

The Politics of Crime Reporting: Electoral Cycles and the Distortion of Out-Group Crime

Ashrakat Elshehawy¹ Arun Frey² Violeta I. Haas³ Sascha Riaz⁴
Tobias Roemer⁵

¹Postdoctoral Fellow, Stanford University, King Center on Global Development

²Postdoctoral Fellow, Stanford University, RegLab

³Postdoctoral Fellow, Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse, TSE

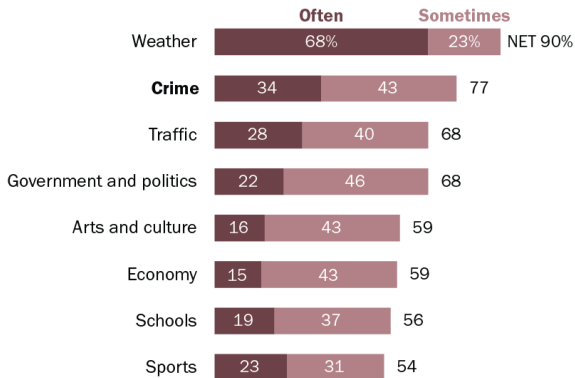
⁴Assistant Professor, European University Institute

⁵PhD Candidate, Nuffield College, University of Oxford

June 25, 2025

More Americans get local news about crime than any other topic except weather

% of U.S. adults who get news and information about each local topic



Source: Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 22-28, 2024.
“Americans’ Changing Relationship With Local News”

Motivation

- ▶ Key driver of anti-immigrant sentiment: fears & prejudice about out-group crime ([Fitzgerald, Curtis, and Corliss 2012](#); [Bove, Elia, and Ferraresi 2023](#)).
- ▶ Large literature on media effects ([Riaz, Bischof, and Wagner 2024](#); [Keita, Renault, and Valette 2024](#); [Couttenier et al. 2021](#); [Berk 2022](#)).
- ▶ Mismatch between perceptions and reality ([Ajzenman, Fede, and Molina 2023](#); [Roose 2021](#)).

Motivation

- ▶ Key driver of anti-immigrant sentiment: fears & prejudice about out-group crime (Fitzgerald, Curtis, and Corliss 2012; Bove, Elia, and Ferraresi 2023).
- ▶ Large literature on media effects (Riaz, Bischof, and Wagner 2024; Keita, Renault, and Valette 2024; Couttenier et al. 2021; Berk 2022).
- ▶ Mismatch between perceptions and reality (Ajzenman, Fede, and Molina 2023; Roose 2021).



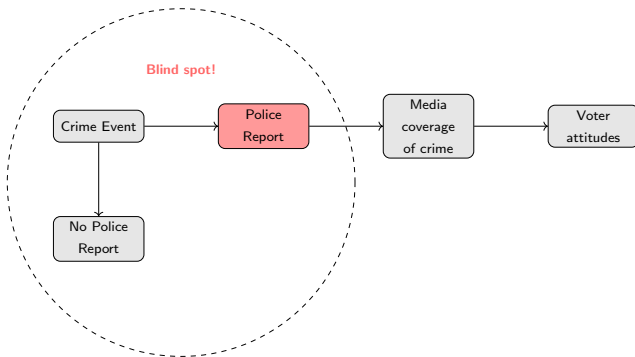
Motivation

- But: media reporting is conditional on what information is available.



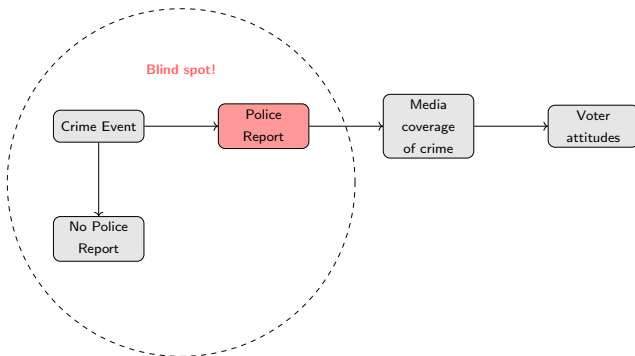
Motivation

- But: media reporting is conditional on what information is available.
 - Police choose what information to share and when.



Motivation

- ▶ But: media reporting is conditional on what information is available.
 - ▶ Police choose what information to share and when.
- ▶ **This project: politics of police reporting.**
 - ▶ Leverage data from > 1 million German police press releases 2014–2024
 - ▶ Test for politically strategic disclosure of information
 - ▶ Out-group crime reporting increases discontinuously prior to local elections



Data Collection and Processing

- ▶ **Source:** Polizei Presseportal
(<https://www.presseportal.de/blaulicht/>)

Data Collection and Processing

- ▶ **Source:** Polizei Presseportal
(<https://www.presseportal.de/blaulicht/>)
- ▶ **Time period:** 2014–2024 ($N \approx 1$ million press releases)

Data Collection and Processing

- ▶ **Source:** Polizei Presseportal
(<https://www.presseportal.de/blaulicht/>)
- ▶ **Time period:** 2014–2024 ($N \approx 1$ million press releases)
- ▶ **We observe:**
 - ▶ Location (police station)
 - ▶ Publication date (+ soon: crime date)

Data Collection and Processing

- ▶ **Source:** Polizei Presseportal
(<https://www.presseportal.de/blaulicht/>)
- ▶ **Time period:** 2014–2024 ($N \approx 1$ million press releases)
- ▶ **We observe:**
 - ▶ Location (police station)
 - ▶ Publication date (+ soon: crime date)
- ▶ **Coded with GPT-4o Batching API (Prompt):**
 - ▶ Crime type
 - ▶ Ethnicity cues: In-group (German) / Out-group / No information
 - ▶ Multiple events (yes/no) and crime status (ongoing vs. concluded)

Data Collection and Processing

- ▶ **Source:** Polizei Presseportal
(<https://www.presseportal.de/blaulicht/>)
- ▶ **Time period:** 2014–2024 ($N \approx 1$ million press releases)
- ▶ **We observe:**
 - ▶ Location (police station)
 - ▶ Publication date (+ soon: crime date)
- ▶ **Coded with GPT-4o Batching API (Prompt):**
 - ▶ Crime type
 - ▶ Ethnicity cues: In-group (German) / Out-group / No information
 - ▶ Multiple events (yes/no) and crime status (ongoing vs. concluded)
- ▶ **Performance:** validated against human coders

Data Collection and Processing

- ▶ **Source:** Polizei Presseportal
(<https://www.presseportal.de/blaulicht/>)
- ▶ **Time period:** 2014–2024 ($N \approx 1$ million press releases)
- ▶ **We observe:**
 - ▶ Location (police station)
 - ▶ Publication date (+ soon: crime date)
- ▶ **Coded with GPT-4o Batching API (Prompt):**
 - ▶ Crime type
 - ▶ Ethnicity cues: In-group (German) / Out-group / No information
 - ▶ Multiple events (yes/no) and crime status (ongoing vs. concluded)
- ▶ **Performance:** validated against human coders

Context: Police Press Releases in Germany

- ▶ **Written by:** dedicated *local police press office*
- ▶ **Reporting rules:**
 - ▶ State press laws & internal directives
 - ▶ German Press Code §12.1: nationality/ethnicity disclosed only if *justified public interest* → inherently vague
- ▶ **Potential for politicization:**
 1. **Selection:** Police choose which incidents to publicize; < 2% of recorded crimes become press releases
 2. **Content:** Discretion w.r.t. information disclosure (e.g., nationality, ethnicity)

Interviews

Data: Police Press Releases (2014-2024)

Source: <https://www.presseportal.de/blaulicht/>

24.03.2017 – 11:08 Time of release

Polizeidirektion Bad Segeberg Police station

**POL-SE: Norderstedt, Rathausallee / Polizei erbittet
Zeugenhinweise nach einer Körperverletzung** Press release title



Bad Segeberg (ots) Location

Am Donnerstagabend, den 23.03.17, kam es in Norderstedt zu einer Körperverletzung in der Rathausallee. Gegen 17.10 Uhr schlug eine Gruppe von rund zehn Jugendlichen mit arabischen Erscheinungsbild in auf dem Bahnhofsvorplatz auf zwei kurdische Brüder (16 u. 19 J.) aus Henstedt-Ulzburg ein. Diese erlitten dabei leichte Gesichtsverletzungen; der 16-Jährige zusätzlich eine Knieverletzung. Sie wurden mit dem Rettungswagen zur weiteren Behandlung in ein Krankenhaus gebracht. Bei einem der Tatverdächtigen handelt es sich um einen 17-jährigen Syrer aus Norderstedt. Ein zweiter wird wie folgt beschrieben: männlich, athletisch, etwa 22 Jahre alt, Ziegenbart mit einem Strich, braune, knöchelhohe Schuhe, Jeans. Er soll arabisch gesprochen haben. Der Grund der Auseinandersetzung ist bisher nicht bekannt. Einen Teil der Tatverdächtigen kannte einer der Geschädigten flüchtig. Wer Angaben zu den Tätern oder dem Grund der Auseinandersetzung machen kann, wird gebeten, sich bei der Kriminalpolizei in Norderstedt unter 040-528060 zu melden.

Press release text

Pressekontakt:

Polizeidirektion Bad Segeberg
- Pressestelle -
Dorfstr. 16-18
23795 Bad Segeberg

*Bad Segeberg – On the evening of
Thursday, March 23, 2017, an
assault occurred in Norderstedt.*

*A group of about ten youths with
Arab appearances attacked two
Kurdish brothers (16 and 19).
One suspect is a 17-year-old
Syrian. A second suspect is
described as male, athletic, about
22 years old [...] and was
reportedly speaking Arabic.*

*The reason for the altercation is
not yet known.*

Classification Performance GPT-4o

Type of Crime

- ▶ Violent: $F1 = 0.92$
- ▶ Property: $F1 = 0.97$
- ▶ Other: $F1 = 0.82$

Ethnicity Cues

- ▶ No information on perpetrator:
 $F1 = 0.95$
- ▶ No ethnicity/nationality
mentioned: $F1 = 0.85$
- ▶ In-group (German): $F1 = 0.83$
- ▶ Out-group / foreign: $F1 = 0.91$

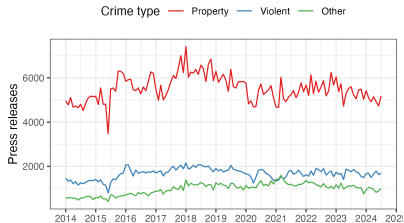
$$F1 = 2 \times \frac{\text{precision} \times \text{recall}}{\text{precision} + \text{recall}}$$

$$\text{precision} = \frac{TP}{TP + FP}$$

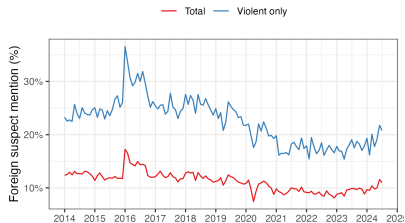
$$\text{recall} = \frac{TP}{TP + FN}$$

GPT-3.5/Gemini 1.5 Pro

Police Crime Reporting over Time



(a) Press releases over time, by crime type



(b) Press releases with foreign perpetrator

Figure 1: Composition of police press releases

Drivers of Selective Transparency in Police Reporting

► Politically strategic disclosure of information

- Test whether police reporting systematically shifts in the days surrounding state elections
- **Regression Discontinuity in Time (RDiT) analysis around local elections**

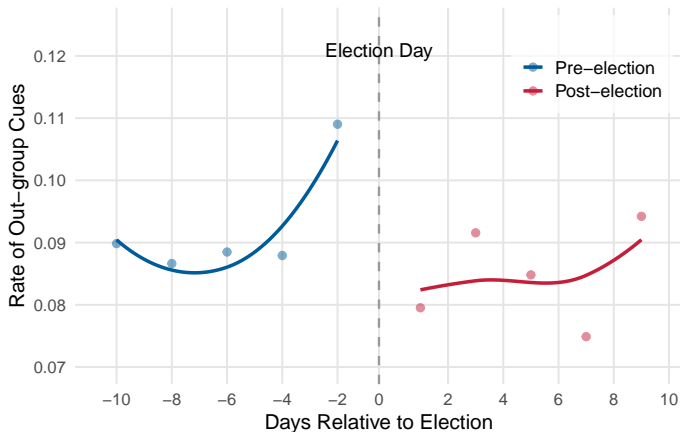
Strategic reporting around elections

- ▶ Does the police differentially report out-group crime in the run-up to local elections?
- ▶ OLS RDiT estimator around state election cutoff:

$$Y_i = \alpha_{s,t} + \beta \text{post}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

- ▶ Y_i : 1 if release i contains an out-group cue, 0 otherwise
- ▶ $\text{post}_i = \mathbf{1}\{X_i \geq 0\}$, with X_i = days from nearest state election for release i
- ▶ Exclude $X_i = 0$; use window $|X_i| \leq h$ with $h = 2$ days for main spec
- ▶ $\alpha_{s,t}$: state/police-station \times election fixed effects; SEs clustered by election

Out-Group Cues Around State Elections



Notes: The figure plots the daily mean rate of out-group cues in police press releases (black points) within ± 10 days of each state election. Means are calculated in 2-day bins. Separate LOESS curves (blue pre-election, red post-election) are fitted on either side of the cutoff (vertical dashed line).

RDiT OLS Estimates: Main Results

Table 3: Main results

	Out-group cue (0/1)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Post-Election (0/1)	-0.029* (0.014)	-0.029** (0.012)	-0.024** (0.011)
R ²	0.002	0.036	0.194
Observations	2,219	2,219	2,219
State x Election fixed effects		✓	
Police station x Election fixed effects			✓

Notes: Results from OLS regressions where the outcome variable is a binary indicator for the presence of out-group cues in a police press release. Police press releases are the unit of observation. Post-election is a binary indicator that equals one for press-releases issued after a given state election. We use a bandwidth of 2 days around state elections. Standard errors are clustered at the state level. Signif. Codes: ***, 0.01, **, 0.05, *, 0.1.

RDiT OLS Estimates: Immigration Salience and AfD-support

Table 4: Heterogeneity by far-right support and immigration salience

	Out-group cue (0/1)	
	(1)	(2)
Post-Election (0/1)	-0.029*** (0.008)	-0.028*** (0.008)
Post-Election (0/1) \times AfD vote share in state election	-0.019** (0.009)	
Post-Election (0/1) \times Immigration salience		-0.015* (0.007)
R ²	0.037	0.036
Observations	2,219	2,219
State x Election fixed effects	✓	✓

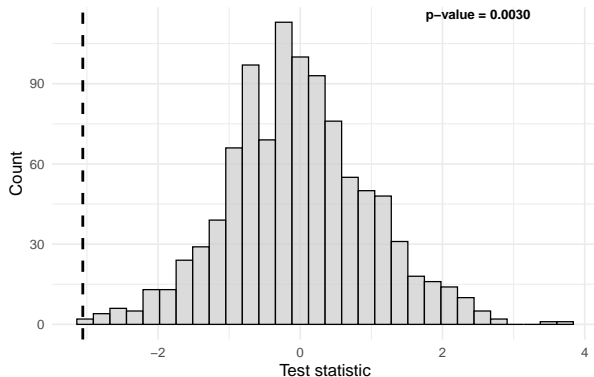
Notes: Results from OLS regressions where the outcome variable is a binary indicator for the presence of out-group cues in a police press release. Police press releases are the unit of observation. Post-election is a binary indicator that equals one for press-releases issued after a given state election. We use a bandwidth of 2 days around state elections. Moderators are (1) AfD vote share in a given state election and (2) survey-based estimates of immigration salience in a given state election. We estimate immigration salience using data from the two most recent waves of the Politbarometer survey conducted in each state prior to its respective state election, including survey weights. Both moderator variables are measured in standard deviations. Standard errors are clustered at the state-election level. Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1.

Additional Analysis

- ▶ Decrease in releases lacking information on ethnicity or nationality
- ▶ No shift in the types of crimes that are covered
- ▶ No shift in the investigation status of crimes that are covered
- ▶ No shift in reporting counts (relative to Pre-Election Fridays/Saturdays)
- ▶ No differences between CDU/CSU and SPD interior minister
- ▶ Soon: Increase in time span between publication and crime date?

Placebo Treatments

1,000 fake Sundays \rightarrow findings are unlikely to be driven by random chance or day-of-the-week effects ($p = 0.086$).



Notes: Distribution of placebo t -statistics. For each of 1,000 iterations, we replace the actual election date of every state with a Sunday drawn at random from the sample period. We then re-estimate the main specification in the ± 2 -day window around these placebo cutoffs and record the t -statistic on the post indicator. The histogram displays the resulting distribution; the dashed vertical line marks the true-election t -statistic.

Placebo Test

Table A.24: Placebo test: mandatory nationality reporting

	Out-group cue (0/1) (1)
Post-Election (0/1)	0.004 (0.006)
R ²	0.252
Observations	89
State x Election fixed effects	✓

Notes: Estimates from OLS regressions. The sample includes the Brandenburg 2024 and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern 2021 state elections. In both states, naming the nationality of offenders in police press releases was the default and mandated by state-level reporting guidelines from 2020 onward. Standard errors clustered at the state-election level.

Wrapping Up

- ▶ German local police systematically amplify out-group crime cues
 - In the days before local elections
- ▶ Police as powerful gatekeepers of information
 - Can shape media narratives and potentially drive public perceptions and attitudes around immigration and crime

Thank You !

Get in touch: `violeta.haas@iast.fr`

`@HaasVioleta`

References I

-  Ajzenman, Nicolás, Federico Fede, and Francisco J. Molina (2023). "Immigration, Crime, and Crime (Mis)Perceptions". In: *American Economic Review: Applied Economics* 15.4, pp. 143–182. DOI: 10.1257/app.20210156.
-  Berk, Nicolai (Dec. 2022). "Limits of Media Effects: How Politicisation Shapes the Pace of Attitudinal Change". Manuscript. URL: %5Curl%7Bhttps://github.com/nicolaiberk/bild/raw/main/paper/Manuscript_Framing.pdf%7D.
-  Bove, Vincenzo, Leandro Elia, and Massimiliano Ferraresi (2023). "Immigration, Fear of Crime, and Public Spending on Security". In: *The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 39.1, pp. 235–280.
-  Couttenier, Mathieu et al. (2021). "Anti-muslim voting and media coverage of immigrant crimes". In: *Review of Economics and Statistics*, pp. 1–33.

References II



Fitzgerald, Jennifer, K Amber Curtis, and Catherine L Corliss (2012).
“Anxious publics: Worries about crime and immigration”. In: *Comparative Political Studies* 45.4, pp. 477–506.



Keita, Sekou, Thomas Renault, and Jérôme Valette (2024). “The Usual Suspects: Offender Origin, Media Reporting and Natives’ Attitudes Towards Immigration”. In: *The Economic Journal* 134.657, pp. 322–362. DOI: 10.1093/ej/uead059.



Riaz, Sascha, Daniel Bischof, and Markus Wagner (2024). “Out-group threat and xenophobic hate crimes: evidence of local intergroup conflict dynamics between immigrants and natives”. In: *The Journal of Politics* 86.4, pp. 1146–1161.



Roose, Jochen (2021). *Wenn es Nacht wird in Deutschland: Ergebnisse einer repräsentativen Umfrage zu Kriminalitätsangst und der Akzeptanz von Maßnahmen gegen Kriminalität*. Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

Supplementary Material

Workflow

Stage	Description
1. Incident	Dispatched officers record details (event, witnesses, location, etc.).
2. Documentation	Officers enter data for each event into a centralized system.
3. Flagging	Local police stations review incident logs and flag high-profile events, incidents with investigative necessities, or public-awareness campaigns as “press-relevant.”
4. Selection	Regional Public Relations Division receives flagged and unflagged cases and decides which incidents to release.
5. Drafting	A press officer prepares the release and selects the information to include, while considering ethical codes.
6. Review	Drafts are reviewed internally, typically by multiple staff members, sometimes by senior leadership, before approval.
7. Dissemination	Approved releases are published via the police website, Presseportal.de, and email to subscribed media. Social media is used selectively.
8. Media Interaction	Journalists may follow up with questions or requests for clarification. The press office may issue corrections or updates.

Table 1: Standard Workflow from Crime to Press Release

Selection Criteria

Three commonly referenced criteria:

- (1) **public interest:** which considers media inquiries and the visibility of the incident
- (2) **investigative value:** which relates to calls for witnesses or clarifications of conflicting facts
- (3) **proactive communication:** which includes managing the narrative in high-profile cases

Interview Quote 1

"So I was very involved in the so-called refugee issue, I believe it was around 2019, when there were also many incidents. During that period, we communicated such incidents involving asylum seekers with maximum transparency because we did not want accusations or criticism from the right-wing spectrum claiming we were hiding something or allowing a narrative to emerge that we remain silent when a particular group of people, who are central to the discussion here, commit something like shoplifting."

back

Interview Quote 2

"...when we currently deal with people of Russian or Ukrainian descent, we aim to be transparent about this as well, because it is now a topic that concerns the public and people in general. We are thus more sensitive in these cases, whereas perhaps five years ago we wouldn't have even considered whether we should specifically address conflicts here between Russians and Ukrainians."

back

Classification Performance GPT 3.5/ Gemini 1.5 Pro

Type of Crime

- ▶ Violent: $F1 = 0.92/0.90$
- ▶ Property: $F1 = 0.94/0.95$
- ▶ Other: $F1 = 0.31/0.71$

Ethnicity Cues

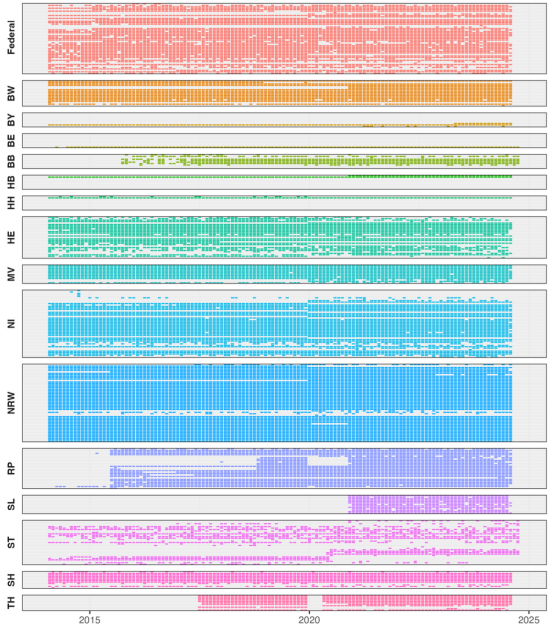
- ▶ No information on perpetrator:
 $F1 = 0.018/0.94$
- ▶ No ethnicity/nationality
mentioned: $F1 = 0.36/0.78$
- ▶ In-group (German): $F1 =$
 $0.45/0.53$
- ▶ Out-group / foreign: $F1 =$
 $0.67/0.88$

$$F1 = 2 \times \frac{\text{precision} \times \text{recall}}{\text{precision} + \text{recall}}$$

$$\text{precision} = \frac{TP}{TP + FP}$$

$$\text{recall} = \frac{TP}{TP + FN}$$

Data Collection



Intercoder Reliability

Variable	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha
multiple_events	0.769669	0.769593
type_of_crime	0.841535	0.841572
non_german	0.800237	0.799914

Summary Statistics by Year

Table A.18: Summary Statistics by Year

[illegible]

Press Releases by Weekday

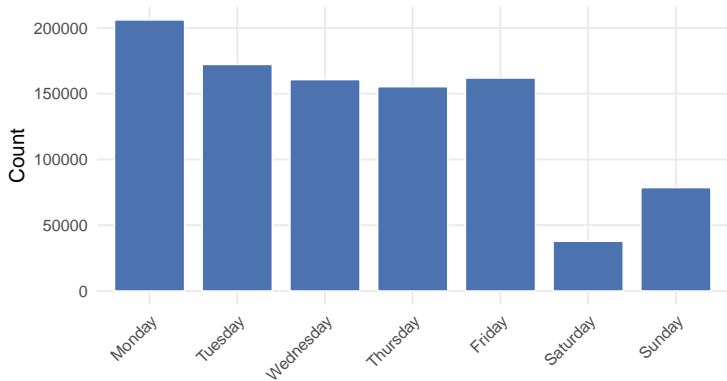
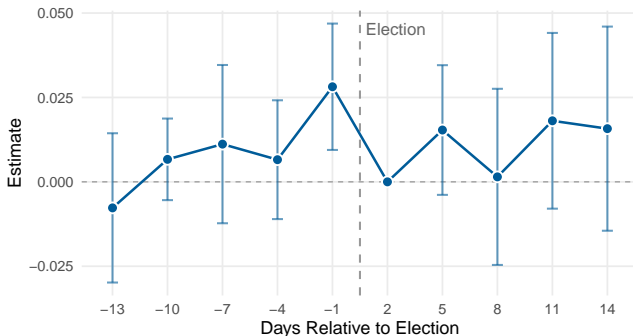


Figure 2: The figure shows the number of police press releases published by weekday.

Event-Study Specification



Notes: The figure displays coefficients from an OLS event study specification where out-group cues in police press releases are the outcome variable. Each point represents the estimate for a 3-day bin relative to a state election, with the first bin post-election (days 1-3) serving as the omitted reference category. The first pre-election bin only covers two days prior to the election (analogous to our main specification) because the day of the election itself is excluded from the analysis. Vertical lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. The model includes state \times year fixed effects ($a_{s,t}$), and standard errors are clustered at the state-election level.

Party of Minister of the Interior

Table 5: Heterogeneity by party of state minister of the interior

Party of interior minister	Out-group cue (0/1)	
	CDU/CSU (1)	SPD (2)
Post-Election (0/1)	-0.037** (0.013)	-0.024* (0.013)
R ²	0.013	0.047
Observations	808	1,411
State x Election fixed effects	✓	✓

Notes: Results from OLS regressions where the outcome variable is a binary indicator for the presence of out-group cues in a police press release. Police press releases are the unit of observation. Post-election is a binary indicator that equals one for press-releases issued after a given state election. We use a bandwidth of 2 days around state elections. The sample is split by party membership of the state interior minister at the time of a given state election. Standard errors are clustered at the state-election level. Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1.

Other Ethnicity Cues

Table A.19: Other ethnicity cues

	In-group (German) cue (1)	No ethnicity info. (2)
Post-Election (0/1)	0.0003 (0.006)	0.029** (0.013)
R ²	0.018	0.037
Observations	2,219	2,219
State x Election fixed effects	✓	✓

Notes: Results from OLS regressions where the outcome variables are binary indicator for the presence of (1) German in-group cues or (2) no cues about nationality/ethnicity in a police press release. Police press releases are the unit of observation. Post-election is a binary indicator that equals one for press-releases issued after a given state election. We use a bandwidth of 2 days around state elections. Standard errors are clustered at the state-election level. Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1.

Type of crime

Table A.20: Type of crime

	Other (0/1) (1)	Property crime (0/1) (2)	Violent crime (0/1) (3)
Post-Election (0/1)	-0.0004 (0.003)	-0.004 (0.004)	0.004* (0.003)
R ²	0.012	0.029	0.028
Observations	972,801	972,801	972,801
State x Election fixed effects	✓	✓	✓

Notes: Results from OLS regressions where the outcome variables are binary indicators for different types of crime in a police press release: (1) other crimes, (2) property crimes, (3) violent crimes. Police press releases are the unit of observation. Post-election is a binary indicator equal to one for press releases issued after a given state election. Standard errors are clustered at the state-election level. Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1.

Pre-Election Fridays/Saturdays

Table A.23: Difference in Daily Report Counts on Pre-Election Fridays/Saturdays

	Daily count of press releases		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Pre-Election Fri/Sat (0/1)	0.454 (3.52)	1.54 (2.46)	1.55 (2.05)
Observations	15,322	15,322	15,322
State fixed effects		✓	✓
Year fixed effects		✓	✓
Weekday fixed effects			✓

Notes: Results from an OLS regression where the outcome variable is the total count of police press releases on a given day. The unit of observation is a state-day (Friday or Saturday). The analysis compares the Fridays and Saturdays immediately before a state election to all other Fridays and Saturdays in the sample period. Pre-Election Fri/Sat is a binary indicator equal to one for the days immediately preceding an election in that specific state. The model includes state, year, and day-of-week fixed effects. Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1.

Placebo: Mandatory Nationality Reporting

Table A.24: Placebo test: mandatory nationality reporting

	Out-group cue (0/1) (1)
Post-Election (0/1)	0.004 (0.006)
R ²	0.252
Observations	89
State x Election fixed effects	✓

Notes: Estimates from OLS regressions. The sample includes the Brandenburg 2024 and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern 2021 state elections. In both states, naming the nationality of offenders in police press releases was the default and mandated by state-level reporting guidelines from 2020 onward. Standard errors clustered at the state-election level.

Investigation status

Table A.25: Investigation status

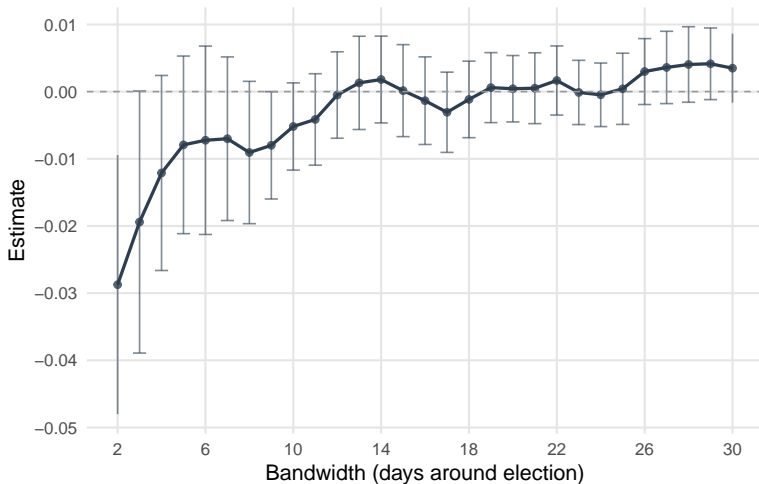
	Investigation concluded (1)	No info. (2)	Investigation ongoing (3)
Post-Election (0/1)	0.002 (0.004)	0.0007 (0.0008)	-0.003 (0.004)
R ²	0.006	0.004	0.006
Observations	981,391	981,391	981,391
State fixed effects	✓	✓	✓

Notes: Results from OLS regressions where the outcome variables are binary indicators for the status of an investigation in a police press release: (1) investigation concluded, (2) no information on investigation status, (3) investigation ongoing. Police press releases are the unit of observation. Post-election is a binary indicator equal to one for press releases issued after a given state election. Standard errors are clustered at the state level. Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1.

Count of press releases over time



Robustness: varying the bandwidth



Notes: Results from the main specification for varying bandwidths between 2 and 30 days.