to the employed population.
- Only in the relationships of age with altruism and employment status with unemployment benefits does the presence of COVID-19 symptoms have a significant moderating effect.

### Limitations

- Impossibility to address causality with panel data analysis as Lohmann & Wang (2022) in Germany: small quantity of cases repeated over time for these questions.
- Inability to include the COVID-19 positive case measure: the survey asks only for perception of infection and symptoms.

### References

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- Mijls, J. J. B. (2018). Inequality is a problem of inference: how people solve the social puzzle of unequal outcomes. *Societies*, 8(3), 64.
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### 1. What explains individual beliefs towards inequality and welfare in Italy?

Which weighs more: people, provinces or regions?

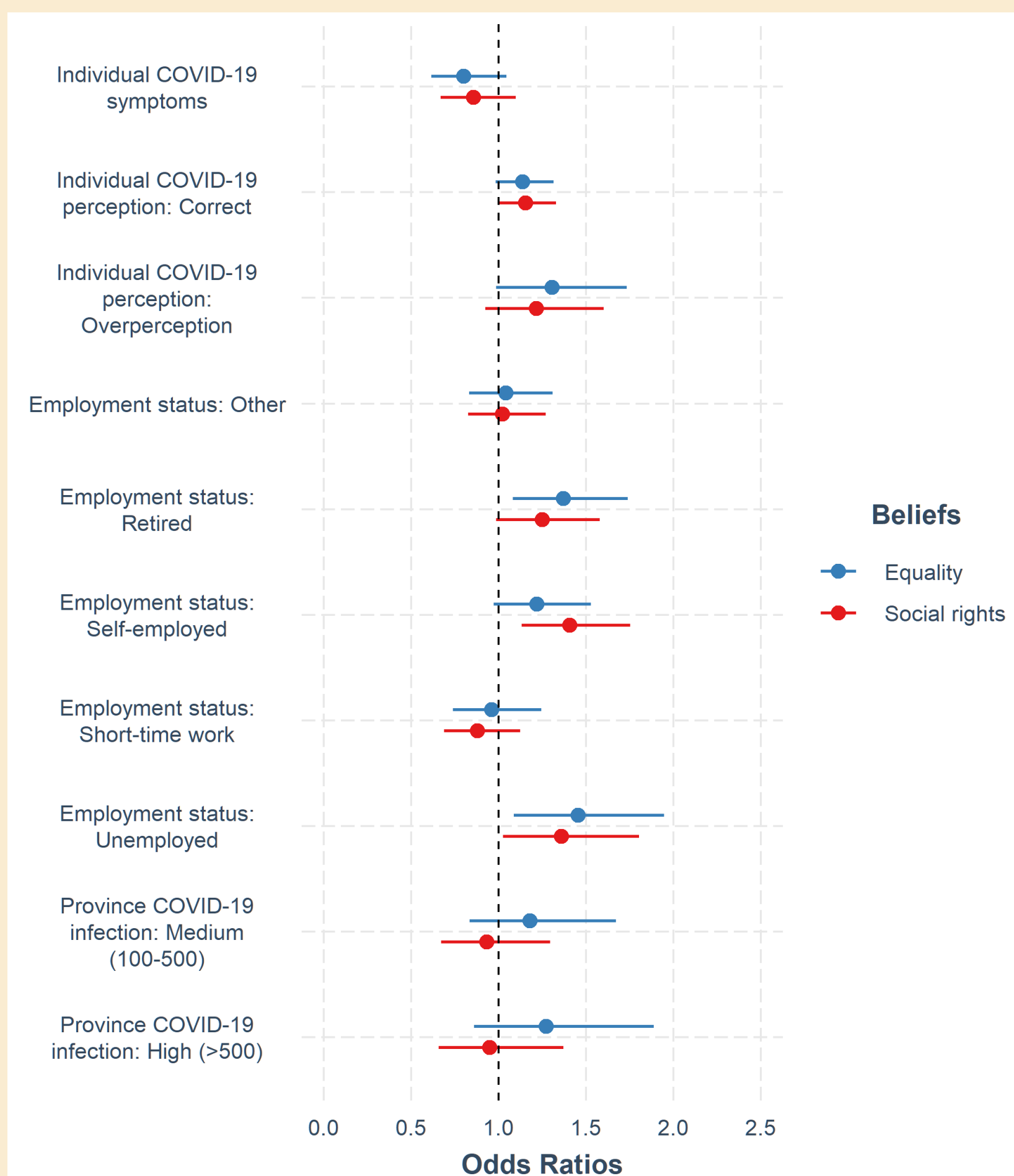
Table 1: Intraclass correlations of multilevel models over beliefs towards inequality and welfare. Percent of variances explained by each level.

		Individuals	Provinces	Regions
Beliefs towards inequality	Equality	97.8%	0.8%	1.4%
	Redistribution	99.7%	0.0%	0.3%
	Altruism	99.6%	0.2%	0.2%
Beliefs towards welfare	Social rights	98.8%	1.0%	0.2%
	Government	97.4%	0.6%	2.0%
	Unemployment	98.0%	1.4%	0.6%

### 2. To what extent does COVID-19 a) symptoms, b) spread perception, and c) province infection rates represent a determinant of individual distributional preferences in Italy?

Multilevel regression models

Figure 1: Odds ratios over the probability to have a strong belief in equality and social rights

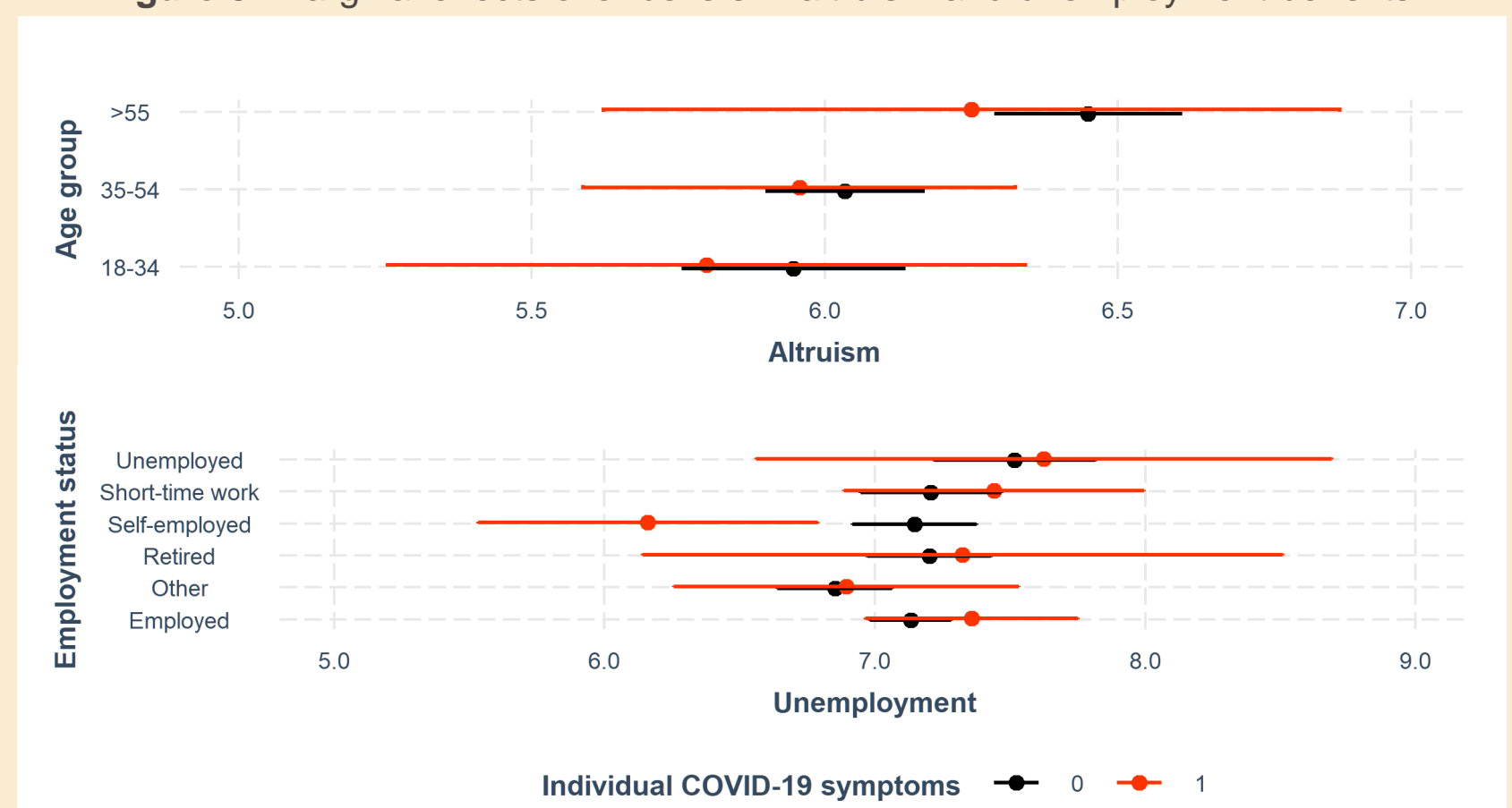


Notes: (1) Reference categories: Underperception (Individual COVID-19 perception), Employed (Employment status), Low (<100) (Province COVID-19 infection), (2) All models control by sex, age group, educational level and regional unemployment rate. (3) 90% confidence intervals.

### 3. With respect to which sociodemographic characteristics of Italians does the COVID-19 symptoms play a moderating role on their beliefs towards inequality and welfare?

Statistically significant interactions with COVID-19 symptoms

Figure 3: Marginal effects over beliefs in altruism and unemployment benefits.



Note: (1) 90% confidence intervals.

Figure 2: Beta estimates over beliefs in redistribution, altruism, government responsibilities and unemployment benefits

