

Media Bias and Democratic Backsliding

Evidence from U.S. Media Bias and Presidential
Interventions

Xingyuan Zhao

2025-10-16

Motivation

President Trump calling out cities for high crime rates and deploying national guard to those cities to combat crime.



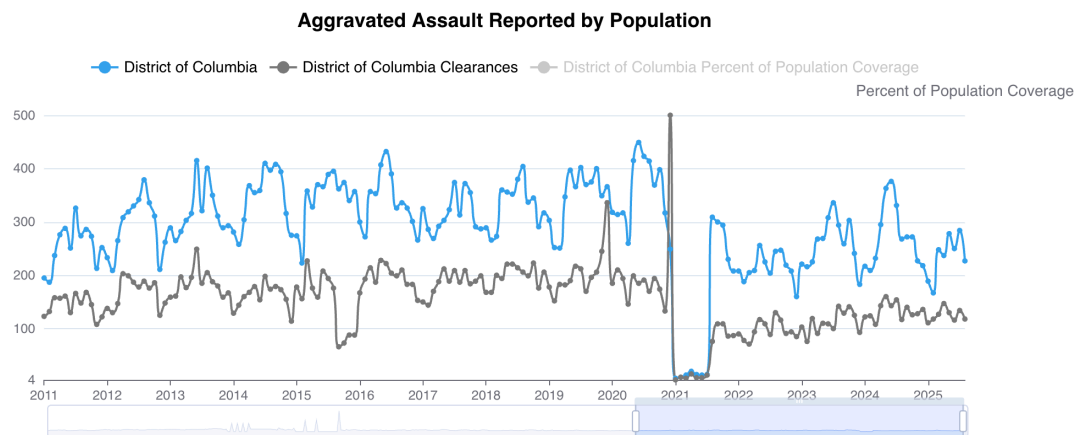
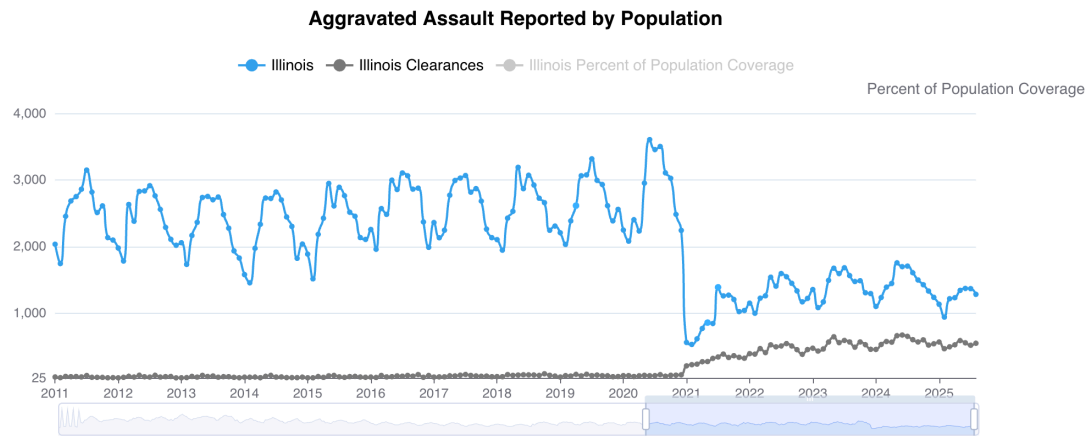
Crime in Washington, D.C., is totally out of control. Local “youths” and gang members, some only 14, 15, and 16-years-old, are randomly attacking, mugging, maiming, and shooting innocent Citizens, at the same time knowing that they will be almost immediately released. They are not afraid of Law Enforcement because they know nothing ever happens to them, but it’s going to happen now! The Law in D.C. must be changed to prosecute these “minors” as adults, and lock them up for a long time, starting at age 14. The most recent victim was beaten mercilessly by local thugs. Washington, D.C., must be safe, clean, and beautiful for all Americans and, importantly, for the World to see. If D.C. doesn’t get its act together, and quickly, we will have no choice but to take Federal control of the City, and run this City how it should be run, and put criminals on notice that they’re not going to get away with it anymore. Perhaps it should have been done a long time ago, then this incredible young man, and so many others, would not have had to go through the horrors of Violent Crime. If this continues, I am going to exert my powers, and FEDERALIZE this City. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!



At least 54 people were shot in Chicago over the weekend, 8 people were killed. The last two weekends were similar. Chicago is the worst and most dangerous city in the World, by far. Pritzker needs help badly, he just doesn’t know it yet. I will solve the crime problem fast, just like I did in DC. Chicago will be safe again, and soon. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!

Discrepancy

However, the actual crime rate tells a different story.



Literature Review

It is already established that media bias exists:

- Strong consensus on bias in “hard news” and politicized issues
- Older research: less severe in “soft news” and objective topics
- Partisan consumption patterns persist across all news types

Literature Review (cont.)

- **Question:** But how exactly do political leaders generate biased narratives to enable democratic backsliding?
- Better socioeconomic performance indeed provides more stable regimes,
- But evidence that lack of such performance causes democratic backsliding remains limited.
- Backsliding leaders win elections when voters embrace the promise of disruptive changes

Main Argument

Political leaders social media posts -> biased media coverage
-> perceived performance -> support for drastic changes ->
democratic backsliding

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Political leaders' strategic communications increase the gap between actual and perceived performance.

Hypothesis 2: Media bias that distorts reality, creating more support for disruptive changes, enables democratic backsliding.

Test 1

- **Unit of analysis:** State-time
- **Dependent variable:** Media bias: the difference between the actual crime rate and media coverage of the same crime type in a period of time
- **Intervention:** Trump Truth Social posts
- **Model:** Difference-in-differences with first treatment group dummy, relative time from the intervention, and state and temporal fixed effects.
- **Expected outcome:** Political leaders incite biased media coverage to achieve their own goals

Test 2

- **Unit of analysis:** Country-time
- **DV:** Democratic Backsliding
- **IV:** Media Bias, from HuggingFace and UnBIAS Classification Bert
- **Model:** Linear regression model
- **Expected outcome:** Media bias distorting reality reduces support for democracy

Data Sources

- **Crime Rate:** FBI Crime Data Explorer
- **Media Coverage:** CNN and Fox News API
- **Media Bias:** Generated from HuggingFace and UnBIAS Classification Bert
- **Democratic Backsliding:** V-Dem indices

Home