Electoral Studies 96 (2025) 102958

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Electoral Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/electstud

Self-interest and voter support for defund the police

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A B S T R A C T

Prior research documents the importance of race, prejudice, and partisanship in shaping mass position-taking on police reform; however, little-to-no research explores self-interest as a potentially operative factor—especially for reforms affecting police budgets and service capacity. We identify a form of self-interest theoretically present for voters when considering "defund the police" proposals and utilize as a test case a police defunding ballot initiative in Los Angeles County with a rare feature rendering it uniquely well-suited for detecting voter self-interest: it targeted the county sheriff's department and was voted on by county residents under and *not under* this agency's jurisdiction. Using a spatial discontinuity design leveraging contiguous election precincts along different sides of the sheriff department's jurisdictional boundaries, we find little-to-no evidence that voters sought to protect the budget—and thus service capacity—of their public safety provider. Instead, we find evidence that voting was largely driven by anti-minority orientations.

1. Introduction

George Floyd's police murder in May 2020 triggered the largest social protest in American history (Buchanan et al., 2020). Years after, police reform remains a prominent issue in the U.S., with 89 % of the public believing that changes are needed to police procedures across the nation.[1] Following the Floyd protests, several police reforms were presented to voters in subnational elections,[2] yielding new opportunities to investigate the forces shaping voters' preferences on progressive justice reform. Research conducted within the past decade identifies race, prejudice, and partisanship as primary factors shaping Americans' reactions to police violence and police reform position-taking (Updegrove et al., 2020; Reny and Newman, 2021; Jefferson et al., 2021; Boehmke et al., 2023). Neglected in this growing literature, however, is an exploration of a factor long-argued to structure policy preferences: self-interest. Additionally, a review of over 60 years of research on self-interest finds ample tests for its presence in areas such as taxation, welfare, affirmative action, immigration, abortion, gay rights, and drug policy, yet a relative scarcity of tests within the domain of law enforcement and, especially, police reform (Weeden and Kurzban, 2017). In short, a contribution can be made to the growing police reform literature and long-standing corpus of studies on self-interest by testing for the presence of self-interest in voter support for police reform.

A major protest slogan and police reform initiative that emerged during the 2020 Floyd protests was "defund the police" (Miller, 2020), which alludes to divesting public funds from law enforcement agencies (LEAs) and reallocating them to non-policing forms of public safety and community support (BLM Global Network, 2020; Lowrey, 2020; Ray, 2020).[3] After the Floyd protests, calls for police defunding moved beyond the streets and into city council meetings and onto local ballots.[4] Defund the police (DTP) was a focal issue in the 2020 Presidential Election, with the controversial "Break In" campaign advertisement by president Trump that connected his challenger, Joe Biden, to the DTP movement. The 30-s advertisement depicted a woman watching a television segment about police defunding. While viewing this segment, a burglar breaks into her home and she calls 911 and receives a message stating, "I'm sorry that there's no one here to answer your emergency call." A YouGov poll found that ratings of Biden among Democratic and Independent registered voters dropped after viewing this attack ad.[5] After winning the Presidency, Joe Biden reignited public debate over DTP following his 2022 State of the Union Address, where he said that the answer to crime "is not to defund the police. The answer is to fund

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[1] https://www.cbsnews.com/news/policing-opinion-poll-2023-02-05/.
[2] Ballotpedia identifies 32 police-related ballot initiatives in local elections in 2020–2021 (link).
[3] There are several acronyms throughout this paper. See Appendix Section A for a guide to the acronyms and their meanings.
[4] See examples from Minneapolis, Austin, Portland, and Los Angeles.
[5] https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/31207-trump-advertisement-break-in-poll.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2025.102958
Received 27 November 2024; Received in revised form 6 April 2025; Accepted 16 June 2025
Available online 1 July 2025

the police."[6]

A central feature of DTP that sets it apart from other popular police reforms is the trade-off presented to the public by competing stakeholders between (a) paring the size and scope of police forces to redress police violence, and (b) maintaining the capacity of LEAs to provide service and public safety. Public discourse surrounding reforms like implicit bias training, chokehold and taser bans, body-worn cameras, and civilian oversight, typically do not involve opposition based on the claim that implementation reduces LEA capacity to respond to 911 calls and provide service.[7] However, when it comes to deliberation over DTP, concern over maintaining police service and public safety are the *main* points of argumentation against the policy, with opponents claiming it will render LEAs unable to do their jobs and crime will therefore worsen.[8] According to the Executive Director of the Fraternal Order of Police, defunding the police would leave "no line of defense between innocent people and the potential for lawlessness."[9] DTP initiatives are thus unique when it comes to the potential sources of voter preference formation due to the distinct presence of a form of self-interest centering on service protection: the motive to protect the capacity of a LEA to provide service to one's household or neighborhood if or when needed.

The literature on policy threat predicts that policies will mobilize to action those whom they directly or indirectly harm (Laniyonu, 2019; Walker, 2020). This prediction is applicable to DTP proposals, as they evoke the threat of a policy change that could lead to salient perceived harms (e.g., reduced police service and public safety). Given threats are highly catalyzing of political action (Miller and Krosnick, 2004), we may expect that service protection would be an operative factor depressing voter support for DTP. Decades of research find a relatively limited role of self-interest in shaping public opinion and political behavior (Sears et al., 1980; Lau and Heldman, 2009). Critically, this literature suggests that self-interest is most likely to be operative when the potential harms of a policy are clear and loom large for affected stakeholders (Chong et al., 2001; Weeden and Kurzban, 2017). Examples of these "most likely" cases for self-interest include cigarette taxes and smokers (Green and Gerken, 1989), property tax cuts and homeowners (Sears and Citrin, 1985), estate taxes and lottery winners (Doherty et al., 2006), welfare spending and the newly unemployed (Margalit, 2013), ACA enrollment and the infirm (Reny and Sears, 2020), and opioid treatment policy and residence in areas with high overdose rates (Benedictis-Kessner and Hankinson, 2019).

DTP initiatives are akin to these most-likely cases on the grounds that they involve substantial perceived costs (e.g., reduced service and increased crime) to affected stakeholders (i.e., households under the jurisdiction of a financially impacted LEA). Americans are notably concerned about crime and victimization: when asked how much they worry about "crime and violence," 54% of Americans reported "a great deal" of worry and another 29% reported "a fair amount."[10] A poll of Californians found that 65% were concerned about being the victim of a crime[11] and surveys of Los Angeles County residents document significant concern over property and violent crime.[12] Experimental evidence demonstrates that Americans believe even small reductions to the size of their local LEA will result in increases in crime and decreases in public safety (Vaughn et al., 2022). In short, the threat of reduced service capacity when the police are needed should loom large for voters in affected jurisdictions, rendering self-interest a plausible factor in shaping voter support for a DTP initiative. Alternately, if self-interest is not operative in shaping DTP support, it would provide a strong addition from a new issue domain to the corpus of evidence concluding that electoral behavior is largely driven by forces other than self-interest.

There are a few recent empirical assessments of public support for DTP (Boehmke et al., 2023), police abolition (Morris and Shoub, 2023), and criminal justice reform (Ang and Tebes, 2023). These studies, however, focus on the effects of exposure to social protest and police violence on policy support, with no explicit mention of "self-interest" or incorporation of voter concern over police service capacity. In fact, consistent with past research demonstrating the predominance of symbolic and partisan orientations in driving public opinion and electoral behavior, these studies find that partisan preference is one of the strongest predictors of individual support for DTP (Boehmke et al., 2023) and precinct support for police abolition (Morris and Shoub, 2023). Homing in on recent studies of exposure to police violence, these works do not conceptualize policy support among the treated as the exercise of self-interest to protect police service; rather, they construe their findings as voter mobilization in response to excessive policing. While this mobilization could be viewed as a type of self-interest enactment, what is unequivocal is that these studies do not theoretically or empirically explore self-interest in the form of service protection. As such, we see the literature as ripe for an explicit exploration of self-interest in voter support for DTP. Importantly, this exploration should channel policy debate surrounding DTP by focusing on self-interest as service protection.

This article provides such an exploration by exploiting a county-wide ballot measure in a populous county that proposed funding reductions for the county-level LEA with staggered and mutually exclusive jurisdiction to the dozens of intra-county municipal LEAs. All county residents were eligible to vote on this measure; thus, this feature of the proposition divided voters into those whose own LEA's funding and service capacity was threatened by the measure and those whose LEA was not. We combine precinct-level election data on this ballot measure with a spatial discontinuity design that greatly reduces covariate imbalance between "treated" and "untreated" precincts by focusing on contiguous election precincts located along the zigzagging jurisdiction border of the funding-threatened county LEA (Keele and Titiunik, 2015). We fail to uncover evidence that voters under the jurisdiction of the funding-threatened county-level LEA went out of their way to protect their public safety service provider by voting against the ballot measure. This null result emerges when analyzing contiguous precincts situated along the funding-threatened county-level LEA's jurisdiction and remains when including all county precincts in the analysis. While we do not uncover evidence voters acted to protect the funding-threatened LEA, we find robust evidence that anti-minority policy support powerfully predicted voter opposition to the police defunding measure, which aligns our findings with recent evidence that prejudice structures the American public's orientation toward law enforcement in the post-Ferguson era (Porter et al., 2018; Jefferson et al., 2021; Reny and Newman, 2021).

2. The case of Measure J

We explore the role of self-interest in voter support for police defunding using the case of Measure J in Los Angeles County (LAC). On the November 3rd, 2020 General Election, LAC voters were presented with a county-wide ballot initiative soliciting a "Yes" or "No" vote on a proposed county amendment that would require LAC to divert 10% of its discretionary budget away from "carceral systems and law enforcement" in order to be spent on social services and jail diversion. The earmarked

[6] https://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2022/.

[7] For example, opposition to body-worn cameras is based on their IT costs and civilian privacy (link); opposition to bias training is based on its presumed inefficacy (link); and opposition to taser bans is based on preserving a means of de-escalation (link).

[8] See examples from ABC News, The Seattle Times, Slate Magazine, and the National Police Support Fund.

[9] Quoted in ABC News.

[10] Gallup Organization. 2023. Gallup Poll, March, Question 14 [31120183.00014]. Gallup Organization. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

[11] Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC). PPIC California Statewide Survey, Question 44. 31120113.00043. Ipsos. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2023. Web. Jan-13-2023.

[12] https://www.lewis.ucla.edu/programs/data/qualityoflife/.

funds under the proposed amendment explicitly prohibited the funds from being used on prisons, jails, or the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD). The principal group behind Measure J was a coalition of local organizations, including the Long Beach and Los Angeles chapters of Black Lives Matter, working under the name "Re-imagine Los Angeles," who publicly characterized it as a "ballot measure to divest from incarceration and policing and invest in the health and economic wellness of marginalized people in their communities."[13] Measure J passed with 57% of the roughly 3.8 million votes cast throughout LAC. Fig. 1, Panel A, provides a greyscale heatmap of voter support for Measure J in LAC election precincts, revealing greater support in Central LA, the South Bay, and Gateway and Westside cities relative to Santa Clarita and the San Fernando, Antelope, and San Gabriel Valley subregions. While myriad polls exist soliciting public preferences over DTP,[14] Measure J was put to a vote, enabling researchers to observe actual behavior or "revealed preferences," which is valuable given that reported preferences do not always align with future behavior (LaPiere, 1934).

Several LAC characteristics situate it as a useful context for studying electoral behavior and police reform. First, LAC is the largest U.S. county by population, with over 10 million residents and 6 million voters as of 2020, rendering it larger than 40 U.S. states. LAC is demographically diverse, with large Latino (48%), Asian (15%), and Black (8%) populations, and it contains 88 cities and approximately 140 unincorporated areas with a heterogenous set of characteristics along demographic, socioeconomic, and political dimensions. In addition, the LASD is the largest U.S. county sheriff's department, with 18,000 employees, 10,000 sworn deputies, and service provision to 42 cities and 153 unincorporated LAC communities. Additionally, LAC is an epicenter for political conflict over law enforcement: LAC experiences the highest level of fatal police violence, with 685 civilian police killings between 2010-2020.[15] Related to this, LAC experienced two of the largest episodes of civil unrest in response to police violence: the 1965 Watts Rebellion and the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising. Moreover, with the onset of the 2020 BLM protests, protesting and civil unrest throughout LAC escalated to the point where the National Guard was called and the entire county was put on a mandatory curfew.[16]

While there is a history of conflict between the police and civilians in LAC, service protection as a form of self-interest remains highly plausible as an operative factor shaping the vote for Measure J given that a March 2020 survey of county residents found that 61% place high importance on being protected from crime and 62% reported satisfaction with local law enforcement.[17]

3. County-wide vote with differing intra-county LEA jurisdiction

Measure J offers a unique opportunity to assess self-interest in the form of service protection due to the county-wide nature of the vote but the disparate intra-county organization of LEA jurisdiction within LAC. Measure J was directed against funding for the LASD but would not affect the budgets of the 46 municipal police departments (MPDs) in LAC. Critically, election precincts in LAC are either serviced by the LASD or a MPD, with no formal overlap in LEA jurisdiction. Fig. 1, Panel B, depicts the jurisdictional boundaries of the LASD, showing the election precincts serviced by either the LASD (dark grey) or a MPD (light grey). Given Measure J only implicated the county budget and the LASD, the initiative presented county voters with the same ballot question but a distinct proposal with differing potential costs depending on where they lived: for voters living under the jurisdiction of the LASD, it involved defunding the policing agency servicing one's own household and neighborhood; however, for voters living under the jurisdiction of a MPD, it involved defunding a widely-known locally-operating LEA while leaving the budget of the police agency servicing one's own household and neighborhood untouched.

This unique feature of the vote implies the presence of a self-interest-based service-protection motive for voters living under the jurisdiction of the LASD but the relative absence of such for those living under the jurisdiction of a MPD. In short, the county-wide nature of the vote—including its targeting of a county-level LEA—but disparate intra-county organization of LEA jurisdiction affords a unique opportunity to test for self-interest in the form of service protection. If popular arguments against DTP evoking concern over police service capacity have traction, such arguments should have been more salient to voters under LASD jurisdiction. While it is conceivable that voters served by a MPD could have been motivated by sociotropic concern over public safety in neighboring and remote county areas under LASD jurisdiction, their egotropic concern should have been little-to-none given that personally envisioning the need to call the police for their household would not entail calling the LASD. Therefore, we expect average support for Measure J to be lower among voters under LASD jurisdiction, which we label the *service-protection hypothesis*.

This hypothesis presumes voters' awareness of the LEA serving their household and community. While we were unable to locate extant survey data asking LAC residents to identify the LEA serving their community, we were able to gain insight into this issue using publicly-available internet search data from Google Trends. Variation in internet search volume has been shown to capture the salience of an issue or entity among the public (Mellon, 2014). Fig. 2 displays differences in information-seeking about the LASD and MPDs across LAC cities by city-level LEA jurisdiction.[18] Panel A reveals a *very large 1.8 standard deviation difference* in information-seeking about the LASD among LASD-served cities compared to MPD-served cities.[19] Put simply, internet users in communities under LASD jurisdiction seek out information about the LASD much more than users in communities not served by the LASD. This difference in information-seeking implies that residents under the jurisdiction of the LASD are aware of this fact as evinced by their differential interest in this LEA. Alternatively, Panel B lists every MPD-served city among the top-20 most populous LAC cities and reveals that information-seeking within these cities about their own MPD maxes out on the Google Trends scale (range: 0–100) but is mostly near zero for other LAC cities.[20] In other words, residents living in a particular MPD-served city (e.g., Burbank) maximally search for their own MPD (e.g., Burbank PD), but residents living outside that particular MPD-served city (e.g., Glendale, Los Angeles, Pasadena) do not search for that MPD. These stark differences in search volumes imply awareness of one's respective MPD among LAC residents residing in cities with a MPD.

The feasibility of the service-protection hypothesis is further buttressed by key aspects of Measure J and the LAC election environment. First, Measure J aligned with the public's understanding of "defund the police." A 2020 survey found that 70% of Americans perceived "defund the police" to mean "redirect some police department funding to other social services" as opposed to "eliminating police departments completely."[21] Evidence that voters in LAC perceived

[13] See https://reimagine.la/about/.
[14] For example, see FiveThirtyEight.
[15] Figure based on the Fatal Encounters database (downloaded May 21, 2021, see https://fatalencounters.org/).
[16] https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-05-31/looting-vandalism-leaves-downtown-l-a-stunned.
[17] https://www.lewis.ucla.edu/programs/data/qualityoflife/.
[18] For information on how city-level Google Trends data is displayed, measured, and normalized for a specific search term, see Section T.
[19] For more information on the interpretation of Fig. 2, see Section U.
[20] The one exception is search interest in the Los Angeles Police Department, but out-of-city interest is likely grossly over-estimated in Google Trends data, see Section U.
[21] PRRI 2020 American Values Survey, Question 92 (Cornell University, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2020).

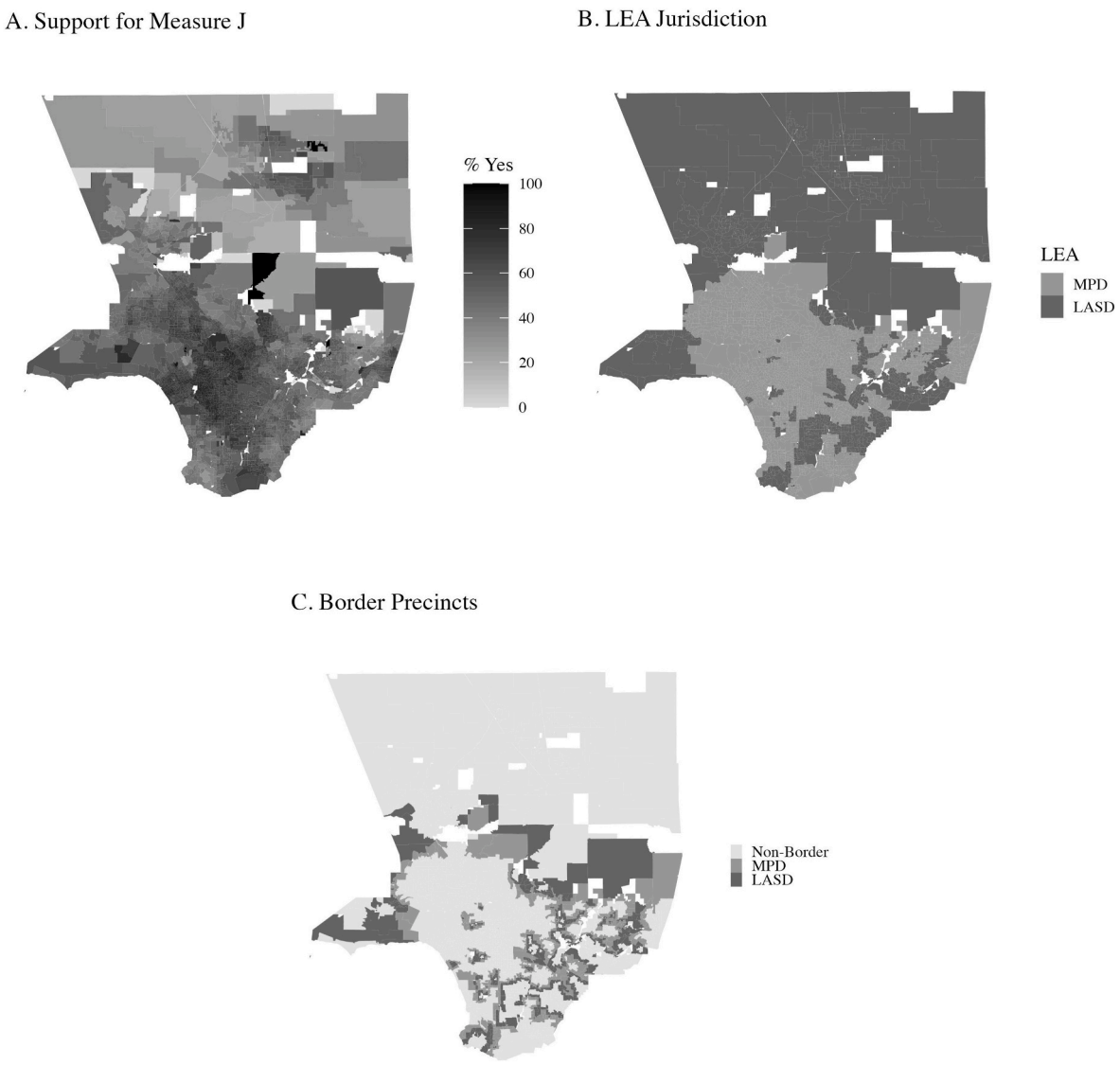

Fig. 1. LAC Map with Election Precinct Boundaries. Maps depict precinct support for Measure J (Panel A), LEA jurisdiction (B), and contiguous precincts along LASD jurisdiction borders (C). White spaces are precincts with 0 overall votes.

Measure J as a DTP initiative comes from internet search activity in the LA metro area in the weeks before and after the 2020 Election. Google Trends data reveal that internet searches for "defund the police" by users in the LA metro area spiked leading up to and following the election. Moreover, search interest in "defund the police" was larger in the LA metro than non-LA metro areas throughout California (Figure C7, Table C2), suggesting DTP interest in the LA metro area was not due to a generalized trend related to the 2020 election but rather the placement of Measure J on the county ballot.

Second, various information sources available to voters conveyed that Measure J was a defunding initiative; moreover, these information sources made it clear the measure would *only affect* the LASD compared to the 46 MPDs operating within LAC.[22] First and foremost: all voters in LAC were sent sample ballots and voter information guides that provided ballot wording and arguments in favor and against each measure (see Appendix B). These materials *explicitly* told voters that the funds set aside from Measure J *could not* be used for the LASD, and no other LEA was singled out in these materials. While Measure J did not propose a direct cut to the LASD budget, various sources of information made it clear to voters that the measure could reduce the flow of funds available to the LASD. Chiefly, the official arguments appearing against Measure J on the sample ballot and voter information guide told voters that the measure "permanently takes $500,000,000 in funding away" from "911 operators" and "public safety officers" (see Figure B5). Second of these sources of information was local media coverage and media outreach by prominent county stakeholders. Critically, each of these sources explicitly depicted the initiative as a defunding measure targeting the LASD. Discussion of Measure J appearing in the Los Angeles Times made it clear the measure implicated the LASD budget and that its principal opponent was the LASD (Cosgrove, 2020). Opponents of Measure J publicly argued that it was a de facto DTP policy since money would inevitably be reduced from the LASD to fund social programs mandated by the charter amendment. For example, the Sheriff of the LASD in 2020, Alex Villanueva, publicly characterized Measure J as a "campaign to continue defunding LASD" that would make the streets of LAC "look like a scene from Mad Max."[23] The LASD released a statement on its website claiming the measure would mean "additional reductions to our

[22] http://www.laalmanac.com/crime/cr69.php.

[23] See: https://twitter.com/LACoSheriff/status/1285718712243412992.

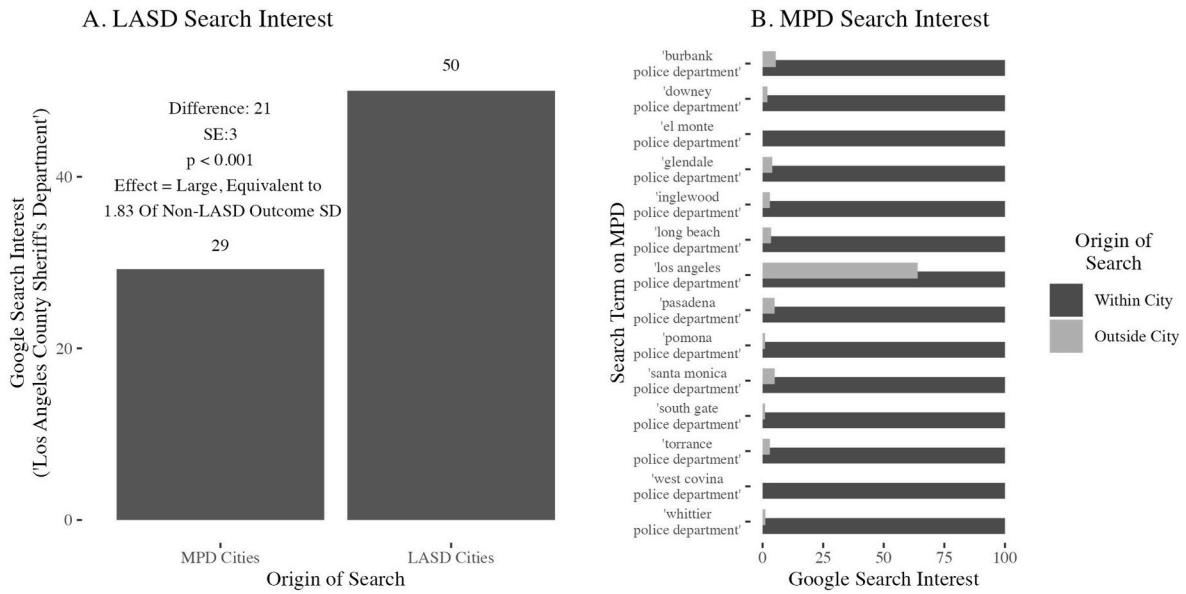

Fig. 2. LASD- and MPD-Served Cities are Differentially More Likely to Seek Information Concerning their Own LEA. Panel A characterizes search interest in the "los angeles county sheriff's department" between MPD and LASD-served cities. Panel B characterizes search interest among the MPD-serviced cities in the top-20 most populous LAC cities on their own MPD relative to all other cities. Data are from Google Trends between 2010-01-01 to 2020-11-01 on all cities Google collects search interest data on with respect to each search term. Search interest is normalized between 0 and 100. Estimates are population-weighted.

budget."[24]

On the LASD's Facebook page, Villanueva posted a video on October 28, 2020,[25] where he stated that the passage of Measure J would mean a "$145,000,000 cut to our budget" and "equate to the loss of 1200 positions in the department," which he said would cause "a devastating cut on our patrol services", concluding that "our response times to go to crime will increase." The Association for Los Angeles Deputy Sheriffs (ALADS), the LASD deputy union, alone spent $3.5 million on TV and social media advertising indicting Measure J's purported threat to public safety by constraining law enforcement resources.[26] Ads released by ALADS in the lead-up to the election contained titles and captions including "Measure J defunds the essential workers we count on to protect us" and "Measure J will lead to devastating consequences. Don't let Measure J defund our public safety." Finally, the Los Angeles County Professional Peace Officers Association (PPOA), the professional association representing LASD deputies, released an ad stating "Measure J will cripple public safety" and "will absolutely DEFUND the work of dedicated PPOA members throughout LA County" (see Section D).

In the end, the primary opponents on record for Measure J were the LASD, Sheriff Villanueva, and organizations representing LASD deputies.[27] From official campaign materials and media coverage to hefty public outreach by opponents, the information environment in LAC leading up to the election was rich with information about the targeting of LASD and the threat to LASD service capacity and public safety. This, in turn, renders it plausible that voters would experience *differential policy threat* from Measure J as a function of their LEA jurisdiction. One method for gleaning the existence of differential policy threat from Measure J is to analyze information-seeking related to Measure J and the election among LAC residents using Google Trends search interest data. Prior research shows threats (Gadarian and Albertson, 2014; Albertson and Kushner Gadarian, 2015), in general, and policy threats (Pantoja and Segura, 2003; Coan et al., 2021), specifically, can motivate differential information-seeking concerning the threat among those subject to the threat. Therefore, if we observe higher levels of information seeking for Measure J-related content among jurisdictions serviced by the LASD, then we may have more confidence that LASD-serviced regions are differentially concerned (relative to MPD-serviced jurisdictions) about the possible implications of Measure J as it relates to the sustainment of public safety provision by the LASD.

Fig. 3 presents estimated differences in search interest in "Measure J", "Defund", and "Sheriff" in the run-up to the 2020 election between users in LASD-served cities versus MPD-served cities. Interest in these terms was significantly higher among LASD-served internet users. Crucially, these differences are substantively large, equivalent to 101-109% of the Google Trends search interest measure standard deviation. Therefore, the threat of police defunding likely loomed large for LAC residents serviced by the LASD. Moreover, LASD-served cities were *not* more likely to search for "Election", "Vote", or "Voting" than MPD-served cities, suggesting the difference in search interest in Measure J and related content by LEA jurisdiction was not due to users in LASD-served cities engaging in more internet searches related to the election in general.[28] In sum, these differential search patterns are consistent with research demonstrating that *information-seeking is stimulated by policy threat* (Coan et al., 2021; Pantoja and Segura, 2003). Perhaps most important, the heightened interest in Measure J and the Sheriff's Department among users in LASD-served LAC areas suggests that these residents knew they fell under LASD jurisdiction and were aware of the targeted policy threat of Measure J to their public safety provider.[29]

[24] https://lasd.org/statement-regarding-measure-j/.

[25] https://www.facebook.com/LosAngelesCountySheriffsDepartment/videos.

[26] https://www.vox.com/2020/11/4/21549019/measure-j-police-abolition-defund-reform-black-lives-matter-protest-2020-election-george-floyd.

[27] See the Ballotpedia page for Measure J and the official endorsements for the measure.

[28] Given our research design assesses the effect of LASD service provision among election precincts bordering LASD jurisdiction, we re-analyze Fig. 3 using only cities along the LASD border. Our statistical conclusions do not change (Section V.1).

[29] The temporal domain we use to call Google Trends data in Fig. 3 is shorter than in Fig. 2 for theoretically and methodologically motivated reasons we outline in Section T.1.

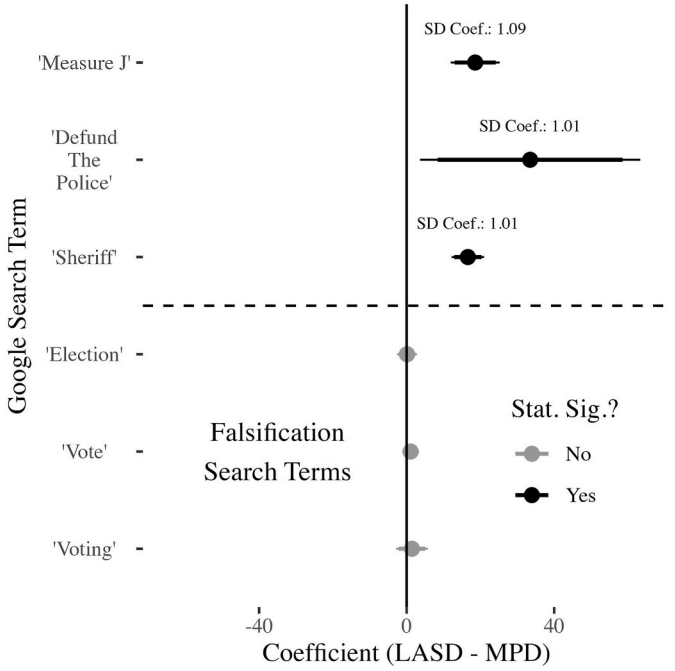

Fig. 3. Differences in Internet Search Interest in Measure J and Related Terms Between Users in LASD- and MPD-Served Cities. X-axis is the *t*-test difference in Google search interest between LASD- and MPD-served cities, Y-axis is the search term. Estimates use data from all LAC cities Google collects search interest data on for each specific search term. Search interest is normalized between 0 and 100. Temporal domain of data is from 2020-09-01 to 2020-11-03. Annotations denote the coefficient normalized by the standard deviation of the search interest outcome. 95% CIs displayed.

4. Anti-minority sentiment and measure J support

Race and racism are inherently tethered to crime and policing. Contemporary and historic theory and evidence suggests the primary function of the police in the United States is to socially control Black populations in service of an anti-Black racial hierarchy and to undercut Black political interests (Gilbert and Ray, 2016; Alexander, 2020). Prior evidence suggests the racialized role of the police is buttressed by white mass opinion and preferences for racial prejudice. Myriad evidence shows anti-Black attitudes (and anti-minority attitudes more broadly) are strongly associated with punitive criminal justice policy preferences and negatively associated with preventative anti-crime measures focused on mitigating structural determinants of criminal behavior (Sears et al., 1980; Hurwitz and Peffley, 1997a; Green et al., 2006; Enns and Ramirez, 2018; Cullen et al., 2021; Jefferson et al., 2021). Recent survey evidence suggests, net of self-interested considerations related to crime exposure, anti-minority orientations dominate support for DTP (Baranauskas, 2022). Prior evidence also implies self-interest in the form of service protection may be less consequential than "symbolic" attitudes related to race. This is because symbolic attitudes, which are rooted in long-term (pre-adult) political socialization, serve as a relatively accessible heuristic that is easier to use as a psychological framework for voting decisions than potentially more complex calculations of self-interest (Sears et al., 1980; Reny and Sears, 2020). Thus, we hypothesize LAC precincts which harbor stronger anti-minority sentiment may be less inclined to support Measure J, and the import of anti-minority sentiment in shaping the vote for Measure J may trump self-interest in the form of service protection (*symbolic politics hypothesis*).

5. Data and methods

Our analysis uses administrative election results data for LAC from the November 3rd, 2020 General Election. We obtained this data at the smallest geographic level available—the precinct-level—from the LAC Registrar-Reporter/County Clerk.[30] The final vote for Measure J was tabulated for 3050 election precincts.[31] The outcome is the proportion of voters in each precinct casting a vote on Measure J who voted "Yes" on the initiative (% Yes, rescaled between 0 and 1). While individual-level survey data would be useful for testing our service-protection hypothesis, we were unable to locate any surveys of LAC residents (e.g., LA Times Poll, CA Field Poll, USC Poll, UCLA Quality of Life Poll) soliciting Measure J support and containing fine-grained geocodes enabling us to situate respondents within police jurisdictional boundaries. In the end, the finest-grained data available is the precinct-level election results.

To determine if an election precinct is served by the LASD or a MPD, we retrieved data on service boundaries for all LAC LEAs from the LAC Open Data website.[32] We overlaid election precinct boundaries with LASD service boundaries in QGIS, and coded a precinct as served by the LASD if it was contained within LASD service boundaries. Conveniently, all precincts fall under the jurisdiction of a single LEA (LASD or a MPD) because both election precinct and LEA service boundaries are determined by the borders of cities and unincorporated communities throughout LAC.[33] We created a dichotomous variable, labeled *LASD*, coded "1" for precincts under the jurisdiction of the LASD and "0" for those under the jurisdiction of a MPD. In this study, residing under the jurisdiction of the LASD captures the theorized "treatment"—namely, the presence of self-interest in the form of the egotropic motive to protect LASD service capacity and provision to one's household or neighborhood.

Given our analysis is at the precinct-level and not the voter-level, readers should be aware of important theoretical considerations regarding the interpretation of our results in the context of the *service-protection hypothesis*. Individual self-interest is multi-faceted. For some voters within LASD-served (as opposed to MPD-served) precincts, they may be self-interested in preventing the loss or reduction of LASD service provision if Measure J passes via referendum. For other voters within LASD-served precincts, they may instead be differentially self-interested in constraining the LASD due to potential negative experiences with the agency (Laniyonu, 2019; Walker, 2020). Thus, a null effect of *LASD* service provision on support for Measure J using precinct-level data may not be due to the absence of service-protection-based self-interest but diverging intra-precinct individual-level voting patterns in regards to Measure J motivated by distinct types of self-interest. To rule out the possibility that our results may be driven by divergent individual-level intra-precinct voting patterns, we will conduct two tests. First, we will assess the effect of *LASD* service provision on turnout and registration. If LASD-served (as opposed to MPD-served) individual voters are inclined to differentially register or vote for or against Measure J based on *any type* of self-interest, we would expect *LASD* service provision to have a positive effect on turnout and registration, consistent with prior work on how policy threats motivate political participation (Miller and Krosnick, 2004; Laniyonu, 2019; Walker, 2020). Conversely, the absence of a positive effect would suggest the limited presence of differential individual-level self-interest motivations among LASD-served voters.

[30] See: https://www.lavote.net/home/voting-elections/current-elections/election-results/past-election-results.

[31] We exclude precincts with 0 votes on Measure J.

[32] https://data.lacounty.gov/GIS-Data/Reporting-Districts/kvwy-dqs6.

[33] GIS data on LASD jurisdiction and LAC precinct boundaries were slightly jittered from each other, which could generate the possibility for error using automatic processes to identify LASD precincts. Therefore, we identified which precincts overlapped with LASD boundaries by hand.

Second, we will assess the effect of LASD service provision on Measure J support conditional on baseline precinct-level support for the LASD before the vote for Measure J. If the effect of *LASD* service provision is biased by divergent individual-level self-interest motivations in favor of or in opposition to Measure J, then we would expect the effect of *LASD* service provision on Measure J support to be more positive in precincts that previously opposed the LASD, and more negative in precincts that previously supported the LASD. Conversely, the absence of heterogeneous effects by baseline LASD support would imply the absence of divergent individual-level self-interest motivations driving our precinct-level results. We discuss these two tests in greater detail in the Results Section.

We account for several precinct-level control covariates potentially correlated with LEA jurisdiction and Measure J support. Using census block group data from the 2015–2019 5-year American Community Survey, we use areal interpolation[34] to generate precinct-level estimates of our controls, including: population size and density, median household income, the proportion of adults holding a college degree or higher *(% college*), the proportion of housing units that are owner-occupied *(% own home*), the proportion of workforce adults that are unemployed *(% unemployed*), the proportion of the population that is 55 years or older *(% 55+*), the proportion of the population that is either Black, Latino or Asian (*% Black, Latino, Asian*), and the proportion of adults employed in protective services (e.g., police and sheriff's officers, *% security*).

To address general differences in left-right political orientations, we control for the proportion of voters in each precinct registered as Democrats in 2020 (*% Democrat*).[35] Given the longstanding racialization of crime in the U.S. (Hurwitz and Peffley, 1997a) and the demonstrated role of race and prejudice in shaping Americans' reactions to police violence (Reny and Newman, 2021; Jefferson et al., 2021) and attitudes toward the police (Newman et al., 2023; Russell and Garand, 2023), we also control for the proportion of precinct voters who supported California Proposition 16 (2020) (*% Proposition 16*). Proposition 16 would have repealed Proposition 209 (1996), which prohibited ethno-racial affirmative action in public institutions. While Proposition 16 failed, passage would have permitted affirmative action in state and local government; as such, we code the percent "Yes" votes to capture precinct voter support for affirmative action. Prior research demonstrates that opposition to affirmative action is largely informed by antipathic attitudes toward non-white groups, specifically Black people (Kluegel and Smith, 1983), making it a suitable proxy for anti-minority sentiment and for helping to test the *symbolic politics hypothesis*. Next, voters exposed to potentially egregious policing practices, like police killings, may be inclined to constrain the police by voting for justice reform (Ang and Tebes, 2023). Therefore, we adjust for precinct-level police killing rates using geocoded data on the universe of police killings in the four years before the 2020 election (*police killing rate*).[36] Finally, routine exposure to violent crime may increase voter's sensitivity to police capacity to mitigate crime (Vaughn et al., 2022). Thus, we adjust for homicide rates[37] using geocoded homicide data throughout LAC in the four years prior to the 2020 election (*homicide rate*).[38]

5.1. Analytic strategy

One approach to testing the *service protection hypothesis* would involve using regression on all 3050 precincts in LAC to assess whether there were average differences in support for Measure J between precinct voters served by the LASD versus a MPD. Given the size of LAC and concentration of LASD-served precincts in specific regions of the county, one concern with this approach is that LASD- and MPD-served precincts significantly differ on several characteristics. This concern is powerfully confirmed in Fig. 4, Panel A, which reveals substantial covariate imbalance: LASD-served precincts are significantly different than MPD-served precincts on 8/15 baseline covariates (i.e. income, education, home-ownership, age, population density, partisanship, and affirmative action support). In short, estimating a regression coefficient for *LASD* entails comparing drastically different precinct types.

To address this imbalance, we use a spatial discontinuity design focusing on the subset of N = 862 *neighboring* election precincts strewn along each side of LASD jurisdictional boundaries throughout LAC. Fig. 1, Panel C, depicts this subset of precincts existing along different sides of LASD's zigzagging jurisdictional boundaries. The identifying assumption for our spatial discontinuity approach is that precincts along each side of the LASD jurisdiction boundary are characteristically similar with the exception of being served by the LASD or an MPD (Keele and Titiunik, 2015). The intuition behind the spatial discontinuity design is that focusing on contiguous precincts will render a more like set of comparison units. Indeed, our identifying assumption appears to be supported. Subsetting to border precincts drastically reduces covariate imbalance between LASD- and MPD-served precincts (Fig. 4, Panel B). Compared to the full set of LAC precincts, we only observe imbalance on 1/15 baseline covariates (home ownership), equivalent to statistical chance. The reduction in covariate imbalance establishes the value of our spatial discontinuity design. What is particularly notable is that use of this bordering precinct subsample eliminates imbalance on partisan orientations *(% Democrat*), and additional tests demonstrate that these precincts voted similarly on state and local referenda pertaining to criminal justice or police reform between 2004 to March 2020 (Figure H14). Moreover, these border precincts experienced similar rates of homicide and police killings, and additional tests demonstrate that bordering precincts served by LASD or the Long Beach and Los Angeles police departments experienced similar rates of police-initiated stops of civilians (Table G4). Altogether, these tests bolster the claim that our spatial discontinuity design is effectively comparing demographically, politically, and criminologically alike units.

One important accompanying demonstration is showing that LEA jurisdictional boundaries are *sharp* among this subset of contiguous precincts, which renders feasible the assumption that voters in these areas are able to discern their LEA. If the LASD or MPDs regularly engage in cross-jurisdiction policing in these bordering precinct areas, voters in these precincts may be justifiably unclear about which LEA is their service provider, which could bias the estimated LASD coefficient toward zero. In contrast, if LEA activity discontinuously shifts across jurisdictional boundaries, it would provide the objective conditions needed to render plausible the assumption that voters along different sides of the LASD border know which LEA services their household.

Fig. 5, Panels A–C characterize policing activity by the LASD, Long Beach Police Department (LBPD), and Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD),[39] whose combined jurisdiction covers 70% of LAC election precincts. Each bar chart groups precincts into four types: LASD-served precincts not touching the LASD border, LASD-served precincts on the LASD border, LBPD/LAPD-served precincts touching the LASD border, and LBPD/LAPD-served precincts not touching the LASD border. The bar charts in Panels A–C reveal discontinuous drops in LEA policing activity (i.e., police stop rates and arrest rates) between precincts just inside and outside its jurisdictional border. One basis for residents to identify which LEA has jurisdiction over their household is—*who engages in policing activity in their immediate neighborhood?* The results in Panels A–C suggest

[34] Implemented via the sf package in R.

[35] Data on Democratic registration retrieved from the California Statewide Database.

[36] Source: https://fatalencounters.org/.

[37] To construct police killing and homicide rates, we normalize the count of police killings and homicides by precinct population and multiply that quantity by 1000.

[38] Source: https://homicide.latimes.com/.

[39] For information on the data used to construct police stop and arrest rates on Fig. 5, see Section E.1.

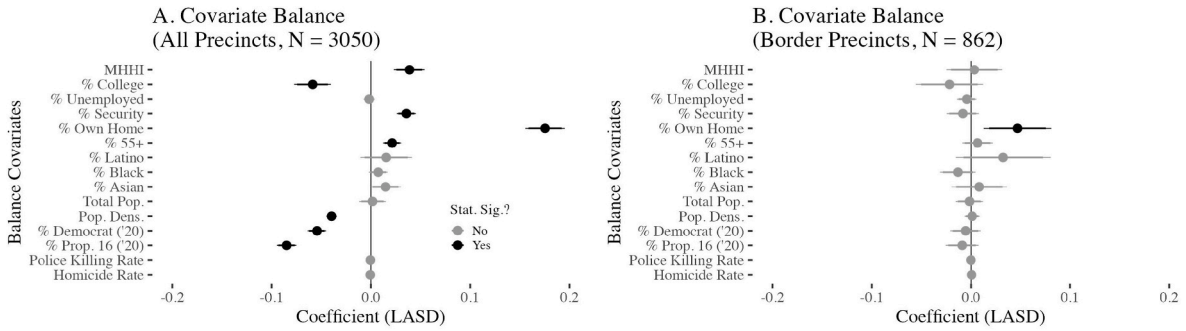

Fig. 4. Covariate Imbalance between LASD- and MPD-Served Election Precincts. Plots depict balance tests for all LAC precincts (Panel A) and contiguous precincts along LASD jurisdiction borders (B). Covariates scaled between 0 and 1. Estimates are population-weighted. 95 % CIs displayed from HC2 robust SEs. See Table S13 for a corresponding regression table.

precinct voters served by an MPD just outside of LASD jurisdiction see very little LASD policing activity in their precinct compared to neighboring precincts just inside LASD jurisdiction. Conversely, precinct voters just inside of LASD jurisdiction bordering LB or LA see little LBPD or LAPD activity in their precinct. A second basis for residents to identify which LEA has jurisdiction over their household is—*who responds to a* 911 call? Panels D–F in the bottom row of Fig. 5 reveal discontinuous shifts across jurisdictional lines in the LEA responding to 911 calls for service or domestic violence (DV). When precinct voters just inside of LAPD jurisdiction call to report DV, the LAPD answers; however, for precinct voters just outside of LAPD jurisdiction, their calls to report DV are answered by a different LEA.[40]

Taken together, these data suggest a discontinuous drop in the "treatment" (self-interest deriving from being served by the LASD) as a function of traversing LASD jurisdictional borders. Despite the proximity of neighboring precincts along the LASD border, the data in Fig. 5 render it plausible that these voters discern being served by the LASD versus a MPD. As such, there is a plausible difference across LASD jurisdictional lines among these border precincts in the presence of self-interest in the form of the motive to protect LASD service capacity and provision.

6. Results

We present coefficient estimates for *LASD* from a bivariate model and a model including controls using the bordering election precinct subsample (Fig. 6). In both models, we find that the effect of *LASD* service provision on *% Yes* for Measure J is statistically null. The *LASD* coefficient conditional on controls is precisely 0 (B = 0.001, SE = 0.002, p = 0.77). The standardized *LASD* coefficient is 0.004 standard deviations (SE = 0.015). Effect size research posits a standardized effect of 0.05 is substantively negligible (Cohen, 2013). Under an equivalence test, coefficients are deemed *very negligible* if their 95 % CIs are within ±0.05 SD (Lakens et al., 2018). The standardized *LASD* coefficient and its confidence intervals are within ±0.05 SD, so the *LASD* effect is negligible under the equivalence test. These results suggest self-interest in the form of voting against a proposition that may reduce the capacity of one's own public safety provider was not operative in shaping Measure J support. This null result is not induced by our spatial discontinuity design, as we also observe a null result when using the full sample of N = 3050 LAC precincts (Section F).

We conducted several checks against these null results. First, in Section K.1, we demonstrate the null results are likely not explained by lack of sufficient knowledge about Measure J and/or LEA jurisdictional boundaries in order for voters to enact self-interest in the form of service protection.

Second, the null result may be a function of "extended" self-interest generating a treatment spillover effect—that is, voters in MPD-served precincts along the LASD jurisdiction border may have an interest in protecting LASD service capacity in bordering LASD-served precincts so they do not have to live near areas with escalating crime. We rule this out in Section I.

Third, our null results may be masking countervailing effects by partisanship (Vaughn et al., 2022). Precincts with more registered Democrats may be inclined to support Measure J if serviced by LASD whereas precincts with more registered Republicans may be differentially motivated to reject Measure J conditional on LASD service provision. Thus, we assess the heterogeneous effect of *LASD* by *% Democrat*. We do not find evidence the null is masking partisan countervailing effects (Table K6).

Fourth, given our outcome is the number of votes for Measure J normalized over the sum of votes for and against Measure J, our results may be affected by post-treatment conditioning on a) voting on Measure J (i.e. not abstaining), b) turnout, and c) registration. We assess if our findings are sensitive to alternative *% Yes* outcomes where the total votes for Measure J are normalized over a) all ballots cast, b) registered voters, and c) the citizen voting-age population (CVAP). Results do not change (Figure J15).

Fifth, self-interest may still be operative even if there are no differences in *% Yes* between LASD and MPD precincts bordering LASD jurisdiction if turnout is higher on the LASD side of the LASD jurisdiction border. This is because *% Yes* at the border is 3 percentage points *less* than the *overall* LAC Measure J vote (54 versus 57 percentage points). Moreover, as mentioned earlier in the Data and Methods Section, higher precinct-level turnout on the LASD side of the border may suggest individual-level mobilization on the basis of self-interested motivations (rooted in LASD service-protection or otherwise). However, the effect of *LASD* on turnout (normalized over registered voters and/or CVAP) is statistically null (Figure J15), suggesting LASD-served precincts were not differentially mobilized to vote on Measure J despite their differential exposure to the policy costs. Moreover, the effect of *LASD* on precinct-level voter registration (normalized over CVAP) is also null (Figure J15), further implying individual-level mobilization on the basis of various self-interest motivations was not operative in the vote for Measure J.

Sixth, our null result may be due to confounding by other city government jurisdictional boundaries overlapping with the LASD jurisdiction border. We conduct empirical tests to mitigate this risk of confounding in Section P.

Seventh, as foreshadowed in the Data and Methods Section, the coefficient for LASD on Measure J support could represent a *bundled treatment* with two countervailing forces rendering a null result: on one hand, service protection motives could push LASD-served precinct voters to oppose Measure J; while on the other hand, LASD-served precinct voters may distinctly dislike the LASD relative to MPD-served

[40] For information on the data used to construct calls for service rates on Fig. 5, see Section E.2.

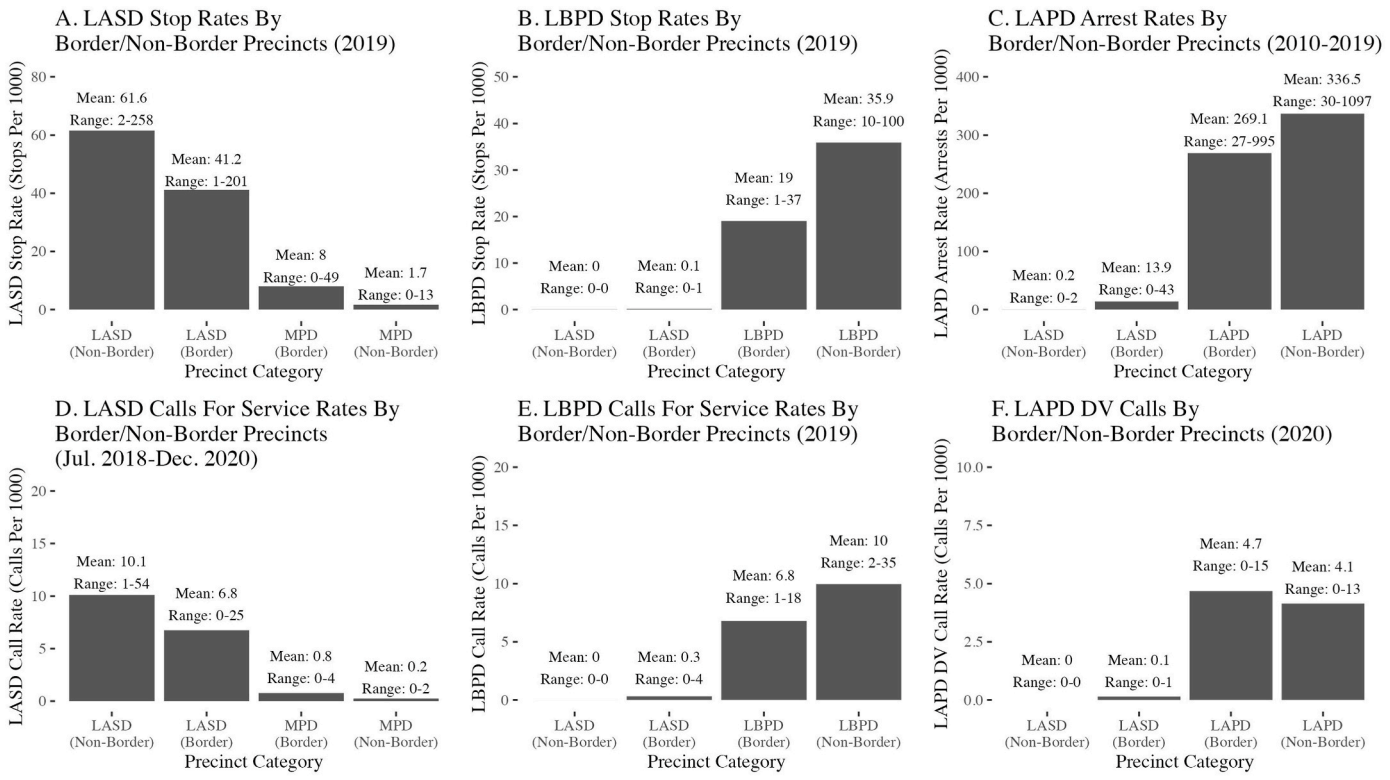

Fig. 5. Rates of Policing and Response to Calls for Service Across LASD and MPD Jurisdictions. Panels A–C characterize the LASD stop rate, LBPD stop rate, and LAPD arrest rate for LASD non-border precincts, LASD border precincts, MPD (LBPD/LAPD for Panel B/C) border precincts, and MPD (LBPD/LAPD for Panel B/C) non-border precincts (x-axis). Panel D-F characterize the LASD call for service rate, LBPD call rate, and LAPD domestic violence call rate (y-axis) by precinct type (x-axis). Estimates are population-weighted.

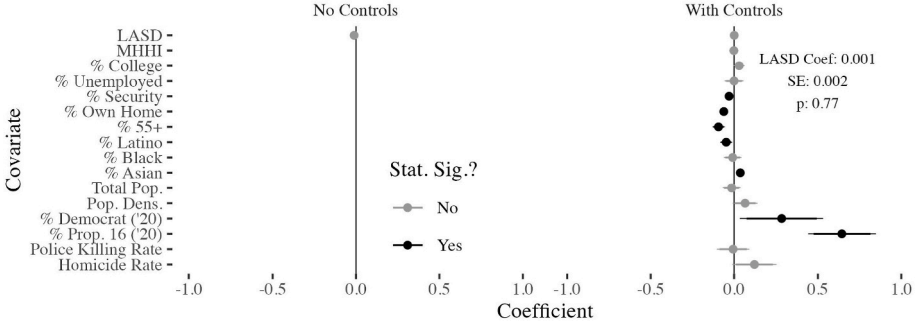

Fig. 6. Effect of LASD Jurisdiction on Measure J Support. Plots present coefficient estimates from bivariate (left-panel) and multivariate (right-panel) regression models. Estimates from LAC border precinct subsample. Covariates scaled between 0 and 1.

precinct voters and may thus have a higher baseline level of predisposition toward support for initiatives that retrench the LASD, like Measure J. If these countervailing factors are present, one could argue the null result for *LASD* on Measure J is theoretically uninformative because it may reflect the absence of service protection efforts by LASD-served precincts or it could involve the presence *but neutralization* of service protection due to standing dislike of the LASD. Luckily, a ballot measure, named Measure R, appeared on the LAC ballot in the March 2020 California Primary Election that proposed the creation of a civilian oversight commission to investigate complaints against the LASD. As such, precinct support for Measure R can be used as an indicator of precinct voters' revealed level of disfavor toward the LASD—and one that should not involve any countervailing service-protection motivations. With precinct support for Measure R in hand, we can perform two valuable additional tests. First, we fail to find evidence that LASD-served precincts were more supportive of Measure R than MPD-served precincts (Figure H14), suggesting against any discernible standing dislike of the LASD among precinct voters under its jurisdiction. Second, if the null *LASD* coefficient on Measure J support is due to dislike for the LASD among LASD-served precincts neutralizing possible service-protection-based self-interest effects, we would expect to observe a null effect of *LASD* on Measure J among precincts who previously supported Measure R but a negative and significant *LASD* coefficient among precincts that previously did not support Measure R. Critically, prior Measure R support *does not moderate* the effect of *LASD* on Measure J support (Table Q11), bolstering our interpretation of the null *LASD* coefficient in our analysis of Measure J support as the absence of service-protection-based self-interest.

Eighth, given prior research shows race strongly structures opinion toward police reform and reactions to police violence (Porter et al., 2018; Jefferson et al., 2021; Reny and Newman, 2021), we assess if our null result is masking a racialized self-interest service protection motive

where the influence of *LASD* on *% Yes* is heterogeneous by precinct-level ethno-racial composition. Section R illustrates there is no racialized self-interest motive.

6.1. Alternative forms of self-interest and symbolic politics

If self-interest in the form of service protection among voters under LASD jurisdiction played an insignificant role in the vote, *what factors played a significant role?* The right-side plot in Fig. 6 reveals that the presence of homeowners and the elderly within a precinct were each negatively related to precinct support for Measure J. Prior research documents that older people are more concerned about crime and vulnerable to crime (Braungart et al., 1980), and that homeowners may be more sensitive to crime than renters due to having a stronger stake in preventing social disorder in their long-term residence and sustaining property values (Donnelly, 1989). As such, these findings could be seen as indicative of self-interest in the form of "crime-sensitivity"—that is, opposition to Measure J among precincts possessing characteristics linked to elevated sensitivity of residents to crime.

Three things should be noted about the estimated relationships between Measure J support and home ownership and elderly composition. First, these relationships are substantively small. The standardized coefficients for *% own home* and *% 55+* are −0.1 and −0.06. Second, these factors are not conditioned by residing within LASD jurisdiction (Table K6, Models 4–5), suggesting a "knee-jerk" negative reaction to DTP among home-owning and elderly voters that could be viewed as "unenlightened" self-interest given that it occurred regardless of whether the initiative at hand affected the LEA serving their household (Bartels, 2016). Third and perhaps most critically, they are highly sensitive to omitted variable bias. We implement a sensitivity analysis to use other variables in our fully-specified regression model to a) identify the variable that is most prognostic of *% own home*, *% 55+*, and *% Yes*; and b) assess how many times the most prognostic variable an omitted variable would have to be to undermine the association between *% own home*, *% 55+*, and *% Yes* (Cinelli and Hazlett, 2020). The most prognostic variable of joint variation in *% own home* and *% Yes* is population density. The association between *% own home* and *% Yes* could be attenuated to 0 in the presence of a confounder equivalent to 4x population density. Likewise, the most prognostic variable of joint variation in *% 55+* and *% Yes* is *% Latino*. The negative association between *% 55+* and *% Yes* could be attenuated to 0 in the presence of a confounder equivalent to 4x *% Latino*. These metrics will become more meaningful below when discussing sensitivity analyses for the estimated coefficients for *% Proposition 16*.

Another key finding in Fig. 6 is the absence of an association between the *homicide rate* and *% Yes* on Measure J. Precincts exposed to more homicides may be more sensitive to perceptible reductions in public safety provision as a function of Measure J's policy impact. Therefore, precincts exposed to higher homicide rates may be inclined to reject Measure J. However, precincts exposed to higher homicide rates are not more or less likely to support Measure J. Moreover, the effect of *LASD* service provision on *% Yes* is not heterogeneous by the homicide rate (Table K6, Models 7–9), further suggesting self-interest in the form of crime-sensitivity is not operative.

One notable finding in Fig. 6 is that the presence of individuals working in protective services (e.g., police officers) in a precinct was negatively related to support for Measure J. While potentially reflective of the exercise of self-interest among individual LASD deputies or group-level solidarity among LEA officers in general, the precinct-level nature of the data along with the lack of precision in the Census data regarding occupation (i.e., LEA employees being lumped together with firefighters, security guards, and park rangers) make it difficult to glean too much from this estimated coefficient. Moreover, this estimated relationship is substantively very small (−0.02 standardized coefficient) and sensitive to omitted variable bias, with a sensitivity analysis demonstrating it would take a coefficient equivalent to 2x *% Proposition 16*, the covariate that is most prognostic of joint variation in *% security* and *% Yes*, to reduce the relationship between *% security* and *% Yes* to 0.

As a final assessment of the import (or lack thereof) of self-interest, we explored the relationship of calls for service (CFS) to precinct support for Measure J (adjusting for controls). This ancillary analysis was intended to capture self-interest in the form of "service-utilization"—namely, that residents who frequently use police services may be more opposed to policy proposals that could erode police service capacity. To measure service utilization, we used time-stamped and geocoded CFS data publicly available from the LASD, LBPD, and LAPD (i.e., the data used for Fig. 5). In each city/department, the relationship of CFS to Measure J support is substantively very small and statistically indiscernible from zero (Figure L16). Notably, CFS are not associated with Measure J support among LASD-served precincts, whose own public safety provider was targeted by Measure J. While readers can likely conceive of alternative police service utilization measures, such measures are not readily publicly available nor geocoded at a level of granularity to map onto election precincts. As such, the results presented in Figure L16 represent the best tests possible using available data, and these tests imply little-to-no self-interest in the form of service utilization.

Given this gamut of negligible and non-robust relationships: *what did matter?* Consistent with the *symbolic politics hypothesis*, the most striking result presented in Figure is the estimated relationship of precinct *% Proposition 16* (i.e., revealed preferences on a "race-conscious" affirmative action policy) to *% Yes* vote on Measure J. The estimated relationship is substantively large (0.65 standardized coefficient respectively) and is significantly larger than the association of *% Democrat* to *% Yes* on Measure J (0.24) and the aforementioned associations between *% own home*, *% 55+*, *% security* and *% Yes* on Measure J. Indeed, coefficient difference tests demonstrate the min-max absolute value coefficients for *% Proposition 16* are statistically larger and distinguishable from the min-max absolute value coefficients for *LASD*, *% own home*, *% 55+*, and *% security* (Table M7). Furthermore, sensitivity analyses demonstrate that the positive association between *% Proposition 16* and *% Yes* would require an unobserved confounder equivalent to 8x *% Black*, the most prognostic covariate of joint variation in *% Proposition 16* and *% Yes*, to be attenuated to 0. These unobserved confounders are much larger than the unobserved confounders it would take to attenuate the coefficients characterizing the relationship between alternative measures of self interest (*% own home*, *% 55+*, *% security*) and Measure J support. This suggests that symbolic orientations related to race mattered more than self-interest for voting on Measure J, and are less likely to be perturbed by omitted variables.

These findings are consistent with a foundational study on self-interest published in 1980 (Sears et al., 1980) finding that crime victimization and concern over crime in one's neighborhood (i.e., self-interest) mattered little in shaping Americans' preferences on "law and order" policies, while symbolic factors like anti-minority sentiment were highly predictive. Moreover, the association between *% Proposition 16* and Measure J support *is not due to generalized conservative ideology*. The coefficient for *% Proposition 16* remains positive, substantively/statistically significant when adjusting for Measure R support, a progressive LAC ballot measure proposing a civilian oversight commission for the LASD during the March 2020 Primary Election (Table O9). This implies that the coefficient estimate for *% Proposition 16* is not simply channeling standing opposition to police reform or generalized conservative ideology, but is rather instead tapping into anti-minority policy support.

7. Conclusion

This article provides a powerful test case for the role of self-interest in shaping voter support for "defund the police." Public discourse surrounding DTP is replete with warnings about eroded LEA service capacity and crime. The American public, as well as LAC residents, are

distinctly concerned about public safety (Vaughn et al., 2022).[41] These conditions suggest the motive to protect the service capacity of one's public safety provider would be a powerful factor for voters when weighing their support for DTP. Measure J in LAC in the 2020 General Election provided a unique opportunity to observe differences in support for the measure between precincts served and not served by the LEA subject to defunding. We implemented a spatial discontinuity design that drastically reduced demographic and political differences between election precincts served and not served by the LASD by subsetting our data to precincts strewn along the LASD jurisdiction border. Our analysis rendered little evidence that precincts served by the LASD opposed the measure more than precincts served by a different public safety provider. Critically, even when relaxing our design to include all county precincts, we found little evidence of service protection among LASD-served precincts. We also fail to uncover robust evidence for other possible self-interest incarnations, including opposition to Measure J among those more frequently using police services or those possessing characteristics associated with greater crime sensitivity. In short, we uncover a consistent lack of evidence that self-interest shaped Measure J support.

These findings offer a powerful addition to the corpus of studies testing for self-interest in political behavior. The standing wisdom is that self-interest plays a negligible role in most areas of politics and that symbolic politics are prepotent drivers of mass behavior (Sears et al., 1980; Lau and Heldman, 2009). As new policies are proposed or new issues become salient, new opportunities for testing self-interest become available. The Black Lives Matter movement contributed to police reform being a salient issue in the U.S. over the past decade. While myriad studies have explored the factors shaping public support for BLM and police reform, this work has yet to theoretically or empirically explore the role of self-interest in the form of service protection. Indeed, tests focusing on criminal justice and policing are notably underrepresented in the corpus of literature on self-interest. This article, therefore, contributes to the literature by identifying a unique test case for self-interest within an underrepresented policy domain. Given Measure J may be a "most likely" case for motivating self-interest, the absence of self-interest offers a powerful reinforcement to the standing wisdom that self-interest typically plays a minimal role in shaping public opinion and political behavior. Instead, our findings reinforce the axiom that citizens largely rely on symbolic orientations—such as anti-minority sentiment—to inform their political behavior.

Having noted our contributions, it is important to discuss limitations. First, since voter file data does not contain information on individual vote choices, the best available option was to analyze precinct-level data (the smallest unit of geographic aggregation) on vote choice for Measure J. Therefore, we caution readers in making inferences concerning individual voters on the basis of our empirical findings. This said, our analysis includes many very small precincts in dense urban areas that include relatively homogeneous collections of voters. Moreover, to mitigate the risk our results may be driven by precinct-level aggregation, we replicate our main analyses using individual-level 2020 Cooperative Election Survey (CES) data to evaluate if individual-level anti-minority orientations are more strongly associated with support for police defunding than individual-level dimensions of self-interest to maintain police funding. Consistent with our precinct-level analysis, we find corroborating evidence that anti-minority orientations are more prognostic of support for police defunding than different dimensions of self-interest at the individual-level using CES data (Section X). Future research should continue to assess the relationship between different self-interest dimensions, symbolic orientations, and DTP support using individual survey data. Such research, while possessing the benefit of individual-level observation, would carry the limitation of analyzing the reported, versus revealed, preferences of voters.

[41] https://www.lewis.ucla.edu/programs/data/qualityoflife/.

Second, although we provide significant evidence to suggest voters in LASD-serviced areas may have understood Measure J as a policy threat to their LEA and LASD-serviced areas understand that the LASD is their LEA, it is plausible voters may have not effectively understood that Measure J differentially affected the LASD versus MPDs throughout LAC. However, this may not be a limitation but rather a theoretical feature of the limited consequences of self-interest. Even when self-interest should be salient in shaping policy preferences (i.e. the explicit imposition of budgetary constraints on a LEA for voters serviced by that particular LEA), it may still be difficult, for several reasons, for voters to effectively gauge how particular policy propositions affect their tangible interests. Therefore, consistent with our conclusion that symbolic orientations mattered more in shaping the vote on Measure J, voters may still rely on relatively accessible symbolic orientations (e.g., anti-minority sentiment) to decide their vote on particular policies. Future research should continue to assess if differences in the extent to which voters understood particular policies pose a threat to self-interest would ultimately affect downstream policy preferences.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Marcel Roman: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **Benjamin Newman:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2025.102958.

Data availability

When the paper is published we will upload full replication code for cleaning and analyzing the data on whatever registry ES sees fit.

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