How Sheriff Turnover Fuels Crime

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In most suburban and rural U.S. counties, the sheriff serves as the chief law enforcement officer, making political transitions particularly consequential. Using a sharp regression discontinuity design based on close elections, I find that crime rates increase by 11 percent when incumbent sheriffs are narrowly defeated, compared with when small margins reelect incumbents. Additional evidence suggests that the increase in crime is driven by law enforcement employee turnover, underscoring the importance of civil service protections against politically motivated dismissals.

Democracies motivate officials to act in the public interest by tying their tenure to electoral approval [Besley et al., 2010]. Additionally, leadership turnover may improve performance by bringing in officials who are more strongly motivated by reelection incentives and the need to build a reputation [Marx et al., 2025].

Yet government performance may decline when an incumbent is replaced by a less experienced government official [Boylan, 2004]. Moreover, the turnover of elected officials can lead to costly policy changes; for instance, it can render prior investments obsolete [Gersbach et al., 2023]. Furthermore, political turnover can increase the proportion of personnel who are new to the bureaucracy. For instance, in Brazil, teacher turnover is higher in cities with new mayors [Akhtari et al., 2022]. Finally, political turnover can lead to a misalignment between elected officials' priorities and the bureaucracy's. For instance, contracts overseen by an officer of the opposing party to the U.S. President exhibit cost overruns that are, on average, eight percent higher [Spenkuch et al., 2023].

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Thus, theory offers competing explanations for why government performance may either improve or deteriorate following an incumbent's electoral defeat. Moreover, regression discontinuity evidence provides empirical support for both predictions [Coviello and Gagliarducci, 2017, Akhtari et al., 2022, Marx et al., 2025, Bazzi et al., 2025].

This paper examines government performance following the electoral defeat of incumbent sheriffs, who serve as the chief law enforcement officers of U.S. counties. Using a sharp regression discontinuity design based on close elections, I find that the defeat of an incumbent sheriff results in an 11 percent increase in crime. Crime is a critical outcome for assessing the detrimental effects of replacing government officials, as its social costs amount to 13–18 percent of U.S. gross domestic product [Anderson, 2021]. Moreover, sheriffs play a central role in counties without large municipal police departments, serving as the primary law enforcement authority in 83 percent of suburban counties and 92 percent of rural counties in the United States [National Sheriffs' Association, 1978]. Thus, it is important to identify and address the mechanisms through which an incumbent's defeat leads to an increase in crime.

The central identifying assumption of the regression discontinuity design is that counties in which incumbents narrowly lost are otherwise comparable to counties in which incumbents narrowly won reelection. Thus, the impact of an incumbent defeat can be measured by the change in crime in counties where the incumbent barely lost minus the change in crime in counties where the incumbent won by a small margin, provided that these two groups of counties are comparable. I support the identifying assumption by showing that neither the incumbent's vote share density nor the covariate values exhibit discontinuities as the incumbent's margin of victory approaches the majority cutoff (50% of the vote).

To examine the mechanisms by which the defeat of incumbents increases crime, I analyze elections without an incumbent. I find that in open-seat elections, the defeat of the incumbent's party candidate does not affect crime. Thus, the increase in crime following an incumbent defeat is not caused by costly policy changes or mismatches in political priorities.

Moreover, the finding that the defeat of the incumbent party's candidate does not affect crime aligns with prior evidence showing that a mayor's party affiliation has no effect on police spending,

police employment, crime, or arrests [Ferreira and Gyourko, 2009, de Benedictis-Kessner et al., 2025]. The results are also consistent with the finding that a sheriff's party affiliation does not influence compliance with federal requests to detain unauthorized immigrants [Thompson, 2020].

I further examine the consequences of a sheriff's electoral defeat on turnover of deputy sheriffs, the county-level equivalent of police officers. Prior empirical work shows that political supporters of winning candidates are often rewarded with government positions for which they may be unqualified [Colonnelli et al., 2020]. In turn, public employees help their patrons be reelected in various ways, such as relaxing the enforcement of eligibility requirements for social programs around elections [Brollo et al., 2020]. In the context of this study, there is considerable anecdotal evidence that deputy sheriffs are pressured to support the incumbent sheriff's reelection campaign and may face retaliation following an incumbent's defeat.[1]

Consistent with prior empirical research on teacher turnover [Akhtari et al., 2022] and anecdotal evidence on sheriff staffing, I find that deputy sheriffs are more likely to depart following an incumbent sheriff's electoral defeat. This pattern suggests that the post-defeat increase in crime may be driven by the dismissal or departure of experienced deputies, as incoming sheriffs prioritize political loyalty over experience in staffing decisions [Akhtari et al., 2022].

Moreover, the finding that sheriffs' defeats lead to deputy turnover is consistent with established case law. Courts have recognized that sheriffs have legitimate reasons to prioritize loyalty, given that, in several states, they are legally liable for their deputies's actions. In addition, courts have held that sheriffs may dismiss deputies for political reasons, emphasizing that state constitutions vest broad authority in the office and that this authority is intertwined with the sheriff's legal responsibility for deputies' conduct.[2] As a result, civil service or union protections typically allow deputies only to appeal employment decisions and do not eliminate the expectation of political

[1] Sheriff Stuart tops election filing [1972], Humboldt County Grand Jury transcripts – Part 37 [1975], Schlichtman [1995], Cherrie [2002], Perez-Trevino [2003], Smith [2017], Finlon [2018], *Jenkins v. Medford*, 119 F.3d 1156 (4th Cir. 1997), and *Ezell v. Darr*, #13-15851, 2015 U.S. App. Lexis 16851 (11th Cir. 2015).

[2] The liability of sheriffs for the actions of their deputies is discussed in *Ramsey v. Strobach*, 52 Ala. 513 (1875), *State, to Use of Russell v. Moore*, 19 Mo. 369, 371–72 (1854), *Horne v. Allen*, 27 N. C. 36 (1844), and *Miller v. Jones*, 50 Va. (9 Gratt.) 584 (1853). The fact that state constitutions and sheriffs' legal exposure justify requiring deputies to be politically loyal to the sheriff is stated in *Terry v. Cook*, 866 F.2d 373, 377 (11th Cir. 1989), *Silva v. Bieluch*, 351 F.3d 1045 (11th Cir. 2003), *Ezell v. Darr*, No. 13-15851 (11th Cir. 2015) *Burns v. Cole*, No. 20-2961 (8th Cir. 2021), *Jenkins v. Medford*, 119 F.3d 1156 (4th Cir. 1997), *Whited v. Fields*, 581 F. Supp. 1444, 1456 (W.D.Va.1984).

loyalty to the sheriff.[3]

Nonetheless, turnover in law enforcement is costly, as officers who change agencies often forgo department- and jurisdiction-specific human capital, may lose accrued pension benefits, and may be required, under state or civil service rules, to accept a lower rank. In addition, because officers must hold state-specific certifications, relocating across state lines can be exceptionally costly. Together, these frictions make it unlikely that deputies would voluntarily depart solely due to a preference not to work under a newly elected sheriff.

I provide further support for the view that sheriffs prioritize loyalty over experience by showing that the post-turnover increase in crime is most pronounced in smaller offices – precisely the settings in which courts are more likely to permit politically motivated firings.[4] Moreover, an examination of open-seat elections further supports the causal link between deputy dismissals and rising crime rates. I show that when the incumbent party's candidate loses an open-seat race, deputy turnover does not increase. These findings reinforce the hypothesis that law enforcement turnover drives crime: while an incumbent's personal defeat spikes both turnover and crime, a change in the governing party alone affects neither.

The absence of an effect of party turnover on employee turnover is consistent with Bolton et al. [2021]'s finding that U.S. federal employee turnover in the first year of an administration is similar whether the new President is of the same or a different party than the predecessor. More broadly, these results align with evidence that ideology is not a primary mechanism in the allocation of patronage jobs [Colonnelli et al., 2020].

Finally, to distinguish the effect of losing an experienced sheriff from that of losing experienced deputies, I compare the impact of electing a former sheriff with that of electing a first-time sheriff. I find that the new sheriff's prior experience has no effect on crime. Consequently, the increase in crime following an incumbent's defeat does not appear to be driven by the loss of an experienced sheriff.

Taken together, case law and the empirical evidence in this paper suggest that sheriffs retain substantial discretion over the employment of their deputies. The results in this paper indicate that

[3] *Ezell v. Darr*, No. 13-15851 (11th Cir. 2015).
[4] *Upton v. Thompson* (930 F.2d 1209 (1991)).

the sheriffs' ability to dismiss deputies contributes to higher crime rates following an incumbent's defeat, adding to the body of evidence that constraining politicians' firing authority can improve bureaucratic performance [Xu, 2018, Ornaghi, 2019, Aneja and Xu, 2024].

The results in this paper also contribute to the literature on electoral turnovers. In theory, government performance can either decline or improve following the electoral defeat of an incumbent. Defeat may impose costs by removing experienced elected officials and employees, but it may also bring benefits by installing leaders who face more substantial reelection incentives and greater reputational concerns [Marx et al., 2025]. Given these trade-offs, tasks carried out directly by the elected official are more likely to improve after an elected official's defeat. In contrast, the performance of functions delegated to employees is more likely to deteriorate.

Consistent with the deterioration of delegated tasks, I find that law enforcement outcomes worsen following leadership turnover, while Akhtari et al. [2022] show that the defeat of Brazilian mayors reduces test scores among fourth- and eighth-grade students. By contrast, consistent with improvements in centralized tasks, Marx et al. [2025] provide evidence that the defeat of a country's leader improves national economic performance. Moreover, Coviello and Gagliarducci [2017] report that Italian cities where incumbent mayors are reelected tend to have higher public works costs, perhaps because longer tenures increase opportunities for collusion between mayors and local contractors. Finally, Bazzi et al. [2025] show that the defeat of an Indonesian village head reduces the likelihood that the leader's relatives are employed in the village government and improves the quality of public goods provision (drinking water, sewage, garbage collection, street lighting, schools, maternity clinics, health centers, paved roads, and public transit).

I discuss the data, empirical framework, main result, and the mechanism that can lead to crime increasing following an incumbent defeat.

1 Data sources, sample, and empirical specification

1.1 Data sources

Determining how sheriff defeats affect crime necessitates data on crime, elections, and deputy sheriff employment. The number of crimes in each sheriff's jurisdiction is obtained from the United States Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reporting Program Data [United States]: Offenses Known and Clearances by Arrest, 1960–2020.

The sheriff election database in Zoorob [2022] was updated using information from county election offices, NewsBank, NewspaperArchive, and Community History Archives. I obtained information about the current and former peace officers' employment histories from various sources, including the Ohio Attorney General's Office, the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, and the National Police Index (`national.cpdp.co`).

The estimation uses demographics as control variables. County population by age and race for 1969-2020 is obtained from the Survey of Epidemiology and End Results, U.S. State and County Population Data. County income per capita for 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2020 Decennial Census and the 2006–2010 and 2016–2020 American Community Survey (5-year estimates), and I interpolated per capita income for the years in between censuses and surveys. Finally, I obtained the historical consumer price index data that I use to compute real income per capita from `https://www.bls.gov/cpi/tables/historical-cpi-u-201710.pdf`.

1.2 Sample

I exclude several states and counties from the analysis. First, states and counties that do not have sheriffs; e.g., Alaska and Riley County (Kansas). Second, states and counties where the sheriff is appointed rather than elected; e.g., Rhode Island and Dade County (Florida). Third, states and counties where sheriffs do not patrol or respond to calls for service, but instead manage jails and provide courthouse security; e.g., Massachusetts and Glynn County (Georgia). Fourth, states and counties for which I had difficulty obtaining sheriff election information. The geographic distribution of elections in my sample is graphed in panel (a) of Figure 1.

To ensure comparability of the crime data, the sample is initially restricted to the years 1974–2020.[5] Because the ability to dismiss deputy sheriffs may have changed following the Supreme Court's 1976 decision in *Elrod v. Burns*, the sample is further restricted to 1976–2020.[6]

Information on sheriff deputies' employment is available for a much more limited set of states and years. The geographic distribution of sheriff deputies at risk of dismissal is shown in panel (b) of Figure 1.

1.3 Empirical specification

I apply a close-election sharp regression discontinuity framework to identify whether an incumbent sheriff's defeat is associated with an increase in crime. The key identifying assumption is that counties where incumbent sheriffs barely lost are similar in all other ways to those where they barely won. In particular, absent the incumbent sheriff's removal, crime in counties where the incumbent barely lost would have evolved similarly to crime in counties where the sheriff barely won. In contrast, absent the removal of the sheriff, I would expect crime to change very differently in counties where the sheriff is reelected by a large margin versus counties where the incumbent sheriff loses decisively.

If the key identifying assumption holds, the impact of an incumbent defeat on crime can be measured by the change in crime in counties where the incumbent sheriff barely lost, minus the change in crime in counties where the incumbent won by a narrow margin. Specifically let $n^I_{i,t}$ denote the votes received by the incumbent in county i and year t, $n^C_{i,t}$ the highest vote total received among all challengers, and $R_{i,t} = n^I_{i,t}/(n^I_{i,t} + n^C_{i,t})$ the incumbent's margin of victory and defeat over the primary opponent (the "running variable"). Thus, the analysis examines close elections, $|R_{i,t} - 0.5| < b$, and compares county-years where incumbents were barely defeated ($R_{i,t} \in (0.5-b, 0.5)$) to county-year where incumbents were narrowly reelected ($R_{i,t} \in (0.5, 0.5+b)$). Which elections are "close" is determined by a "bandwidth" b computed from the data using the

[5]The FBI transitioned to the National Incident-Based Reporting System on January 1, 2021, while the type of assaults recorded changed in 1974.

[6]Before the 1970s, employees fired for political reasons could not obtain legal redress [Marshall, 1977]. In *Elrod v. Burns* (427 U.S. 347 (1976)), the Supreme Court first limited politically motivated terminations, holding that four sheriff's office employees who were fired for refusing to switch party affiliation had viable First and Fourteenth Amendment claims.

procedure discussed in Calonico et al. [2014].

In states with partisan primaries, an incumbent's winning margin is defined as their lowest vote share across the primary and general elections. For example, if an incumbent sheriff receives 55% of the vote in the primary and 58% in the general election, the incumbent's winning margin is 55%. However, the results do not change qualitatively if the incumbent's winning margin only accounts for the vote in the general elections.

For various reasons, the number of crimes reported by each sheriff can be quite noisy. First, there are clear errors in the reported figures. The procedure for identifying these errors and replacing them with missing values is described in the appendix. For example, the sheriff's office in St. Charles County, Missouri, reported only one crime in both 2016 and 2017; these observations are therefore treated as missing, as illustrated in Figure 2a.

Second, in counties served by multiple law enforcement agencies, the number of crimes reported by the sheriff may reflect incidents both within and outside the sheriff's jurisdiction for several reasons. For example, many city police departments outsource dispatching to sheriff's offices, which can inflate the number of crimes attributed to the sheriff; this figure may subsequently decline if cities later bring dispatching in-house. Similarly, some cities contract with the sheriff for law enforcement services, a practice shown to increase the number of crimes reported by the sheriff [Boylan, 2022]. Consistent with this concern, the number of crimes reported by the Pottawattamie County, Iowa, sheriff's office appears to be on a different scale in 1982–1991 compared to 1992–2001, see Figure 2b.

Thus, if the number of crimes within sheriff i's jurisdiction in year t is $c_{i,t}$, the sheriff's office may report $\tilde{c}_{i,t} = \alpha_{i,t} c_{i,t}$. I account for this measurement error by examining the percentage change in reported crimes $\ln(\tilde{c}_{i,t+1}) - \ln(\tilde{c}_{i,t})$, which is approximately equal to the percentage change in crimes in the sheriff jurisdiction $(\ln(c_{i,t+1}) - \ln(c_{i,t}))$ when reporting bias does not change drastically from year to year $(\alpha_{i,t+1} \approx \alpha_{i,t})$.

Consequently, I estimate the impact of an incumbent's reelection on changes in crime as the coefficient β from a local regression of changes in reported crime on the incumbent's margin of

victory over the primary opponent (R_{it}):

$$\ln(\tilde{c}_{i,t+1}) - \ln(\tilde{c}_{i,t}) = \begin{cases} \alpha + \beta + \gamma R_{i,t} + \epsilon_{i,t} & \text{if } R_{i,t} \in (0.5, 0.5 + b) \\ \alpha + \delta R_{i,t} + \epsilon_{i,t} & \text{if } R_{i,t} \in (0.5 - b, 0.5). \end{cases} \tag{1}$$

2 Main Result

First, I examine the main result: the impact of an incumbent candidate's defeat on crime. Second, I present evidence supporting the validity of the regression discontinuity design in sheriff elections.

2.1 Impact of the sheriff's defeat on crime

I examine the relation between the incumbent's share of the vote and crime graphically, and then through local regression.

Graphically, I divide the values for the incumbent's share of the vote into 40 equal-sized bins. I then calculate the percentage change in crime for all observations within a bin. In Figure 3, each dot plots the average change in crime against the incumbent's share of the vote. Moreover, fourth-order polynomials that best approximate the dots are estimated, separately, for incumbent sheriffs who are reelected versus those who are defeated. Overall, crime tends to increase when incumbent sheriffs are defeated and tends to decrease when they are reelected. Additionally, the increase in crime after a sheriff's defeat holds for close elections.

When I use a local linear regression to estimate the relation between the incumbent margin of victory over the primary opponent and the change in crime (Equation 1), I find that a sheriff's defeat increases crime by 11 percent in close elections (see column (1) in Table 4). The procedure in Calonico et al. [2014] determines the optimal "bandwidth" to be elections decided by a margin of 12 percentage points or less. Moreover, the results are robust to the inclusion of controls for log population, the share of the population that is Black, and log real income per capita, using the estimator proposed by Calonico et al. [2019] (see column (2) in Table 4).

2.2 Validity of the regression discontinuity framework

The identification condition of the impact of incumbent defeat assumes that elections won by the incumbent are ex ante comparable to elections won by the challenger. Thus, to ensure the validity of the regression discontinuity results, I test for continuity at the reelection threshold across five variables: the density of the incumbent's margin of victory, three control variables, and the crime rate in neighboring counties (a "placebo outcome").

Specifically, the regression discontinuity framework would be invalid if some incumbents manipulated election results. Under such manipulations, any observed effects of turnovers on performance could be driven by unobservable differences between elections in which the incumbent is reelected through manipulations and those in which the incumbent is not.

Figure 4 plots a histogram that approximates the density of the incumbent's margin of victory over the primary opponent. The figure also overlays a local polynomial estimate of the density, computed separately on either side of the 0.5 cutoff, along with its confidence band [Cattaneo et al., 2020b]. If incumbent sheriffs manipulated elections, they would be more likely to narrowly win than narrowly lose, leading to a discontinuous upward jump in the density at the cutoff. The absence of such a jump in Figure 4, therefore, provides evidence against electoral manipulation.

A more formal test based on local polynomial estimation of the density function fails to reject the hypothesis of a discontinuity, with a p-value of 0.71 [Cattaneo et al., 2020b]. An approximate sign test likewise finds no evidence of discontinuity, yielding a p-value of 0.76 [Bugni and Canay, 2021].

Another concern is that the characteristics of counties where sheriffs are defeated differ from those in counties where sheriffs are reelected. This hypothesis can be tested by estimating the local regression (1) with the log of the county population, the share of the population that is black, and the log of real income per capita as the dependent variables. I find no demographic differences between counties where the incumbent sheriff is reelected and those where the incumbent is defeated (see Table 2).

Additionally, it is conceivable that crime trends impact a sheriff's reelection. Thus, rather than the sheriff's defeat leading to an increase in crime, it is the expectation that crime will increase that

leads to the incumbent's defeat. This hypothesis can be tested by assuming that crime trends are correlated across neighboring counties and examining whether a sheriff's defeat influences crime in those neighboring jurisdictions.

Specifically, I use a local linear regression to estimate the relationship between the incumbent's margin of victory over their primary opponent and changes in crime in neighboring counties, and I find no statistically significant effect (see column (5) in Table 4). Thus, the impact of incumbent defeat on crime does not appear to be driven by factors that are correlated with crime trends in neighboring counties.

Finally, I estimate the effect of the incumbent's margin of victory on crime using placebo cutoffs – for example, assuming that an incumbent sheriff is reelected with 49 percent of the vote. The motivation for this test is that evidence of a discontinuity away from the true cutoff would cast doubt on the validity of the regression discontinuity design [Cattaneo et al., 2020a]. To prevent real treatment effects from biasing the placebo tests, the sample is restricted to elections in which the incumbent won when using cutoffs above the true threshold, and to elections in which the incumbent lost when using cutoffs below the true threshold. This sample restriction eliminates contamination from the actual discontinuity.

The estimated coefficients measuring the effect of reelection on crime at the artificial cutoffs, along with their 95 percent confidence intervals, are presented in Figure 5. The true cutoff at 0.5 is included as a benchmark against which the placebo cutoffs can be compared. Only one of the artificial cutoffs yields a coefficient that is statistically significant at conventional levels. Moreover, conducting multiple statistical tests on the same data substantially increases the probability that at least one estimate appears statistically significant purely by chance [Fusejima et al., 2025]. Consistent with the hypothesis that the significant estimate arises by chance, I fail to reject the null hypothesis that all placebo effects are jointly equal to zero using the procedure in Calonico et al. [2025] (p-value = 0.637).

3 Mechanisms

To identify the causal effect of sheriff turnover on crime, I utilize a regression discontinuity design based on the incumbent sheriff party's margin of victory in open-seat elections (where the incumbent does not seek reelection), along with an instrumental variable approach that exploits whether the incumbent is term-limited. I then examine whether electing a former sheriff affects crime, whether incumbent defeats lead to turnover among deputy sheriffs, and whether the impact of an incumbent's defeat varies with the size of the office.

3.1 Impact of the incumbent party's defeat on crime

First, I examine whether partisanship explains the increase in crime after a sheriff's defeat. Specifically, I use a local linear regression to estimate the relationship between the incumbent sheriff's party margin of victory and changes in crime in elections where the incumbent did not seek reelection. I find that the defeat of the incumbent party candidate does not affect crime (see column (3) in Table 4). Moreover, using the procedure in Calonico et al. [2025], I show that the effect of an incumbent's defeat on crime is statistically different from the effect of an incumbent party's defeat at the one percent significance level (i.e., the coefficients in Table 4 columns (1) and (3) are statistically different from one another).

Thus, the increase in crime does not appear to be caused by costly policy changes resulting from a change in the sheriff's party. Moreover, the increase in crime does not appear to be caused by mismatches in priorities between a sheriff from one party and deputies from a different party.

The absence of an effect of incumbent party defeat on crime is consistent with the findings in Ferreira and Gyourko [2009] and de Benedictis-Kessner et al. [2025]. Specifically, these papers employ a regression discontinuity framework to demonstrate that a mayor's party affiliation does not impact policies or priorities regarding law enforcement. The results in this paper are also consistent with the finding that the party affiliation of the sheriff does not affect compliance with federal requests to detain unauthorized immigrants [Thompson, 2020]. Thus, in elections that do not involve an incumbent, one should not expect an incumbent sheriff's party defeat to affect crime.

3.2 Instrumental estimate of the impact of sheriff turnover on crime

Second, I examine whether the effect of an incumbent's defeat on crime stems from resentment generated by a narrow loss. To test this hypothesis, I analyze turnover induced by term limits. Specifically, I regress the change in crime on whether the sheriff is reelected, instrumenting the likelihood of reelection with an indicator for whether the incumbent is is term-limited. I find that a sheriff's defeat increases crime by 8 percent, an effect that is statistically indistinguishable from the regression discontinuity estimate. This result suggests that the post-defeat increase in crime is driven by turnover in the sheriff's office rather than political divisiveness.

3.3 Impact on crime of the election of a prior sheriff

Third, I investigate whether the elected sheriff's inexperience contributes to the increase in crime following an incumbent's defeat. Specifically, I estimate a linear regression relating changes in crime to whether the elected candidate is the incumbent, a former sheriff, or an inexperienced candidate (the omitted category). I find that an incumbent's victory reduces crime, while the election of a former sheriff has no effect (Table 3). These results do not support the hypothesis that post-election increases in crime are driven by the new sheriff's lack of experience.

3.4 Impact of the incumbent sheriff's defeat on deputy sheriff turnover

Fourth, I investigate whether turnover among deputy sheriffs contributes to the increase in crime following an incumbent's defeat. Specifically, I examine the relation between the incumbent's vote share and deputy sheriff turnover using both graphical evidence and local regression methods.

Graphically, I divide the values for the incumbent's share of the vote between 0.2 and 0.8 into 40 equal-sized bins. I then calculate the average turnover for all observations within a bin. In Figure 6, each dot represents the average turnover rates plotted against the incumbent's share of the vote. Moreover, fourth-order polynomials that best approximate the dots are estimated, separately, for incumbent sheriffs who are reelected versus those who are defeated. Overall, deputy sheriff turnover is higher when incumbent sheriffs are defeated and lower when they are reelected. Additionally, the result holds for close elections.

When I use local linear regression to estimate the relation between the incumbent's margin of victory over the primary opponent and turnover, I find that a sheriff's defeat increases turnover by six percentage points (see Table 4). Thus, our results are of a similar magnitude to those of Akhtari et al. [2022], who find that party turnover increases the share of personnel that is new to the bureaucracy by seven percentage points.

In contrast, in elections without incumbents, the defeat of a candidate from the incumbent's party does not affect turnover. These findings further reinforce the hypothesis that law enforcement turnover drives crime: while an incumbent's personal defeat spikes both turnover and crime, a change in the governing party alone affects neither.

3.5 Impact of the incumbent sheriff's defeat in small counties

Fifth, I examine whether the increase in crime following an incumbent's defeat varies with the size of the sheriff's office. Courts have held that politically motivated dismissals are more likely to be permissible in smaller offices, where a sheriff's core group of advisers is more likely to include deputy sheriffs, see *Upton v. Thompson* (930 F.2d 1209 (1991)).[7] Thus, I expect the impact of a sheriff's defeat to be greater in offices with fewer than the median number of deputies (21) than in larger offices.

I find that in smaller sheriff's offices, an incumbent's defeat increases crime by 18 percent, while there is no statistically significant effect in larger offices (see Table 5). Moreover, the difference between the two coefficients is statistically significant at the five percent confidence level using the procedure in Calonico et al. [2025]. Taken together, these results further suggest that the increase in crime is driven by deputy sheriff turnover, as sheriffs are more likely to be able to remove employees for political reasons in smaller offices.

[7]However, the small size of the office alone does not make partisan affiliation relevant to deputies' ability to perform their duties, see *Burns v. County of Cambria, Pa.* (F.2d 1015 (1992)).

4 Conclusion

Despite the perceived job security of police officers, I find that electoral defeats of incumbent sheriffs lead to substantial turnover among deputy sheriffs.[8] This pattern is consistent with anecdotes of deputies being pressured to campaign for incumbents and facing retaliation following incumbents' losses (see footnote 1 on page 3). Such turnover is legally enabled by judicial doctrine, which affords sheriffs considerably greater discretion to dismiss deputies on political grounds than is permitted for municipal police officers.[9]

Deputy sheriff departures are consequential since they are associated with a 12 percent increase in crime. Moreover, departing sheriff deputies face substantial obstacles when seeking new employment and may forfeit accrued pension benefits. Consequently, the prospects of politically motivated dismissals make employment as a sheriff's deputy less attractive and may contribute to ongoing difficulties in recruiting and retaining deputies [Police Executive Research Forum, 2019, Chapman, 2025].

The increase in crime and staffing instability following an incumbent sheriff's defeat is socially costly because sheriffs provide the primary law enforcement for 83% of suburban and 92% of rural U.S. counties. To mitigate the volatility of these electoral transitions, standard police employment protections could be extended to sheriff's deputies. Nonetheless, any increase in job security may reduce deputies' accountability [Dharmapala et al., 2022].

This study contributes to the broader literature on the consequences of incumbent electoral defeat. Building on existing empirical research, the findings demonstrate that electoral turnover can either diminish or enhance government performance [Coviello and Gagliarducci, 2017, Akhtari et al., 2022, Marx et al., 2025, Bazzi et al., 2025]. Specifically, performance tends to decline in tasks delegated to career civil servants – such as teachers and sheriff's deputies – while improving in areas under the direct purview of elected officials, including tax policy, contract allocation, and hiring. These results suggest that when assigning policy tasks to elected versus appointed officials,

[8]The difficulty of firing police officers is discussed in Fisk and Richardson [2017] and Rushin [2019].

[9]For police officers, *Stephens v. Kerrigan*, 122 F.3d 171 (3d Cir. 1997), states that "It is not disputed that ... positions of sergeant and lieutenant do not require a political affiliation"; similarly, in *Saullo v. Burough of Nesquehoning*, Civil No. 3:16-CV-00811 (M.D. Pa. Sep. 21, 2020) "by alleging he was employed as a police officer, Saullo has shown he was employed at a public agency in a position that does not require political affiliation." In contrast, in many circumstances, deputy sheriffs can be subject to politically-based firings [Berry, 2001].

policymakers must account for how these roles affect performance during political transitions, alongside the trade-offs identified by Besley and Coate [2003], Maskin and Tirole [2004], Alesina and Tabellini [2007], and Iaryczower et al. [2013].

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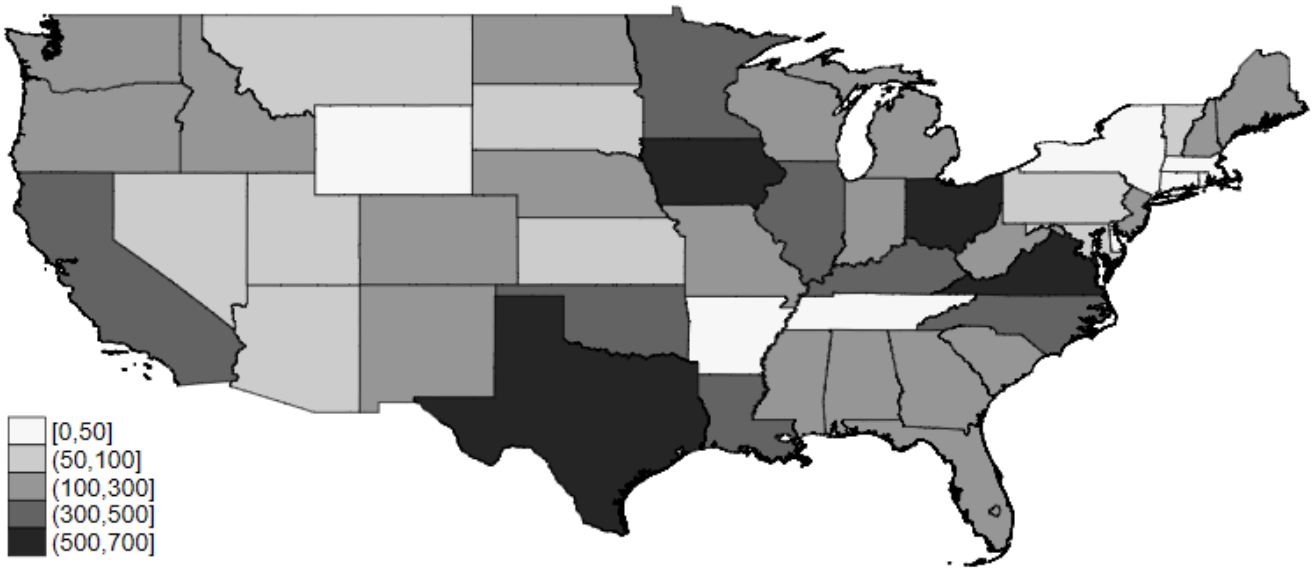
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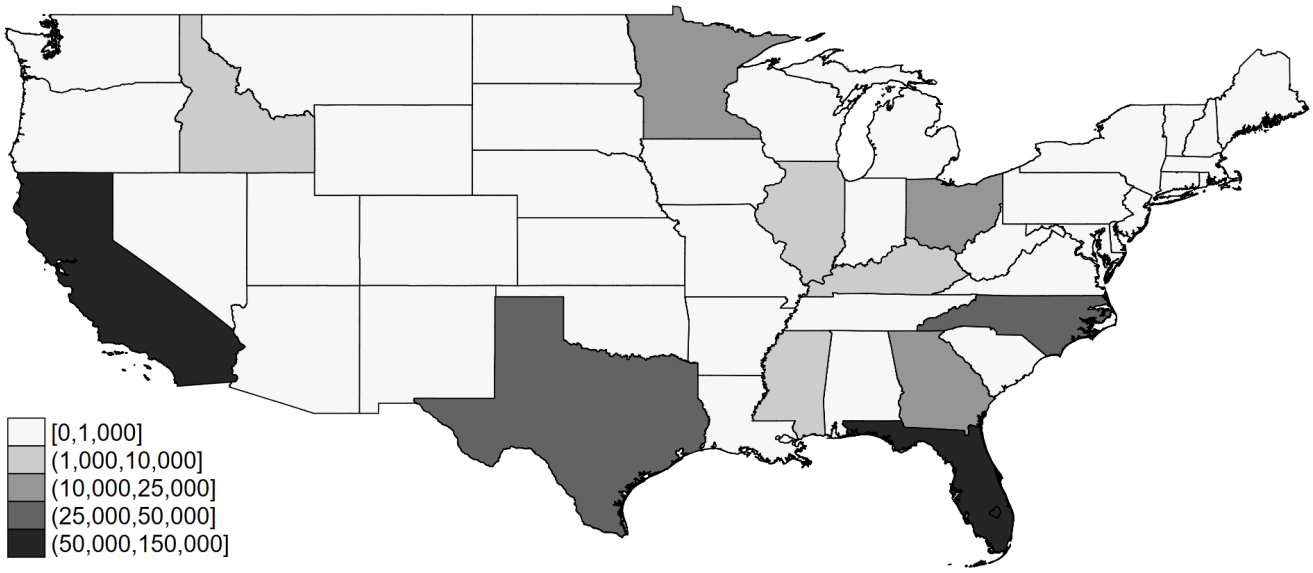
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Figure 1: Number of Elections of Sheriffs and Number of Sheriff Deputies at Risk of Dismissal

(a) Number of elections in the sample



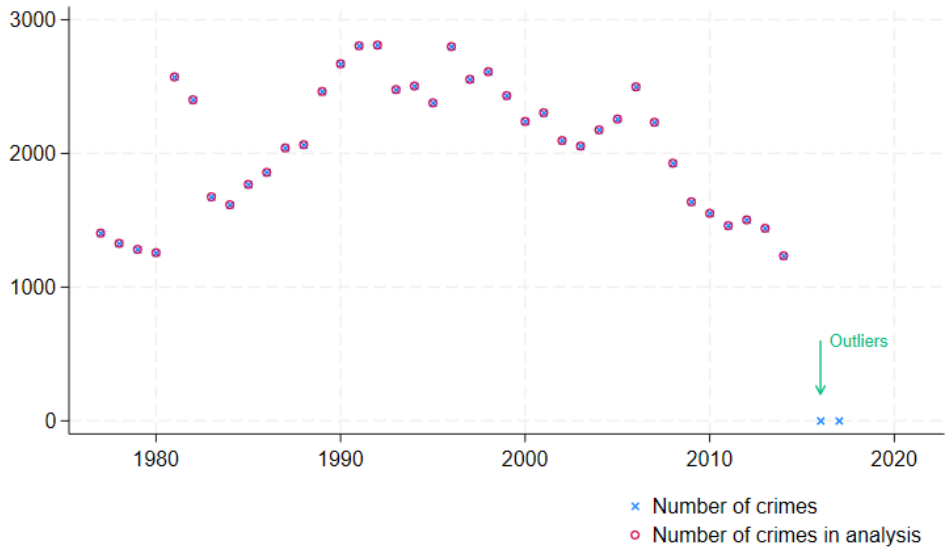
(b) Number of deputies in the sample



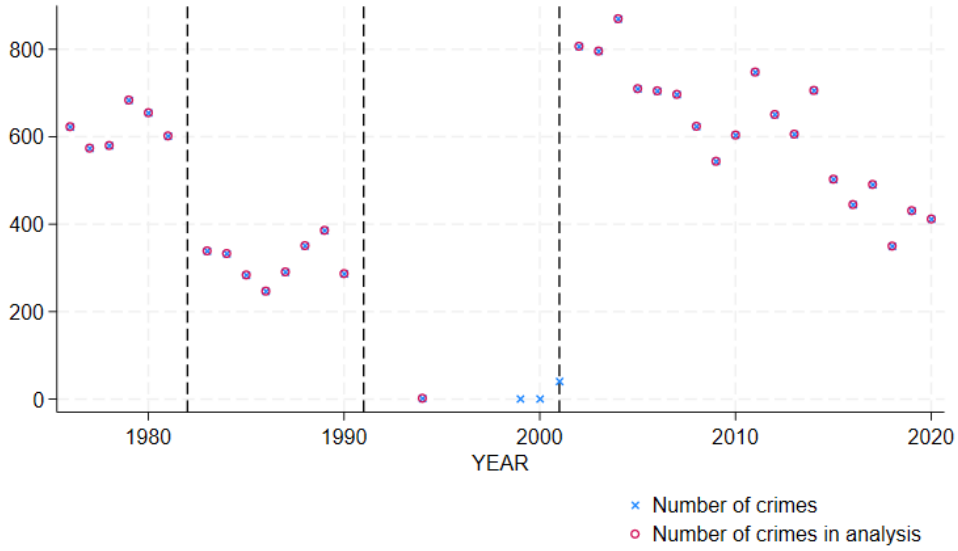
Data sources are listed in Section 1.

Figure 2: Number of crimes reported crimes and number of crimes used in this paper for two sheriff agencies

(a) St. Charles County, Missouri

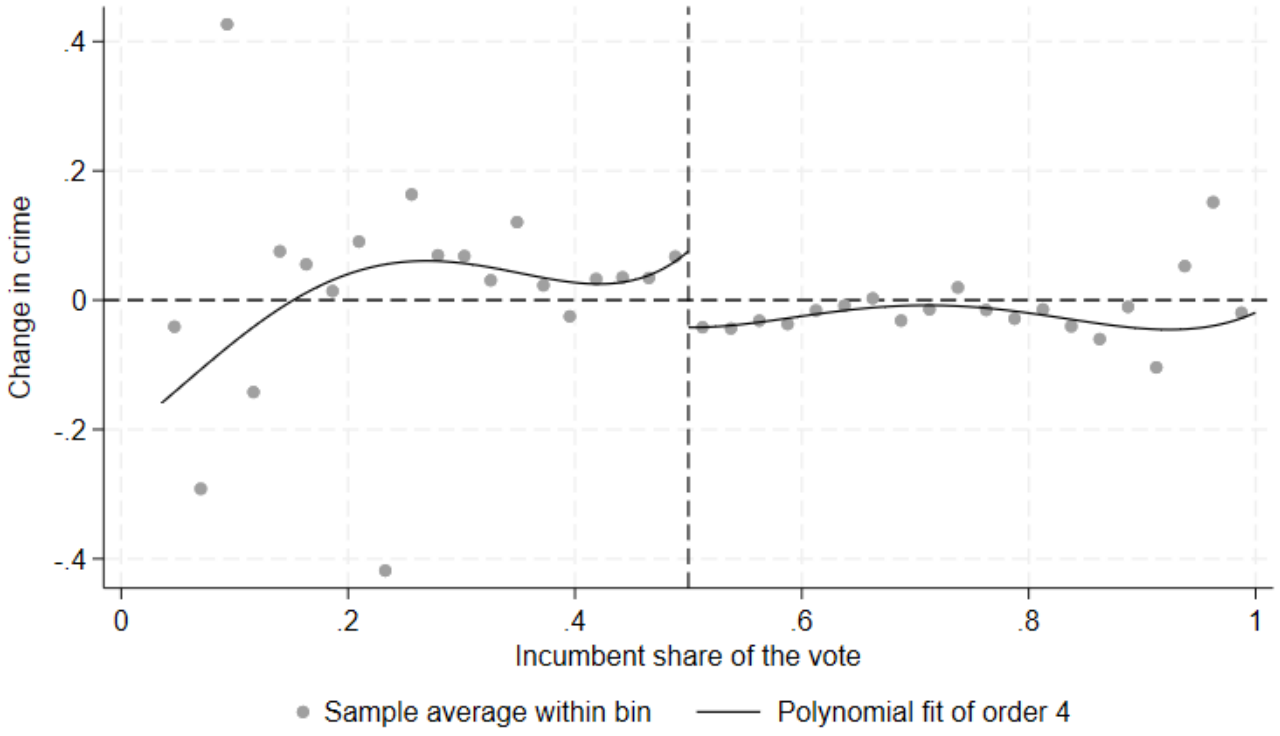


(b) Pottawattamie County, Iowa



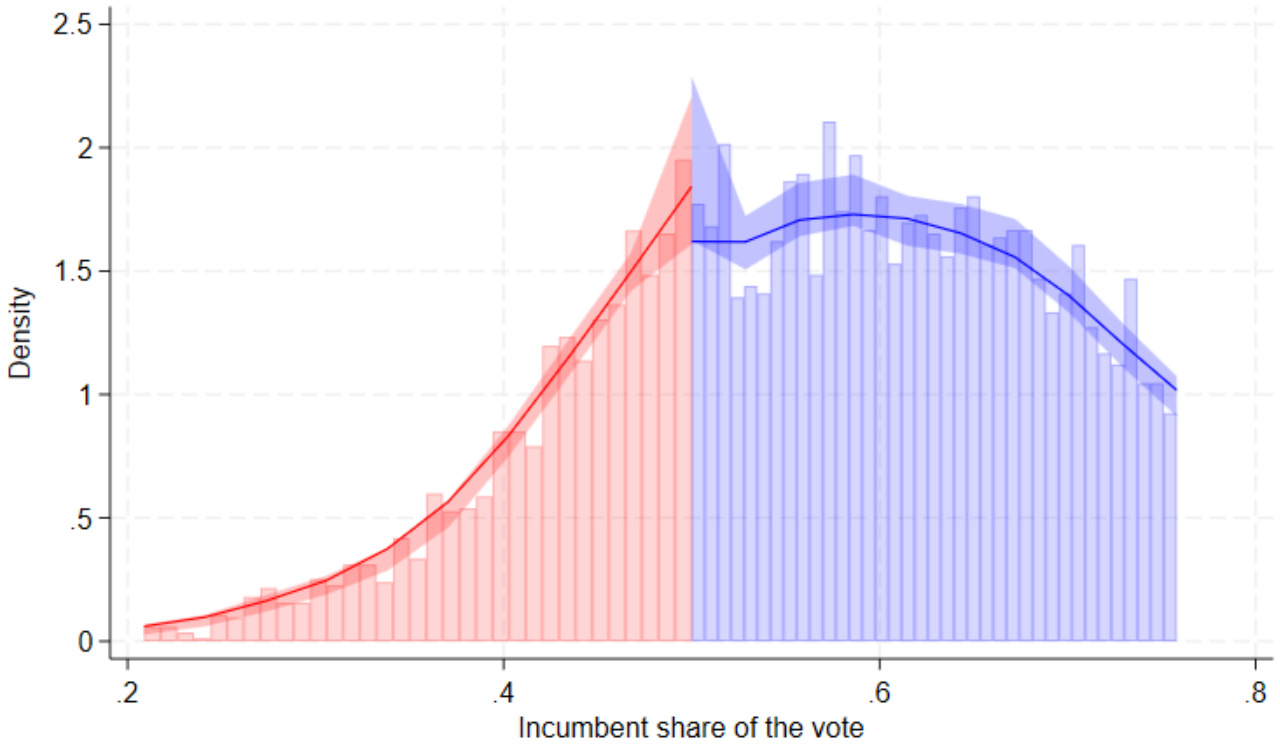
Pottawattamie County's sheriff office appears to use a similar methodology in reporting crimes for the years within the vertical dashed lines the panel (b).

Figure 3: Change in crime rate as a function of the incumbent's margin of victory over primary opponent



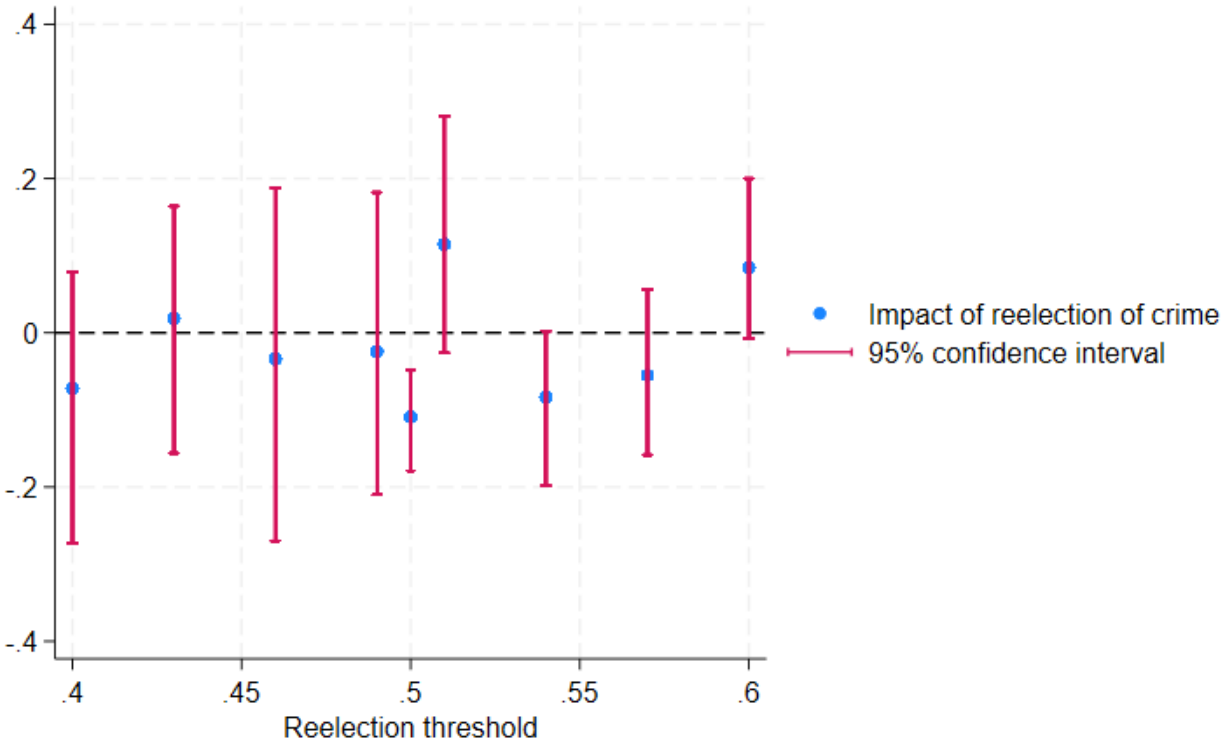
Values for the incumbent margins of victory are split into 40 bins of equal size. Each dot plots the average change in crime rate against the incumbent share of the vote (within a specific bin), adding a fourth-order polynomial fit estimated separately for incumbent sheriffs who win and lose reelection. The data is discussed in Section 1.

Figure 4: Density of incumbent margin of victory over primary opponent



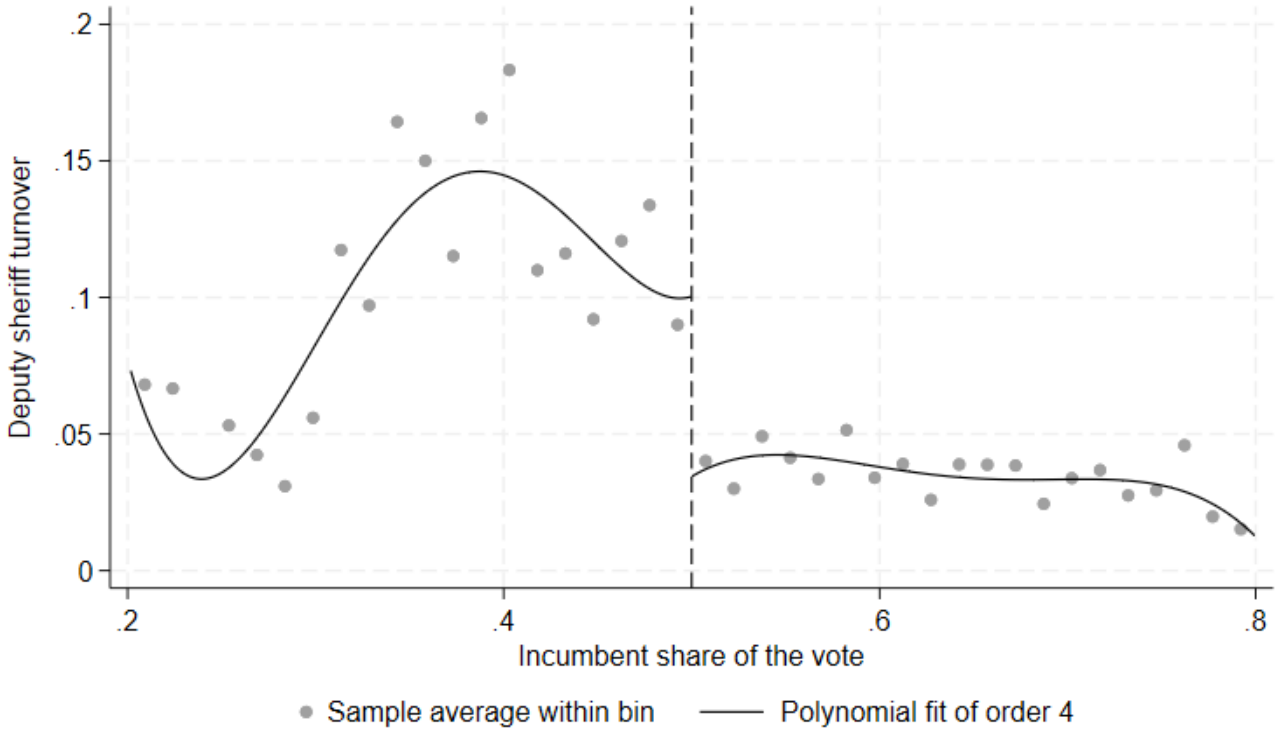
The horizontal axis denotes incumbent's margins of victory, where values below 0.5 indicate an incumbent sheriff defeat, while values above 0.5 indicate an incumbent victory. I graph a histogram for the data, a local polynomial approximation to the histogram, and a confidence band. The data is discussed in Section 1. The graph is generated by Matias D. Cattaneo & Michael Jansson & Xinwei Ma, 2022. "RDDENSITY: Stata module to perform Manipulation Testing Using Local Polynomial Density Estimation," Statistical Software Components S459094, Boston College Department of Economics. The documentation for the Stata module explains why the confidence band is not centered on the point estimate.

Figure 5: Impact of reelection on crime using true and placebo minimum election margins for victory



The horizonal axis denotes the minimum incumbent's margin necessary for reelection (true and placebo). The vertical axis denotes the estimated impact of reelection on crime (true reelection when the threshold for victory is 0.5, and placebo reelection when the threshold for victory is different than 0.5). The data is discussed in Section 1.

Figure 6: Deputy sheriff turnover as a function of the incumbent margin of victory over primary opponent



Values for the incumbent margins of victory between 0.2 and 0.8 are split into 40 bins of equal size. Each dot plots the average deputy sheriff turnover rate against the incumbent share of the vote (within a specific bin), adding a fourth-order polynomial fit estimated separately for incumbent sheriffs who win and lose reelection. The data is discussed in Section 1.

Table 1: Change in crime rate after incumbent and incumbent-party reelection

	Sheriff jurisdiction				Neigh. sher. juris.			
	Incumbent		Inc. party		Incumbent		Inc. party	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Reelection	-0.109***	-0.109***	0.040	0.029	-0.001	-0.001	-0.026	-0.028
	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.051)	(0.049)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.032)	(0.032)
Controls	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Number of Observations	6,813	6,813	2,104	2,104	8,700	8,700	2,891	2,891

*** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; + p<.1.

Robust standard errors in parentheses

Regression discontinuity of change in crime on incumbent margin of victory over primary opponent and incumbent party winning margin (for races without an incumbent). Crime in the sheriff's jurisdiction and in the jurisdictions of neighboring county sheriffs (placebo outcome). Finally, controls consist of the log of the population and the share of the population that is black. Regressions include year fixed effects, and standard errors are clustered at the county level.

Table 2: Population, share black, and real income per capita after incumbent reelection

	Percent black	Population	Income pc
Reelection	0.010	-0.032	-0.005
	(0.012)	(0.120)	(0.020)
Number of Observations	9,170	9,170	9,170

*** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; + p<.1.
Robust standard errors in parentheses

Regression discontinuity of county demographics on the incumbent margin of victory over primary opponent.

Table 3: Change in crime as a function of incumbent reelection: regression and instrumental variable estimates

	(1)	(2)
Incumbent wins	-0.084**	-0.088**
	(0.030)	(0.032)
Former sheriff wins		-0.041
		(0.036)
Observations	17,183	17,183

In regression (1), the change in crime is regressed on whether an incumbent wins the election instrumented by whether the incumbent sheriff is term-limited. In regression (2), the change in crime is regressed on whether an incumbent wins the election (instrumented by term limits), whether a former sheriff wins the election, or whether a brand new sheriff is elected (excluded category). The regressions include year fixed effects and standard errors account for clustering at the county level. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$;

Table 4: Deputy sheriff turnover after incumbent and incumbent-party reelection

	Incumbent	Inc. party
Reelection	-0.061***	-0.005
	(0.016)	(0.041)
Number of Observations	2,907	857

*** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; + p<.1.
Robust standard errors in parentheses

Regression discontinuity of deputy sheriff turnover on the incumbent and incumbent-party margin of victory. "Turnover" is the fraction of deputy sheriffs who depart during the first three months of the new sheriff's term.

Table 5: Change in crime rate after incumbent reelection in small versus large offices

	Small offices	Large offices
Reelection	-0.178***	-0.019
	(0.048)	(0.026)
Number of Observations	3,326	3,381

*** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; + p<.1.
Robust standard errors in parentheses

Regression discontinuity of change in crime on incumbent margin of victory over primary opponent in small versus large sheriff offices.

Appendix: identification of outliers in crime data

Let $c_{i,t}$ be the number of crimes reported by the sheriff in county i and year t. Reported crime, $c_{i,t}$, is an outlier and dropped from the data when one of the following conditions holds:

$$c_{i,t} > 8 \max\{c_{i,t+1}, c_{i,t+2}, c_{i,t-1}\}$$

$$c_{i,t} > 8 \max\{c_{i,t+1}, c_{i,t-1}, c_{i,t-2}\}$$

$$c_{i,t} < (1/4) \min\{c_{i,t+1}, c_{i,t+2}, c_{i,t+3}\}$$

$$c_{i,t} < (1/4) \min\{c_{i,t+2}, c_{i,t+3}, c_{i,t+4}\}$$

$$c_{i,t} < (1/8) \min\{c_{i,t-1}, c_{i,t-2}, c_{i,t-3}\}.$$