

# Voting to Build Prisons: Exploring Support for Prison Construction Bond Referenda

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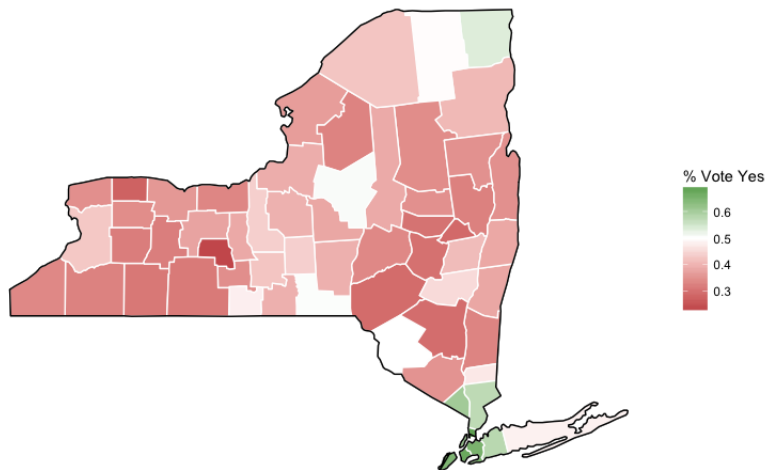
## New York Prison Bond Referendum, 1981

November 3, 1981 on PROPOSITION NUMBER ONE (Chapter 850, Laws of 1981) authorizing the creation of a state debt in the amount of \$500,000,000 to provide moneys to acquire, construct, rehabilitate and equip facilities to be used to provide security through improved correctional facilities in the state of New York.

Results:

- Yes: 1,272,672 (49.7%)
- No: 1,286,371 (50.3%)

# New York Prison Bond Referendum, 1981



## Background - Prison Construction

- During the 1980s, skyrocketing numbers of prison commitments in many states, along with longer sentences for those committed, caused overcrowding crises and required some kind of policy change.
- States built around 400 prisons between the mid-1970s and 2000, increasing the total number of state prisons from about 600 to about 1,000.
- In some states, the public had a direct role in prison construction via bond referenda. In order to finance new prison construction, 14 states held a total of 31 prison construction bond lease referenda.

## Background - Public Opinion and Race

- Increasingly punitive public opinion helped cause the increase in incarceration rates from the late 1970s to today (Nicholson-Crotty, Peterson, and Ramirez, 2009; Enns, 2014; Boushey, 2016).
- Crime policy preferences are partially driven by race and racial prejudice (Hurwitz and Peffley, 1997; Peffley and Hurwitz, 2002; Green, Staerklé, and Sears, 2006; Barkan and Cohn, 2005).
- During the time period of prison construction, voters tended to oppose state government spending, including on corrections (Hagan et al., 2015; Gottschalk, 2015; Aviram, 2015).
- State racial composition affects incarceration rates (Smith, 2004; Yates and Fording, 2005; Keen and Jacobs, 2009).

# Analysis

Research questions:

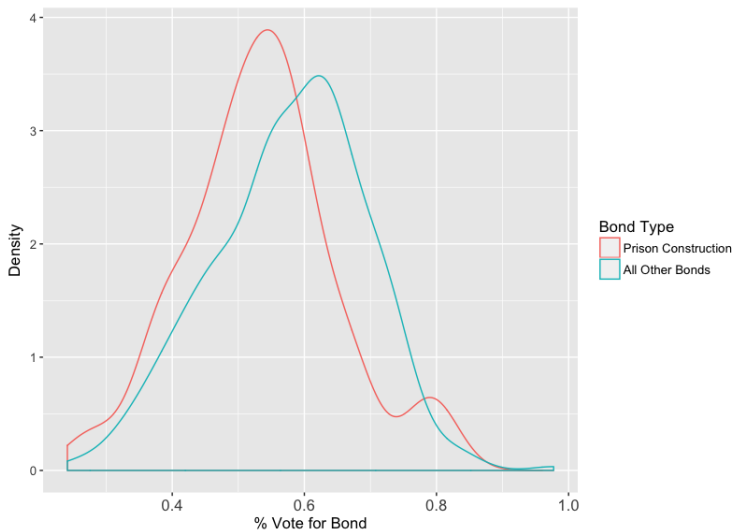
- To what extent does the level of support for prison bond referenda differ from other state bond referenda?
- What is the relationship between racial context and support for prison bond referenda?

Data: county-level vote shares on bond referenda

Methods: OLS fixed-effects models

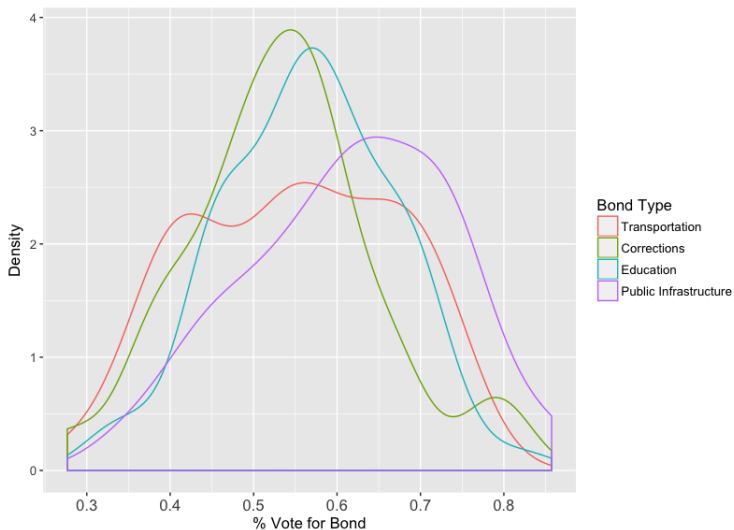
- ICPSR “Referenda and Primary Election Materials”: county-level returns from approximately 4,241 state referendum elections from 1968-1990.
- Restricted to states that have prison bond referenda, then included all bond referenda in these states.
- 449 state bond referenda elections in 13 states from 1968-1990.
- Merged with Census data on county demographics and ICPSR county-level presidential election returns.

# Support for Bond Referenda, Prison Construction

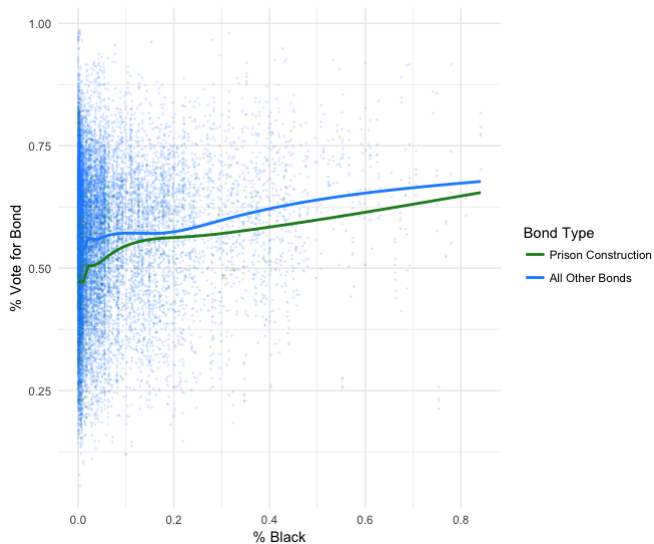




# Support for Bond Referenda - Top Categories



# Support for Bond Referenda by Pct Black



# OLS Results

	Dependent variable: % Vote for Bond			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Prison construction	-0.039*** (0.0001)	-0.038*** (-0.00003)	-0.046*** (0.0003)	-0.043*** (0.0002)
Pct urban	0.067*** (0.001)	-0.022*** (-0.0003)	0.067*** (0.001)	-0.021*** (-0.0003)
Pct black	0.081*** (0.002)	0.337*** (-0.020)	0.072*** (0.002)	0.337*** (-0.020)
Pct hisp	0.070*** (0.003)	0.026*** (0.009)	0.070*** (0.003)	0.029*** (0.009)
Unemp rate	-0.124*** (-0.012)	0.294*** (-0.008)	-0.124*** (-0.011)	0.290*** (-0.008)
Prior pres Dem share	0.196*** (-0.006)	0.167*** (-0.008)	0.195*** (-0.006)	0.165*** (-0.008)
Prison constr. * Pct black			0.072*** (-0.002)	0.049*** (-0.003)
State fixed effects	✓		✓	
County fixed effects		✓		✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	13,413	13,413	13,413	13,413
R <sup>2</sup>	0.377	0.486	0.377	0.486

Note:

\* p<0.1; \*\* p<0.05; \*\*\* p<0.01

# OLS Results

	Pct Vote for Bond	
	(1)	(2)
Social Services	0.057*** (-0.004)	0.056*** (-0.004)
Recreation	0.010*** (-0.002)	0.009*** (-0.002)
Public Infrastructure	0.068*** (-0.003)	0.067*** (-0.003)
Gov Construction	-0.047*** (-0.011)	-0.048*** (-0.011)
Environment	0.054*** (-0.003)	0.053*** (-0.003)
Education	-0.007*** (0.0001)	-0.008*** (0.0001)
Economic	0.009*** (-0.003)	0.008** (-0.003)
Corrections	-0.007*** (-0.002)	-0.007*** (-0.002)
State fixed effects	✓	
County fixed effects		✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓
Observations	12,266	12,266
R <sup>2</sup>	0.429	0.539

Note: \* p<0.1; \*\* p<0.05; \*\*\* p<0.01

## Summary and Conclusion

- Voters are somewhat less supportive of prison construction than the generic bond referendum, or than particular comparable bond referenda.
- During the buildup to mass incarceration, voter enthusiasm for imprisonment is less pronounced when it comes to supporting the actual construction of prisons.
- Counties with larger black populations are associated with increased support for prison construction referenda.
- The positive interaction between prison bonds and race suggests that race plays an even larger role in prison bond referenda than other referenda, supporting notion that race plays a uniquely powerful role in determining crime policy preferences.

## Next Steps

- What exactly is the role of racial context? Is this an effect of a voter's race or a voter's proximity to other racial groups?
- What is the role of local demand for prison construction?
- How does holding a close or failed prison bond referendum shape criminal justice policy?

## Bond Referenda by Category

Bond Category	Total	Passed	% Passed	Mean Vote Yes
Education	72	53	74%	0.569
Transportation	56	37	66%	0.549
Public Infrastructure	54	44	81%	0.616
Corrections	41	28	68%	0.561
Recreation	41	29	71%	0.551
Environment	40	34	85%	0.602
Economic	30	20	67%	0.555
Veterans	26	23	88%	0.623
Mental Health	21	20	95%	0.666
Gov Construction	19	9	47%	0.474
Health Care	18	12	67%	0.564
Housing	12	7	58%	0.505
Social Services	9	7	78%	0.564
Public Safety	8	7	88%	0.615
Bond	2	2	100%	0.692
Total	449	332	74%	0.574

## Bond Referenda by State

State	Total	# Passed	% Passed	Mean Vote Yes
Alabama	9	8	89%	0.611
Alaska	3	3	100%	0.675
California	79	61	77%	0.574
Maine	103	81	79%	0.586
Michigan	8	5	62%	0.576
New Jersey	47	36	77%	0.567
New York	11	6	55%	0.517
North Carolina	6	6	100%	0.636
Oregon	3	2	67%	0.687
Pennsylvania	10	10	100%	0.705
Rhode Island	108	65	60%	0.543
Texas	16	13	81%	0.596
Wyoming	2	1	50%	0.528
Total	449	332	74%	0.574



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