

The Police as Gatekeepers of Information: Immigration Salience and Selective Crime Reporting

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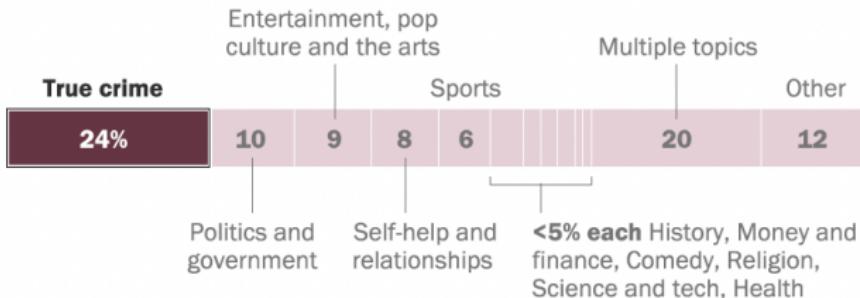
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True crime is the most common topic among top-ranked podcasts ...

% of top-ranked podcasts that are primarily about each topic

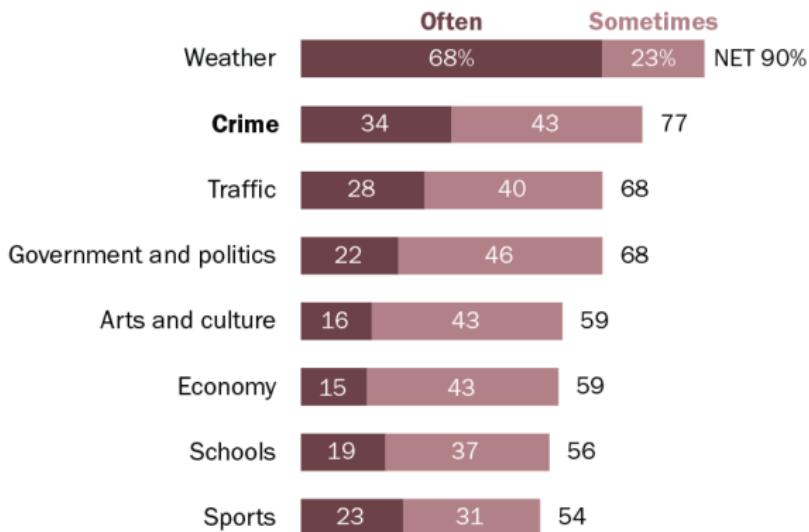


Note: N=451 top-ranked podcasts. Refer to the "How we did this" box for more. "Podcast listeners" in this analysis are those who have listened to a podcast in the past 12 months.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 451 podcasts that were in the top 300 in average U.S. daily rankings on Spotify and Apple Podcasts from April 1-Sept. 30, 2022. Survey of U.S. adults conducted Dec. 5-11, 2022.

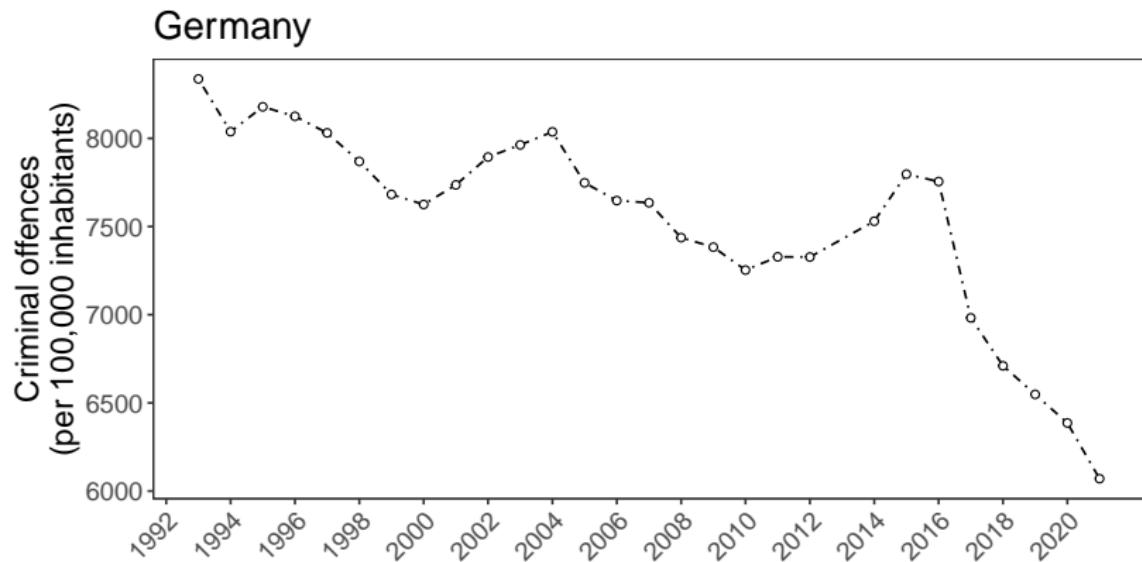
More Americans get local news about crime than any other topic except weather

% 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”

Crime rates are decreasing...



...yet worries about crime are increasing

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 - ▶ 66% view crime as (very) important issue
 - ▶ 43% feel unsafe in public spaces at night
- ▶ One-third of local news articles cover crime (van Um 2015)
 - ▶ Disproportionate coverage of violent crime

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 2025a](#)).
 - ▶ Mismatch between perceptions and reality ([Ajzenman, Fede, and Molina 2023](#); [Roose 2021](#)).

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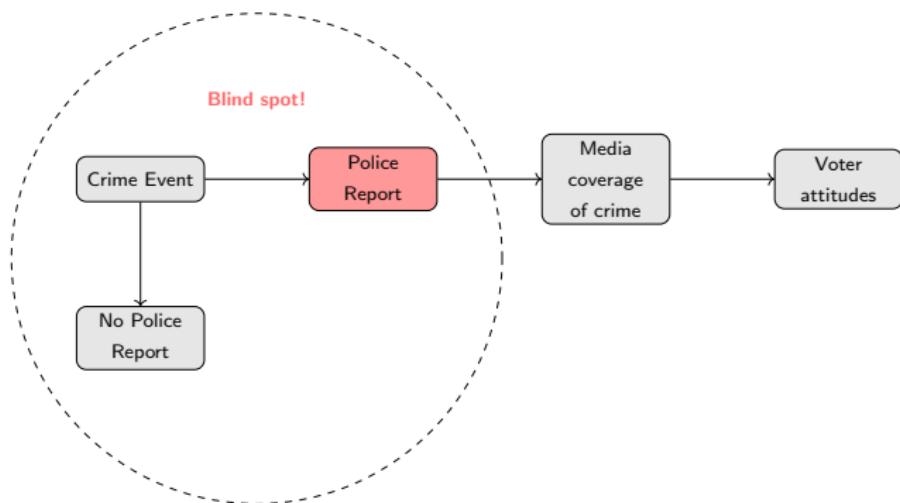
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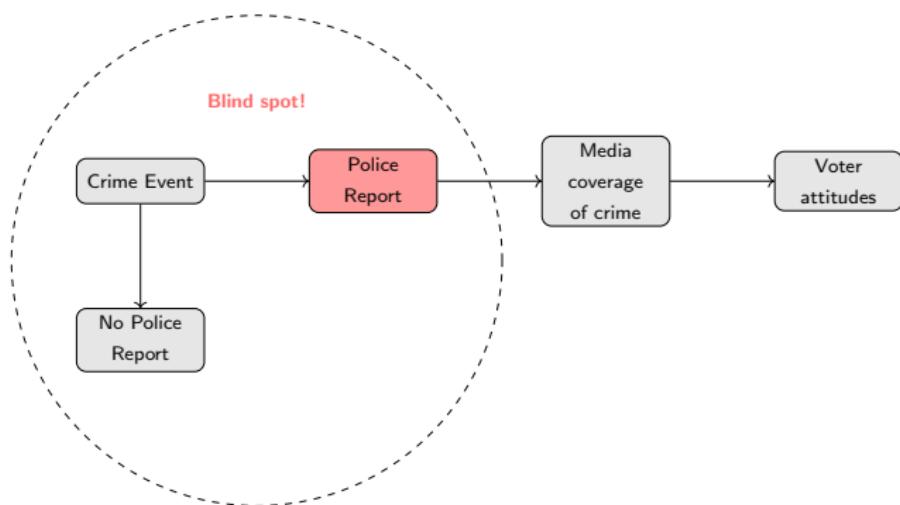
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- ▶ **This project: police as gatekeepers of information**
 1. Choose which incidents to publicize (in Germany, less than 2%).
 2. Decide what details to include (e.g., nationality).



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 - ▶ Police have been shown to manipulate operational functions to exert pressure on politicians who adopt policies they oppose (Wirsching 2025).

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- Pole position as the near-monopolist of crime information.

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Interviews

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- ▶ Immigration and crime are heavily linked in the public mind
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- The disclosure of out-group cues in police press releases will rise and fall with the political salience of immigration.

Data Collection and Processing

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 - ▶ Multiple events (yes/no) and crime status (ongoing vs. concluded)

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- ▶ **Performance:** Validated against human coders

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- ▶ **Reporting rules:**

- ▶ State press laws & internal directives
- ▶ German Press Code §12.1: nationality/ethnicity disclosed only if *justified public interest* → inherently vague

Workflow

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 Zeughinweise 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 konnte 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

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Press release text

Pressekontakt:

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

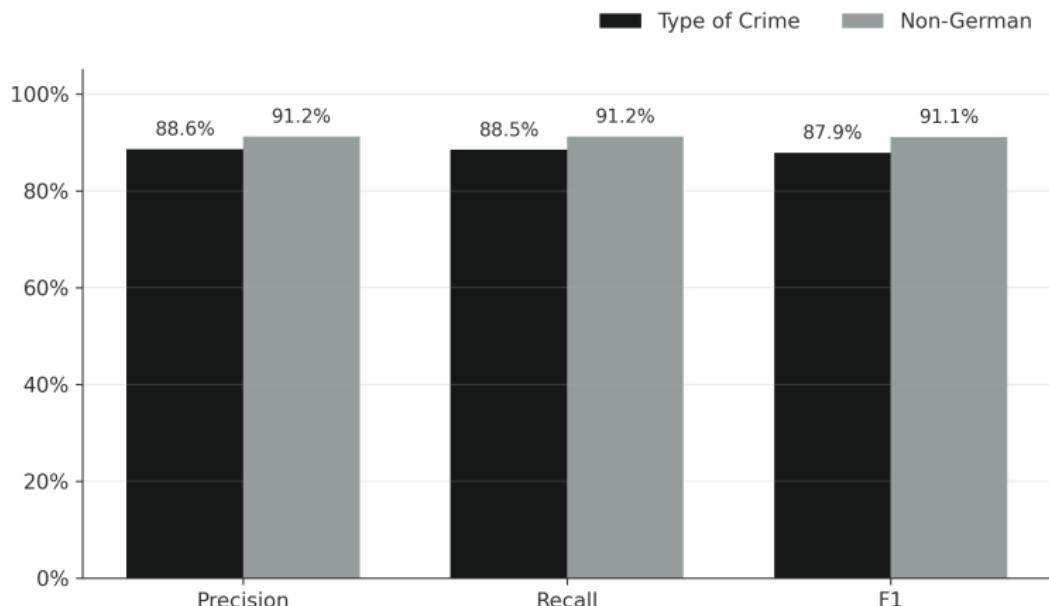
A group of about ten youths with Arab appearances attacked two Kurdish brothers (16 and 19). One suspect is a 17-year-old Syrian. A second suspect is described as male, athletic, about 22 years old [...] and was reportedly speaking Arabic.

The reason for the altercation is not yet known.

Example Classification

Variable	Coding
Publication Date	March 24, 2017
Location	Bad Segeberg
Type of crime	Violent
Investigation status	Ongoing
Out-group cue	Yes
Out-group markers (verbatim)	“arabischen Erscheinungsbild”; “Syrer”; “arabisch gesprochen”
Multiple events	No

Classification Performance GPT-4o



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

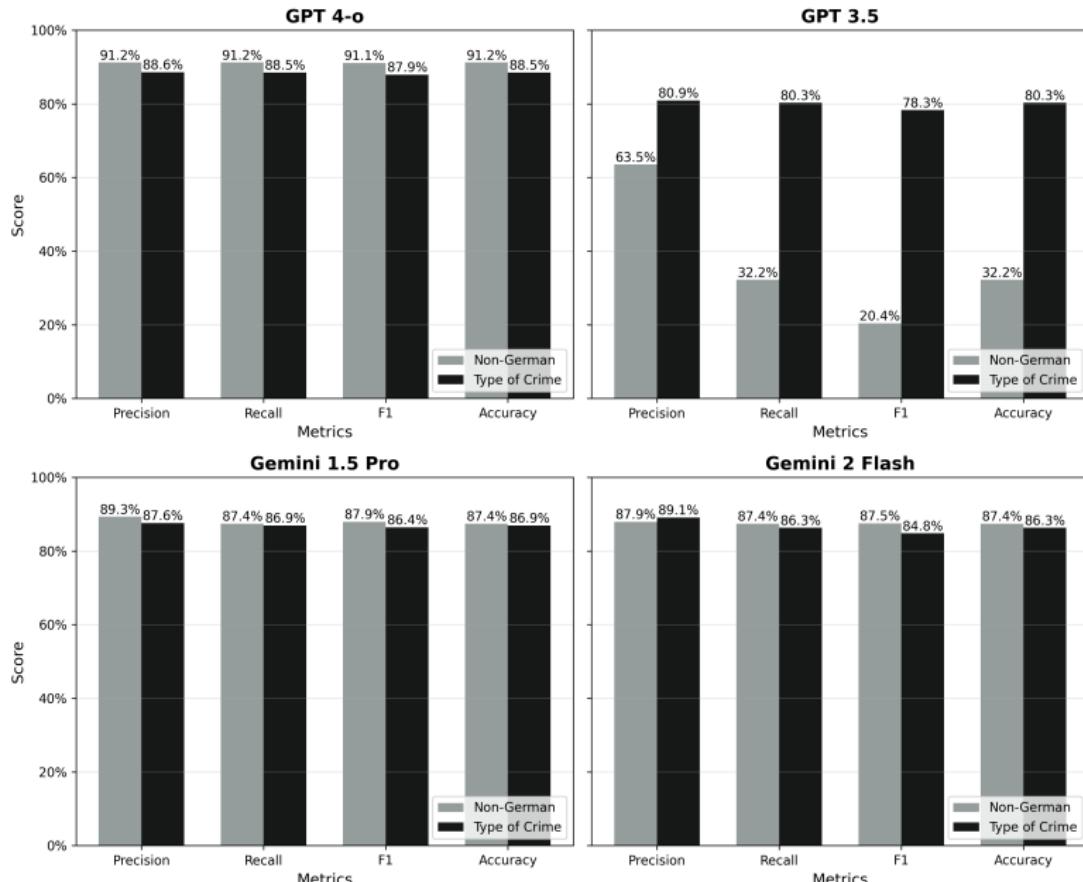
$$\text{recall} = \frac{\text{TP}}{\text{TP} + \text{FN}}$$

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

Breakdown of Classification Performance

Intercoder Reliability

Comparision of Performance to Other Models



Police Reporting in High-Salience Periods

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The screenshot shows a news article from WDR (Westdeutscher Rundfunk) titled "Silvester: Einsatzleiter dachte, alles im Griff zu haben". The article features a photograph of a man in a dark suit and tie sitting in a conference room. He is looking towards the left of the frame. In the background, several other people are seated at tables in what appears to be a meeting or press conference setting. The WDR logo is in the top left corner, and a navigation bar at the top includes links for Wetter, Verkehr, and a search function.

Silvester: Einsatzleiter dachte, alles im Griff zu haben

Stand: 18.03.2016, 18:54 Uhr

Study I: sudden, nationwide salience shock around 2015/16 Cologne New Year's Eve (NYE) assaults.

Police Reporting in High-Salience Periods



The screenshot shows a news article from WDR. At the top, there's a navigation bar with the WDR logo, weather and traffic icons, and search functions. Below the navigation, there are tabs for Nachrichten, Sport, Wissen, Verbraucher, Kultur, and Unterhaltung. The main content features a photograph of a man in a suit sitting at a conference table in what appears to be a police or government meeting room. Below the photo is the caption: "Silvester: Einsatzleiter dachte, alles im Griff zu haben". At the bottom left, it says "Stand: 18.03.2016, 18:54 Uhr".



Study I: sudden, nationwide salience shock around 2015/16 Cologne New Year's Eve (NYE) assaults.

Study II: predictable cycles of immigration-salience around state (*Landtag*) elections

Empirical Strategy

- ▶ OLS RDiT estimator around 2015/16 NYE/state election cutoff:

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

- ▶ Y_i : 1 if release i contains an out-group cue, 0 otherwise
- ▶ $\text{post/pre}_i = \mathbf{1}\{X_i < 0\}$, with X_i = days from 2015/16 NYE/nearest state election for release i
- ▶ Exclude $X_i = 0$; use window $|X_i| \leq h$ with $h = 30/2$ days for main spec
- ▶ $\alpha_{s,t}$: state/police-station \times election fixed effects; SEs clustered by election

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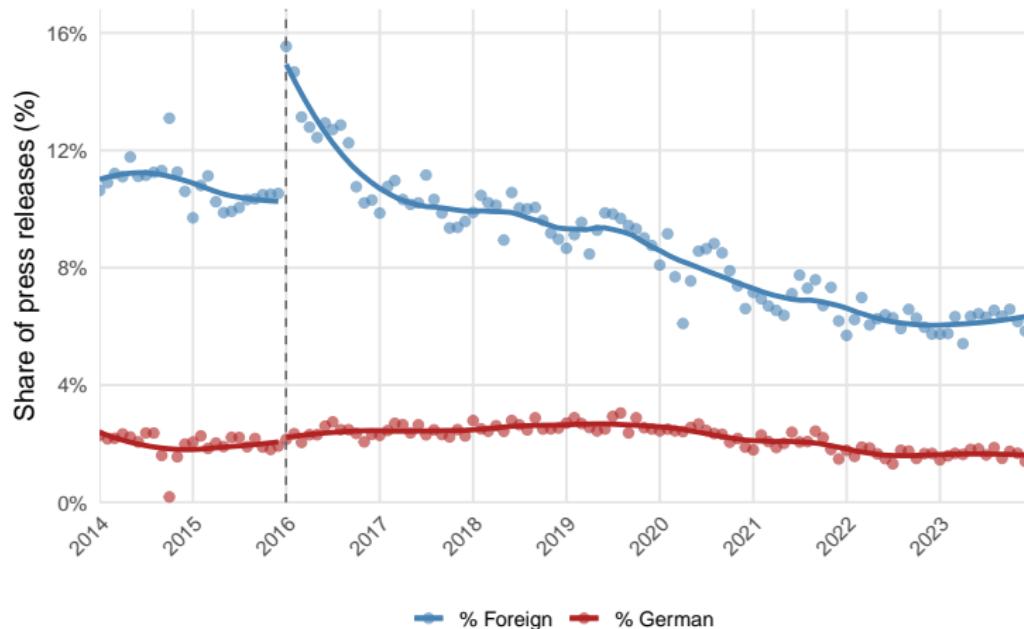
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Interpretation: difference in mean probability of out-group cue being disclosed

Assumption: true composition of offenders does not shift around cutoff

Study I: Reporting before and after NYE 2015/16

Discontinuity in the disclosure of out-group cues in press releases immediately following the assaults



Notes: The figure displays the monthly share of all police press releases that mention foreign versus German perpetrators from January 2014 through December 2023. Raw monthly values are shown as points, with separate LOESS smoothers fitted before and after the December 31, 2015, cutoff (vertical dashed line).

Study I: NYE RDiT OLS Estimates

Table 1: Differential reporting around NYE 2015

	Out-group cue (0/1)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Post-NYE	0.054*** (0.005)	0.052*** (0.005)	0.043*** (0.008)	0.053*** (0.005)
R ²	0.006	0.083	0.004	0.006
Observations	15,837	15,837	8,272	15,399
Police station fixed effects		✓		
Excluding NRW			✓	
Excluding Cologne				✓

Notes: Results from OLS regressions where the outcome is a binary indicator for the presence of out-group cues in a police press release. The unit of observation is the individual press release. *Post-NYE* is a binary indicator equal to one for releases issued after NYE 2015. The analysis uses a bandwidth of ± 30 days around NYE. Significance codes: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

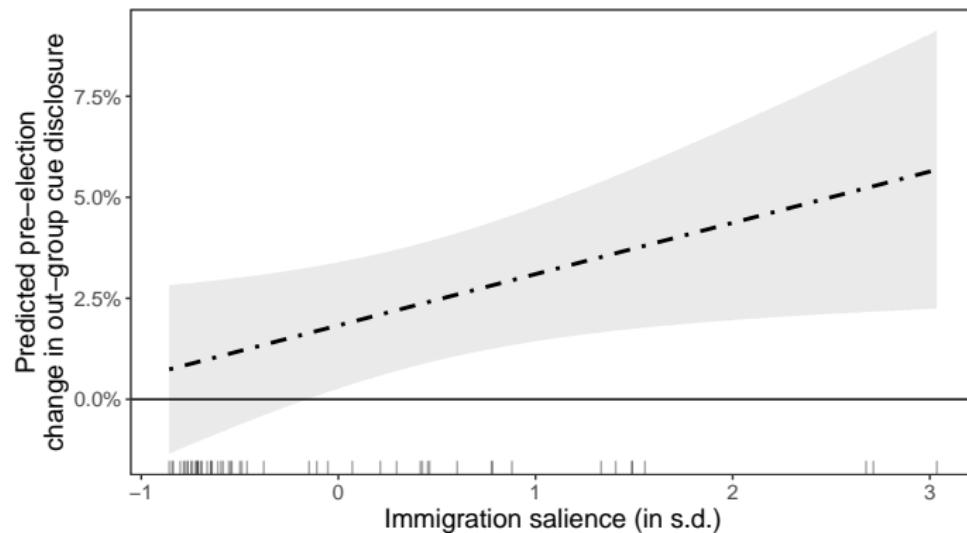
Study II: State Election RDiT OLS Estimates

Table 2: Differential reporting around elections

	Out-group cue (0/1)					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Pre-Election	0.029** (0.012)	0.024** (0.010)	0.029*** (0.009)	0.027*** (0.010)	0.023*** (0.007)	0.028*** (0.008)
Pre-Election × Mig. salience				0.019** (0.008)	0.018*** (0.006)	0.015* (0.007)
R ²	0.002	0.178	0.035	0.006	0.179	0.036
Observations	2,219	2,186	2,218	2,219	2,186	2,218
Police station × Election fixed effects	✓				✓	
State × Election fixed effects			✓			✓

Notes: Results from OLS regressions where the outcome is a binary indicator for the presence of out-group cues in a police press release. The unit of observation is the individual press release. *Pre-election* is a binary indicator equal to one for releases issued before a given state election. The analysis uses a bandwidth of ±2 days around state elections. The moderator is a survey-based measure of immigration salience for each state election, defined as the share of respondents naming integration, foreigners, or refugees as one of the two most important political issues facing the country. Immigration salience is calculated from the two most recent Politbarometer survey waves conducted in each state prior to its respective state election, incorporating survey weights, and standardized (mean = 0, SD = 1). Standard errors are clustered at the state-election level. Significance codes: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Study II: Marginal Effects by Immigration Salience



Notes: The plot shows the estimated post-election change in the probability that a police press release contains an out-group cue as a function of immigration salience. The solid line is the estimated marginal effect with 95% confidence intervals. The rug marks the empirical distribution of the moderator across state elections. Immigration salience is measured as the share of respondents naming *integration/foreigners/refugees* as one of the two most important political issues in the two Politbarometer waves prior to each election (standardized).

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- ▶ **Are police trying to swing elections?** Unlikely. Effect is no larger in competitive races.

Contribution

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Media & Politics:

- ▶ Downstream effects of crime news coverage on public opinion and behavior (e.g., Couttenier et al. 2021; Keita, Renault, and Valette 2024; Berk 2025b)
- *Supply-side*: police shape information envir. before reaching the media

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Racial Bias in Policing:

- ▶ Street-level interactions (Voigt et al. 2017; Hoekstra and Sloan 2022; Rho et al. 2023; Xu et al. 2024)
 - *New channel*: strategic public communications and reporting

Implications & Discussion

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- ▶ **Finding:** German local police systematically amplify out-group crime cues
 - After immigration salience triggering events (NYE 2015/16)
 - Before predictable cycles of immigration-salience (state elections)

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- ▶ **Finding:** German local police systematically amplify out-group crime cues
 - After immigration salience triggering events (NYE 2015/16)
 - Before predictable cycles of immigration-salience (state elections)
- ▶ **Implication:** Police shape the information environment in which citizens form attitudes and behavior
 - ▶ Partly explains mismatch between falling crime rates and rising fear
 - ▶ Potential feedback loop: selective reporting fuels salience driving disclosure

Thank You !

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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."

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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.”

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Data Collection



Performance Metrics, Main Model (GPT 4-o)

	precision	recall	f1-score	support
Type of Crime				
Violent	0.907	0.916	0.912	546.000
Property	0.879	0.974	0.924	1835.000
Other	0.726	0.768	0.747	280.000
None	0.898	0.564	0.693	624.000
Traffic	0.921	0.933	0.927	1074.000
<i>macro avg</i>	0.866	0.831	0.840	4359.000
<i>weighted avg</i>	0.886	0.885	0.879	4359.000
Multiple Events				
No	0.994	0.866	0.925	3042.000
Yes	0.465	0.954	0.626	373.000
<i>macro avg</i>	0.729	0.910	0.775	3415.000
<i>weighted avg</i>	0.936	0.875	0.892	3415.000
Non-German				
No Information	0.941	0.947	0.944	1443.000
No Ethnicity or Nationality	0.882	0.834	0.857	752.000
German	0.859	0.807	0.832	83.000
Foreign	0.866	0.964	0.912	334.000
<i>macro avg</i>	0.887	0.888	0.886	2612.000
<i>weighted avg</i>	0.912	0.912	0.911	2612.000

To align the evaluation sample with our empirical analysis, we exclude for both variables releases describing multiple incidents, ensuring that each observation corresponds to a single crime event. For the Non-German variable, we additionally omit traffic-related incidents, which fall outside the scope of our theoretical interest and are rarely coded for nationality or ethnicity

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Intercoder Reliability

Table 3: Intercoder Reliability: Between Human Coders

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

Table 4: Intercoder Reliability: Human Coders Agreement Against GPT 4-o Coding

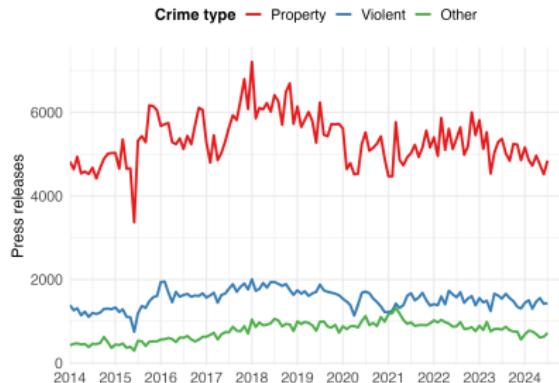
Variable	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha
Multiple Events	0.613026	0.606521
Type of Crime	0.869164	0.869035
Non German	0.940253	0.940288

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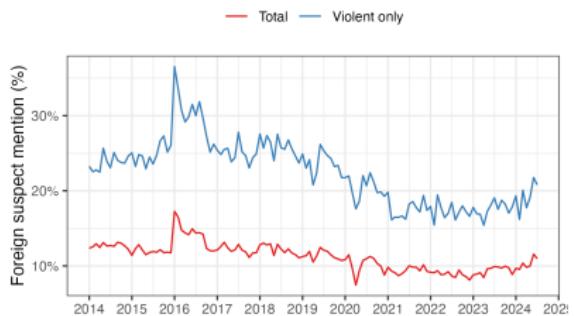
Summary Statistics by Year

Table 5: Summary Statistics by Year

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

Press Releases by Weekday

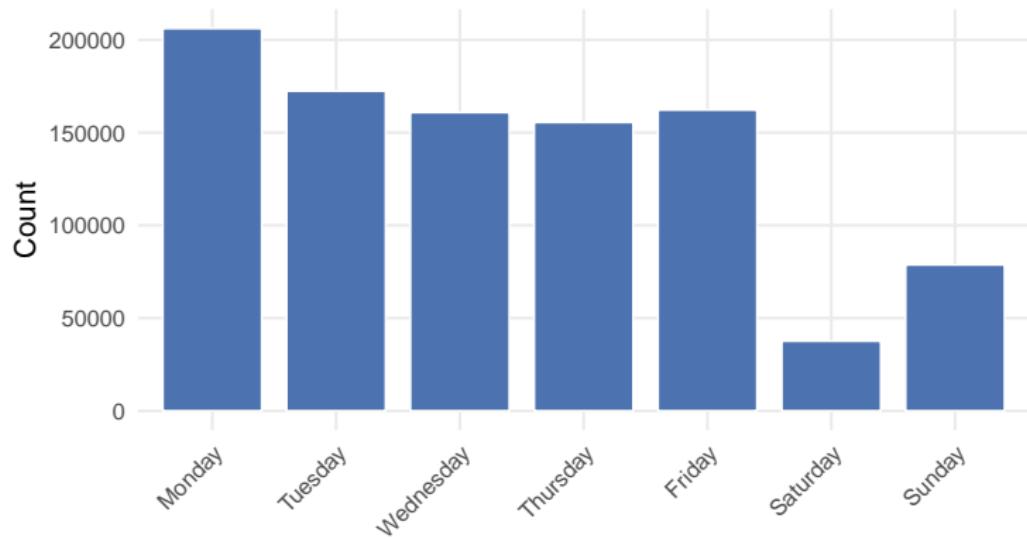
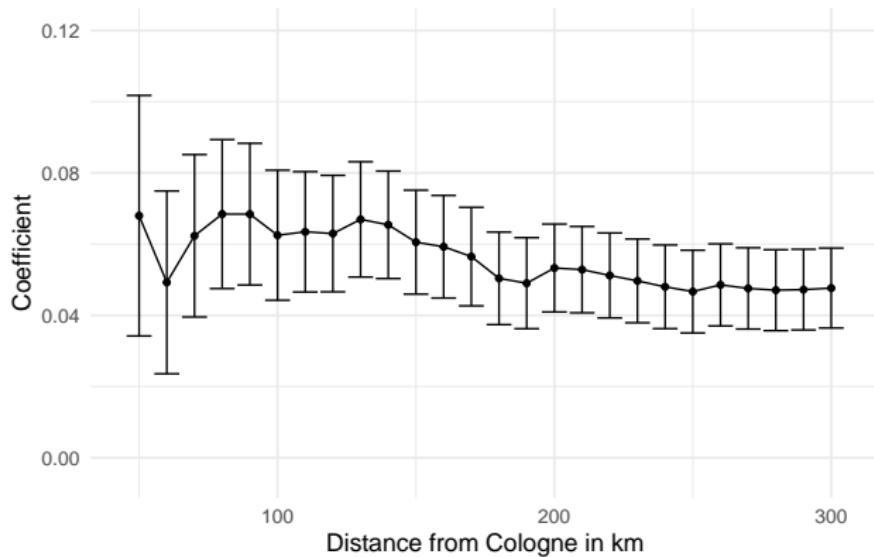


Figure 2: The figure shows the number of police press releases published by weekday.

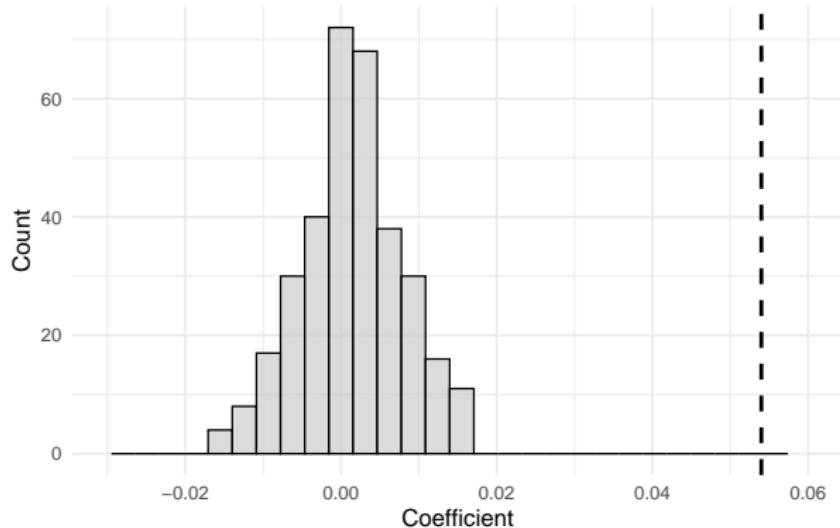
Study I: Distance from Cologne

Figure 3: Distance from Cologne



Notes: We re-estimate the specification from column (1) subsetting the data to all observations within *dist* km from Cologne. Radius around Cologne is indicated on the x-axis. To calculate radii, we use distance between centroids for each municipality and centroid of Cologne. The y-axis shows the respective coefficient estimate on that subset with corresponding 95% confidence intervals.

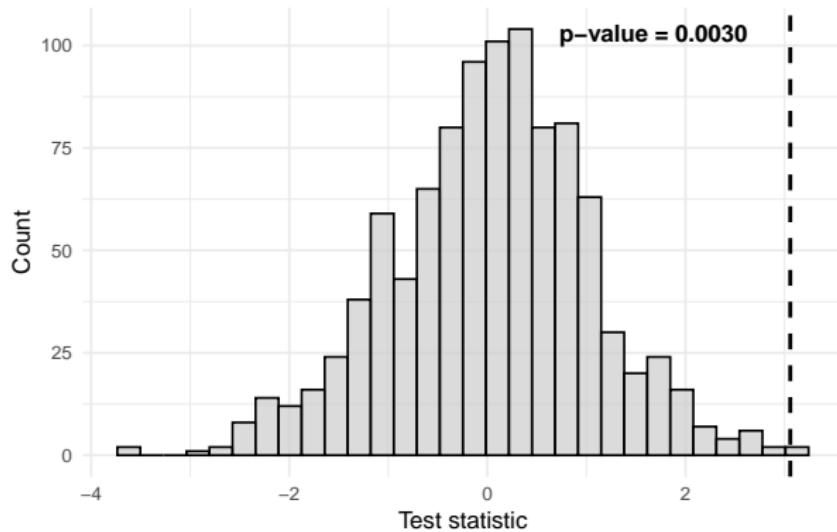
Study I: Placebo Treatments



Notes: Distribution of placebo t -statistics. We replace the actual 2015/16 NYE date with each day between January and November 2015. We then re-estimate the main specification in the ± 30 -day window around these placebo cutoffs and record the coefficient on the post indicator. The dashed red vertical line marks the true NYE 2015/16 coefficient. The two-sided randomisation p -value is the proportion of placebo statistics whose absolute value is at least as large as the true statistic.

Study II: Placebo Treatments

1,000 fake Sundays → findings are unlikely to be driven by random chance or day-of-the-week effects ($p = 0.003$).



Notes: Distribution of placebo t -statistics. We replace the actual election date of every state with a *Sunday* drawn at random 1,000 times. We then re-estimate the main specification in the ± 2 -day window around these placebo cutoffs and record the t -statistic on the pre indicator. The dashed red vertical line marks the true-election t -statistic. The two-sided randomisation p -value is the proportion of placebo statistics whose absolute value is at least as large as the true statistic.

Study II: Party of Minister of the Interior

Table 6: Heterogeneity by party of state minister
of the interior

Party of interior minister	Out-group cue (0/1)	
	CDU/CSU (1)	SPD (2)
Pre-Election	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. Pre-election is a binary indicator that equals one for press-releases issued before a given state election. We use a bandwidth of 2 days around state elections. The sample is split by

Study II: Competitive Elections

[htbp]

Table 7: Heterogeneity by competitiveness of a given election

		Out-group cue (0/1)			
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Pre-Election		0.029 (0.017)	0.033 (0.218)	0.141* (0.079)	-0.070 (0.067)
Pre-Election × Margin of victory (winner minus runner-up, in p.p.)		4.38×10^{-5} (0.002)			
Pre-Election × Competitiveness index (1 – MoV)			-0.004 (0.232)		
Pre-Election × Herfindahl–Hirschman Index of vote-share concentration				-0.494 (0.329)	
Pre-Election × Effective Number of Parties (1 / HHI)					0.022 (0.016)
R ²		0.036	0.036	0.036	0.036
Observations		2,219	2,219	2,219	2,219
State × Election fixed effects		✓	✓	✓	✓

Notes: Results from OLS regressions where the outcome is a binary indicator for the presence of out-group cues in a police press release. The unit of observation is the individual press release. *Pre-election* equals 1 for releases issued in the two days before the relevant state election; releases on election day are excluded. The analysis uses a bandwidth of ± 2 days around state elections. Moderators are election-level measures of electoral competitiveness computed from official vote shares across seven categories (including a residual *Other* so shares sum to 100): (i) the winner–runner-up vote-share gap in percentage points; (ii) a normalized competitiveness index defined as one minus that margin divided by 100; (iii) the Herfindahl–Hirschman Index, the sum of squared proportional party vote shares; and (iv) the Effective Number of Parties, the inverse of the Herfindahl–Hirschman Index. All models include state × year fixed effects and standard errors clustered at

Study II: Other Etnicity Cues

Table 8: Other ethnicity cues

	In-group (German) cue (1)	No ethnicity info. (2)
Pre-Election	-0.0003 (0.006)	-0.029** (0.013)
R ²	0.018	0.037
Observations	2,218	2,218
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. Pre-election is a binary indicator that equals one for press-releases issued before 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.

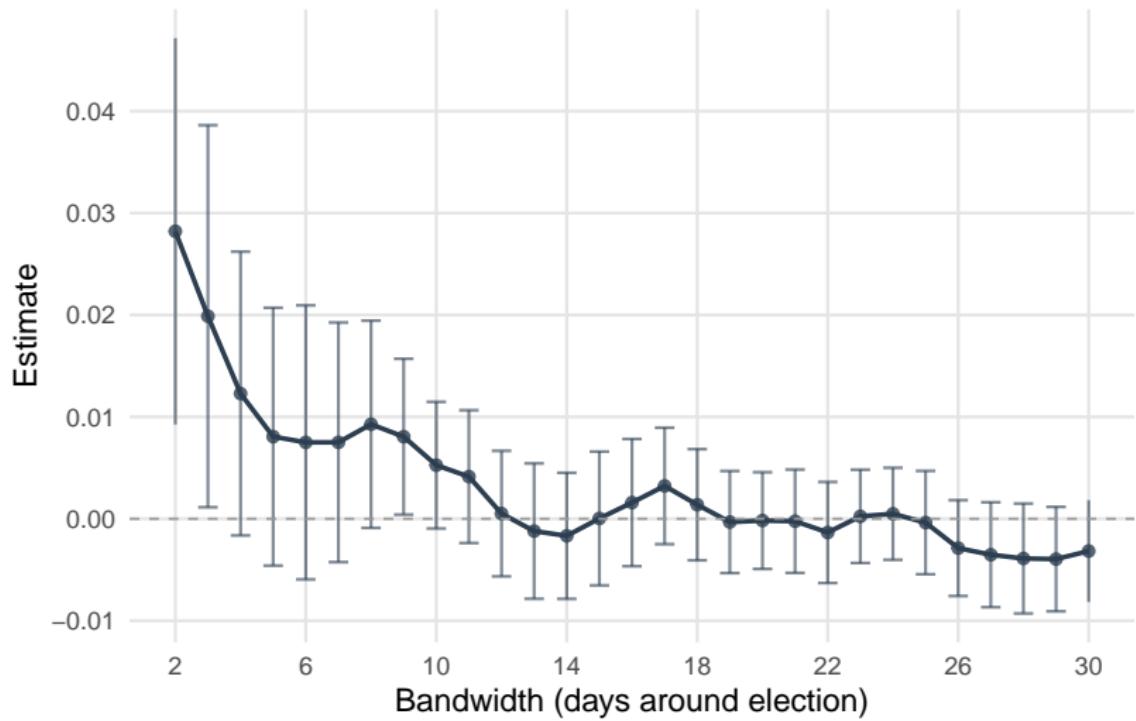
Study II: Pre-Election Fridays/Saturdays

Table 9: Difference in Daily Report Counts on
Pre-Election Fridays/Saturdays

	Daily count of press releases		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Pre-Election Fri/Sat (0/1)	0.492 (2.96)	1.26 (2.07)	1.26 (1.75)
Observations	14,849	14,849	14,849
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 pre-

Study II: Varying the bandwidth



Notes: The figure shows the results from the main specification for varying bandwidths between 2 and 30 days.