


DOES PROSECUTOR PARTISANSHIP EXACERBATE THE RACIAL CHARGING GAP?

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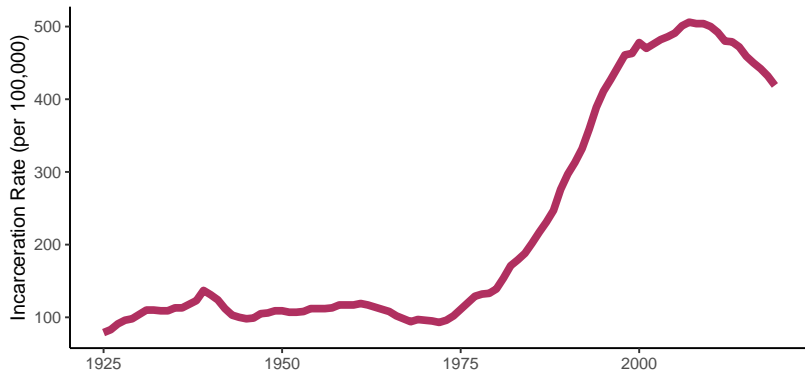
December 3, 2021

¹**Slides:** sidakyntiso.github.io/research.html 

Introduction

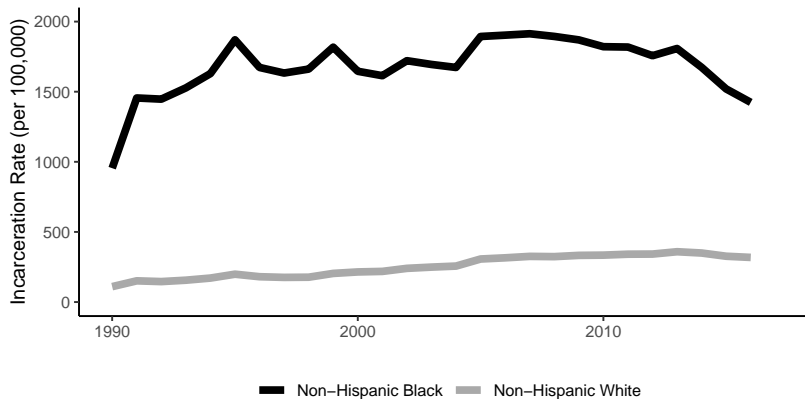
To what extent do electoral selection and incentives influence how local prosecutors treat defendants from different races?

Introduction



Source: *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics Online*

Introduction



Source: Incarceration Trends Dataset (population housed in state-run facilities).

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Challenges to inference:

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2. Non-random assignment of partisanship
3. Difficulty distinguishing role of police, prosecutors and judges

This Paper

Collect 39 million criminal records from TX, VA and WA.

- 300 districts over 20 years;
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Leverage electoral RDD to examine the causal impact of partisanship on prosecutor behavior, by defendant race.

Exploit variation in electoral calendar and within-district geographic variation to uncover incentive effects:

- critical to understand viability of institutional remedies.

Preview of Findings

1. Republican prosecutors seek tougher charges than their Democratic counterparts.
 - Partisan disparity concentrated in charging of Black defendants.

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 - Partisan disparity concentrated in charging of Black defendants.
2. This finding cannot be explained by preferences alone:
 - Partisan difference increases over electoral calendar, at different rates depending on defendant race.
3. Racial charging disparities between parties most pronounced for Democratic/minority neighborhoods.

2. Institutional Background

Local Criminal Prosecutions in the U.S.

Prosecutors do not face formal oversight by higher offices:

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- Although decision to prosecute cannot be based on race (Oyler v. Boles, 368 U.S. 448, 456)...

Racial disparities are widespread

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Competing explanations:

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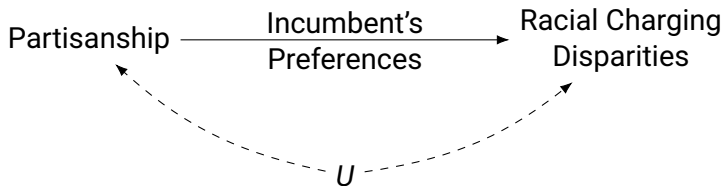
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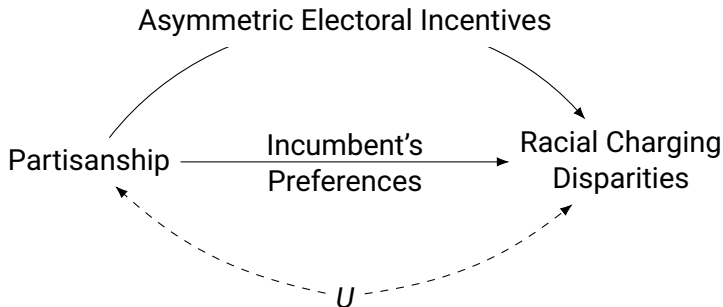
1. Role of racial threat (*Keen and Jacobs 2009; Feigenberg and Miller 2019*)
2. Conservative electoral strategy in post Civil-Rights Era (*Flamm 2005; Lowndes 2008; Mendelberg 2001; Weaver 2007; Becket and Francis 2021*)

3. Partisanship & Racial Charging Gap

Electoral Selection



Electoral Selection and Incentives



Incentives: partisan differences in benefits or costs of charging?

Electoral Benefits of Punitive Charging

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 - Electorate may weight under-punishment differently by race

Electoral Costs of Punitive Charging

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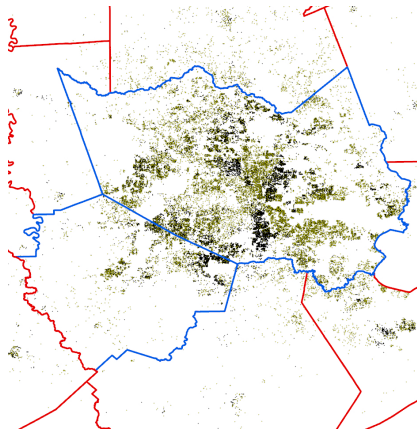
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To extent that social costs carry with them electoral penalties

- Incentives to target prosecutions in areas that are not in support coalitions (*e.g. Holland 2014*)

Racial residential segregation



Black defendants (black dots) and white defendants (yellow dots) in Harris County, TX.

Why do mechanisms matter?

Mechanism		Implied policy recommendation
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Mechanism		Implied policy recommendation
1. Prosecutor tastes	⇒	Elect less biased prosecutors?
2. Partisan differences in reelection concerns	⇒	Insulate officeholders from electoral scrutiny
3. Partisan differences in electoral costs	⇒	Redesign political boundaries

4. Data & Empirical Approach

The States

	Texas	Virginia	Washington
A. Institutional Setting			
Incarceration ranking	6th	16th	37th
Primary system	Partisan	Partisan	Top-two
DA responsibilities	Felony	Felony & Misd.	Felony & Misd.
B. Charging Data			
Period	1980-2020	2000-2020	2000-2020
Arrest charges	Y	N	N
Decision to prosecute	Y	N	N
Indictment charges	Y	Y	Y

DA Elections: Descriptive Statistics

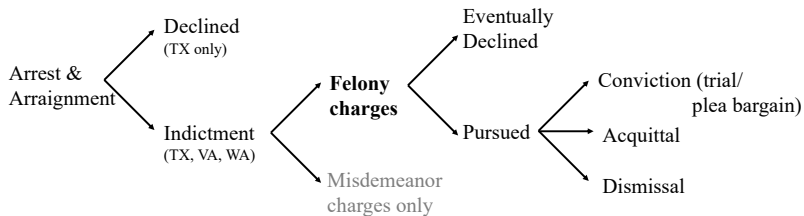
DA Elections: Descriptive Statistics

	Never Contested	Contested at least once
Republican wins	0.425 (0.418)	0.530 (0.346)
Total population	0.057m (0.107m)	0.176m (0.462m)

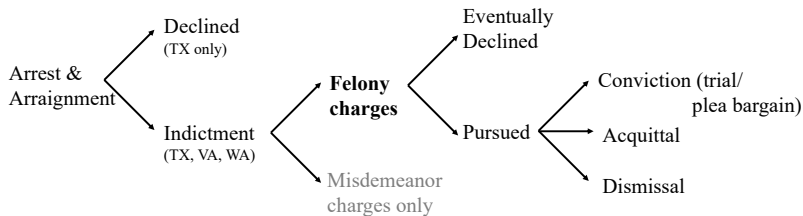
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Republican wins	0.425 (0.418)	0.530 (0.346)
Total population	0.057m (0.107m)	0.176m (0.462m)
Total prison pop.	350.608 (498.187)	1,058.285 (3,201.216)
Black prison pop.	58.9 (131.918)	345.695 (1,625.281)
Num. of felony cases	1.87m	3.85m
Num. of districts	182	142

Criminal Records

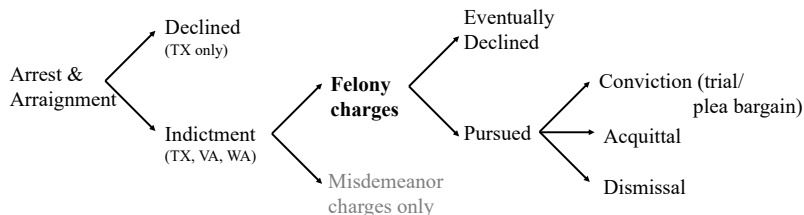


Criminal Records



Aggregated to 5.9 million felony cases.

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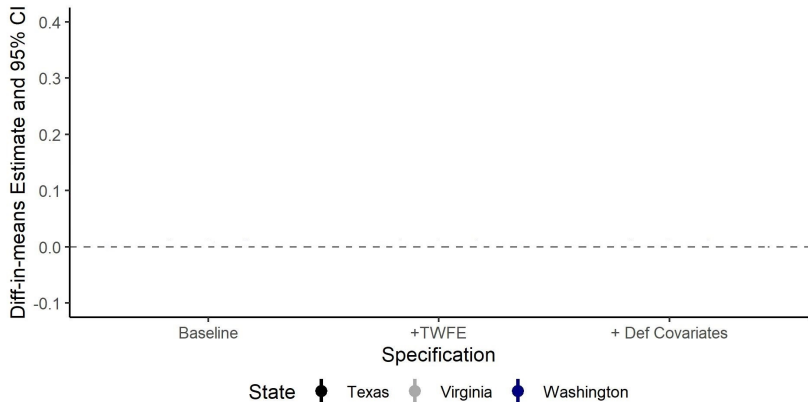


Aggregated to 5.9 million felony cases.

Primary outcome: Charge severity (maximum possible sentence) constructed using state- by-state functions of

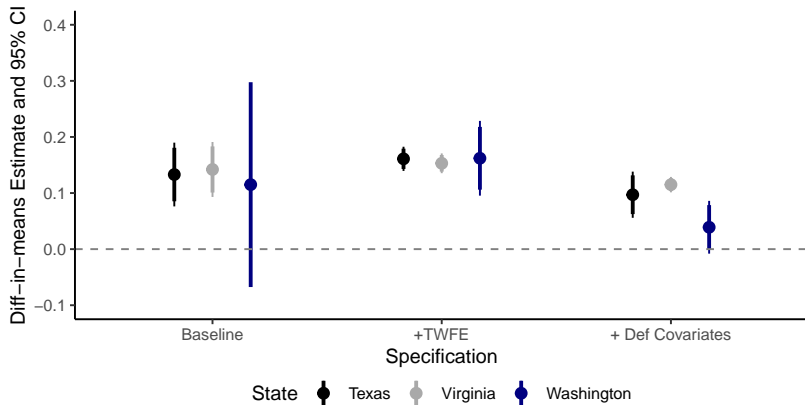
- indicted charges and enhancements;
- defendant criminal history.

Racial Disparities in Charging



The dependent variable is (logged) charge severity. Defendant characteristics include prior criminal history, crime type (violent, property, or drug), gender as well as arrest offense in TX.

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Challenges to Inference

1. Confounding differences between jurisdictions that elect Democratic and Republican district attorneys.

Two-way fixed effects estimates

Empirical Approach

Baseline local-linear regression model:

$$\log(y_{ijst}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \mathbb{1}(r_{jst} > 0.5) + f(r_{jst} - 0.5) + \alpha_{st} + \epsilon_{ijst}$$

- y_{ijst} is an charge severity; r_{jst} is Republican vote share.

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- Unit of analysis is case, so cluster at election level
- Estimated by defendant race throughout.
 - Once disaggregated, need to adjust for sex, prior history, and crime type (whether violent, drug, property, or other)

Challenges to Inference

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1. Confounding differences between jurisdictions that elect Democratic and Republican district attorneys.
2. **Sample selection bias:** estimates may reflect changes in case composition due to strategic behavior by police.

Selection into Arrest: Intuition

Police face an opportunity cost for making arrest.

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- Less likely to make arrest when (liberal) prosecutor is unlikely to seek indictment.

RDD Effect on Arrest Outcomes

	Estimate	Std. Err.	Eff. Obs	Clusters
A. Arrest Characteristics				
(log) Num. of Arrests (TX)	0.234	(1.015)		
(log) Num. of Traffic Stops	0.339	(1.353)		
(log) Arrest Severity (TX)	-0.107	(0.071)		
Pr(Arrest Traffic Stop)	-0.002	(0.004)		

Traffic stops sourced from the Stanford Open Policing project.

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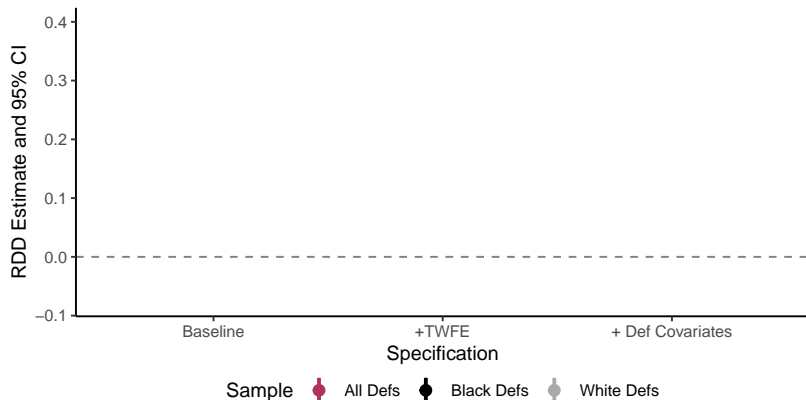
- Less likely to make arrest when (liberal) prosecutor is unlikely to seek indictment.
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But how large is the downward bias? And might it vary by race?

Estimating Selection into Arrest

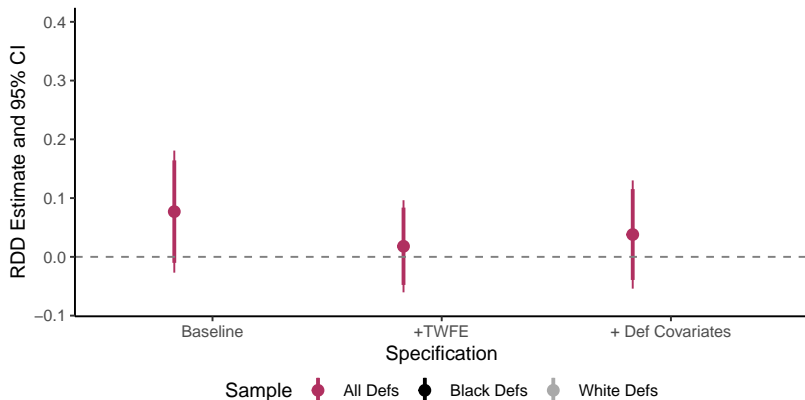
5. Main Results

Local-linear Estimates



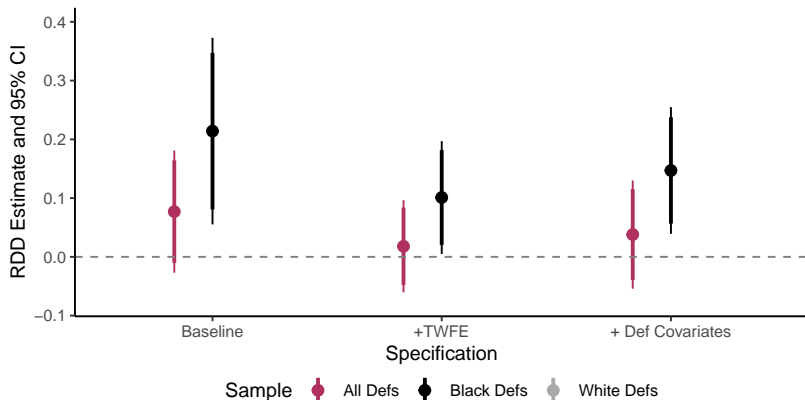
The dependent variable is (logged) charge severity, adjusted by state-and year- fixed effects. Defendant characteristics include prior criminal history, crime type (violent, property, or drug) and sex.

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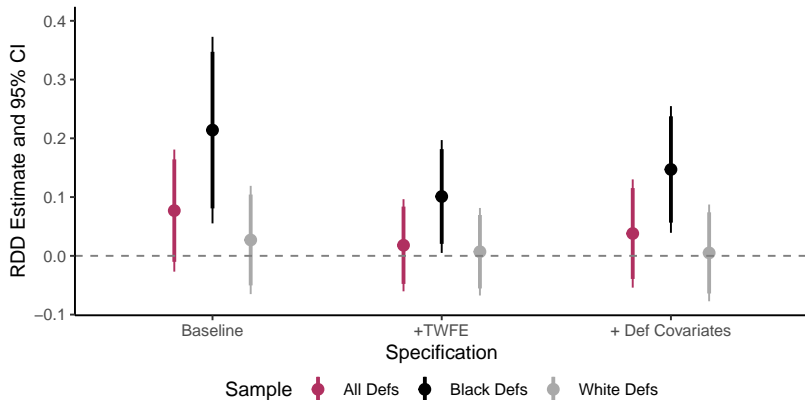
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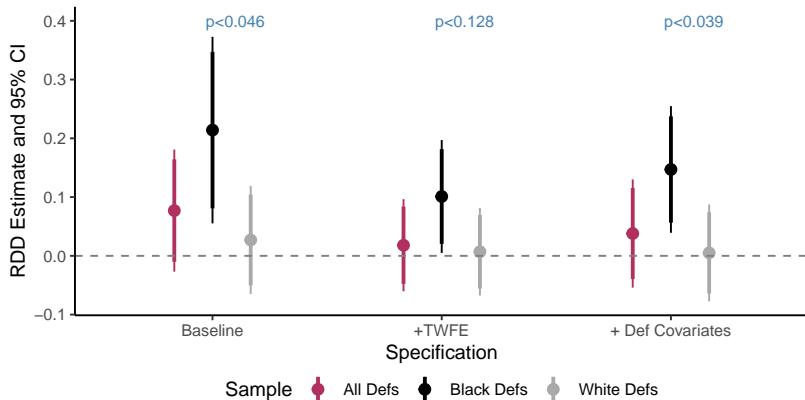
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Interpretation

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Interpretation

Robustness to alternative specifications

Effect on indictment severity for Black defendants robust to:

1. Varying bandwidth used for estimation
2. Clustering on district level
3. Alternative samples and outcomes
4. Null effect for White defs. persists under all robustness checks.

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Partisan differences appear largest in low-level drug and property crimes.

Heterogeneity by Crime Type

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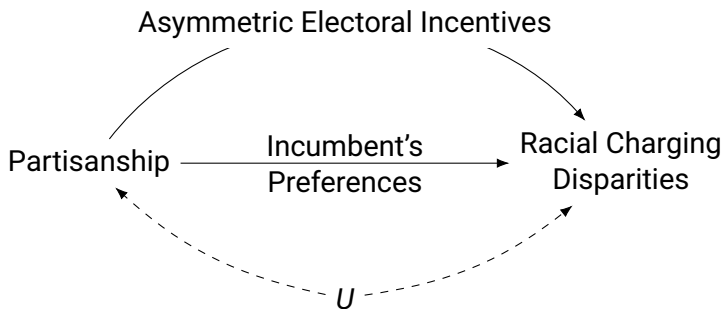
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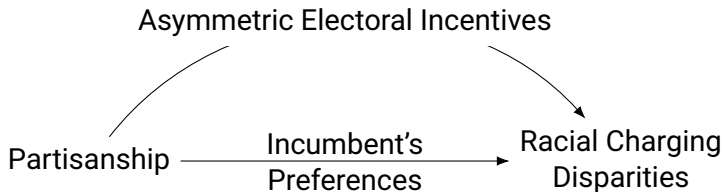
Similar partisan differences appear on prison admissions (estimated using a larger sample). [Effect on Prison Admissions](#)

6. Isolating Incentive Effects

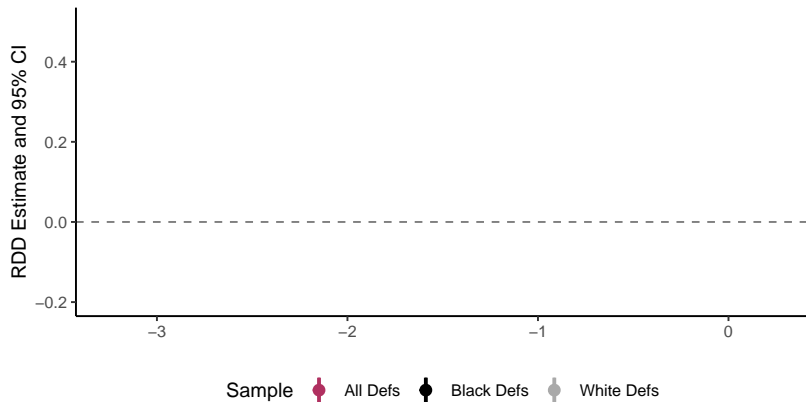
Electoral Selection and Incentives



RDD removes U path but doesn't isolate mechanism

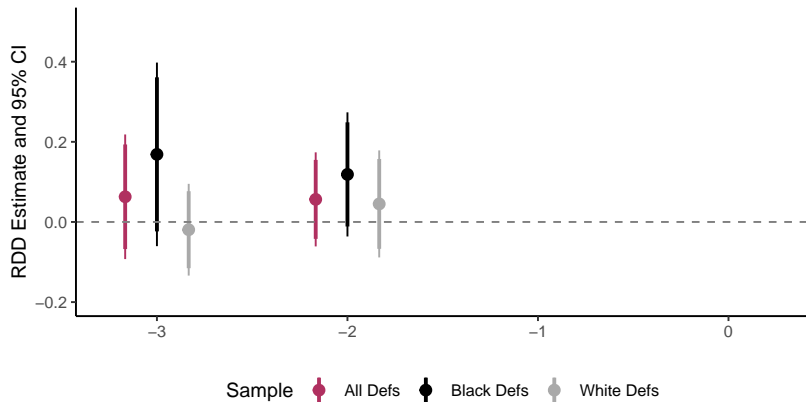


Electoral Benefits of Punitive Charging



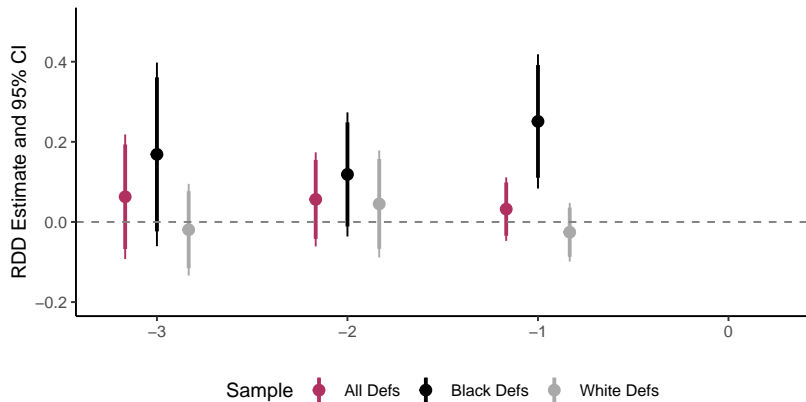
Each point corresponds to the RDD effect on (logged) charge severity by year to reelection.

Proximity to Reelection



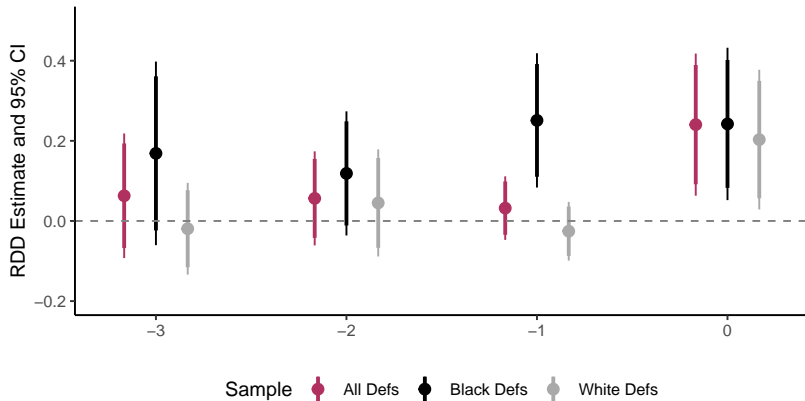
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Permutation Test

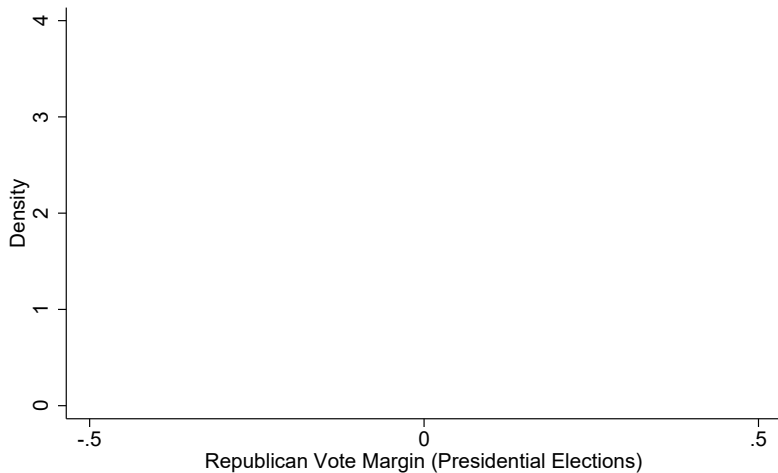
7. Next Steps & Discussion

Electoral Costs of Punitive Charging

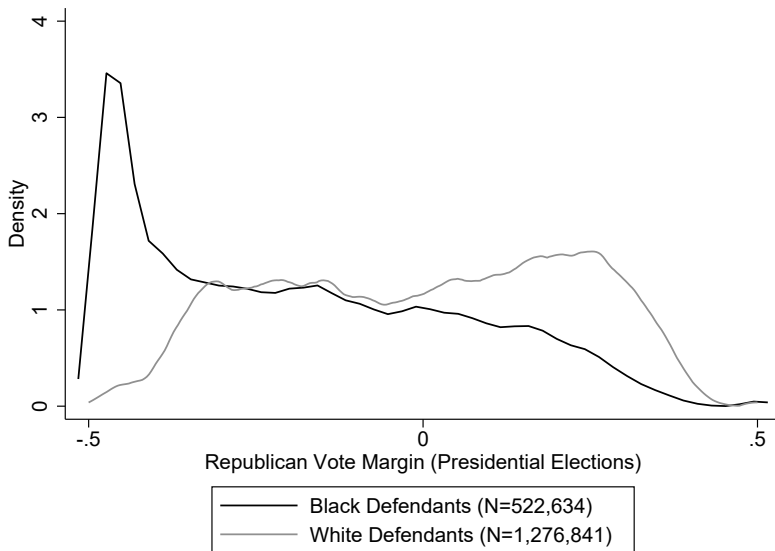
Necessary conditions:

- A greater proportion of minorities reside in areas where Republicans are not competitive (majority D-precincts).

Local partisan context



Black defendants tend to live in Democrat precincts.



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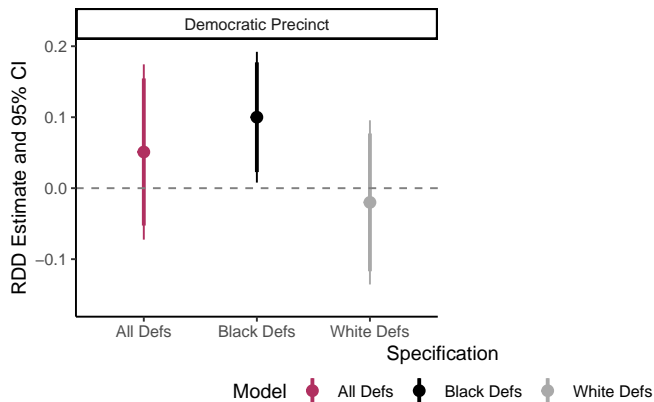
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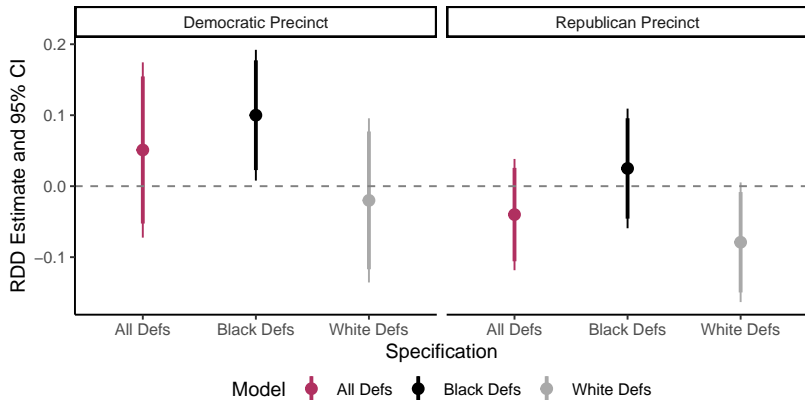
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 2. Republican areas: social costs ↑ at electoral threshold.

Heterogeneous Effects by Partisan Context



Each point corresponds to the RDD effect on (logged) charge severity by precinct partisan context.

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Next steps: Substantive Importance

Incarceration rate for Black males is 5.7 times higher than for non-Hispanic White males (*Carson, 2020*).

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Incarceration rate for Black males is 5.7 times higher than for non-Hispanic White males (*Carson, 2020*).

How much of this disparity is attributable to prosecutor partisanship?

Little's law (1961) anticipates that steady state number of prisoners = admissions rate \times expected sentence (by race):

- Disaggregated by partisanship of prosecutor.

Discussion

Partisan differences in charging decisions:

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- implications for criminal justice reform;

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Growing evidence that incentive effects matter:

- “Incentive Effects of Recall Elections” (Gordon and Yntiso, forthcoming, *Journal of Politics*)
- “Judicial Accountability and Racial Disparity in Criminal Appeals” (Harvey and Yntiso 2021, *Journal of Legal Studies*)

Discussion

Partisan differences in electoral costs:

- officeholders responsive to geographic variation in partisan incentives;

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Discussion

Partisan differences in electoral costs:

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Next steps:

- “Targeting Punishment: Political Geography and Criminal Sentencing in Texas” (Yntiso 2021)
- “Shaping the (S)electorate” (Simpson and Yntiso 2022)

Thank you!

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Appendix

DA Elections: Descriptive Statistics

	Uncontested	Contested
Republican wins	0.496 (0.496)	0.565 (0.496)
Total population	0.091m (0.203m)	0.341m (0.800m)
Total prison pop.	528.374 (1,167.007)	2,246.135 (5,782.0127)
Black prison pop.	115.328 (514.882)	916.519 (3009.637)
Num. of felony cases	3.78m	1.94m
Num. of elections	1,760	260

[Back to Presentation](#)

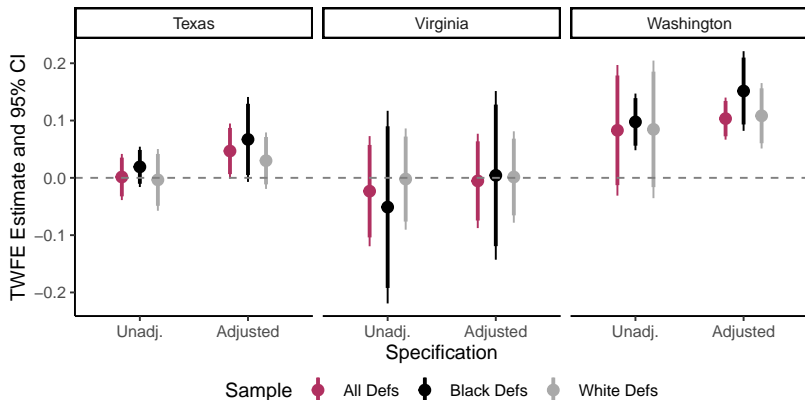
Descriptive Evidence of Partisan Effects



Two-way fixed effects estimates. Sample restricted to contested elections. Robust standard errors clustered at district level.

[Back to Presentation](#)

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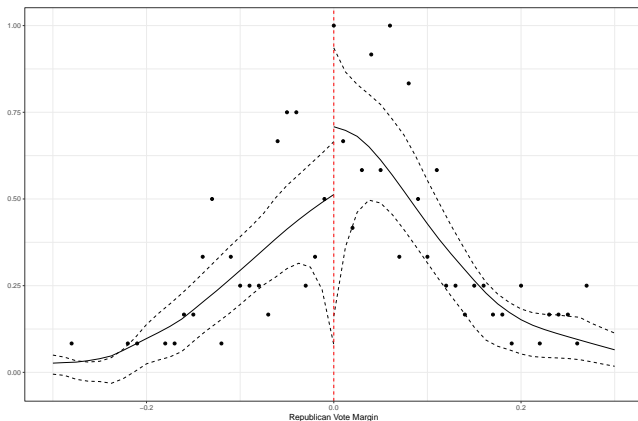
[Back to Presentation](#)

Validity of Research Design: Balance

	Estimate	Std. Err.	Eff. Obs	Clusters
<i>A. Pretreatment Covariates</i>				
Black pop. share	0.053	(0.069)	160	160
(log) Total pop.	0.133	(0.560)	185	185
Rep. Vote Share _{t-1}	0.014	(0.039)	44	44
<i>B. Defendant Characteristics</i>				
Female	0.003	(0.011)	0.778m	147
Prior Criminal History	0.041	(0.060)	1.308m	165

[Back to Presentation](#)

Validity of Research Design: Sorting



[Back to Presentation](#)

Selection into Arrest: Estimand

Consider effect on indictment decision as risk ratio:

$$RR_{naive} = \frac{E[Y|R = 1, A = 1]}{\underbrace{E[Y|R = 0, A = 1]}_{\text{naive risk ratio}}}$$

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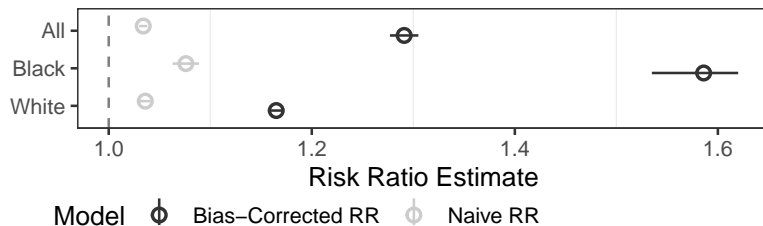
$$RR_{naive} = \frac{E[Y|R = 1, A = 1]}{\underbrace{E[Y|R = 0, A = 1]}_{\text{naive risk ratio}}}$$

Causal risk ratio approach (*see by Zhao et al. 2020*)

$$\begin{aligned} RR_{causal} &= \frac{E[Y_i(1)]}{E[Y_i(0)]} \\ &= \underbrace{\frac{E[Y|R = 1, A = 1]}{E[Y|R = 0, A = 1]}}_{\text{naive risk ratio}} \underbrace{\frac{Pr(R = 1|A = 1)}{Pr(R = 0|A = 1)} / \frac{Pr(R = 1)}{Pr(R = 0)}}_{\text{bias factor}} \end{aligned}$$

[Back to Presentation](#)

Risk Ratio Results: Texas Sample



Estimates adjust for two-way FE and defendant covariates. Bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals.

[Back to Presentation](#)

Selection into Indictment: Estimands

Let I_i denote the indictment decision, with potential outcomes defined accordingly.

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1. **The extensive margin:** RDD effect on the indictment decision ($E[I_i(1) - I_i(0)|r_{jt} = 0.5]$), where r_{jt} is the running variable.

Selection into Indictment: Estimands

Let I_i denote the indictment decision, with potential outcomes defined accordingly.

1. **The extensive margin:** RDD effect on the indictment decision ($E[I_i(1) - I_i(0)|r_{jt} = 0.5]$), where r_{jt} is the running variable.
2. **The intensive margin:** RDD effect on charge severity, regardless of changes in the composition of cases ($E[Y_i(1)|I_i(1) = 1, r_{jt} = 0.5] - E[Y_i(0)|I_i(0) = 1, r_{jt} = 0.5]$; see Dong 2019)

[Back to Presentation](#)

Identifying Assumption

Suppose that conditional on arrest severity, the probability of inclusion into the arrest sample is smooth at the threshold.

Identifying Assumption

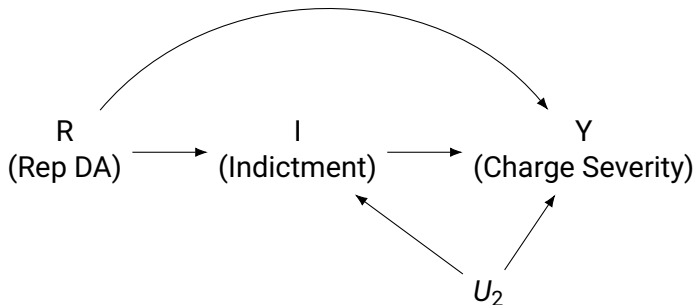
Suppose that conditional on arrest severity, the probability of inclusion into the arrest sample is smooth at the threshold.

To test for indirect effect of party, suppose no direct:

- partisanship affects charge severity only through the indictment decision.

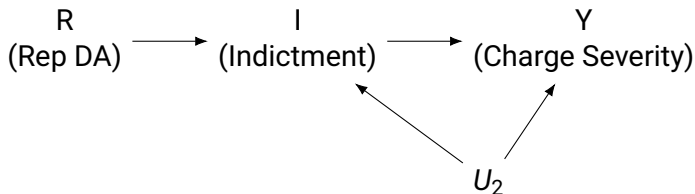
[Back to Presentation](#)

Complete DAG



[Back to Presentation](#)

Visualizing Assumption



[Back to Presentation](#)

Estimation

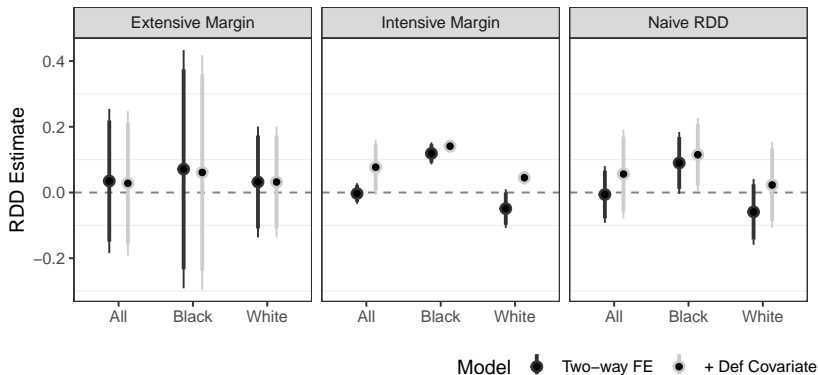
The intensive margin is point identified by with a fuzzy RD estimator using $1\{r \geq 0\} \times Y \times I$ as the outcome and $I \times 1\{r \geq 0\}$ as the treatment e.g. from the right hand side:

$$I \times Y \times 1\{r \geq 0\} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 r + \beta_2 (I \times \widehat{1\{r \geq 0\}}) + \epsilon_2$$

$$I \times 1\{r \geq 0\} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 r + \alpha_2 (1\{r \geq 0\}) + \epsilon_1$$

[Back to Presentation](#)

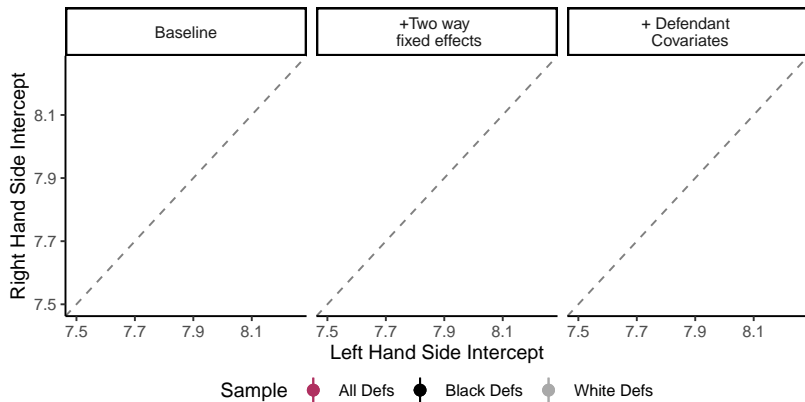
Extensive and Intensive Margins: Texas Sample



Estimates adjust for the severity of the underlying arrest offense. Standard errors are clustered at the election level in the first two panels. Bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals reported in the third panel.

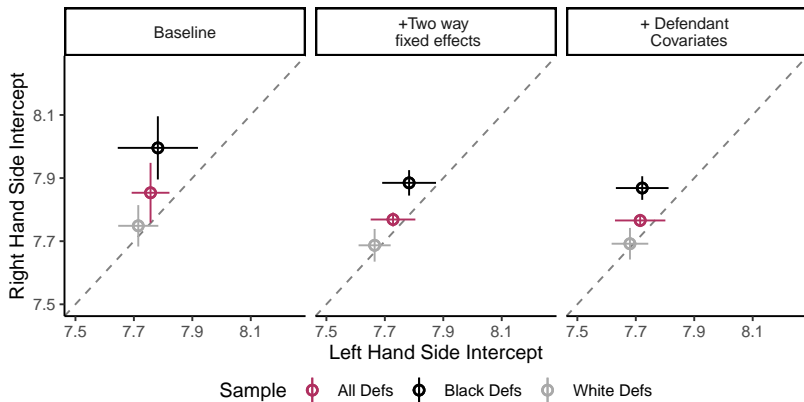
[Back to Presentation](#)

Main Estimates



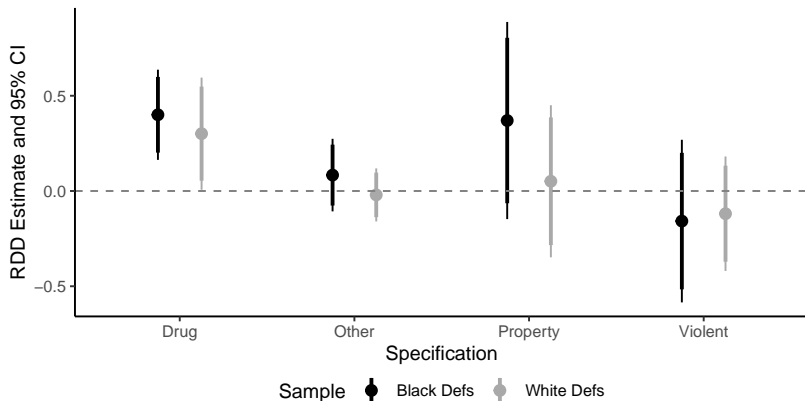
[Back to Presentation](#)

Main Estimates



[Back to Presentation](#)

Heterogeneity by Crime Type



The dependent variable is (logged) charge severity, adjusted by state-and-year- fixed effects. Defendant characteristics include dummies for prior criminal history, and sex. Standard errors are clustered at the election level.

National-level dataset

Local prosecutor elections:

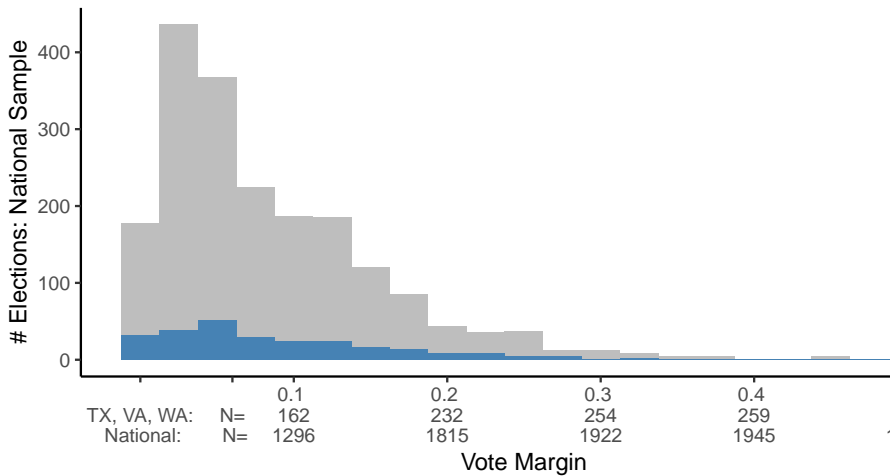
- Covers 2700 counties, for the period 1995-2017

National-level dataset

Local prosecutor elections:

- Covers 2700 counties, for the period 1995-2017

Number of Contested Elections



Effect on Prison Admissions

Incarceration Trends Dataset:

- Prison admissions (by race) by county of commitment
- Assembled by Vera Institute of Justice
- Covers all counties, for the period 1983-2018

Effect on Prison Admissions

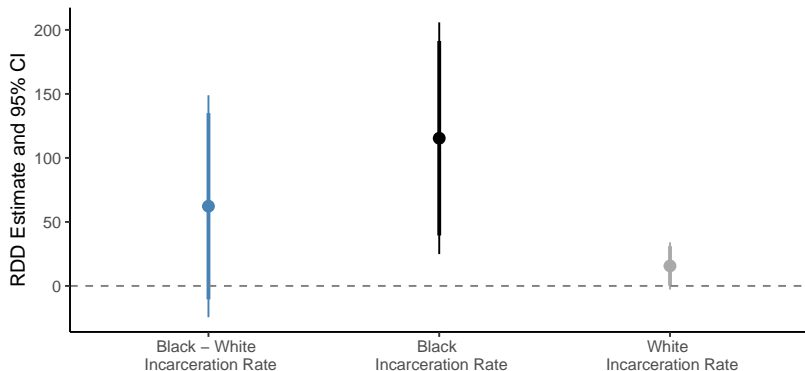
Incarceration Trends Dataset:

- Prison admissions (by race) by county of commitment
- Assembled by Vera Institute of Justice
- Covers all counties, for the period 1983-2018

Final dataset:

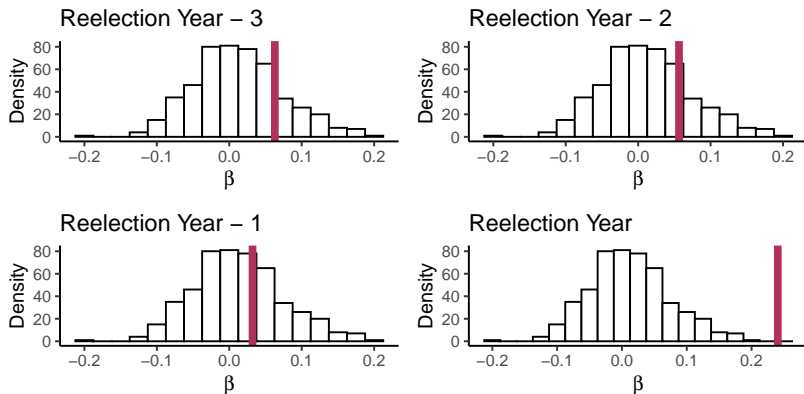
- **Unit:** county - election year dataset
- **Outcome, by race:** new prison admissions per 100k

Effect on New Prison Admissions per 100,000, by race



[Back to Presentation](#)

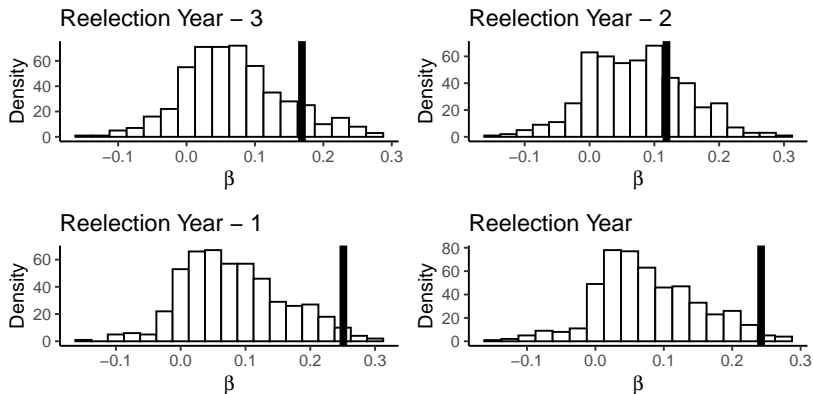
Permutation Test: Full Sample



Estimated placebo effects of electing Republican prosecutor on charge severity. Solid lines depict point estimate obtained in the original data.

[Back to Presentation](#)

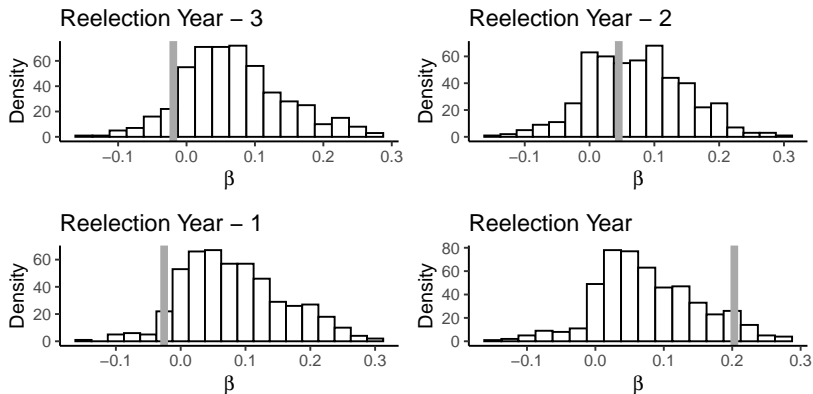
Permutation Test: Black Defendants



Estimated placebo effects of electing Republican prosecutor on charge severity. Solid lines depict point estimate obtained in the original data.

[Back to Presentation](#)

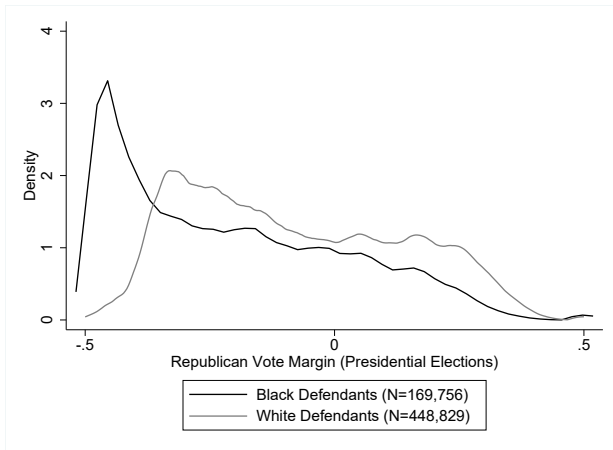
Permutation Test: White Defendants



Estimated placebo effects of electing Republican prosecutor on charge severity. Solid lines depict point estimate obtained in the original data.

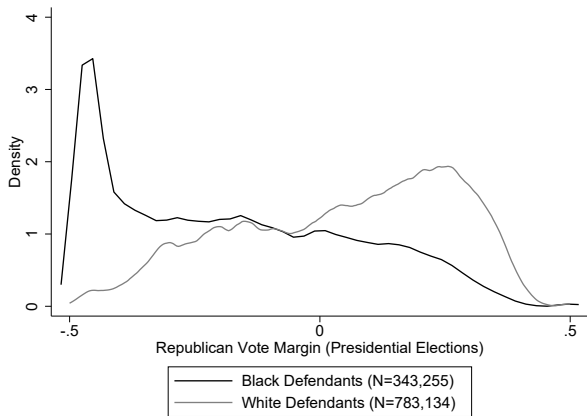
[Back to Presentation](#)

Residential Segregation, Democratic Jurisdictions



[Back to Presentation](#)

Residential Segregation, Republican Jurisdictions



[Back to Presentation](#)