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

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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 2023; Keita, Renault, and Valette 2023; Couttenier et al. 2021; Berk 2022).
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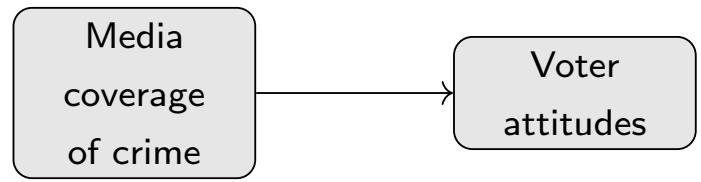
- **This project: politics of police reporting.**
  - Leverage data from $>$ 1 million German police press releases 2014–2024
  - Test for politically strategic disclosure of information
  - Reporting of out-group crime increases discontinuously
    - Prior to local elections

The Police as Gatekeepers of Information



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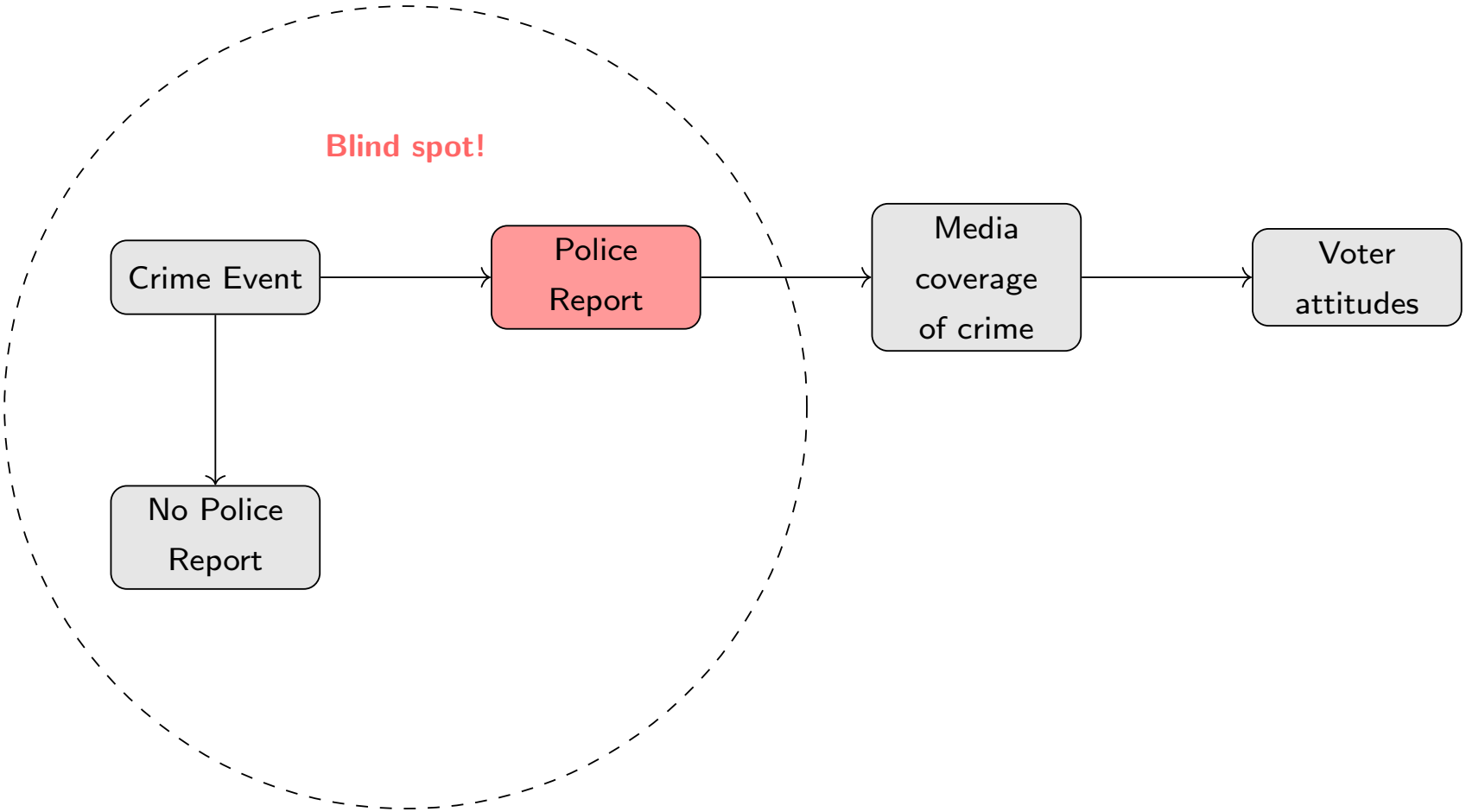

Data Collection and Processing

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

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- **Performance:** validated against human coders
- **Intercoder Reliability:** 0.8 average across categories Cohen's Kappa, Krippendorff's Alpha

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* $\rightarrow$ inherently vague
- **Potential for politicization**:
  - **Selection**: Police choose which incidents to publicize; $< 2\%$ of recorded crimes become press releases
  - **Content**: Discretion w.r.t. information disclosure (e.g., nationality, ethnicity)

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

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

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

$$\mathrm{F1} = 2 \times \frac{\mathrm{precision} \times \mathrm{recall}}{\mathrm{precision} + \mathrm{recall}} \qquad \mathrm{precision} = \frac{\mathrm{TP}}{\mathrm{TP} + \mathrm{FP}} \qquad \mathrm{recall} = \frac{\mathrm{TP}}{\mathrm{TP} + \mathrm{FN}}$$

Classification Performance GPT 3.5/ Gemini 1.5 Pro

Type of Crime

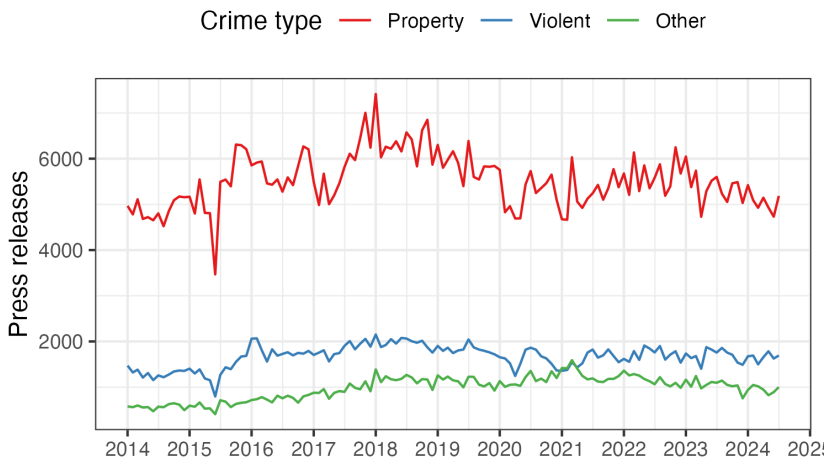
- Violent: F1 = 0.92/0.90
- Property: F1 = 0.94/0.95
- Other: F1 = 0.31/0.71

Ethnicity Cues

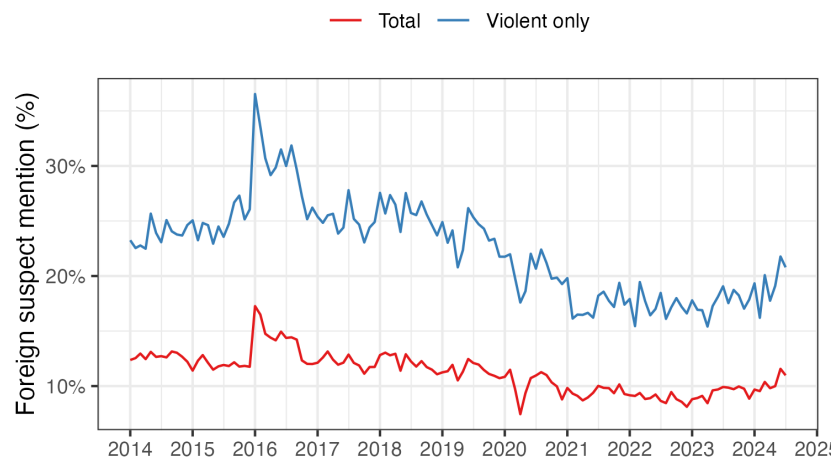
- No information on perpetrator: F1 = 0.018/0.94
- No ethnicity/nationality mentioned: F1 = 0.36/0.78
- In-group (German): F1 = 0.45/0.53
- Out-group / foreign: F1 = 0.67/0.88

$$\mathrm{F1} = 2 \times \frac{\mathrm{precision} \times \mathrm{recall}}{\mathrm{precision} + \mathrm{recall}} \qquad \mathrm{precision} = \frac{\mathrm{TP}}{\mathrm{TP} + \mathrm{FP}} \qquad \mathrm{recall} = \frac{\mathrm{TP}}{\mathrm{TP} + \mathrm{FN}}$$

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**

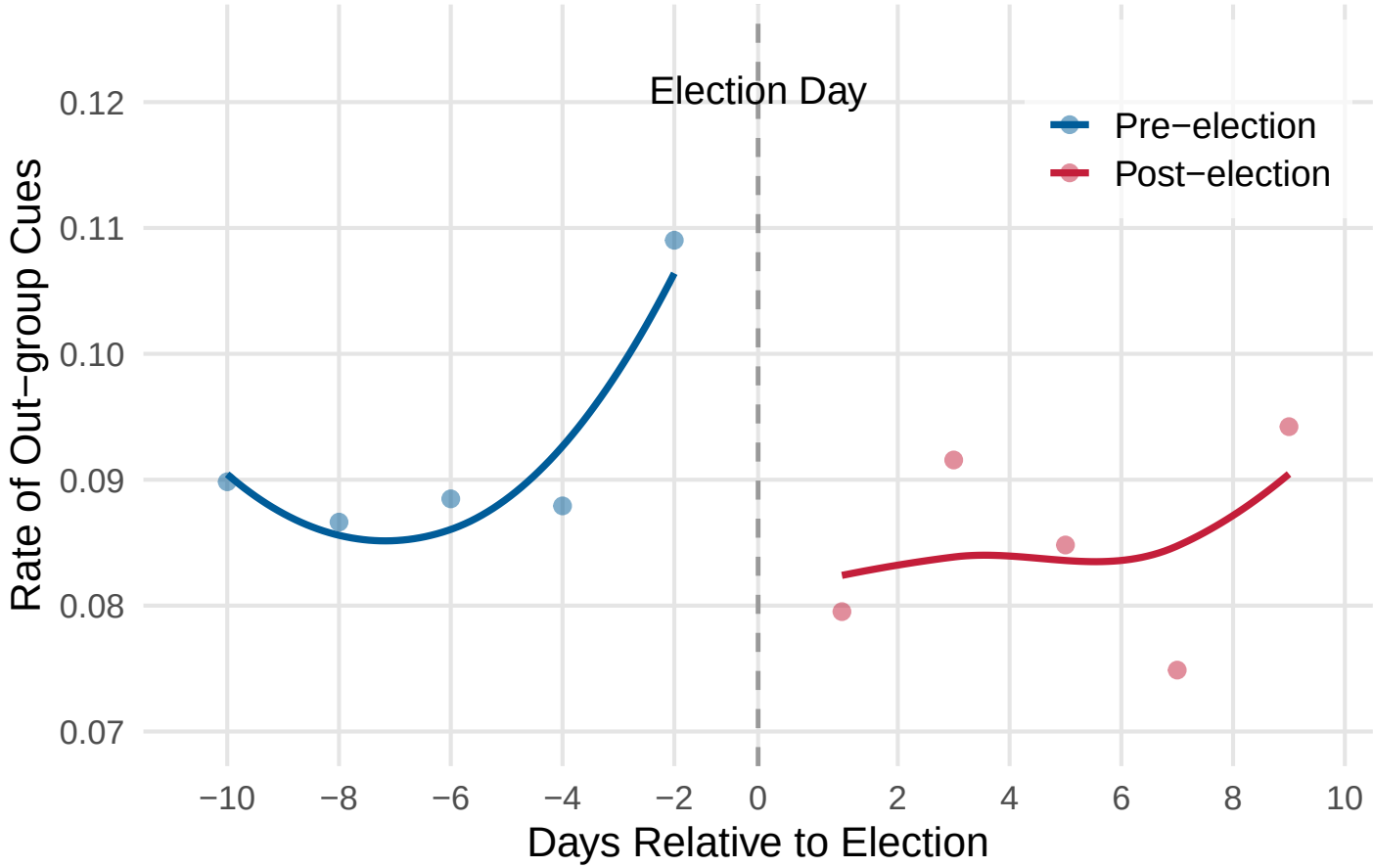
Strategic reporting around elections

- **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 $\times$ election fixed effects; SEs clustered by state

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

Table 3: Main results

	Out-group cue (0/1)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Post-Election (0/1)	-0.029*	-0.029**	-0.024**
	(0.014)	(0.012)	(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.

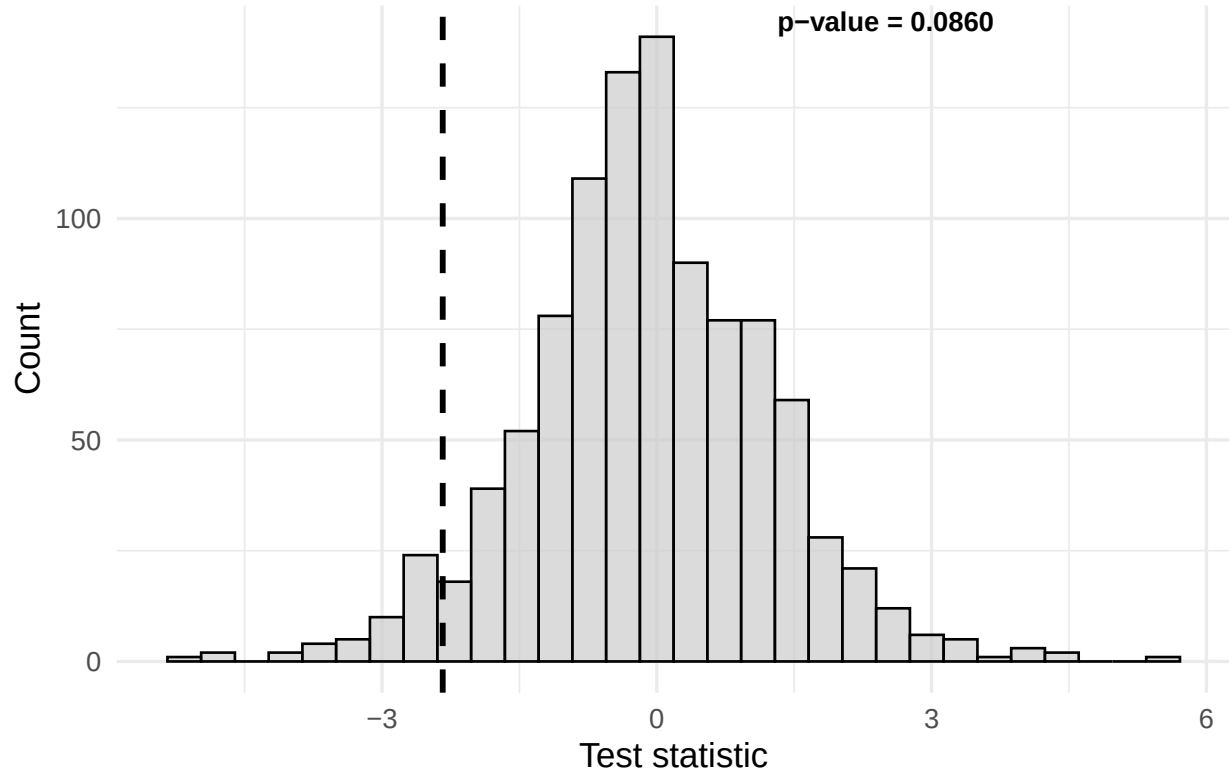
Table A.18: Other ethnicity cues

	In-group (German) cue (1)	No ethnicity info. (2)
Post-Election (0/1)	0.0003	0.029*
	(0.007)	(0.015)
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 level. Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1.

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 $\pm$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.

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 !

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References I

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Supplementary Material

Selection Criteria

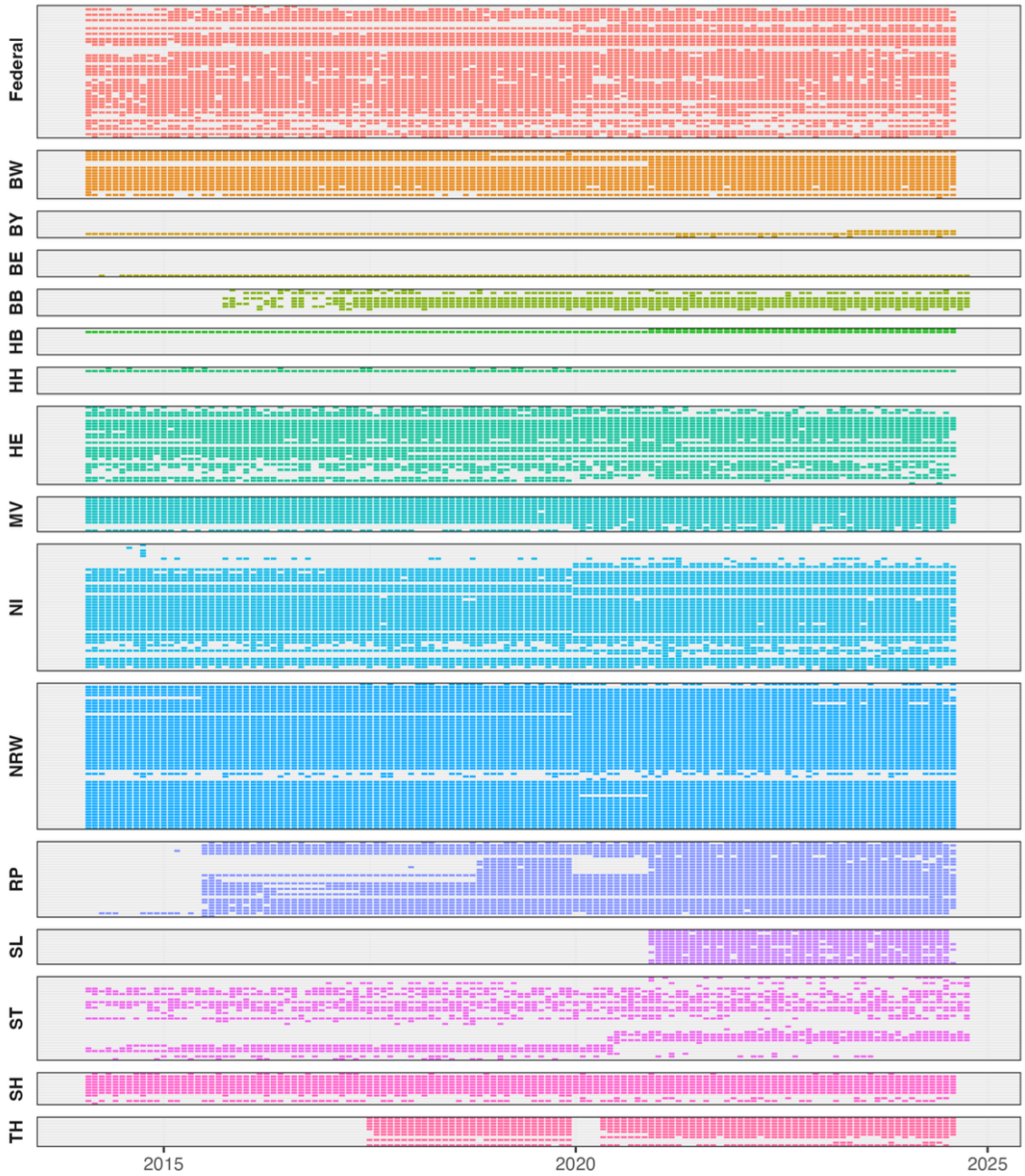
Three commonly referenced criteria:

(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

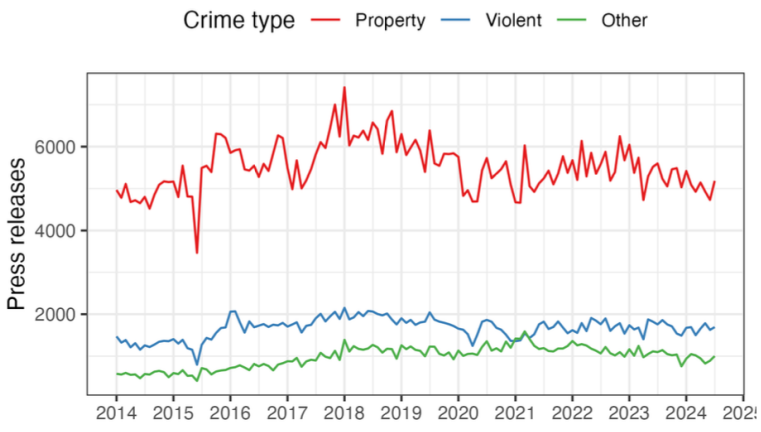
Data Collection



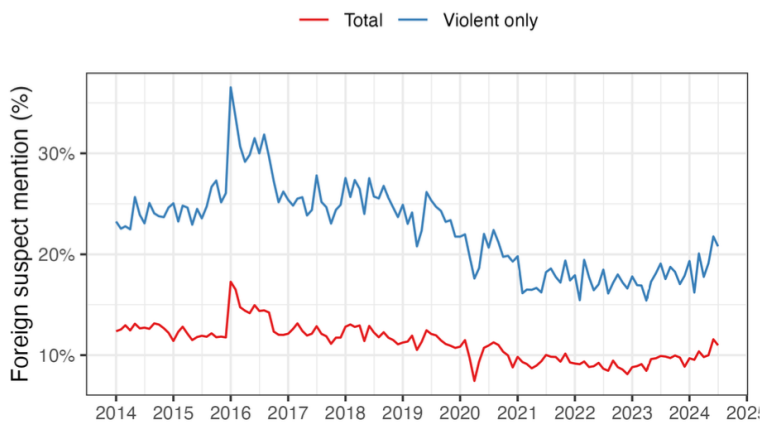
Intercoder Reliability

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

Descriptives



(a) Press releases over time, by crime type



(b) Press releases with foreign perpetrator

Performance Metrics GPT4-o

Table A.3: Classification Report (Type of Crime Full RA Sample Without Traffic a

	precision	recall	f1-score	support
Violent	0.934	0.910	0.921	587.000
Property	0.972	0.977	0.974	2164.000
Other	0.863	0.771	0.815	319.000
accuracy	0.943	0.943	0.943	0.943
macro avg	0.554	0.532	0.542	3070.000
weighted avg	0.953	0.943	0.948	3070.000

Figure 2: Caption

Performance Metrics GPT4-o

Table A.4: Classification Report (Non German Full RA Sample without Traffic and None)

	precision	recall	f1-score	support
No Information	0.943	0.947	0.945	1726.000
No Ethnicity or Nationality	0.880	0.829	0.854	849.000
German	0.869	0.793	0.830	92.000
Foreign	0.858	0.966	0.909	383.000
accuracy	0.912	0.912	0.912	0.912
macro avg	0.710	0.707	0.708	3050.000
weighted avg	0.913	0.912	0.912	3050.000

Performance Metrics GPT4-o

Table A.5: Classification Report (Multiple Events Full RA Sample without Traffic and None)

	precision	recall	f1-score	support
No	0.981	0.868	0.921	3087.000
Yes	0.526	0.899	0.664	505.000
accuracy	0.872	0.872	0.872	0.872
macro avg	0.754	0.883	0.792	3592.000
weighted avg	0.917	0.872	0.885	3592.000

Performance Metrics GPT3.5

ChatGPT 3.5

Table A.12: Classification Report (Type of Crime (All RA coding without Traffic and None) GPT 3.5)

	precision	recall	f1-score	support
Violent	0.927	0.920	0.924	611.000
Property	0.915	0.983	0.948	2210.000
Other	0.821	0.196	0.317	326.000
accuracy	0.889	0.889	0.889	0.889
macro avg	0.444	0.350	0.365	3147.000
weighted avg	0.908	0.889	0.878	3147.000

Performance Metrics GPT3.5

Table A.13: Classification Report (Non German (All RA coding without Traffic and None) GPT 3.5)

	precision	recall	f1-score	support
No Information	0.727	0.009	0.018	1760.000
No Ethnicity or Nationality	0.255	0.666	0.369	874.000
German	0.596	0.362	0.450	94.000
Foreign	0.512	0.980	0.672	399.000
accuracy	0.327	0.327	0.327	0.327
macro avg	0.418	0.403	0.302	3127.000
weighted avg	0.564	0.327	0.212	3127.000

Performance Metrics GPT3.5

Table A.14: Classification Report (Multiple Events (All RA coding without Traffic and None) GPT 3.5)

	precision	recall	f1-score	support
No	0.947	0.955	0.951	3164.000
Yes	0.710	0.674	0.691	515.000
accuracy	0.916	0.916	0.916	0.916
macro avg	0.828	0.814	0.821	3679.000
weighted avg	0.914	0.916	0.915	3679.000

Performance Metrics Gemini 1.5

Gemini 1.5 Pro

Table A.15: Classification Report (Type of Crime (All RA coding) Gemini 1.5 Pro withou
Traffic and None)

	precision	recall	f1-score	support
Violent	0.961	0.848	0.901	611.000
Property	0.931	0.985	0.957	2210.000
Other	0.835	0.604	0.701	326.000
accuracy	0.919	0.919	0.919	0.919
macro avg	0.545	0.487	0.512	3147.000
weighted avg	0.927	0.919	0.920	3147.000

Performance Metrics Gemini 1.5

Table A.16: Classification Report (Non German (All RA coding without Traffic and None) Gemini 1.5 Pro)

	precision	recall	f1-score	support
No Information	0.958	0.926	0.942	1760.000
No Ethnicity or Nationality	0.837	0.736	0.783	874.000
German	0.378	0.894	0.532	94.000
Foreign	0.862	0.940	0.899	399.000
accuracy	0.874	0.874	0.874	0.874
macro avg	0.759	0.874	0.789	3127.000
weighted avg	0.894	0.874	0.880	3127.000

Performance Metrics Gemini 1.5

Table A.17: Classification Report (Multiple Events (All RA coding without crime and none) Gemini 1.5 Pro)

	precision	recall	f1-score	support
No	0.983	0.864	0.920	3164.000
Yes	0.521	0.909	0.662	515.000
accuracy	0.870	0.870	0.870	0.870
macro avg	0.752	0.886	0.791	3679.000
weighted avg	0.918	0.870	0.884	3679.000

Type of crime

Table A.23: Type of crime

	Other (0/1) (1)	Property crime (0/1) (2)	Violent crime (0/1) (3)
Post-Election (0/1)	0.003	-0.010	0.008
	(0.003)	(0.007)	(0.005)
R^2	0.006	0.024	0.026
Observations	981,391	981,391	981,391
State 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 level. Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1.

Count of press releases

Table A.24: Count of press releases as the DV

	Daily count of press releases		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Post-Election (0/1)	1.59***	1.63***	1.72***
	(0.365)	(0.401)	(0.321)
R^2	0.032	0.264	0.704
Observations	509	509	509
State fixed effects		✓	
Police station fixed effects			✓

Notes: Dependent variable is the daily count of police press releases (measured by police station). Post-Election is a binary indicator equal to one for observations after a given state election. Bandwidth is ±2 days around state elections. Standard errors clustered at the state level. Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1.

Investigation status

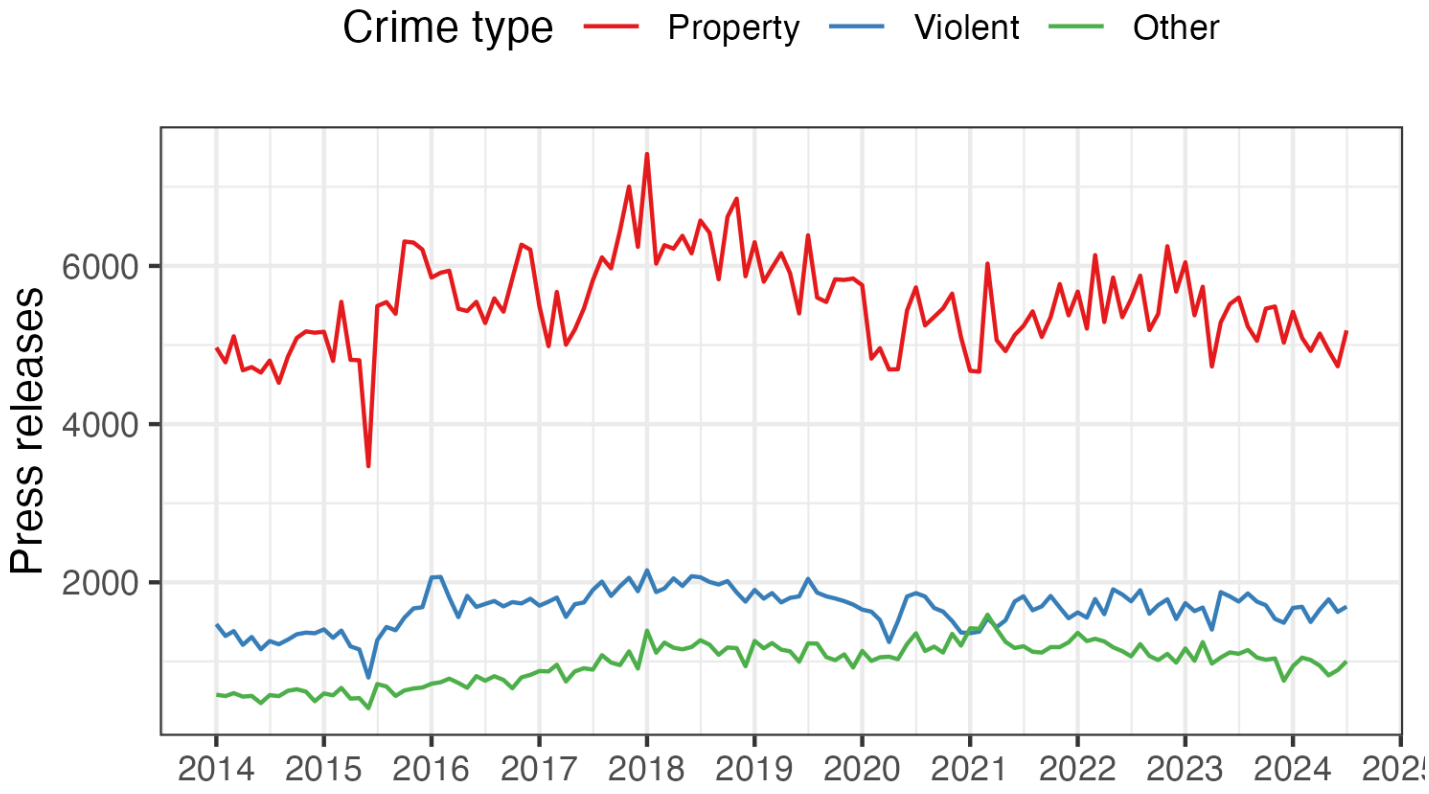
Table A.25: Investigation status

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

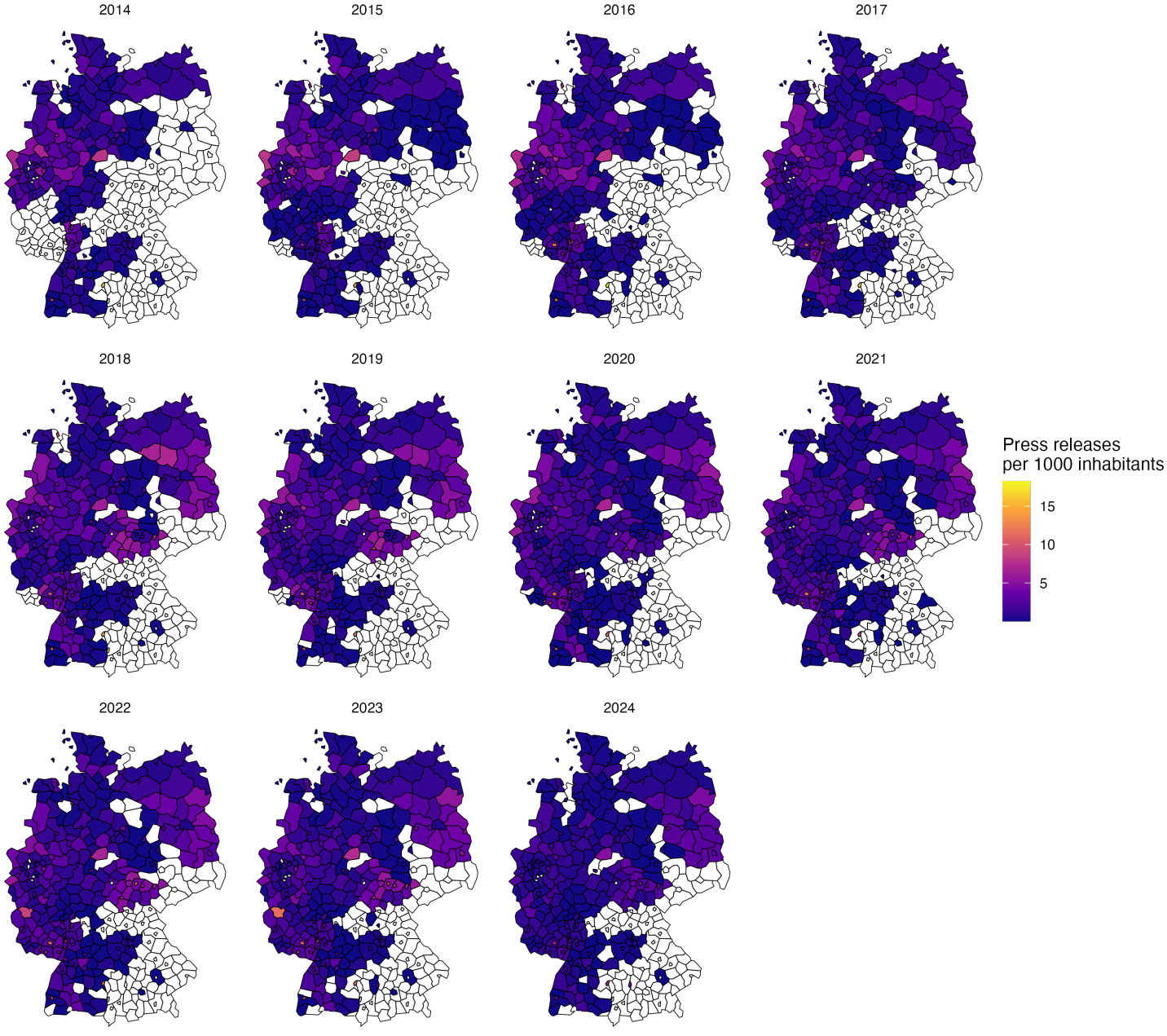
Notes: Results from OLS regressions where the outcome variables are binary indicators for the status of an investigation in a police press release: (1) investigation concluded, (2) no information on investigation status, (3) investigation ongoing. Police press releases are the unit of observation. Post-election 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.

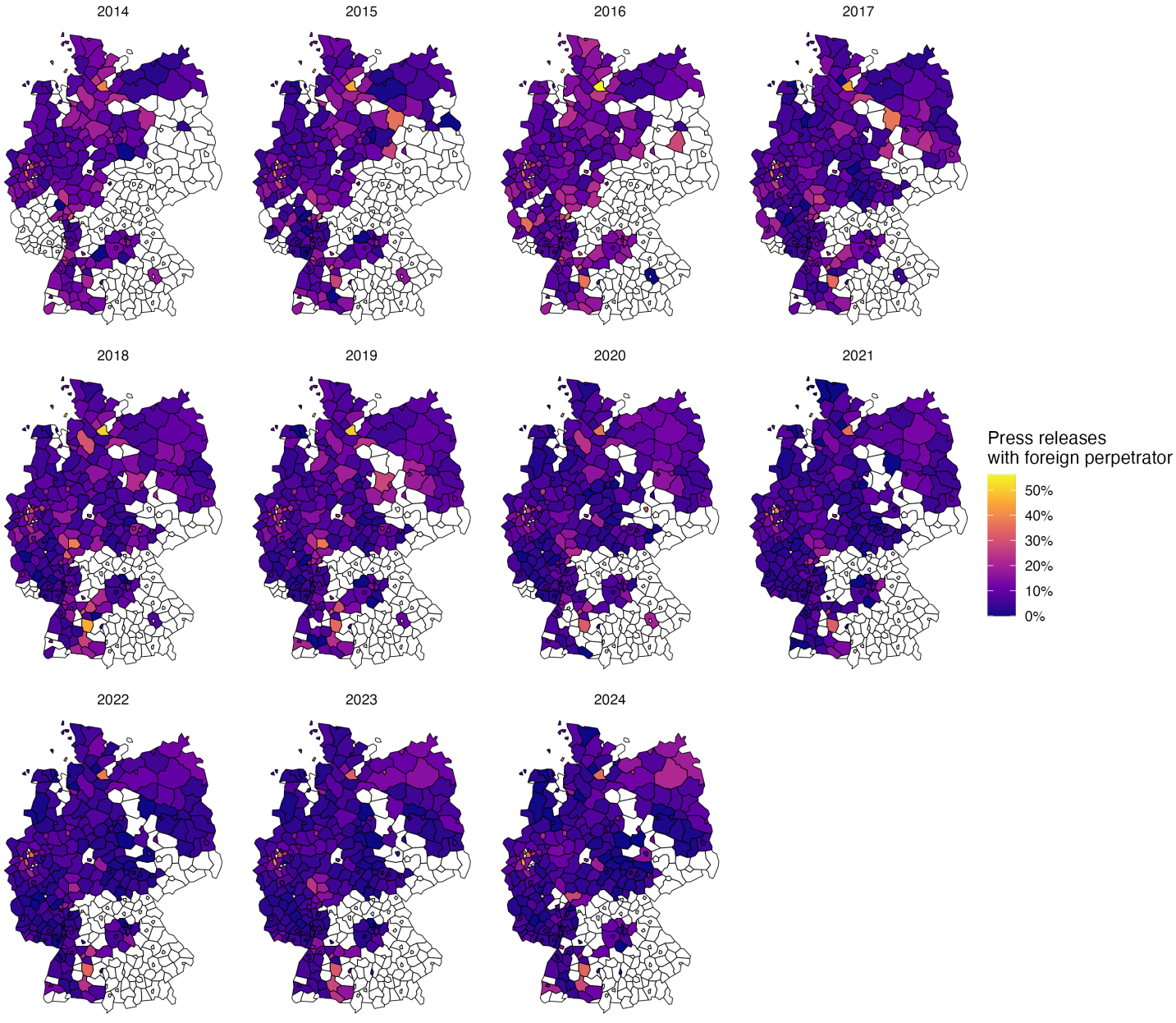
Count of press releases over time

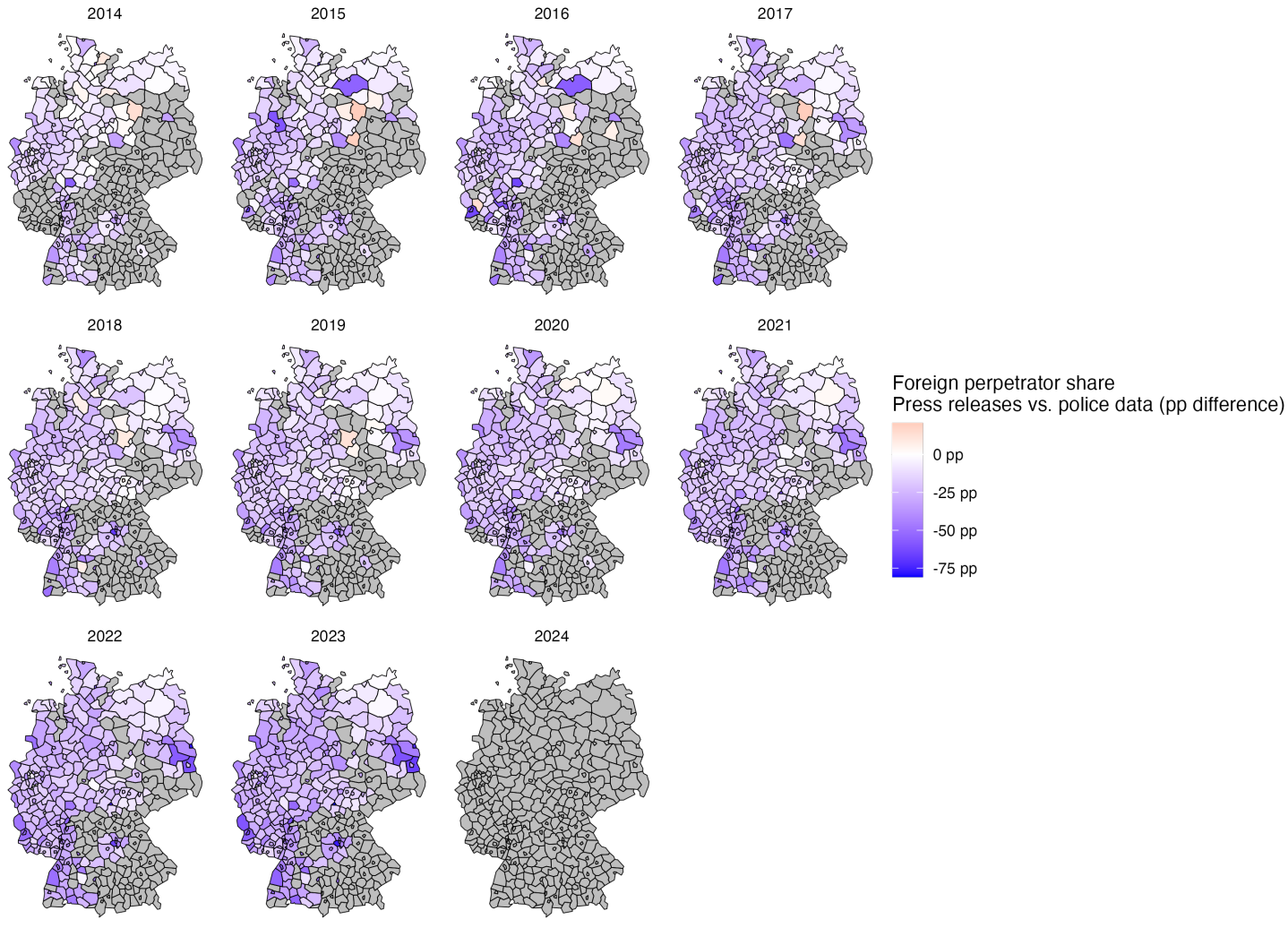
Count by type of crime over time




Total
Violent only
Press releases mentioning a foreign perpetrator (%)
30%
20%
10%
0%
2014
2015
2016
2017
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
2023
2024
2025
Date

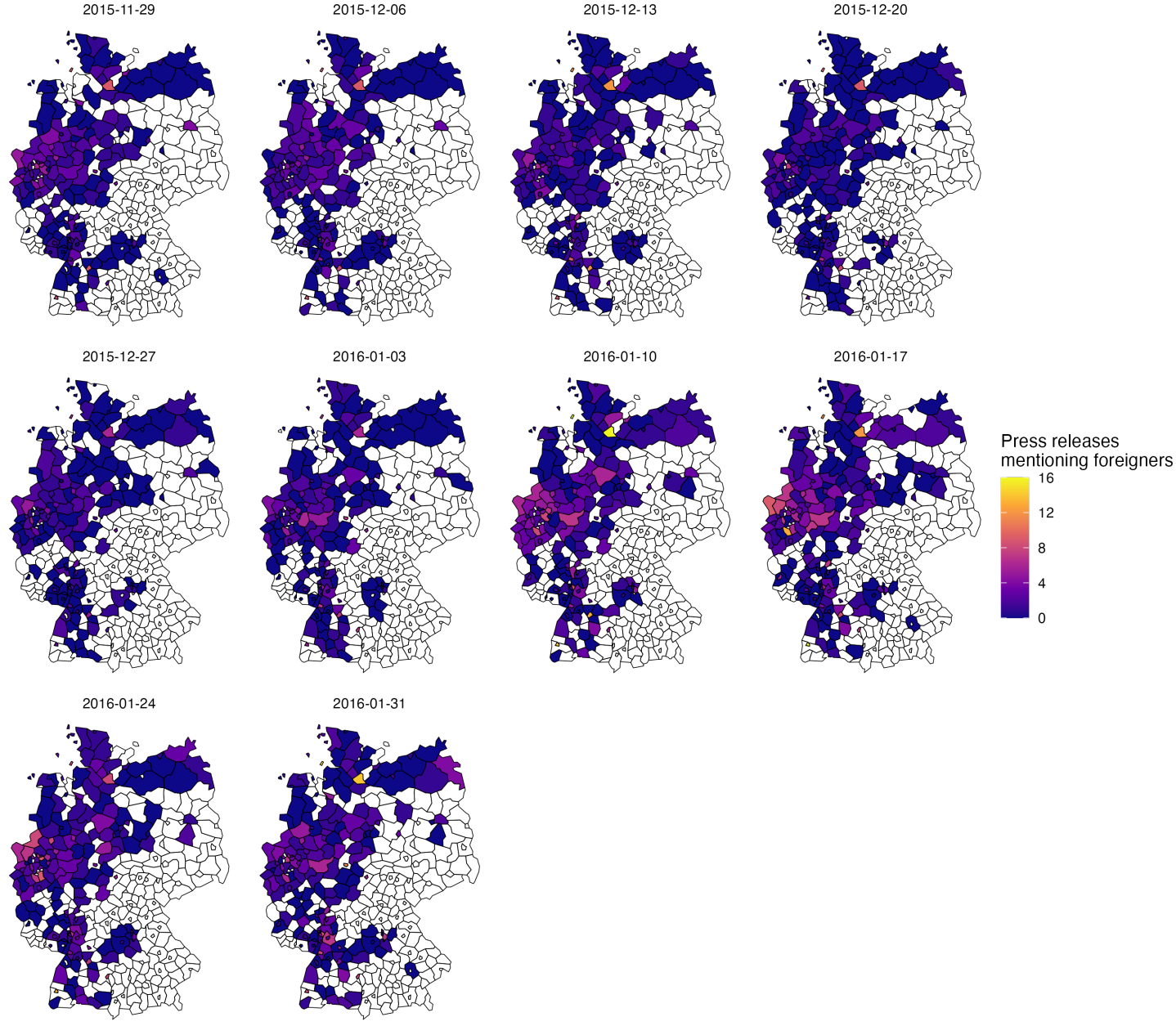

2014
2015
2016
2017
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
2023
2024
Press releases
per 1000 inhabitants
15
10
5

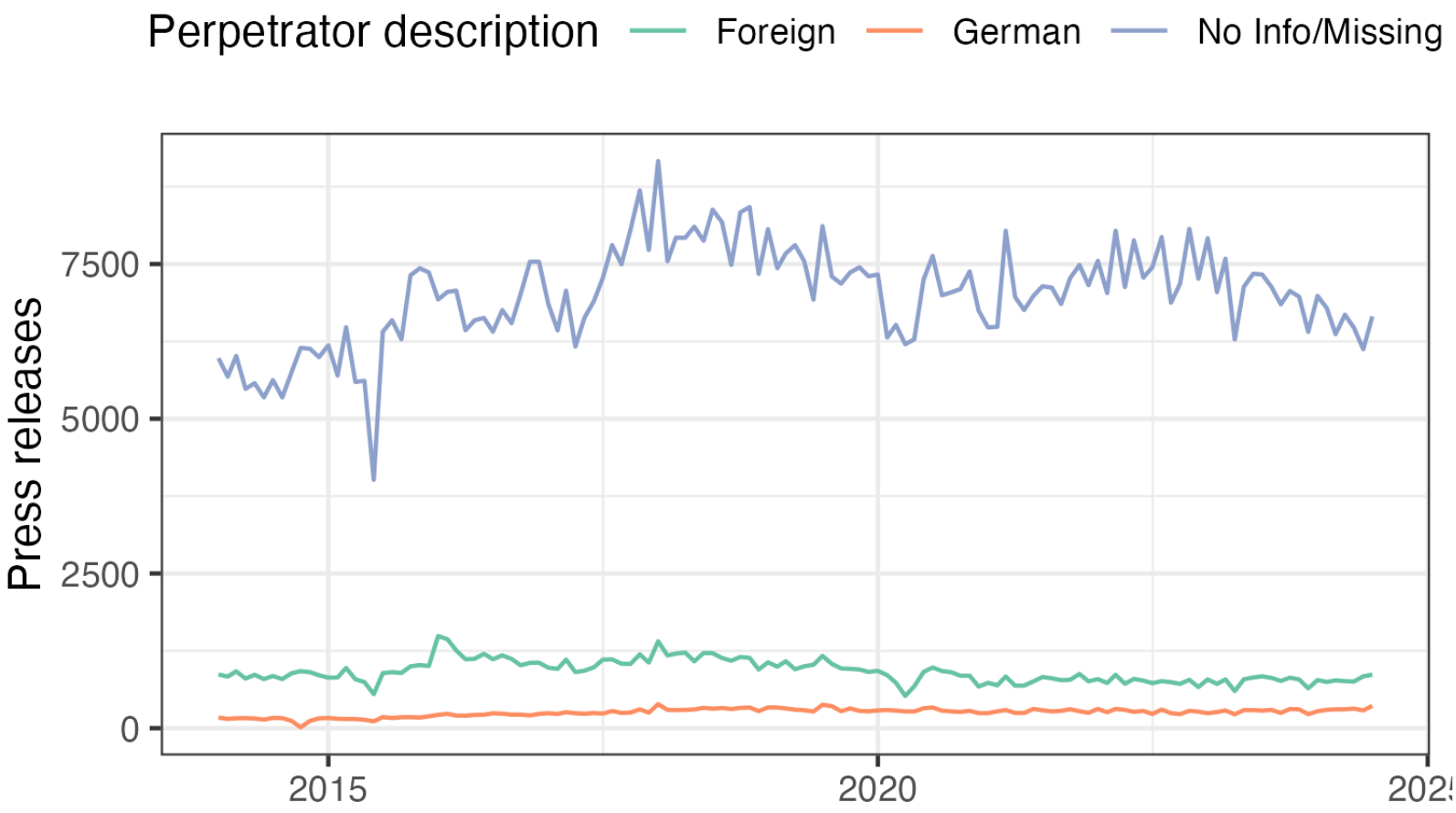

2014
2015
2016
2017
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
2023
2024
Press releases
with foreign perpetrator
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%


2014
2015
2016
2017
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
2023
2024
Foreign perpetrator share
Press releases vs. police data (pp difference)
0 pp
-25 pp
-50 pp
-75 pp

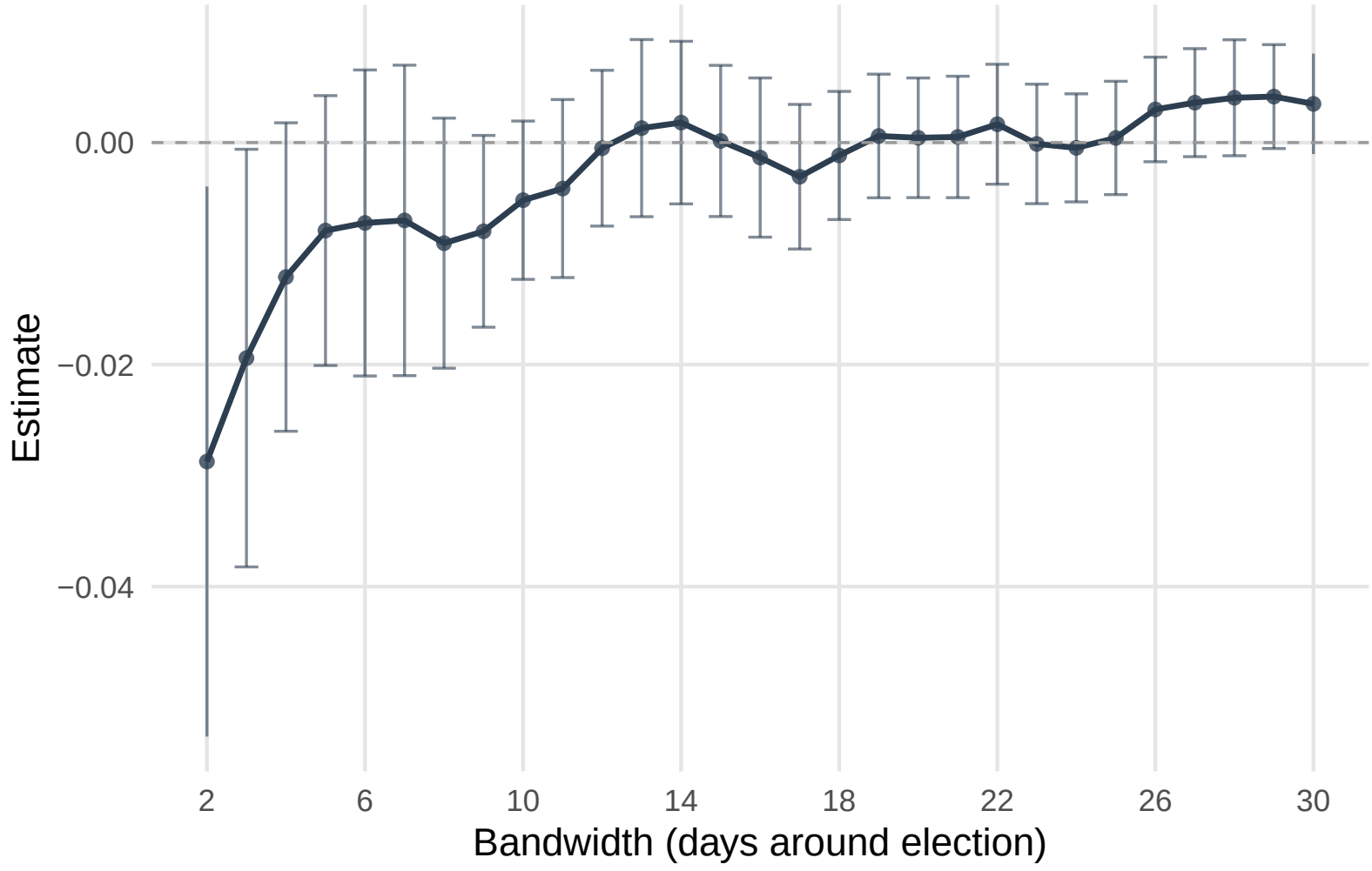
Press Releases Mentioning Foreigners

Dec 2015 – Jan 2016




Perpetrator description
Foreign
German
No Info/Missing
Press releases
7500
5000
2500
0
2015
2020
202

Robustness: varying the bandwidth



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