

Election Season in the Sheriff's Office

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Big Picture

How do electoral incentives structure the behavior of elected officials?

- We know that securing re-election is an important concern for elected officials.
- Prior work suggests that elected judges and district attorneys become more punitive around elections.

Introduction

We test whether discretionary arrest behavior of elected law enforcement agencies (Sheriffs) change during election years. Matching a ten-year panel of Sheriff Offices with similar unelected Police Departments, we find that Sheriffs have **reduced rates of discretionary arrests** during election years. The effect-size of reduced discretionary arrests was substantial, but plausible, equal to about a 17% decline in monthly discretionary arrest rates for sheriffs agencies during election years.

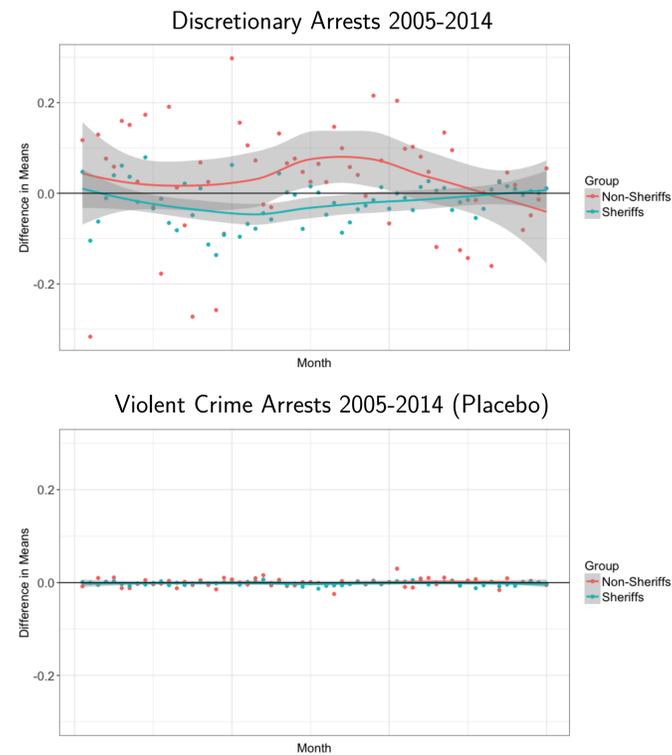
Data

- Utilized the Uniform Crime Reporting Program Data for monthly arrest rates by arrest categories.
- Collected this data for years 2005 - 2015 for Arkansas all police agencies
- Collected census data about jurisdictions and law enforcement characteristics from the Department of Justice.

Model Specification on Matched Sample

$$Arrest_{ijk} = \gamma A_i + \eta Y_j + \gamma(S_i \cdot E_k) \quad (1)$$

- A_i indexes Agencies.
- Y_j indexes Years.
- S_i indicates whether the i th agency is a sheriff.
- E_k indicates whether the k th year is an election.



Methods

- 1 Use Coarsened Exact Matching to pair elected Sheriff Agencies with local police departments of similar size, capacity, and constituency.
- 2 Estimate a “generalized difference-in-differences” – a panel regression with agency and year fixed effects – modeling the changes in discretionary arrests between election years and non-election years for elected Sheriffs and unelected Police Departments.
- 3 Assess the magnitude and significance of the interaction between election year and elected status of police agency.
- 4 Placebo test using “stickier” arrest categories, which we do not think can be changed easily around election time.
- 5 Iterate through different sets of matching covariates (Bias-Variance tradeoff).

Conclusion

- We found causal evidence that sheriff arrest behavior differed around election time.
- Monthly discretionary arrests *declined* by about 15% in election years.
- Placebo tests found no changes for homicide and manslaughter arrests during election years.

Next Steps

We hope both to widen and deepen this analysis through adding states and specifications.

- Expand analysis to other states (gain leverage on term length effects)
- Incorporate electoral data; perhaps competitive elections are moderators?
- Analyze potential mediators like density and racial composition.

Contribution to the Literature

Consistent with other studies, we find that **electoral timing influences political behavior**. However, unlike existing studies, we find that proximity to elections produces **less punitive** criminal justice policy.

Results

Table: Discretionary Arrest Rates

	Dependent variable:		
	Discretionary Arrests		
	Full	Match 1	Match 2
Elected*Election	-0.060*** (0.020)	-0.144*** (0.024)	-0.100*** (0.039)
Constant	0.029 (0.071)	0.678*** (0.051)	0.679*** (0.077)
Agency F.E.	✓	✓	✓
Month F.E.	✓	✓	✓
Year F.E.	✓	✓	✓
Observations	28,783	6,992	1,824
R ²	0.417	0.632	0.513
Adjusted R ²	0.411	0.626	0.499
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01		

Placebo Results

Table: Placebo Test (Violent Crimes Arrests)

	Dependent variable:		
	Violent Crime Arrests		
	Full	Match 1	Match 2
Elected*Election	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)
Constant	0.003 (0.005)	0.003 (0.004)	0.010** (0.005)
Agency F.E.	✓	✓	✓
Month F.E.	✓	✓	✓
Year F.E.	✓	✓	✓
Observations	28,783	6,992	1,824
R ²	0.027	0.076	0.109
Adjusted R ²	0.018	0.062	0.084
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01		

References

- [1] Gregory A Huber and Sanford C Gordon. Accountability and coercion: Is justice blind when it runs for office? *American Journal of Political Science*, 48(2):247–263, 2004.
- [2] Melissa R Nadel, Samuel JA Scaggs, and William D Bales. Politics in punishment: the effect of the state attorney election cycle on conviction and sentencing outcomes in florida. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 42(4):845–862, 2017.

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