Partisan Law Enforcement and Extremist Violence: Evidence from U.S. Sheriffs*

Steven C. Rosenzweig
Boston University
scrosen@bu.edu

Abstract

Previous research has found that the partisanship of local elected officials affects the incidence of political violence in countries of the Global South, where government responses to violence vary according to the political identify of officials and the perpetrators or victims of the violence. Does this phenomenon extend to the Global North? Analyzing the case of sheriffs in the U.S.—law enforcement officials elected in partisan elections in a context of increasing political polarization, radicalization, and extremist violence—I find robust evidence that sheriffs' partisanship does not affect the incidence of right or left-wing political violence in the counties that they oversee. The results suggest that the effect of local officials' partisanship on the incidence of political violence in the Global South is unlikely to obtain in the Global North. Additional analyses explore potential mechanisms that may explain the lack of partisan effects on violence in this context.

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Recent research has demonstrated how the partisanship of elected officials can affect the local incidence of political violence in the Global South (Nellis, Weaver and Rosenzweig 2016; Nellis and Siddiqui 2018; Kuipers, Nellis and Weaver 2021). In these contexts, parties' ideological commitments and/or favoritism towards particular social groups lead them to take different approaches vis-a-vis violent actors that affect the incidence of violence in the places where they win elected office.

In the Global North, where bureaucracies and legal systems tend to be more independent and less subject to political control—and where higher-quality elections may allow voters to better hold accountable officials who fail to combat violence—partisanship may be less likely to affect how governments respond to threats of political violence, and therefore whether and how it occurs. We might be less likely to observe, for instance, tamping down on violent actors associated with opposing parties, ideologies, or group identities while giving free rein to those associated with their own; government agents will impartially apply the rule of law to prevent violence from occurring no matter the perpetrator or target of that violence. In this view, the incidence of political violence by different actors should have no relation to the partisan affiliation of local elected officials.

Still, research from democracies in the Global North such as the U.S. has shown that the partisanship of local officials does matter for important outcomes such as levels of public spending (Gerber and Hopkins 2011; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020). In addition, increasing polarization and radicalism among American elected officials and the politicization of government activity previously outside the scope of partisan politics suggests that even public security—a basic task of government—could be affected by officials' partisan affiliation. For instance, the politicization of the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol and the government's prosecution of those involved—with leading figures in the Republican party arguing *against* the government's actions to arrest and prosecute those responsible for violence—may indicate that partisanship could indeed affect how government officials

manage the threat of political violence and thus the manner and extent to which it occurs. Furthermore, the U.S. is home to a peculiar law enforcement institution that is particularly subject to the effects of partisan politics in the directly elected position of sheriff, with prior research suggesting that sheriffs' political views may significantly affect law enforcement policy and even the incidence of certain forms of violence (Farris and Holman 2017; Nemerever 2021; Farris and Holman 2023*a*,*b*) (though see Thompson (2020) for an opposing view).

This raises the question: does the nature of institutions in the Global North insulate them from the effects of partisanship on the fundamental government responsibility of impartially maintaining law and order and preventing violence, regardless of the violent actor's political orientation? Do more independent, less politicized institutions—or higher quality elections—prevent partisanship from affecting whether different forms of political violence occur? Or does partisanship operate in a similar fashion to what's been observed in countries of the Global South?

This study analyzes the case of sheriffs in the U.S., evaluating how sheriffs' partisanship (affiliation with the right-leaning Republican party or left-leaning Democratic party) affects the incidence of right-wing and left-wing extremist violence in their jurisdictions. Incidents of extremist violence—particularly right-wing violence—has increased markedly in the U.S. in recent years, rising from a low of five in 2006 (three right-wing, two left-wing) to 98 in 2020, with right-wing actors responsible for three quarters of the incidents in that year (O'Harrow, Tran and Hawkins 2021).[1]

Sheriffs in the U.S. are an unusual institution, being law enforcement officials directly elected in partisan elections rather than appointed to oversee a bureaucratized department. That feature—combined with a political context of increasing polarization and radicalization, especially on the right—suggest that sheriffs in the U.S. represent a plausible case for

[1]The dataset from which these figures are drawn is described in more detail below.

identifying a relationship between elected officials' partisanship and the incidence of political violence in the Global North.

Employing two alternative causal identification strategies, I find a robust null effect of sheriffs' partisanship on extremist violence. Most notably, I find that electing a Republican sheriff has no effect on the incidence of right-wing violence in a county, despite the rise in such violence in recent years and the apparent sympathy that some conservative Republican sheriffs have for right-wing extremists and their ideological commitments (Powers 2018; Nemerever 2021; Farris and Holman 2023*a*, 2024). Estimates from difference-in-difference analyses and a close-election regression discontinuity design both show no significant effect of sheriff partisanship on extremist violence, and the results of formal equivalence tests suggest these nulls are not simply due to a lack of statistical power to detect small effects. I also explore potential mechanisms that might explain the lack of partisan effects on political violence in this context, including sheriffs' preferences, institutionalization and professionalization of law enforcement agencies, and electoral competition.

The results suggest that, in the case of partisan law enforcement in the U.S.—a Global North democracy—partisanship does not affect how the state responds to the threat of extremist violence, in particular whether violent actors receive differential treatment depending their political affinity with elected officials. While sheriffs' political orientation may affect their decisions about the implementation of certain policies locally (Farris and Holman 2017, 2023*a*,*b*), it does not appear to affect a particularly important outcome: whether they enforce the law differentially with respect to violent actors that are more proximate or distant to them politically. Furthermore, with sheriffs in the U.S. being a seemingly most-likely case for partisanship affecting how the state responds to threats of political violence in the Global North, the results can be interpreted as evidence that the partisanship of elected officials is particularly unlikely to affect this outcome in Global North countries with less polarization

and radicalism among elected officials and where law enforcement officials are not selected via partisan elections.

Why Sheriff Partisanship May (or May Not) Affect Local Political Violence

Recent research has found the partisanship of elected officials in some of the largest and most prominent Global South countries to have an effect on the local incidence of political violence. In India and Pakistan, Nellis and coauthors find that the election of secular party legislators reduces local ethno-religious violence in the districts they are elected from, seemingly driven by their greater interest in forcefully deploying state security forces to stem such violence (Nellis, Weaver and Rosenzweig 2016; Nellis and Siddiqui 2018). In Indonesia, the election of legislators from Islamist (rather than secular nationalist) parties increases the local incidence of religious violence, at least in part due to a rise in expressions of religious intolerance among the population (Kuipers, Nellis and Weaver 2021). In these contexts, parties' ideological commitments or favoritism towards particular social groups lead them to take different approaches to violent actors that affect the incidence of violence in the places where they win elected office. This could occur, for instance, if elected officials assign and/or transfer local bureaucrats (including security officials) based on their identity (a signal of loyalty) rather than their skill (Iyer and Mani 2012; Hassan 2017).

Governments in the Global North may be characterized by stronger rule of law, however, limiting the influence of elected officials' partisanship on the government's most fundamental task of preventing violence and insecurity without regard to the identity of violent actors. Figure A1, for example, shows that OECD countries have government bureaucracies that are, on average, significantly more "impartial" than their non-OECD counterparts, while

Figure A2 highlights a sample of particular Global North and Global South countries for comparison on the same scale.[2]

Another feature of Global North democracies that might ensure elected officials combat violence regardless of the perpetrator is their tendency to select officials in higher quality elections than the average democracy in the Global South. To wit: Figures A3-A6 show that OECD countries cluster among the highest scores in terms of their level of electoral democracy, as well as in holding quality ("clean") elections, specifically.[3] If most voters prefer the government to maintain law and order irrespective of political or group affiliation, then free, fair, and competitive elections may induce elected officials to act impartially against violent actors even if their personal preferences would lead them to do otherwise. In other words, extremist violence may be akin to a valence issue, where competitive elections force sheriffs to demonstrate their ability to effectively combat it in order to win over the majority of voters.

[2]The measure of impartiality is from Nistotskaya et al. (2021) and is defined as "when deciding upon a case, a public official should not take into consideration anything about the applicant's circumstances, which is not stipulated in policy or law beforehand." While this measure is not specific to local law enforcement, it constitutes a reasonable proxy given that the impartiality of such institutions is likely to be correlated, on average, with the impartiality of government bureaucracies more generally.

[3]These measures come from V-Dem, with the "electoral democracy" index capturing a country's extent of freedom of expression, freedom of association, suffrage, clean elections, and public offices selected via direct election. The "clean elections" index specifically measures the quality of elections, including electoral management bodies' autonomy and capacity; the extent of government intimidation, voting irregularities, and electoral violence; the quality of the voter registry; and the prevalence of vote buying.

These features of institutions in the Global North may insulate the security sector from the effects of partisanship on the part of elected officials that oversee the law enforcement apparatus. If so, we would expect a similar government approach to political violence when elected officials come from different parties regardless of the identity of the violent actor; in particular, whether that actor is nominally aligned with, or opposed to, the elected official on the basis of ideology, group status, or some other politically salient factor. The incidence of extremist political violence thus should not vary by the partisanship of local officials.

Still, research from the U.S., a Global North democracy, suggests that partisanship may indeed influence the conduct of law enforcement, including—potentially—how it responds to the threat of political violence, thus affecting the extent to which it occurs. This may be particularly likely in the case of sheriffs' departments given 1) sheriffs' broad autonomy and authority and 2) the fact that they're selected in partisan elections.[4] On the former, Farris and Holman note that sheriffs "blend broad executive and bureaucratic powers in their positions" and "generally enjoy a significant amount of autonomy in their decisions, with wide discretionary authority in the enforcement of laws with the decision...whether (or not) to arrest someone, as well as whether to keep someone in jail" (Farris and Holman 2023*a*, 5). They also have nearly unfettered discretion with respect to personnel decisions about their deputies (Zoorob 2022). On the latter, their selection in partisan elections suggests a more direct connection between the operations of sheriff's departments and partisan politics—associated with various ideological and policy divides—than one might find in police forces whose leaders are appointed rather than elected. Wells and Falcone (2006, 60) note that "the sheriff is less insulated from the public than the police chief and lacks the administrative buffer that most municipal departments have."

In line with the idea that sheriff election outcomes can have important consequences, Farris and Holman (2017, 2023*a*,*b*) have found that sheriffs' ideology, which is closely correlated

[4]Sheriffs are elected in partisan elections in more than 2,700 counties in 41 states.

with partisanship, is associated with reported differences in the likelihood of their offices 1) conducting immigration status checks, 2) enforcing COVID-19-related mask mandates, and 3) enforcing gun safety laws (though Thompson (2020) identifies no effect of sheriff partisanship on sheriff compliance with federal requests to detain unauthorized immigrants). Nemerever (2021) also finds evidence of an association between the election of right-wing sheriffs (known as "Constitutional" sheriffs) and the incidence of violence and harassment targeted at employees of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) tasked with enforcing federal policies anathema to their right-wing ideology. These sheriffs have embraced extreme right-wing views about the government and their role in it (Powers 2018; Nemerever 2021), views that make them natural political allies of the right-wing paramilitary groups and like-minded individuals that are responsible for the bulk of extremist violence in the U.S. in recent years (O'Harrow, Tran and Hawkins 2021). Their 2024 convention included speakers that had been jailed for their participation in the January 6th insurrection, with one speech calling on sheriffs to "build some kind of surge capacity through auxiliary forces, or alliance with the militias" (Gilbert 2024).

For sure, not all Republican sheriffs subscribe to the extreme views of this group. Still, party identification is closely associated with ideology, including the likelihood of holding extremist views. Farris and Holman (2023*a*), for example, find sheriffs' partisanship to be equally predictive of right-wing extremist views as their support for the CSPOA organization of constitutional sheriffs, and nearly as predictive as their support for the Oath Keepers, a right-wing extremist militia associated with the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol.[5] As Farris and Holman (2024) show, examples of conservative Republican sheriffs with demonstrated support for—and ties to—right-wing extremists are numerous. These include Elkhart County, Indiana sheriff Brad Rogers, who joined in the militia standoff with federal agents at the Bundy ranch in Nevada in 2014; Joe Arpaio of Maricopa County, Arizona, who armed

[5]These findings are presented in Farris and Holman's Online Appendix Table B2.

up to 52 different volunteer posse groups (Tsai 2017); and Glenn Palmer of Grant County, Oregon, who called armed militants occupying Malheur National Wildlife Refuge "patriots" and was alleged to have leaked federal information to the Bundy ranchers (Zaitz 2016). Sheriffs are members of right-wing militias like the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Three Percenters, and have participated in events involving threats and violence against federal and state government, including the Capitol riot on January 6th, 2021 (Farris and Holman 2024, 143).

Given the above, we might therefore expect the partisanship of sheriffs to affect the local incidence of political violence in at least two ways. First, sheriffs may inspire violence via their rhetoric as prominent local leaders—especially in instances where they espouse particularly extreme views—normalizing extremist sentiments that may make violence more likely to occur (Kuipers, Nellis and Weaver 2021; Nemerever 2021; Kalmoe and Mason 2022). In many counties, sheriffs are well-known and influential leaders, giving their words sway. Their use of extremist rhetoric could therefore shape public opinion and/or the social acceptability of holding and expressing extremist views (Tankard and Paluck 2016; Kuipers, Nellis and Weaver 2021; Kalmoe and Mason 2022), contributing to an environment in which extremist violence is more likely to occur.

Second, sheriffs may expend fewer resources investigating and gathering intelligence on extremists with whom they share some political affinity (Kuipers, Nellis and Weaver 2021), or they may implement laxer enforcement of legal violations short of violence that extremist groups and individuals may engage in (Nemerever 2021; Farris and Holman 2023*a*).[6] Novaes (2024), shows, for example, how elected officials can shape law enforcement in ways that affect the local incidence of violence, finding that elected officials with close connections to

[6]Powers (2018) cites an example of a sheriff letting go a man who'd been arrested by a deputy for carrying a weapon without a permit because, he told him, he was "a believer in the Second Amendment." The man later shot and killed a man in a dispute.

the police influence where they choose to devote their attention and thus where violence is most likely to occur. Elected sheriffs preside directly over the relevant law enforcement agencies, making the mechanism of politicized decisionmaking even more straightforward. If sheriffs' choices about who or what to investigate or enforce follows such a political logic, it could embolden violent actors on the sheriff's side of the political spectrum and provide them with greater breathing room to plan and carry out attacks.

The particular nature of U.S. sheriffs' departments—combined with a political climate of increasing partisan polarization and radicalization, especially among the right (Iyengar et al. 2019; Kalmoe and Mason 2022)—thus suggests a particularly likely context to find a relationship between the partisanship of elected officials and the incidence of extremist political violence in the Global North. In short, whether the partisanship of local elected officials affects the incidence of political violence in a Global North context remains an open question, and U.S. sheriffs provide a useful "most-likely" case in which to study the possibility that such a relationship might exist.

Data and Research Design

I study the relationship between sheriffs' partisanship and the incidence of extremist political violence in the counties that they represent with over a decade of data on sheriff elections and the incidence of right- and left-wing extremist violence in the U.S. from 2007 to 2018. The data on sheriff elections comes from Thompson (2020) and is merged with data on extremist violence compiled by the Transnational Threats Project (TNT) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (Jones et al. 2021) to construct a dataset recording the number of violent incidents in a given county-year. As described in Thompson (2020), the electoral data comes from 1) 15 states with partisan sheriff elections that collect county-

level election results at the state level for the period under study[7] and 2) sheriff election data collected directly from county election boards for every county with a population over 100,000 according to the 2000 Census.

CSIS compiled the data on extremist violence drawing on multiple existing datasets—relying most heavily on the START Global Terrorism Database (GTD)—with a team of five researchers tasked with collating, coding, and reviewing incidents for accuracy and consistency (Jones et al. 2021).[8] Incidents were cross-referenced against criminal complaints and affidavits when possible, as well as multiple local and national news sources, and the data was examined by several external reviewers. To be included in the dataset, incidents had to involve "the deliberate use–or threat–of violence by non-state actors in order to achieve political goals and create a broad psychological impact" (Jones et al. 2021, 2); any incidents that did not involve any actual or threatened violence or definitively political motives were excluded.[9] Incidents were coded as motivated by right-wing extremism if perpetrators acted on "ideas of racial or ethnic supremacy; opposition to government authority...; misogyny...; hatred based on sexuality or gender identity; belief in the QAnon conspiracy theory; or opposition to certain policies, such as abortion" and by left-wing extremism if perpetrators were

[7]These states include Arkansas, Arizona, Georgia, Idaho, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Montana, North Carolina, New Mexico, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Virginia, Vermont, and West Virginia.

[8]The underlying datasets are themselves primarily compiled from media reports. Researchers compiling the START GTD, for example, review articles identified via keyword searches using the Metabase API provided by Lexis Nexis and the API from BBC Monitoring, which includes English-language translations of sources from around 150 countries in over 100 languages (START 2021).

[9]For instance, hate crimes that did not involve actual or threatened violence were not included.

motivated by "an opposition to capitalism, imperialism, or colonialism; Black nationalism; support for environmental causes or animal rights; pro-communist or pro-socialist beliefs; or support for decentralized political and social systems, such an anarchism" (Jones et al. 2021, 3-4). Importantly, the data captures both major and minor incidents, mitigating concerns that only the most high-profile acts of violence are included; of the incidents included, just 10 percent involve any fatalities, for example. While the CSIS data runs from 1994 through 2020, I only analyze the years 2004 to 2018 due to the more limited availability of sheriffs' election data.

Overall, the full panel dataset includes more than 10,000 county-years across 37 states between 2004 and 2018, including 4,734 county-years in which a Democratic sheriff presided and 5,285 in which a Republican sheriff did. It includes 118 acts of violence, 96 associated with right-wing actors and 22 associated with left-wing perpetrators. 70 unique counties saw an act of right-wing violence and 22 of the left-wing variety. Of the county-years where extremist violence occurred, 83 were marked by one incident while 13 recorded two or more.

Using this newly constructed dataset, I employ two research designs to identify the effect of sheriffs' partisanship on the incidence of extremist violence in their counties. First, I analyze the results of a close-elections regression discontinuity (RD) design, a well-validated strategy for identifying the effect of partisanship in the U.S. (Eggers et al. 2015).[10] Because the RD identifies a local average treatment effect that may not apply to elections more generally, I also conduct a difference-in-differences analysis, taking advantage of changes in the partisanship of sheriffs within counties over time. While this approach relies on stronger identifying assumptions than the RD, they are still easier to satisfy than traditional regression analyses that attempt to control for confounders by conditioning on observable character-

[10]The dataset for the regression discontinuity analysis is smaller due to its being subset to instances where 1) both a Democrat and Republican ran and 2) the top two vote-getters were a Republican and a Democrat.

istics. Furthermore, given the null effects these analyses produce, I use the difference-in-differences framework to implement equivalence testing to bolster confidence that the results reflect a truly nonexistent effect of partisanship, rather than a lack of statistical power to reject a null hypothesis of no effect. While I analyze the effects of electing a Democratic versus Republican sheriff on both right-wing and left-wing violence, the results for right-wing violence are likely of particular interest because 1) the lion's share of extremist violence in recent years has been committed by right-wing actors[11] and 2) some Republican sheriffs (such as those subscribing to the far-right constitutionalist movement) have demonstrated clear ideological affinities with some groups and individuals responsible for these acts.

Results

Table 1 and Figure 1 summarize the results of the RD analysis estimating the effect of sheriff partisanship on the incidence of right-wing and left-wing extremist violence, where the treatment is a Democratic sheriff, the running variable the Democratic share of the two-party vote, and the outcome measure is the number of incidents in a given county-year.[12] Table 1 presents point estimates and confidence intervals for estimates from first-order regression lines fitted on either side of the RD threshold using an optimally-derived

[11] 96 out of 118 violent incidents in the dataset were coded as being committed by right-wing actors.

[12] Note that for both the RD and diff-in-diff analyses, employing a count measure (as opposed to, for instance, a rate normalized by county population) is appropriate since for the former, county characteristics are continuous at the treatment threshold, while for the latter, variables such as population size that do not vary significantly over time are controlled for by design.

Table 1: Effect of sheriff partisanship on extremist violence, RD estimates

	(1) Right-Wing Violence	(2) Left-Wing Violence
Democratic Sheriff	-0.00915	0.000176
	(0.0112)	(0.000944)
Observations	4044	4044

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

bandwidth as specified in Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik (2014).[13] The estimates are near zero and far from statistically significant.[14] Figure 1 tells the same story visually, with a very small to nonexistent gap in the number of predicted violent incidents per county-year at the threshold defining treatment.[15] These null results are robust to the use of different kernels and bandwidths for estimation, as well as combining incidents of right and left-wing violence into a single outcome measure (Table B1). The analyses thus strongly suggest that sheriffs' partisanship has no effect on the incidence of extremist violence in their county.

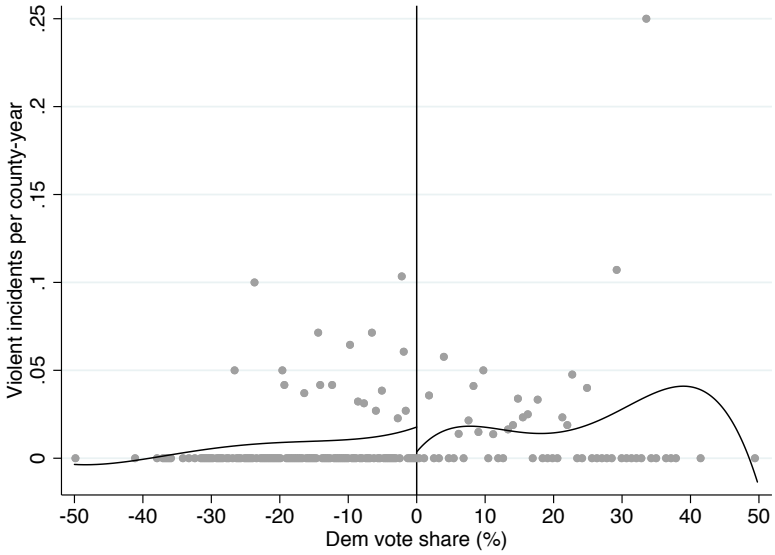
The estimates in Table 1, however, represent a local average treatment effect (LATE) at the threshold (counties where an election for sheriff was closely decided) and may not be generalizable to a broader population of U.S. counties. To address this concern, I conduct a

[13]This results in a bandwidth of 10.382 for the analysis of right-wing violence and 6.76 for the analysis of left-wing violence.

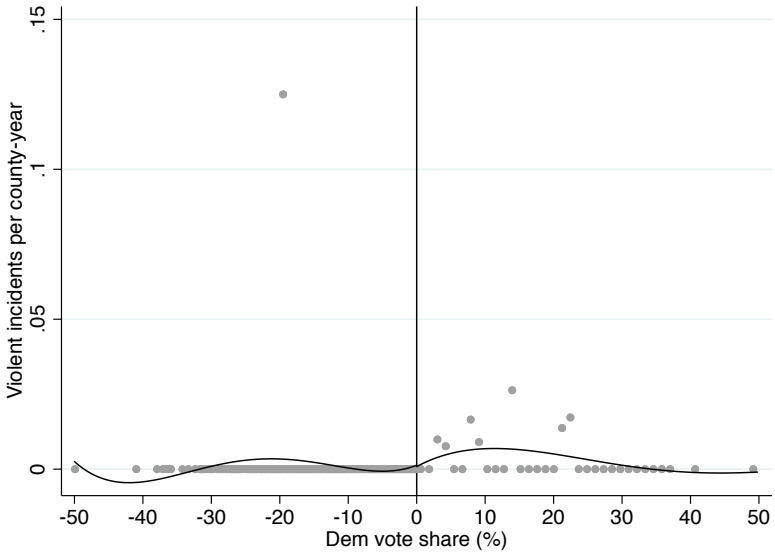
[14]Power calculations indicate this design has 100% power to detect an effect size of 0.5 SDs and 77% power to detect an effect size of 0.25 SDs.

[15]Figure 1 models higher-order (fourth-order) polynomials to more flexibly fit the full range of data (as binned averages) on either side of the threshold; Figures B8a and B8b show similar visualizations, but for the actual models (first-order regressions and optimally-derived bandwidth) used to generate the estimates in Table 1.

Figure 1: RD plot, sheriff partisanship and the incidence of extremist violence



(a) Right-Wing Violence



(b) Left-Wing Violence

Note: Points in this figure represent average outcome values across binned values of running variable: Democratic vote share. Number of bins selected via the mimicking-variance evenly spaced method.

difference-in-differences analysis to identify the effect of sheriff partisanship, taking advantage of counties where elections result in a shift in the sheriff's partisan affiliation over time. This approach identifies the effect of sheriffs' partisanship for a broader and more representative sample. Changes in sheriffs' partisanship have occurred in 16 percent of counties in the sample, including in 31 out of 37 states.[16] Furthermore, counties that saw a partisan change at some point in the sampled timeframe range include contests decided by as little as a tenth of a percent to those where the winning candidate won with more than 90 percent of the vote (as well as many uncontested elections), demonstrating that estimates are not derived only from counties with the closest elections.[17] I limit the difference-in-differences analysis to the right-wing violence outcome because—reflecting the lower incidence of left-wing violence overall—there is only one county in the sample where both 1) left-wing violence occurs and 2) the partisanship of the sheriff changes within the timeframe under study.

Understanding of the assumptions required for generating consistent estimates from difference-in-differences designs—and as a result, methods for analyzing them—has advanced rapidly in recent years, particularly when treatment timing varies across units, as is the case in this setting (Roth et al. 2023). Still, the key identifying assumption remains that the average outcome among treated and comparison units would have followed the same trajectory in the absence of treatment. Though the parallel trends assumption cannot be proven to hold, one way to assess its plausibility is to conduct an event study comparing the trend in average outcomes in treated and comparison units over the pretreatment period. Figure B7 summarizes the results of such an analysis, demonstrating that treated and control units do not significantly or systematically diverge prior to treatment.

[16]The exceptions are a diverse group including Iowa, Maine, Mississippi, Nebraska, Utah, and Vermont.

[17]The median vote margin in these counties was 13.5 percentage points, not including uncontested elections, which constituted a quarter of elections in such counties.

Table 2 reports the results of four approaches to estimating the effect of sheriff partisanship on the local incidence of right-wing violence: a traditional two-way fixed effects (TWFE) model estimated via OLS (Column 1); a TWFE model estimated with a Poisson model often used for nonnegative count data (Column 2); a doubly-robust estimator as described in Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021), with Democratic partisanship as the treatment as in the RD analysis (Column 3); and a doubly-robust estimator with Republican partisanship as the treatment (Column 4).[18] Standard errors for all estimates are clustered by state (using bootstrapping for the Poisson model). As with the RD, the results across all models are consistent, showing no significant effect of sheriffs' partisanship on the local incidence of extremist violence.

[18]Each model uses different weights to construct a control group to compare treated units to. Since treatment timing varies across units, recent research on difference-in-differences would suggest employing a heterogeneity-robust estimator that compares treated units only to never-treated or not-yet-treated units as in Columns 3-4. However, the "correct" approach in this case is not entirely clear, since treatment can be characterized as either Democratic or Republican incumbency, and units that appear to be not yet treated in the panel may have in reality been treated (i.e. had an incumbent from the other party) in some period prior to the first year in the dataset; in fact, as Columns 3-4 in Table 2 show, how one characterizes the treatment (and therefore the comparison group that is constructed) when applying these estimators changes the point estimates and can generate somewhat nonsensical results, where e.g. the estimates for *both* Democratic and Republican incumbency on right-wing violence are negative. How one characterizes the treatment has no bearing when applying a TWFE model as in Columns 1-2; the estimates for Democratic versus Republican incumbency are simply the inverse of each other. Given these issues, I show results for each approach, all of which are consistent in finding no significant effects.

Table 2: Difference-in-differences estimates of the effect of sheriff partisanship on right-wing violence, 2007-2018

	(1) TWFE OLS	(2) TWFE Poisson	(3) Callaway and Sant'Anna	(4) Callaway and Sant'Anna
Democratic Sheriff	0.00526	0.477	-0.0231	
	(0.00527)	(0.465))	(0.0366)	
Republican Sheriff				-0.00590
				(0.00501)
Observations	10019	871	5025	4946

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: This table presents estimates from difference-in-differences estimates from a standard TWFE model estimated via OLS (Column 1), TWFE estimated with a Poisson model (Column 2), and from the method described in Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) for estimating treatment effects for multiple periods and staggered treatment timing (Columns 3-4). Column 3 reports results from characterizing Democratic sheriffs as the treatment; Column 4 reports results characterizing Republican sheriffs as the treatment. Standard errors for all estimates are clustered by state.

Robustness

Sheriff's departments are more important—and therefore who's in charge of them likely to be more impactful—in some counties than others. In particular, in counties with large numbers of officers employed by local police departments, sheriff's departments are likely less important players in law enforcement than those where local forces are smaller in size. To check the robustness of the results when focusing on those counties where sheriff's departments dominate, I re-analyze the effect of sheriff partisanship in only those counties that are above the median in terms of the proportion of sworn officers employed in sheriff's versus local police departments.[19] I employ only the RD design for this analysis since there is only a

[19]I use data from the 2008 Census of State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies conducted by the U.S. Justice Department on personnel employed by all state and local law enforcement agencies. The median share of sworn officers employed by sheriff's versus local

single county in the sample with an above-the-median share of officers in sheriff's versus local police departments where the partisanship of the sheriff changes *and* there is an incident of left or right-wing violence, undermining the validity of the difference-in-difference approach. The results from this subsample are in line with those from the full sample, finding no significant effect of sheriff partisanship on the incidence of extremist violence (Online Appendix Table B2.

To further examine the robustness of these consistently null effects, I conduct a formal equivalence test, a tool that can be used to help rule out the possibility that failing to reject the null hypothesis of no effect is due to limited statistical power. Equivalence tests require a higher burden of proof to support the conclusion of no (or a negligibly small) effect by inverting the null hypothesis, requiring sufficient evidence to reject the null of some small effect at some accepted level of statistical significance. Results from this test show that *we can reject the possibility of a treatment effect size as small as one-quarter of a standard deviation*, providing additional assurance that the effect of sheriffs' partisanship on such violence is negligible if not approximately zero.[20] In short, the evidence across multiple rigorous approaches—including regression discontinuity, difference-in-differences, and formal equivalance testing—is consistent in finding that the partisanship of U.S. sheriffs has no effect on the incidence of extremist violence in their counties.

police departments in the counties included in my dataset is 0.35, with a standard deviation of 0.24.

[20]Equivalence testing was conducted using Stata's *tostregress* command based on a TWFE model, with an equivalence interval of 0.25 standard deviations and a Type I error rate of 0.05.

Exploring Mechanisms

What explains the consistent null effect of sheriff partisanship on the incidence of right and left-wing violence? There are at least three plausible explanations. First, despite sharp differences in partisan preferences about a range of important topics in American politics, Democratic and Republican sheriffs may share similar perspectives on political violence in particular, i.e. they may generally agree that violence is undesirable and should be combated with force no matter whether the ideology of a violent actor is closer or further from their own views. Thompson (2020), for example, finds that a lack of difference in the way that sheriffs enforce immigration policy can be attributed to the fact that they hold more similar views on immigration enforcement than partisans of opposing parties more generally. Second, Democratic and Republican sheriffs may have different preferences, on average, with respect to political violence, but they may be constrained in their ability to translate those preferences into actions that would result in different outcomes; unlike in the Global South contexts where partisan effects on violence have previously been uncovered, sheriff departments may be more institutionalized, with greater bureaucratic checks and less room for elected leadership to undermine the impartiality of law enforcement. Finally, sheriffs from different parties may differ in their views on political violence but be constrained in another way: by voters. If the voters they rely on to win election desire sheriffs to impartially combat extremist violence no matter the identity of the violent actor, then sheriffs from both parties may be pushed to act against it even if their personal preferences may differ.

Sheriffs' preferences

Studying the sheriffs' preferences regarding violence and the role those preferences play in how they address it as law enforcement officials is difficult. Farris and Holman's seminal research collected the first survey data on sheriffs' views, but 1) data about their preferences with respect to extremist violence is not available and 2) survey data on this topic might not

be reliable anyway, since sheriffs might be reluctant to express normatively undesirable views about the acceptability of violence or extremist groups. Nevertheless, if sheriffs' preferences matter—i.e. they influence how they run their offices in ways that affect the likelihood of violence, but we don't see differences in violent incidents between Democratic and Republican sheriffs on average because most sheriffs from both parties agree that violence is undesirable and should be forcefully combated no matter the political affiliation of the perpetrator—we would still expect to find a relationship between sheriffs' ideology and such violence when we *do* have information about their ideology that suggests an affinity between them and the violent extremists that carry it out. One such piece of information is a sheriff's association with the constitutional sheriffs movement, the far-right group movement described above. If most Republican sheriffs do not subscribe to these views and thus do not condone violent right-wing groups operating with greater impunity, that would explain the lack of a partisan effect on violence on average; at the same time, if sheriffs' preferences explain why their departments operate the way they do, we *should* expect right-wing violence to be more likely under extremist constitutional sheriffs that hold preferences in line with right-wing violent extremists.

Our ability to assess the relationship between constitutional sheriff incumbency and right-wing violence is limited given that there are only 53 county-years in the dataset coded as having constitutionalist sheriffs in office;[21] however, there is only one incident of right-wing violence recorded in this subsample. While far from dispositive, this result suggests that sheriffs with the most extreme views do not make such violence subtantially more likely to occur. Thus, sheriffs' personal preferences alone would seem unable to explain the lack of a relationship between sheriff partisanship and the incidence of extremist violence; some

[21]This is due to the limited overlap in time period and geography with the Nemerever dataset, which only covers 11 Western states from 1995-2015.

other factor likely plays a role in preventing sheriffs' partisan and ideological identity from affecting this important outcome.

Institutionalization

As noted above, the relative independence of institutions in Global North countries like the U.S. may prevent partisanship from affecting the impartiality of law enforcement efforts to combat extremist violence irrespective of the politics of the violent extremists. Perhaps sheriff's departments operate in the mode of Weberian bureaucracies, with the elected sheriff providing overall direction and policy guidance but not exerting substantial influence over the day-to-day decisionmaking around investigations and the gathering of and response to intelligence?

Again, studying the role of institutionalization is difficult, mainly due to the challenges of measuring and tracing the effect of a feature that is hard to directly observe. One reasonable proxy for the institutionalization of an organization is its size, where larger organizations (largely by necessity) tend to be more institutionalized and professionalized than smaller ones (e.g. Huntington (1968, 31-32)). Larger sheriffs departments would therefore likely be more bureaucratized, professionalized, and insulated from the personal whims of the elected sheriff, even as sheriffs that oversee smaller departments have a greater ability to run them as personal fiefdoms. Thus, if relatively high levels of institutionalization or professionalization explain why the partisanship of elected officials does not, on average, affect political violence in the U.S., we might expect to find a partisan effect on violence where sheriff's departments are smaller (and therefore less institutionalized) while no such effect obtains in the larger departments.

To examine this possibility, I split the sample into counties with sheriff's departments above and below the median in terms of sworn officers, then estimate the effect of partisanship

Table 3: RD estimates of the effect of sheriff partisanship on right-wing violence for below and above-median sheriff department size, 2007-2018

	(1) Below Median	(2) Above Median
Democratic Sheriff	-0.00908	-0.00912
	(0.00831)	(0.0240)
Observations	2030	2014

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

for larger and smaller departments, respectively.[22] As with the analysis above of counties with more sheriff's deputies relative to local police officers, here I employ only the RD design because there is only a single county in the sample with a below-the-median department size where the partisanship of the sheriff changes *and* there is an incident of right-wing violence.[23] The results of this analysis, summarized in Table 3 and Figure B9, show no substantive differences between the estimated effects for larger and smaller departments (the RD effect sizes are nearly identical). The evidence therefore suggests that relatively high professionalization or institutionalization does not explain why the partisanship of elected law enforcement officials has no effect on political violence in U.S. counties.

Electoral competition

A third possibility that could explain the lack of a partisan effect on violence in U.S. counties is not that Republican and Democratic sheriffs share similar preferences or that they're

[22]The median sheriff's department in the sample—using data from the DOJ's 2008 Census of State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies—employs 48 sworn officers.

[23]I only estimate effects on right-wing violence due the very small number of left-wing incidents, which is particularly noticeable when analyzing subsamples. E.g. there are only two incidents of left-wing violence in county-years with below-median department size.

constrained by the independence of the bureaucratized departments they oversee, but that they're constrained by the voters who elect them. In short, sheriffs—especially the most ideologically extreme ones, such as the constitutionalists—may tend toward using their office in ways that make violence perpetrated by their ideological allies more likely to occur. But if the voters they rely on to win election prefer that sheriffs impartially combat violent extremism across the political spectrum—and if they use their votes accordingly—then they may be forced to act in line with voters' preferences lest they risk losing office. In such a scenario, differences in the incidence of extremist violence by sheriff partisanship would not arise, even if sheriffs' natural inclination is to act in ways that might produce such differences.

There is reason to believe that a large majority of American voters—including both Republicans and Democrats—disdain political violence and prefer law enforcement to combat it irrespective of the political orientation of the violent actor. Kalmoe and Mason (2022) find partisan bias among voters in terms of whether they find particular acts of violence to be justified, as well as shifting partisan support for the use of violence depending on which party controls the presidency, yet only small minorities from each party have supported violence in any form at any point in time. Westwood et al. (2022) suggest support for violence is even lower, with no differences in support by party.

If voters are to hold sheriffs to these preferences, however, then 1) the marginal voter for a given sheriff's reelection must prefer political impartiality in law enforcement against violent actors of all stripes and 2) sheriff elections must be competitive enough such that there is a reasonable threat of losing, both of which are much more likely in situations where sheriffs face reasonably competitive general elections. Many sheriffs are elected unopposed or in highly uncompetitive elections (Zoorob 2022; Farris and Holman 2024), making it difficult for voters to hold them to account (or, perhaps, leading them to rely on the votes of primary voters who may be much more extreme in their views). I therefore look at whether the effect of sheriffs' partisanship varies according to whether they face competitive elections or not. If

voters constrain sheriffs' behavior via electoral competition with respect to how they address violent extremism, then we might expect the same null effect of partisanship where sheriff elections are competitive as we see in the full sample, but we may find that partisanship indeed matters where elections are uncompetitive and sheriffs are thus unconstrained by majority opinion.

To test this, I divide the sample according to whether sheriffs were elected in elections in the top quartile of competitiveness (a vote margin of 12 percentage points or less) versus those determined by a larger vote margin (uncompetitive elections) and estimate the effect of partisanship for each.[24] Since the local average treatment effect within the RD setup is identified at the treatment threshold—a vote margin of zero—this is only possible with the difference-in-differences approach. The results are presented in Table 4, and they do not suggest that electoral competition is what explains the lack of partisan effects on violence. The point estimates vary in direction and generally lack significance. The only significant coefficient—for the effect of Democratic partisanship on violence where elections are uncompetitive using the Calloway and Sant'Anna estimator—*is* is in the expected direction, while the coefficient using the same estimator for competitive elections is not, which is line with expectations were electoral competition driving sheriffs with differing preferences over violence to tamp down on it regardless of the political affiliation of the perpretrators. However, the point estimate for competitive elections is nearly identical, the difference in significance primarily being due to a sizeable difference in sample size (there are many more uncompetitive elections than competitive ones). As a result, electoral competition also seems to fail in explaining the null effect of sheriffs' partisanship on political violence in their counties.

[24]As with the analysis of department size above, I only estimate effects on right-wing violence due to the very small number of left-wing incidents in the smaller subsamples.

Table 4: Difference-in-differences estimates of the effect of sheriff partisanship on right-wing violence for counties with competitive and uncompetitive sheriff elections, 2007-2018

	TWFE OLS		TWFE Poisson		Callaway and Sant'Anna	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Uncompetitive	Competitive	Uncompetitive	Competitive	Uncompetitive	Competitive
Democratic Sheriff	0.00669	0.00529	0.944	0.218	-0.0101**	-0.0948
	(0.00695)	(0.0199)	(0.941)	(0.782)	(0.00515)	(0.207)
Observations	8643	1376	715	66	4350	578

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: This table presents estimates from difference-in-differences estimates from a standard TWFE model estimated via OLS (Columns 1 and 2), TWFE estimated with a Poisson model (Columns 3 and 4), and from Stata's *csdid* command based on the method described in Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) for estimating treatment effects for multiple periods and staggered treatment timing (Columns 5-6). Columns 5 and 6 report results from characterizing Democratic sheriffs as the treatment; results from characterizing Republican sheriffs as the treatment are not estimable. Standard errors are clustered by state.

Conclusion

The results described above suggest an answer to the question posed earlier: does something about government institutions in the Global North insulate them from the effects of partisanship on government's ability to impartially maintain order and prevent violence, or does the partisan affiliation of local officials affect the incidence of political violence as it does in parts of the Global South? In short, the evidence supports the former view. Despite increasing partisan polarization, rising extremism in the Republican party, growth in right-wing violence, and an unusual institution in which law enforcement leadership is elected in partisan elections, the partisanship of U.S. sheriffs does not affect the incidence of extremist violence in the counties they oversee.

The article also explores potential mechanisms that might explain the lack of partisan effects despite their existence in other contexts, finding little evidence for any of them. Whatever explains the difference between the U.S. and other contexts where such an effect has been found requires further investigation.

Regardless of the reason, the results presented here suggest that the effect of local officials' partisanship on the incidence of political violence in the Global South is unlikely to obtain in the Global North context. With no such effect found in the U.S. case—a context with high levels of partisan polarization, right-wing extremism, increasing extremist violence, and partisan law enforcement—the chance of such a relationship existing in the Global North more broadly appears low.

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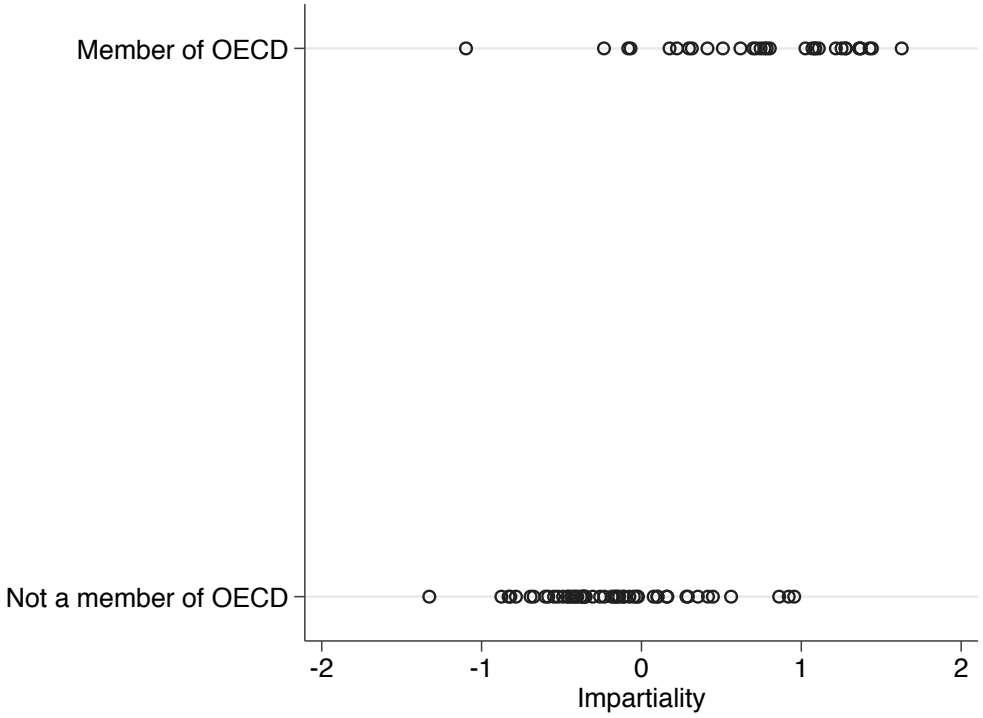
Online Appendix

Contents

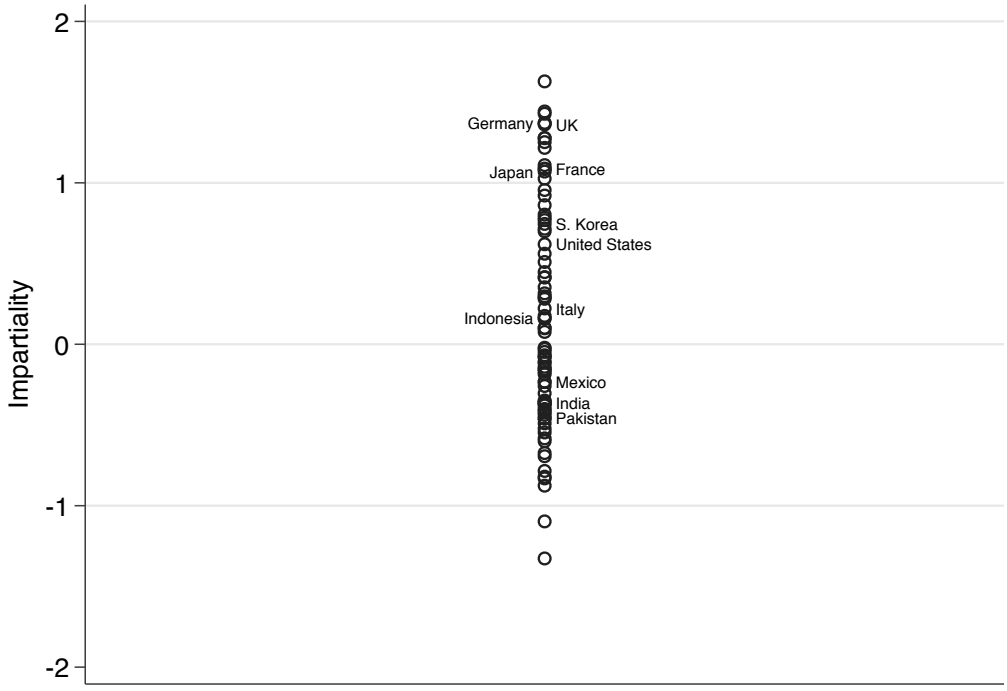
A Data on Country Bureaucratic and Electoral Institutions

Figure A1: Country government bureaucratic impartiality, by OECD status



Note: This figure presents expert assessments (from 2020) of the impartiality of country governments' bureaucracies from Nistotskaya et al. (2021), defined as "when deciding upon a case, a public official should not take into consideration anything about the applicant's circumstances, which is not stipulated in policy or law beforehand," separated out by OECD status.

Figure A2: Country government bureaucratic impartiality



Note: This figure presents expert assessments (from 2020) of the impartiality of country governments' bureaucracies from Nistotskaya et al. (2021), defined as "when deciding upon a case, a public official should not take into consideration anything about the applicant's circumstances, which is not stipulated in policy or law beforehand."

Figure A3: V-Dem electoral democracy score, by OECD status

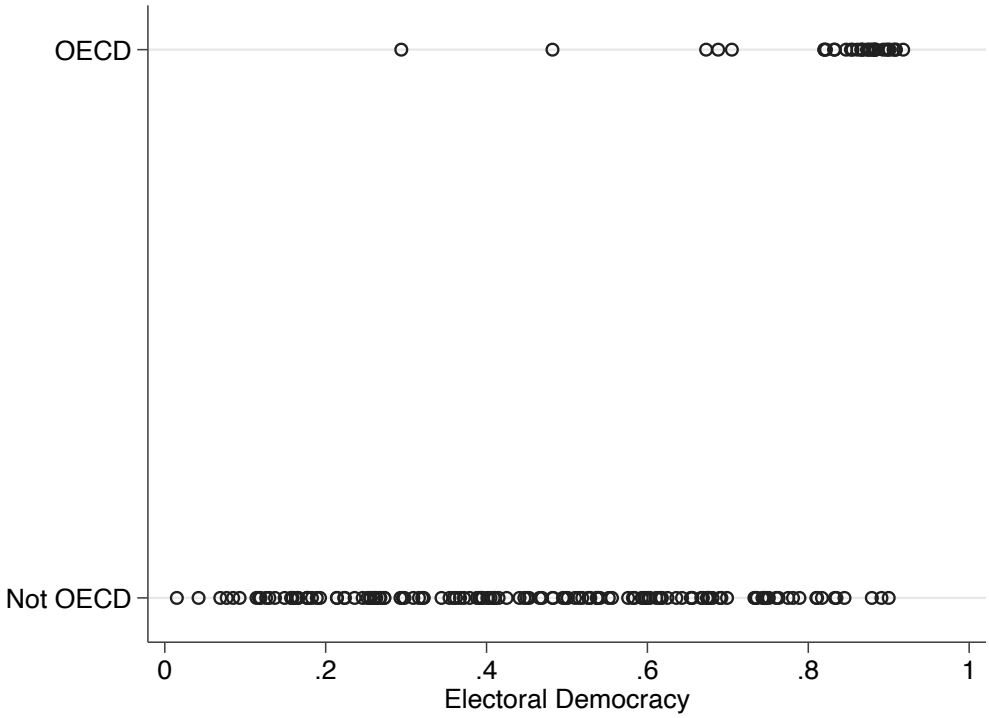


Figure A4: V-Dem electoral democracy score

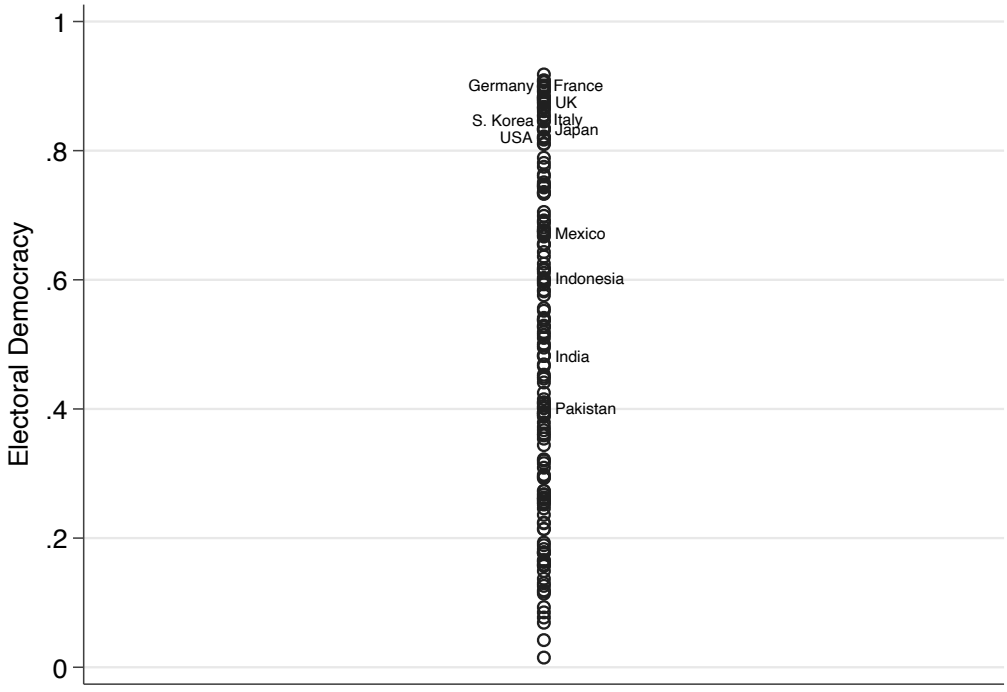


Figure A5: V-Dem clean elections score, by OECD status

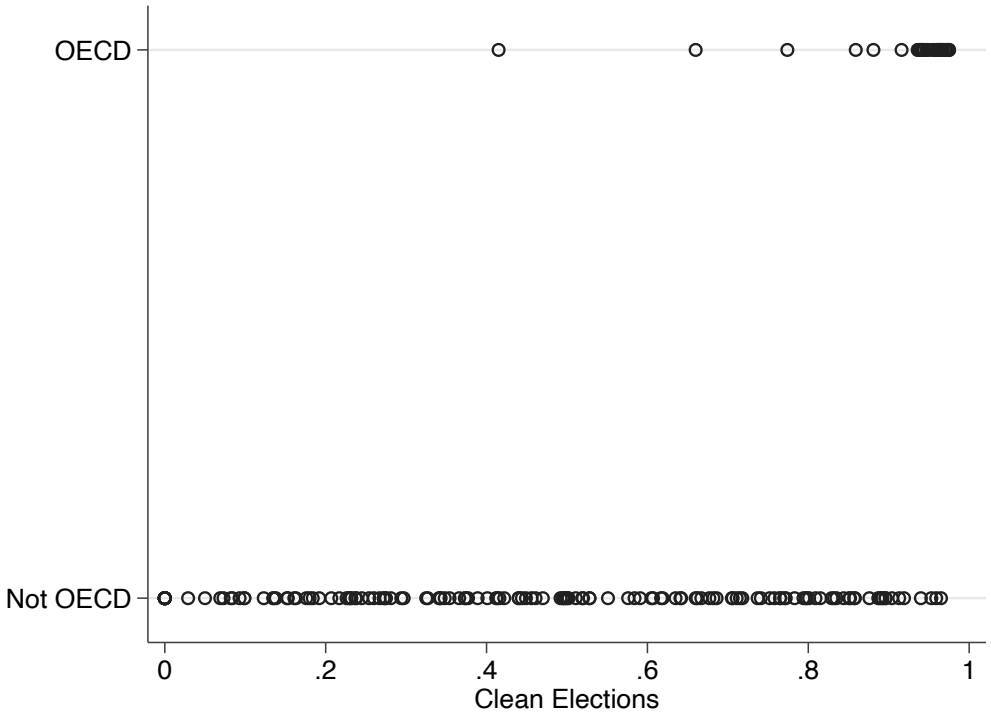
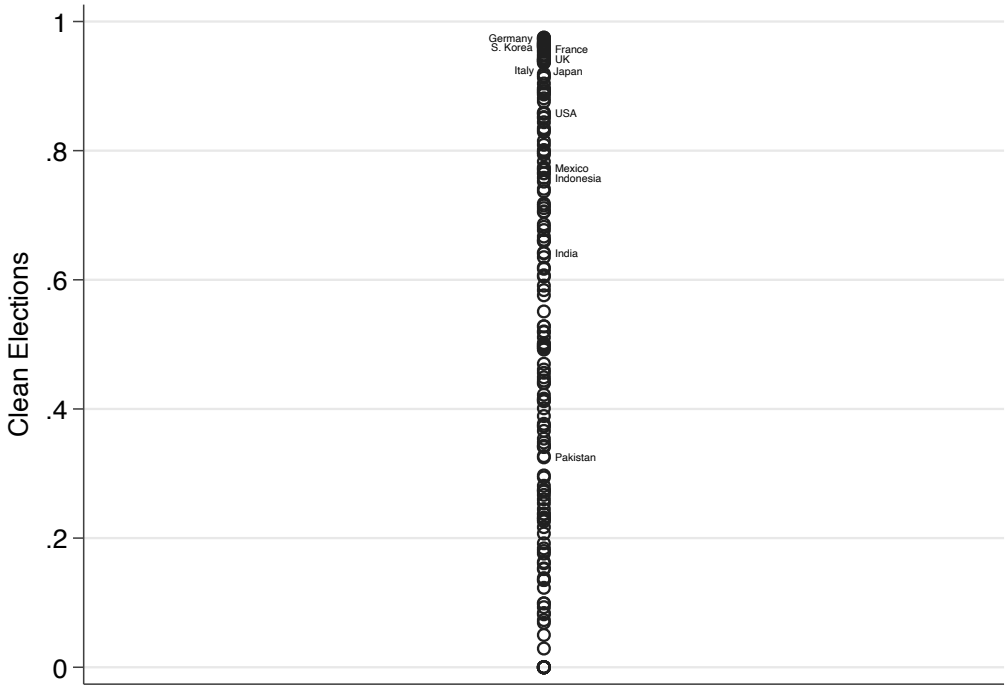
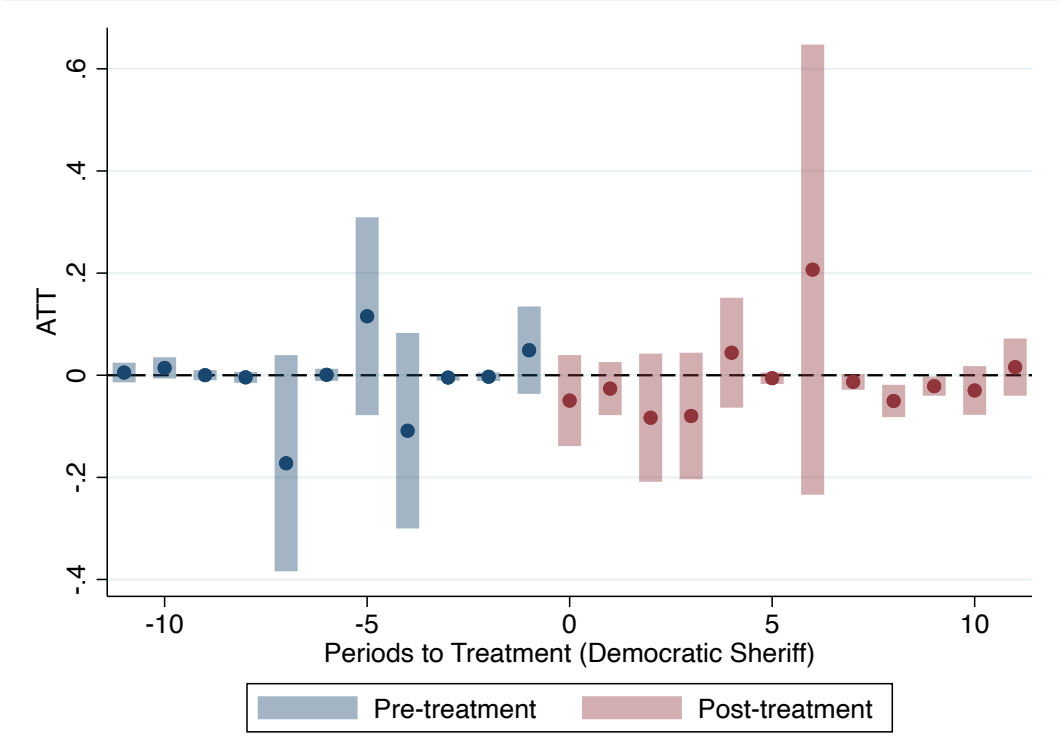


Figure A6: V-Dem clean elections score



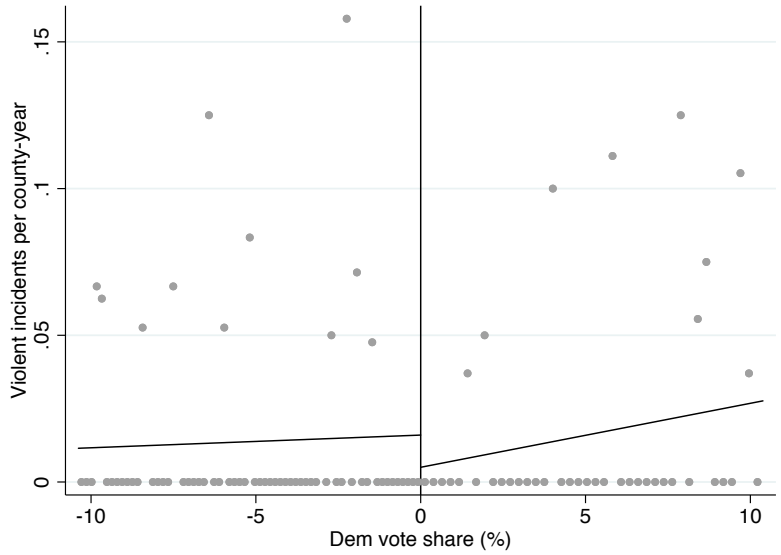
B Identifying Assumptions and Robustness Checks

Figure B7: Estimated treatment effect by number of years pre/post-treatment

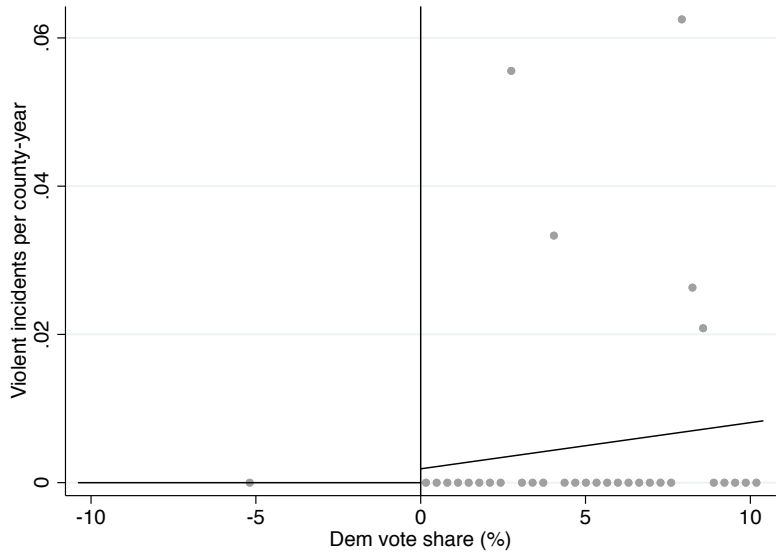


Note: This figure presents the results of an event study analyzing trends in the estimated treatment effect (characterized as a Democratic sheriff holding office) on the main outcome of interest (incidents of right-wing violence) by number of periods (years) pre- and post-treatment. If the parallel trends assumption holds, there should be no significant difference between treated and comparison units in the pre-treatment period (prior to period 0).

Figure B8: RD plot, sheriff partisanship and the incidence of extremist violence, optimal bandwidth and first-order polynomial



(a) Right-Wing Violence



(b) Left-Wing Violence

Note: This figure presents binned averages and first-order regression lines produced by Stata's *rdplot* command. Unlike Figure 1, these plots reflect the estimation procedure (i.e. first-order regressions and the same optimally-derived bandwidth) that produced the estimates in Table 1.

Table B1: RD estimates of the effect of sheriff partisanship on extremist violence: Robustness to different kernels and bandwidths

	Epanechnikov		Uniform		BW 5		BW 2.5		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	Right-Wing Violence	Left-Wing Violence	Right-Wing Violence	Left-Wing Violence	Right-Wing Violence	Left-Wing Violence	Right-Wing Violence	Left-Wing Violence	Right vs. Left Violence
Democratic Sheriff	-0.0092	-0.0012	-0.0114	-0.0034	-0.0051	-0.0021	0.0110	-	-0.0096
	(0.0121)	(0.0014)	(0.0133)	(0.0032)	(0.0074)	(0.0015)	(0.0101)	-	(0.0114)
Observations	4044	4044	4044	4044	4044	4044	4044	4044	4044

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

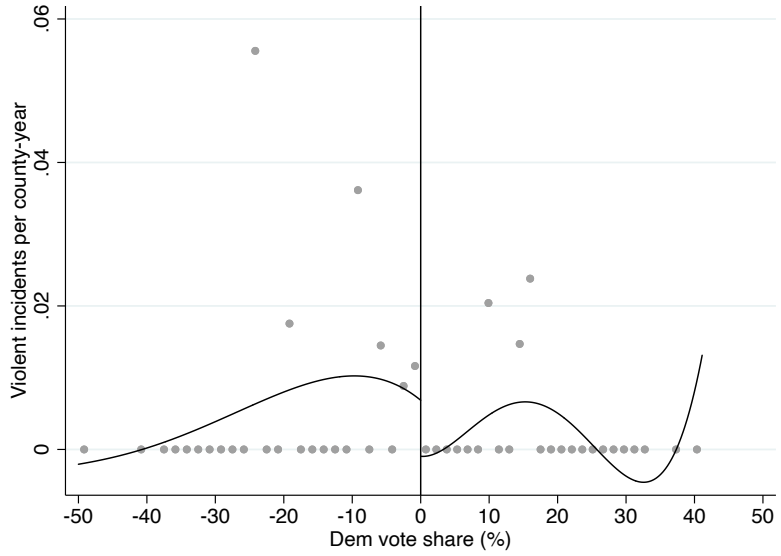
Note: Columns 1-4 demonstrate the robustness of the RD results to different kernels (Epanechnikov and uniform). Columns 5-8 demonstrate the robustness of the RD results to different bandwidths (5 and 2.5 percentage points). Column 9 shows the estimate for the effect of the treatment on an outcome that includes both right and left-wing violence, with positive values for incidents of right-wing violence and negative values for incidents of left-wing violence. The effect of Democratic sheriffs on left-wing violence is not estimable using a bandwidth of 2.5 due to a lack of positive values on the outcome variable within this bandwidth.

Table B2: RD estimates of the effect of sheriff partisanship on extremist violence for counties with an above-median share of officers employed by sheriff's departments, 2007-2018

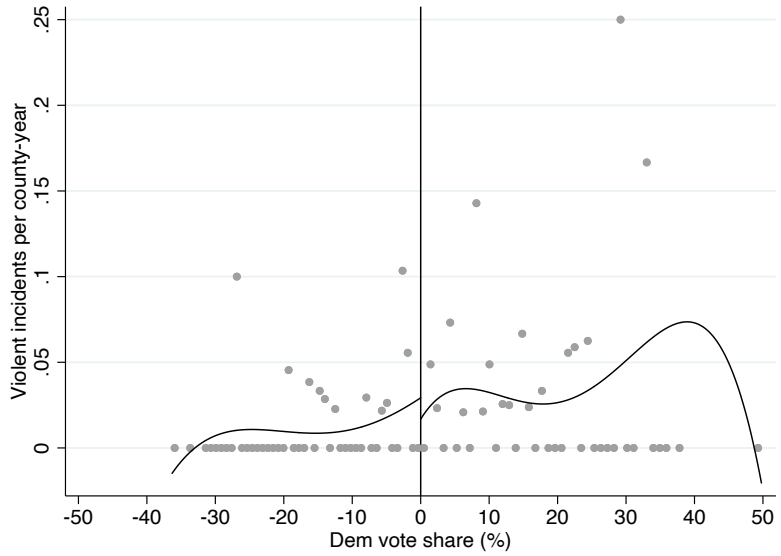
	(1)	(2)
	Right-Wing Violence	Left-Wing Violence
Democratic Sheriff	-.00296	.00207
	(.00296)	(.00193)
Observations	2021	2021

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Figure B9: RD plot, sheriff partisanship and the incidence of right-wing violence for below and above-median sheriff department size



(a) Below-median department size



(b) Above-median department size

Note: This figure presents binned averages and first-order regression lines produced by Stata's *rdplot* command for county subsamples with below and above-median sheriff department size according to the number of sworn officers.