

Reluctant Citizens? Conscription Evasion and the Making of State Capacity in Italy (1862-1912)

Nicola Fresco | Department of Economics and Statistics | University of Siena
n.fresco@student.unisi.it



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DI SIENA
1240

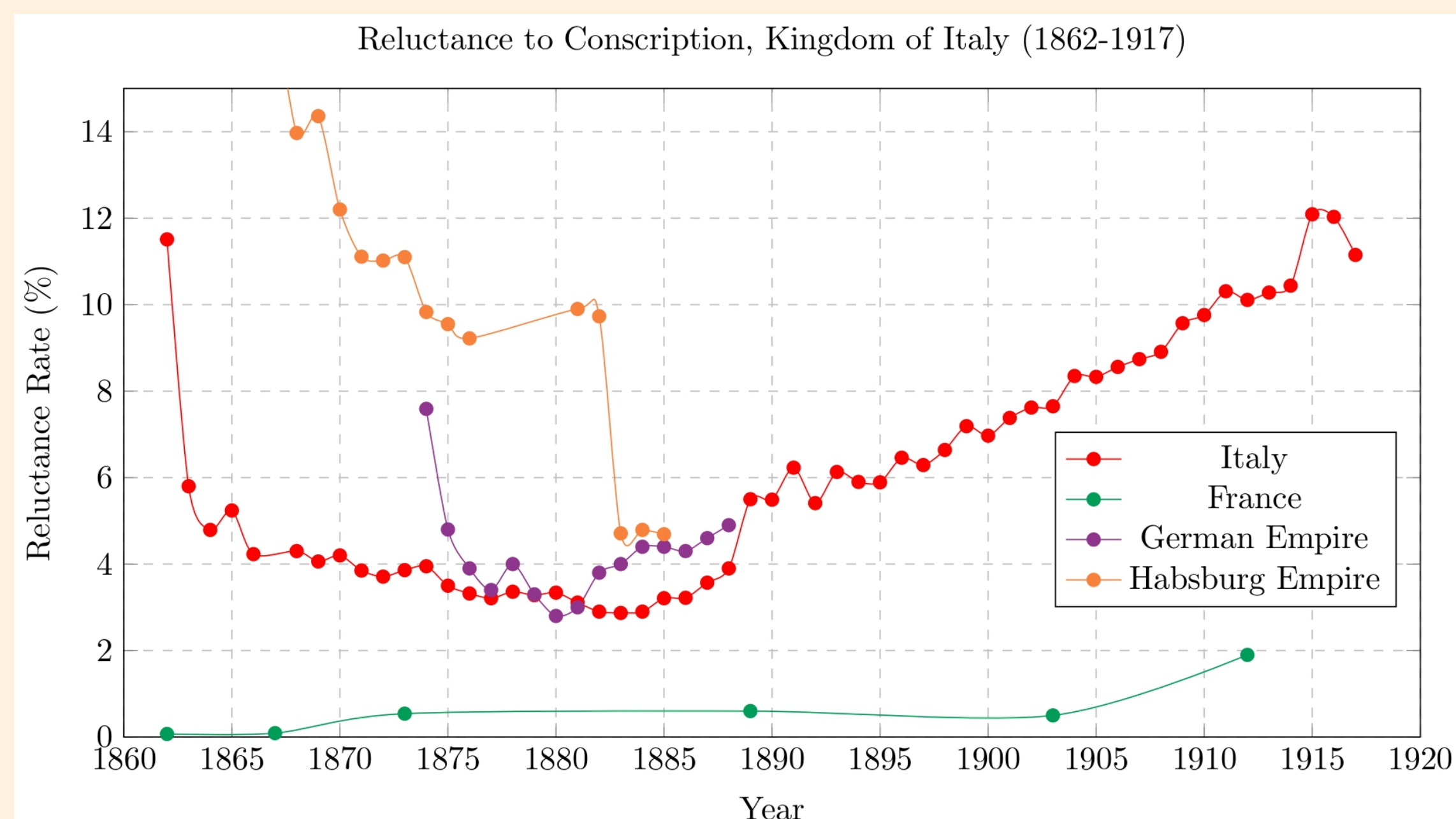
1. Abstract

In 1862, the Kingdom of Italy implemented its first national military conscription. Districts responded to this new state demand in markedly different and persistent ways. This poster asks what explains these differences and advances a mechanism based on reciprocity along both vertical (state-citizen) and horizontal (civic) dimensions.

2. Motivation

Historical Context: Universal Military Conscription

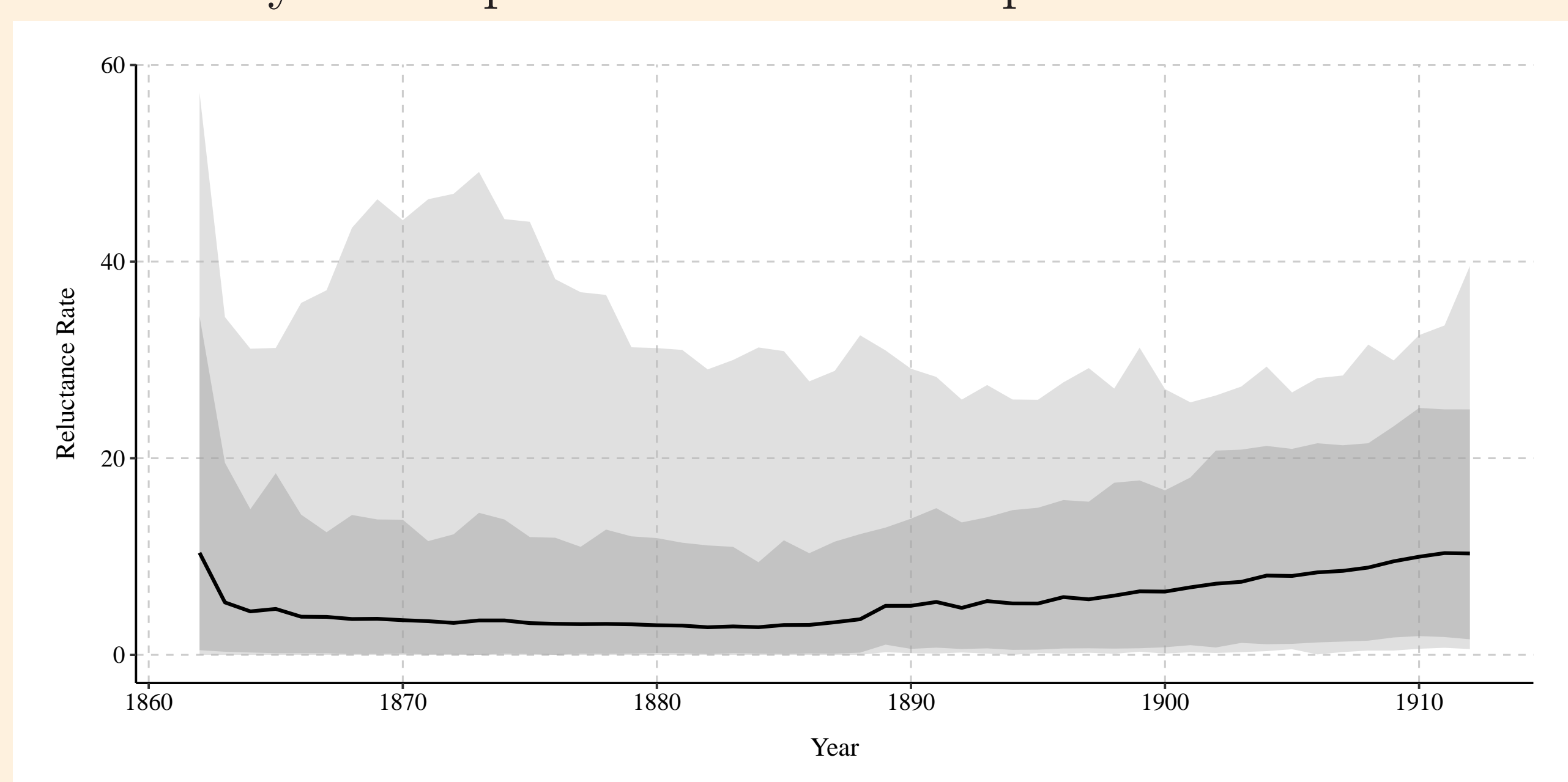
- First adopted during French Revolution represented a turning-point in military and political affairs. Transition from professional to citizen armies.
- Conscription posed an unprecedented challenge for the state and was met with widespread resistance from citizens.
- An underexplored dimension of the origins of state capacity.



Reluctance to conscription in comparative perspective

3. Data

I collect annual district-level data ($n = 206$) on reluctance rates from Italian military conscription records for the period 1862–1912.



Reluctance rate across Italian districts. The black line shows the annual mean; shaded areas indicate the 5th–95th percentile and min–max ranges.

Key Figures

18M Young men enlisted for conscription, 1862-1912	1 in 18 Declared reluctant to conscription, 1862-1912	40x Gap in average reluctance between most and least reluctant province: Napoli (16,2%) vs Siena (0,4%)
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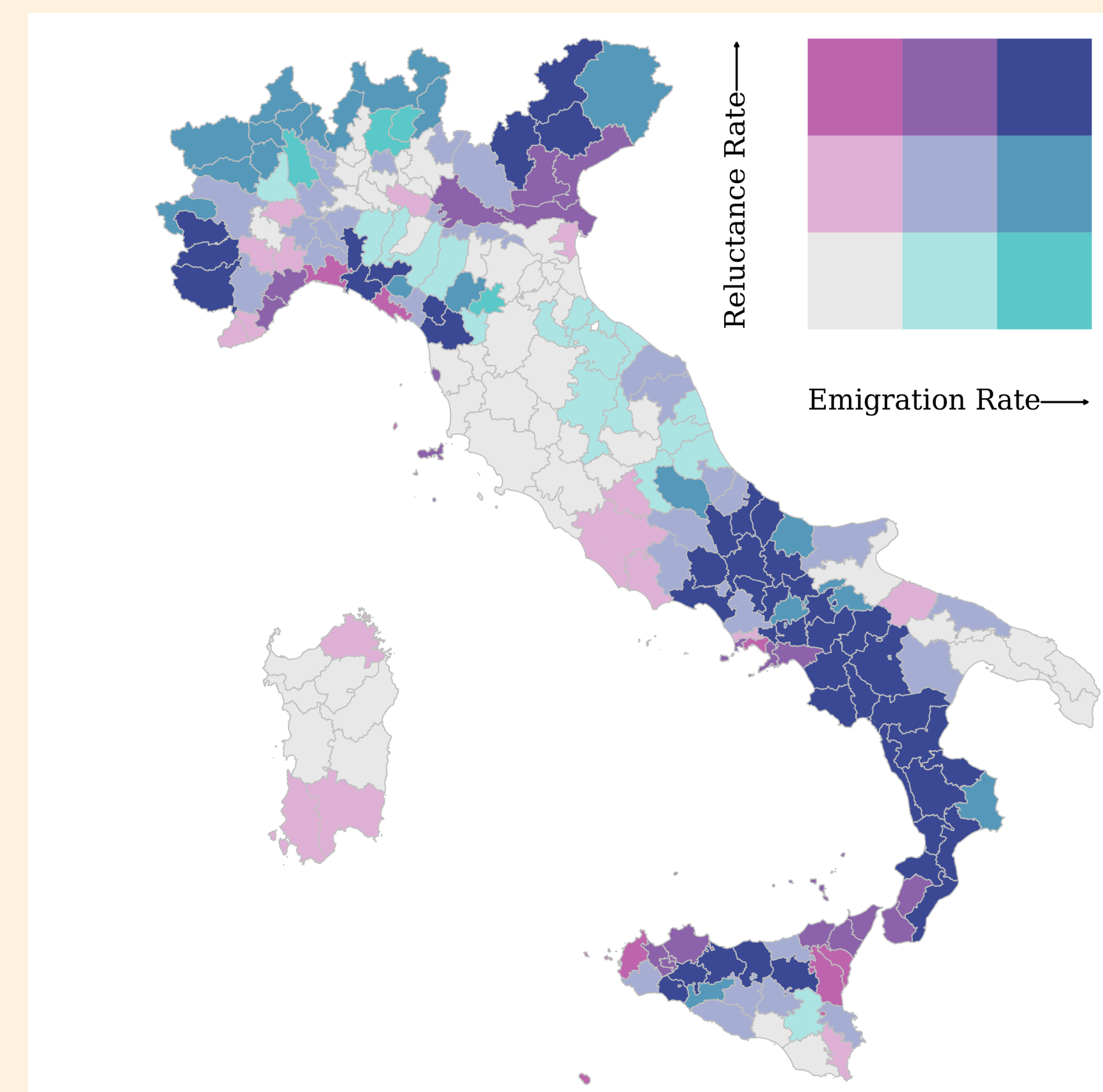
4. Research Questions

RQ1) How did citizens respond to the new state demand for universal military conscription?

Reluctance was highly heterogeneous across districts and remarkably persistent over time.

RQ2) What explains the substantial variation in compliance?

Emigration played an important role in shaping reluctance. However, it does not fully account for the observed variation. Some districts exhibit low emigration and high reluctance, while others show high emigration and low reluctance.



Bivariate map of reluctance and emigration rates, 1876-1912

5. A Model of Contingent Consent

A long-standing tradition has framed government as a social contract with mutual obligations. Political scientist Margaret Levi (1997) has put forward a model of Contingent Consent to explain compliance with conscription demands.

Compliance is contingent on two levels of reciprocity:

- Horizontal civic reciprocity (proxied by Mutual Aid Membership)
- Vertical State-citizen reciprocity (proxied by Municipal Charity)

	Reluctance Rate				
	1873	1878	1885	1894	1904
Emigration Rate	0.005 (0.038)	0.024 (0.040)	0.068* (0.038)	0.141** (0.065)	0.146* (0.084)
Mutual Aid Membership	-0.637 (0.484)	-0.762* (0.417)	-0.506* (0.302)	-0.426 (0.387)	-1.435*** (0.387)
Municipal Charity	-0.029** (0.012)	-0.019** (0.007)	-0.023** (0.010)	-0.052** (0.020)	
Observations	69	69	69	69	69
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
R^2	0.515	0.575	0.465	0.350	0.252

Robust standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** ($p < 0.01$)

Controls include: real wages, share of labour in agriculture, male literacy, terrain ruggedness, municipal expenditure in public order and local police.

6. Conclusions

- This study documents the magnitude, geographic distribution, and temporal evolution of reluctance to conscription in Italy (1862-1912).
- Consistent with a model of Contingent Consent, it finds that higher reciprocity, measured by participation in Mutual Aid Societies and Municipal Expenditure in Charity, is associated with lower reluctance to conscription.

References: Besley, Timothy. 2020. 'State capacity, reciprocity, and the social contract'. *Econometrica* 88(4). || Levi, Margaret. 1997. *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism*. Cambridge University Press. || Spitzer, Yannay, and Ariell Zimran. 2023. 'Like an Ink Blot on Paper: Testing the Diffusion Hypothesis of Mass Migration, Italy 1876-1920.' NBER Working Paper 30847. || Federico, Giovanni, Alessandro Nuvolari, and Michelangelo Vasta. 2019. 'The origins of the Italian regional divide: Evidence from real wages, 1861-1913'. *The Journal of Economic History* 79 (1): 63–98.

Sources: Ministero dell'Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio (various years: 1863, 1873, 1878, 1885, 1894), *Statistica delle Società di Mutuo Soccorso* || *Id.*, various years, *Bilanci Comunali*. || Ministero della Guerra (various years, 1862-1912), *Della Leva sui Giovani Nati nell'anno [...]*.