



# The Rodney King incident and verdict revisited: Examining opinion-mobilizing effects using data from Southern California in 1991 and 1992<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*Purpose:* We revisit the Rodney King incident and verdict to study their effect on confidence in local police using a design-based causal inference approach.

*Methods:* We apply rigorous state-of-the-art quasi-experimental methods to analyze survey data from Southern California and Los Angeles in 1991 and 1992 overlapping with the two focal events.

*Results:* While we find a substantial decrease in confidence in the local police both after the incident as well as the verdict, contrary to previous research using non-quasi-experimental designs, our results demonstrate that the loss of confidence caused by the incident varied only modestly by ethnicity and not at all by political orientation. The negative effect of the verdict only varied to a limited extent by political orientation but not ethnicity. Additionally, although there is robust evidence that the incident in 1991 did indeed have a causal negative effect, this evidence is substantially weaker for the effect of the verdict. Given the pre-existing negative time trend prior to the acquittal in April 1992, it is doubtful that the verdict itself played a causal role in mobilizing public opinion.

*Conclusions:* Our results shed new light on these two pivotal events and their consequences, which are discussed alongside contemporary research on police-citizen relations.

## 1. Introduction

On March 3, 1991, the severe beating of Rodney King by four officers from the Los Angeles Police Department [LAPD] was caught on tape by a bystander and subsequently aired on local and national news. The Rodney King incident reflects an important moment in which citizen-recorded video was used to document and disseminate police-citizen interactions among the wider public (Miller, 2016). The use of technology facilitated a “new visibility” of police produced and distributed by citizens (Goldsmith, 2010; Sandhu & Haggerty, 2017). This allowed for previously “low visibility” interactions and misconduct to be disseminated much more widely among the public (Miller, 2016). As a result, these “vicarious experiences” (Weitzer, 2017) became increasingly important in shaping public perceptions about the legitimacy of the police (Farmer & Sun, 2016; Graziano, 2019; Nix & Pickett, 2017; Sandhu & Haggerty, 2017; St. Louis, Saulnier, & Walby, 2019). Theoretically, these videos publicize different dimensions of police interactions and performance, such as procedural and distributive (in

justice. Police procedural justice, characterized by fair, respectful, transparent, and neutral treatment, is associated with more positive attitudes towards the police, including higher levels of trust, confidence, and willingness to cooperate (Bolger & Walters, 2019; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Distributive justice concerns the extent to which police services and outcomes are fairly distributed across the population (Charman & Williams, 2021; McLean, 2020). Experiences with unequal policing, such as stop-and-search tactics, have been associated with higher distrust and lower perceptions of police legitimacy (Murray et al., 2021; Oberwittler & Roché, 2018). Videos of police misconduct therefore communicate information about police procedural and distributive injustices to the public, which theoretically motivates watchers to update their beliefs about the trustworthiness and legitimacy of the police in general.

In 2014, a number of high-profile events were made visible to the public through surveillance or bystander video, as well as the media (Miller, 2016). The deaths of Eric Garner in New York City and Michael Brown in Ferguson in particular renewed academic and public interest in

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the impact of such events on public opinion about the police (Cobbina, Conteh, & Emrich, 2019; Cole, April, & Trinkner, 2020; Culhane, Boman, & Schweitzer, 2016; Kochel, 2017). Researchers again investigated the immediate and long-term effects of these incidents on perceptions of police using surveys and interviews conducted before, during, and after the focal events (Campbell & Valera, 2020; Jackson, Fedina, DeVlyder, & Barth, 2021; Kochel, 2019; Pryce & Gainey, 2022). In some cases, researchers took advantage of the overlap between survey fieldwork and incidents of police violence, a type of natural experiment known as Unexpected Event During Survey Design [UESD], to estimate causal effects of these events on public opinion (Nägel & Lutter, 2021; Reny & Newman, 2021; White, Weisburd, & Wire, 2018).

This body of research suggests that trust and legitimacy decreased for a short period of time following high-profile events, especially among minorities and self-identified political progressives (Kochel, 2019; Nägel & Lutter, 2021; Pryce & Gainey, 2022; Reny & Newman, 2021). However, others found no significant change in attitudes, possibly due to already low levels of support resulting in 'floor' effects (White et al., 2018). In a study examining the change in attitudes following the death of George Floyd and subsequent protests in the summer of 2020, Reny and Newman (2021) found that while the negative effects on attitudes were ubiquitous across ethnic groups, the effect seemed to persist over time among Blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans. In addition, the negative effect was more pronounced among strong self-identified Democrats (i.e., politically left) compared to strong Republicans (i.e., politically conservative). In an analysis of the effects of police violence in France, Nägel and Lutter (2021) found similar heterogeneous effects, whereby the negative change in trust in police was significantly stronger among ethnic minority respondents.

However, the Rodney King incident differed to some extent from more recent high-profile cases of police misconduct. First, while the incident was videotaped by a bystander, the distribution of the video was controlled by the media (Miller, 2016). Unlike the instantaneous and rapid dissemination of information through social media today, it took several days for the video to be shared with and reported in US national news outlets (Jacobs, 1996; Solomon, 2004). It is therefore unclear to what extent news about the incident would reach saturation in the population and influence changes in attitudes towards the police. Second, there are two key moments in the Rodney King case that communicate information about police misconduct and (lack of) accountability: the initial reporting on the event itself, and the subsequent trial and acquittal of the police officers involved in the beating one year later. Following research on police misconduct and public opinion, the expectation is that both the event and subsequent trial should influence attitudes towards the police. However, there has been less attention on to what extent subsequent trials of misconduct increase or possibly reverse losses in police legitimacy (Ang, Bencsik, Bruhn, & Derencourt, 2021; Chermak, McGarrell, & Gruenewald, 2006).

The current study therefore aims to test the impact of the Rodney King incident and subsequent acquittal of officers on public perceptions of police. Specifically, we take advantage of the overlap between two surveys conducted in Los Angeles, California and the incident and trial, respectively. We do so by applying state-of-the-art research methods (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno, & Hernández, 2020) to examine the historical events of the early 1990s from both a more methodologically rigorous and theoretically grounded perspective, potentially providing new insights for current scholarship.

Since contemporary social, policing, and policy environments are radically different from those of the early 1990s, it is reasonable to ask why analyzing public attitudes and police practices in 1991 and 1992 would be of relevance today and whether they should be judged by the knowledge and practices today. By drawing comparisons with related incidents like the murder of George Floyd, the worldwide rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and their influences on attitudinal dynamics today, we add to the discussion on the significance of political and racial polarization and its development over the last thirty years. In

this way, we hope to contribute to the field of historical criminology, as understood by Lawrence as "research which incorporates historical primary sources while addressing present-day debates and practices in the criminal justice field" (Lawrence, 2019, p. 493).

## 2. Historical context: the incident and the verdict

In the early morning of March 3rd, 1991, California Highway Patrol and the LAPD pursued a car in a high velocity chase after it was observed speeding. As the car eventually stopped, four white LAPD officers surrounded the driver, 25-year-old Rodney King, an African American, in order to subdue him and his passengers. King was kicked seven times, beaten with batons at least 56 times, and shot with an electric Taser four times (Solomon, 2004). The remaining police sergeant and another group of officers on the scene reportedly looked on as King was beaten by the officers. In the official police report of the incident, the injuries were described as "[s]everal facial cuts due to contact with asphalt. Of a minor nature. A split upper lip. Suspect oblivious to pain" (Mathews & Walker, cited in Solomon, 2004, p. 25). Newspapers later reported that King suffered skull fractures, a shattered eye socket, a concussion, injuries to the knees, a broken leg, nerve damage, and permanent brain damage (Walker, cited in Solomon, 2004).

Unknown to the officers, the incident was captured on film by George Holliday, who lived in the nearby apartment building. Holliday sold his recording to a local news station, where it is broadcast for the first time locally on the evening of March 4th, 1991. The next day, the video was acquired by national news outlets and broadcast nationwide (Sigelman, Welch, Bledsoe, & Combs, 1997). Over the next weeks, the video would be played repeatedly on most major news networks across the United States. Early media coverage described the incident as "shocking," which "sparked an outcry over police misconduct" and made visible the officers' violations of fairness and justice (Jacobs, 1996). Soon media discourse shifted from descriptions of the individuals involved in the incident to questioning institutional legitimacy and accountability within the LAPD. Activists argued that the incident was not isolated, and newspaper editorials described the LAPD, particularly Chief Daryl Gates, as unaccountable and racist (Jacobs, 1996; Solomon, 2004). Local African American media outlets, such as *The Los Angeles Sentinel*, depicted the incident as "in the middle of a long and continuous narrative, rather than at the beginning of a new one" (Jacobs, 1996).

On March 4th, 1992, the trial of the four police officers involved in the beating began in the conservative, white city of Simi Valley (Fukurai, Krooth, & Butler, 1994). Media coverage surrounding the trial was described as cautious, reportedly in an effort to ensure a fair trial (Solomon, 2004). According to an analysis of media coverage at the time, major news outlets did not extensively cover the defense's frame-by-frame dissection and police-friendly interpretation of the video evidence which is believed to have influenced the subsequent acquittal (Crenshaw & Peller, 1993; Rabinowitz, 2015; Solomon, 2004; Stuart, 2011). Following the verdict acquitting the four officers of all charges on April 29th, 1992, protesters gathered in South Central Los Angeles and violence erupted soon after (Bergesen & Herman, 1998; Morrison & Lowry, 1994). The riots lasted for six days, resulting in 51 deaths, 2383 injuries, and an estimated 1 billion dollars in property damage (Bergesen & Herman, 1998). We expect that the event and the verdict both contributed to 'opinion mobilizing'. We lend the expression from a recent paper studying the effect of the George Floyd killing on public attitudes towards the police in the US (Reny & Newman, 2021). With 'opinion-mobilizing' scholars usually refer to changes in opinion during times of political unrest, in which grassroots protests function as a catalyzer of these dynamics (Lee, 2002). While Reny & Newman consider the social unrest and the worldwide BLM protests as mainly responsible for the identified effects after the George Floyd killing, our paper is framed around the direct effects of the incidents (i. e., the beating and the verdict) themselves. While we employ many different design choices to determine in how dynamics in perceptions might have

been delayed to the specific events, there is no way to completely disentangle the effect of the events from possible effects of uprising and social movements related to these events.

### 3. Effects on public opinion

Public opinion research occurring during the time period of the Rodney King incident suggest that disapproval of the incident was nearly universal across demographic characteristics, although the decline in support was greater among African Americans (Lasley, 1994; Weitzer, 2002). A poll conducted by *The Los Angeles Times* reported that a large percentage (86%) of the population had seen the video, and 92% believed that the LAPD used “too much” force (Rohlich, 1991; Sonenshein, 1994). In the same poll, 50% of respondents reported an “unfavorable impression” of honesty in the LAPD, and only 46% approved of the way the LAPD was doing its job (Rohlich, 1991). The article reports that this number reflected a “nose-dive” compared to a poll taken in 1988, wherein 74% of respondents approved of the way the LAPD was doing its job.

Perceptions of the subsequent trial verdict and rioting were more starkly divided (Bobo, Zubrinsky, Johnson, & Oliver, 1994; Soo Son, Tsang, Rome, & Davis, 1997). In a survey of Los Angeles residents conducted before and after the trial, Bobo et al. (1994) found that the majority of respondents across ethnic groups disagreed with the verdict, although there were still group differences in the proportion of disagreement. While 96% of Blacks disagreed with the verdict, around 65% of whites disagreed. Group differences were even larger when respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed that blacks do not receive fair treatment in the courts and criminal justice system (80% of blacks agreed vs 39% of whites). The authors argue that this division reflects racial differences in understanding how the beating and verdict fit within wider society, whereby whites perceive the incident as wrong but exceptional and blacks perceive it as part of wider systemic injustice. Even so, support for police reform was also supported widely across the population in Los Angeles, and that even political conservatives supported the implementation of reforms (Bobo et al., 1994).

Importantly, the previous questions were implemented *after* the verdict was decided and violence erupted (April 29th). This means that the results are informative for descriptive purposes but cannot tell us whether the verdict itself changed attitudes towards the police. Bobo and colleagues note that the survey was ongoing before, during and after the trial. They briefly describe how confidence in police changed before and after the verdict: among Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians, there were no significant changes in confidence in police, however the percentage of Whites who reported “not much” confidence increased from 13% to 20.5%. It is unfortunately not clear what statistical methods were used to determine “significant” change. Jesilow and Meyer (2001) used data collected from inner-city residents in Santa Ana, California to investigate attitudes towards the police before (1990) and after (1992) the Rodney King incident and trial. The same respondents were not interviewed in 1990 and 1992. The authors found that the proportion of respondents reporting at least one complaint about individual officer behavior was 8.1% in 1990 compared to 15.3% in 1992 (Jesilow & Meyer, 2001). Another study used four waves of panel data collected in South Central Los Angeles in December 1990, February 1991, April 1991, and June 1991 to examine within-individual changes in attitudes towards the police (Lasley, 1994). Lasley found that attitudes became more negative following the Rodney King incident, but eventually levelled out in the months that followed. When attitudes were disaggregated by race, reductions were greatest among African Americans compared to whites and Hispanics. Between April and June 1991, attitudes among whites

and Hispanics began to increase again, whereas attitudes continued to decline among African American respondents.

Taken together, the studies using data collected around the Rodney King incident and verdict provide relatively mixed evidence of causal change in attitudes due to the events. Only one study was able to use panel data and thus measure within-individual change (Lasley, 1994), however this approach does not rule out threats to internal validity. While another study takes advantage of data that overlap with one of the events (the verdict in 1992) to make before and after comparisons (Bobo et al., 1994), they do not assess the relevant assumptions or threats to internal validity that we discuss and assess in this paper. While some of the methodological threats to causal inference in comparable research designs had already been discussed within the field of econometrics at the time (See e.g., Villamizar-Villegas, Pinzon-Puerto, & Ruiz-Sanchez, 2021), it is important to note that the specific methodological and statistical advances relevant to study opinion mobilizing effects emerged only in recent years (Muñoz et al., 2020).

The current study aims to use the most up-to-date best practices in quasi-experimental research to re-evaluate the causal effect of the Rodney King incident and verdict on attitudes towards the police. Specifically, based on recent research on the effects of high-profile police violence on public opinion (e.g. Kochel, 2019; Nägel & Lutter, 2021; Reny & Newman, 2021), we formulate the following hypotheses:

- H1a: Individuals exposed to the Rodney King incident (post-event ‘treatment’ group) will have lower levels of confidence in the local police compared to those who were not exposed (pre-event ‘control’ group).
- H1b: The negative effect of treatment (i.e., exposure to the incident) will be stronger for Black individuals compared to Non-Black individuals.
- H1c: The negative effect of treatment (i.e., exposure to the incident) will be stronger for individuals who identify as liberal compared to those who do not identify as liberal.
- H2a: Individuals exposed to the acquittal (post-verdict ‘treatment’ group) will have lower levels of confidence in the local police compared to those who were not exposed (pre-verdict ‘control’ group).
- H2b: The negative effect of treatment (i.e., exposure to the acquittal) will be stronger for Black individuals compared to Non-Black individuals.
- H2c: The negative effect of treatment (i.e., exposure to the acquittal) will be stronger for individuals who identify as liberal compared to those who do not identify as liberal.

### 4. Data

The Southern California Social Survey [SCSS] (1991) covered three counties in the Los Angeles area: Los Angeles, Ventura, and Orange County (Bobo et al., 1994). The SCSS aimed to measure attitudes of residents on topics such as health status, government spending, trust in government, political participation, victimization, work, and confidence in police (University of California, L. Angeles. I. for S. S. Research, 2011b). The target sample size was 1000 adults, oversampling households in areas with higher Black populations (Institute for Social Science Research, University of California Los Angeles, 1991). We could not find information about how the oversampling was conducted in detail. There was also no information available concerning the cooperation rate of respondents. Interviews were conducted using computer assisted telephone interviewing [CATI] system, and fieldwork took place from February 4, 1991, to March 18, 1991. The final sample size was 1007

respondents.

In 1992, the SCSS was restricted to cover only Los Angeles County and was therefore renamed the Los Angeles County Social Survey [LACSS] (Bobo et al., 1994). The LACSS covered many of the same topics as the SCSS. The LACSS targeted a random sample of households with a telephone, oversampling areas with high proportions of Black and Asian households (University of California, L. Angeles. I. for S. S. Research, 2011a). According to Bobo and Hutchings (1996), the survey oversampled phone numbers in areas where the percentage of black residents was 65% or higher, and the percentage of Asian respondents was 30% or higher to generate a larger number for these ethnic groups. The cooperation rate of the study was 55%. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish using the CATI system. Fieldwork took place between February 2, 1992, and July 28, 1992. The final sample was  $n = 1585$ .<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that these two data sources are not panel data but repeated cross-sections of two non-identical target populations. The SCSS targeted Los Angeles, Ventura, and Orange County, and the LACSS targeted only Los Angeles County. The authors of this paper were not in any way responsible for fielding the two surveys.

## 5. Identification strategy and analysis plan

Our research design relies on the Unexpected Event During Survey Design [UESD] framework (Muñoz et al., 2020). While this particular design had been used previously (Balcells & Torrats-Espinosa, 2018; Dinesen & Jaeger, 2013), Muñoz et al. were the first to formalize the approach and lay out the specific threats to causal inference inherent to this design (see also Legewie (2013) for an earlier discussion of potential biases). The design is based upon the exploitation of random variation in the field period of survey programs overlapping with high profile events. To defend claims of causal inference, two potential threats need to be addressed: Ignorability assumes that the design can indeed be considered (quasi-) experimental in the sense that “assignment” to either the pre- or post-event group is essentially random. Ignorability is evaluated by examining the imbalance on observables between pre- and post-event groups, the robustness of the estimates and standard errors to adjusting the specified time-window, the inclusion of covariates and, finally, the analysis of non-response patterns.

The second assumption, excludability, states that survey timing (days before and after the respective event) influences the outcome variable through no other channel than the event itself. In other words, the survey timing can be considered an instrumental variable for assessing the effect of the focal event on the outcome (see e.g. Labrecque & Swanson, 2018). To evaluate this assumption, the following robustness tests/checks are recommended: Checking for (the absence of) placebo effects at the empirical median of the control group, analyzing pre-existing time trends, falsification on other units (e.g., surveys that were collected when the event did not take place), as well as falsification on outcomes that are closely related to the focal outcome but should, theoretically, not be affected by the event. Finally, excludability can be evaluated based on an in-depth qualitative description of the event that justifies that the event (a) can be assumed to have been witnessed by the post-event respondents (on average), and (b) no collateral events took place that might be responsible for dynamics in the outcome in question. To ensure the reliability of our estimates and our overall research

design, we will conduct all recommended sensitivity analyses that are possible to conduct with the given data.

The presentation of results will be structured as follows: Since we are interested in both the incident itself as well as the subsequent verdict and acquittal of the involved police officers one year later, the results will be presented as Study 1 (the incident) and Study 2 (the verdict). While we will discuss the results from both studies in the paper, we moved all tables and some of the figures from Study 2 to the Appendix to avoid redundancy and improve readability of the paper. For both studies, we will present regression models with a binary before/after, followed by a model with relevant covariates as well as the respective interaction terms. Finally, we will discuss the robustness checks with a focus on those tests that do not clearly support the robustness of our results. All robustness checks not reported in the paper are included in the Appendix.

### Dependent variable

The dependent variable “Confidence in local police” is measured on a 3-point ordinal scale ranging from 1 “Not so much”, 2 “Some” to 3 “Very much”. Due to the limited nature of this item, we opted for an ordered logistic regression approach. The results are robust to using Ordinary Least Squares regression (see Tables A1 and A4 in the Appendix).

### Independent variables

The main independent variable is a binary indicator denoting whether respondents were interviewed before (treatment = 0) or after (treatment = 1) the incident and verdict. For Study 1, respondents are assigned to the treatment group when the interview took place after March 5, 1991, when KTLA news in Los Angeles broadcasted the video of the beating.<sup>2</sup> For Study 2, treatment status involves respondents interviewed after April 29, 1992, when the officers charged with assault were acquitted by the jury.

As control variables, we chose respondents' income (over \$30,000 = 1, under \$30,000 = 0), age in years, gender (1 = Female, 0 = Male), and whether respondents have been a victim of a crime in the past 12 months (1 = Yes, 0 = No). We also controlled for ethnicity (Black = 1, all other = 0) and political orientation (1 = liberal, 0 = not liberal). These two items were used to create product terms with the treatment indicator in order to test hypotheses H1b-c and H2b-c.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Study 1 – the incident

Table 1 gives an overview of descriptive statistics in both the control (before the incident) and the treatment (after the incident) groups. Delta denotes the difference between the group means and hence represents an imbalance analysis. Surprisingly, the groups are well balanced. The only slight difference on exogenous observables is that the post-intervention group contains slightly more people with an income under \$30,000. The difference in means, however, is small ( $\Delta = -0.062$ ,  $p = 0.070$ ). This gives us confidence that the as-good-as-random assumption (i.e., ignorability) might not be violated for Study 1 (see robustness checks for a closer inspection).

Fig. 1 visualizes the dynamics in the outcome variable before and after the Rodney King incident. Note that no interviews were conducted on March 1st and 2nd, 1991, which prevents us from using a regression discontinuity design, because there are not enough observations in the direct vicinity of the cut point. The regression line before and after the incident are locally weighted regressions (LOESS) that give a first idea about the opinion mobilizing effect. There is a visible drop in confidence in the local police right after the video had been released. However, the positive slope suggests that confidence appears to increase again around

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the information provided on the Harvard Dataverse storing the datasets is limited. We managed to find information about the random sampling procedure from an announcement of the data collection in which it is clarified that Random Digit Dialing was used for the 1991 SCSS (Institute for Social Science Research, University of California Los Angeles, 1991). We did not find a comparable document for the LACSS. However, Bobo and Hutchings (1996) used the exact same data and clearly stated that random digit dialing was used here as well.

<sup>2</sup> It is of course possible that news about the incident broke before the video was leaked by KTLA. However, in this analysis we assume respondents to be ‘treated’ when being interviewed after the video release.

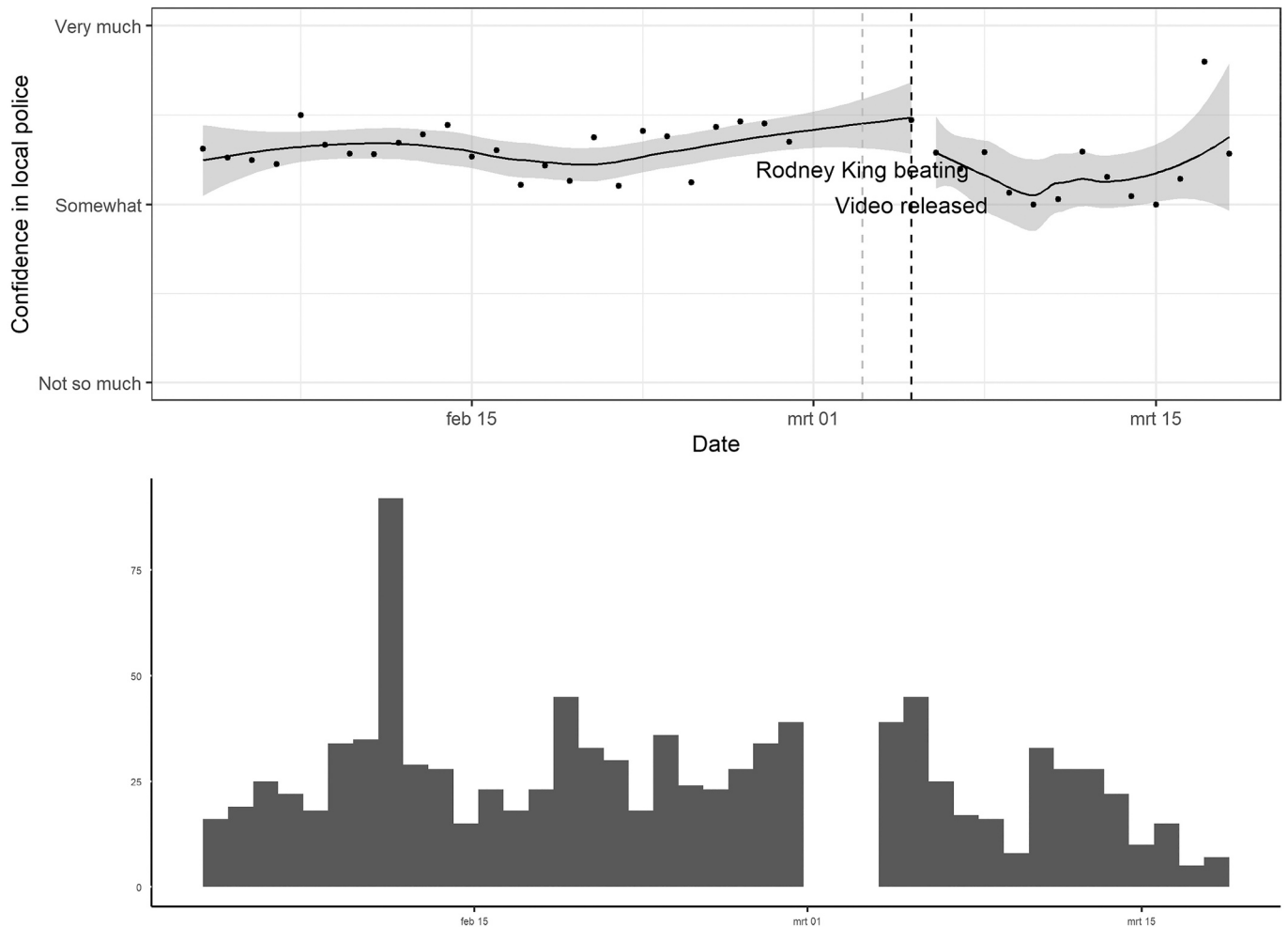


**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics. Southern California Social Survey [SCSS] (1991).<sup>a</sup>

Variable	Control group					Treatment group						
	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max	Δ	
Confidence in local police	694	2.311	0.676	1	3	291	2.220	0.714	1	3	-0.091	***
Income over \$30,000	663	0.652	0.477	0	1	278	0.590	0.493	0	1	-0.062	*
Age	699	41.363	16.371	18	93	294	40.619	15.293	18	83	-0.744	
Gender (1 = Female)	707	0.540	0.499	0	1	298	0.534	0.500	0	1	-0.006	
Victim of crime in the past 12 months	706	0.188	0.391	0	1	296	0.166	0.372	0	1	-0.022	
Liberal	686	0.220	0.415	0	1	288	0.201	0.402	0	1	-0.019	
Black	698	0.128	0.334	0	1	298	0.114	0.318	0	1	-0.014	

\*p < 0.1, \*\*\*p < 0.01.

<sup>a</sup> We adjusted for those covariates that were recommended in such a design by Muñoz et al. (2020) and that were available in the datasets. Additionally, we also adjusted for Victimization since this variable usually is associated with confidence in police.



**Fig. 1.** Development of confidence in local police before and after the Rodney King incident. Histograms represents daily number of interviews. Southern California Social Survey [SCSS] (1991).

March 15th.

To improve our understanding of this effect, we estimated a number of ordered logistic regressions using the *polr* command from the MASS package (Venables & Ripley, 2002). The results can be seen in Table 2. We start with a baseline model containing only the binary treatment indicator. Since the coefficients are scaled in logs, we convert them to odds ratios to ease interpretations (i.e., we exponentiate the estimates:

$e^{-0.363} = 0.695$ ). For respondents interviewed after the video had been released, the odds of having more confidence in the police (i.e., “Very much” or “Some” as opposed to “Not so much”) are 30.5%  $([1-0.695] * 100\%)$  lower than for respondents interviewed before the video release ( $p = 0.009$ ). The odds slightly decrease to 28.2%  $([1 - e^{-0.331}] * 100\%)$  lower for the post-event group when holding covariates constant, while still showing a significant effect ( $p = 0.026$ ). Overall, these results

**Table 2**  
Ordered logistic regression models, Southern California Social Survey [SCSS] (1991)

	Dependent variable:			
	Confidence in local police			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
After 'Rodney King video release'	-0.363*** (0.139)	-0.331** (0.149)	-0.282* (0.159)	-0.244 (0.167)
Income over \$30,000		-0.194 (0.137)	-0.194 (0.137)	-0.200 (0.138)
Age		0.008** (0.004)	0.008** (0.004)	0.008** (0.004)
Gender (1 = Female)		-0.006 (0.129)	-0.012 (0.130)	-0.006 (0.129)
Victim of violent crime		0.323* (0.168)	0.323* (0.168)	0.330** (0.168)
Liberal		-0.247 (0.157)	-0.246 (0.157)	-0.145 (0.181)
Black		-0.927*** (0.196)	-0.831*** (0.226)	-0.924*** (0.196)
Treatment x Black			-0.377 (0.439)	
Treatment x Liberal				-0.411 (0.362)
AIC	1959.3	1716.8	1718	1717.5
Observations	985	882	882	882

Note: \*p < 0.1 \*\*p < 0.05 \*\*\*p < 0.01.

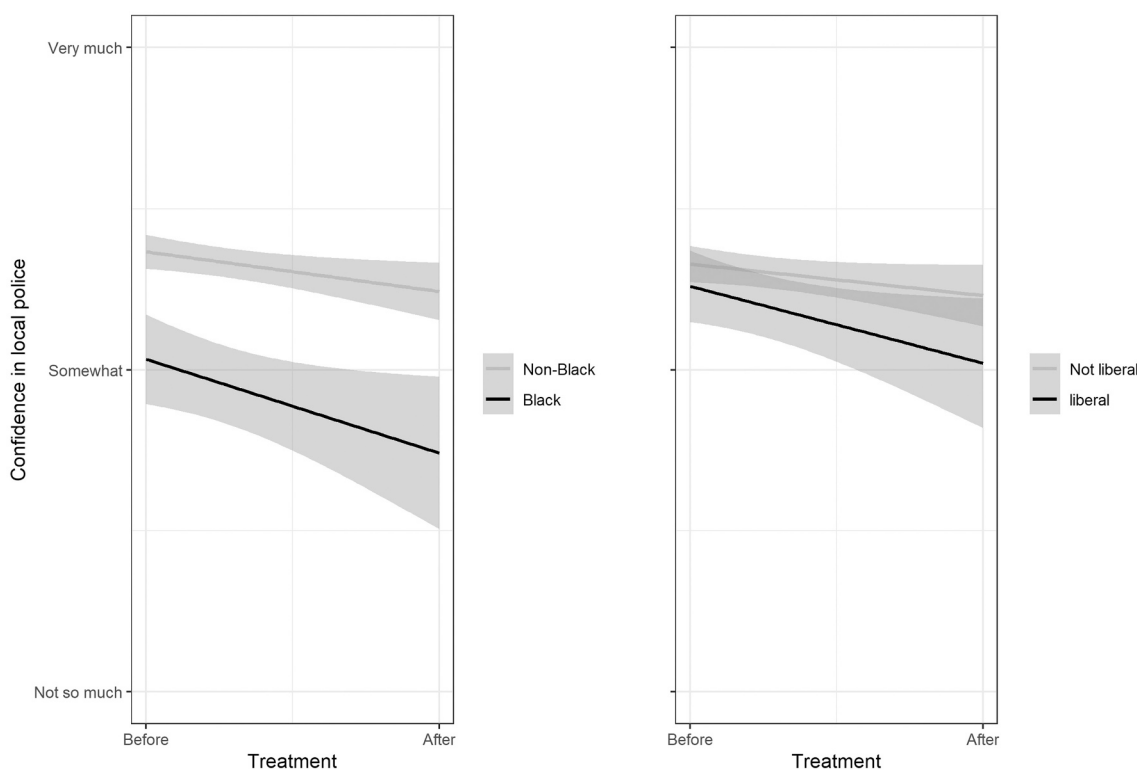


Fig. 2. Visualization of interaction effects. Southern California Social Survey [SCSS] (1991).

cannot fully reject the assumptions made in H1a.

Turning to the interaction effects it should be noted that we did not center the variables. Accordingly, the treatment effect cannot be interpreted as the main effect in Models 3 and 4. The slopes of the product terms for each interaction (Black\*Treatment and Liberal\*Treatment) are negative as predicted but not significant. Hence, we cannot reject the null hypotheses implied by H1b and H1c. To explore this question more closely, we plotted the interaction effects in Fig. 2. The plots represent mean differences without covariate adjustment. The lines for both effects are almost parallel, suggesting that there is little heterogeneity in

the treatment effect regarding liberal attitudes as opposed to non-liberal attitudes or Black respondents compared to Non-Black respondents.

### 6.2. Robustness checks for Study 1

Since we compare Black individuals to all other respondents in Model 3, and liberal political attitudes to all other political attitudes (including moderate attitudes) in Model 4, our coding strategy could hide more nuanced variation in the treatment effect. To make a more reliable statement about the heterogeneity of the treatment effect, we

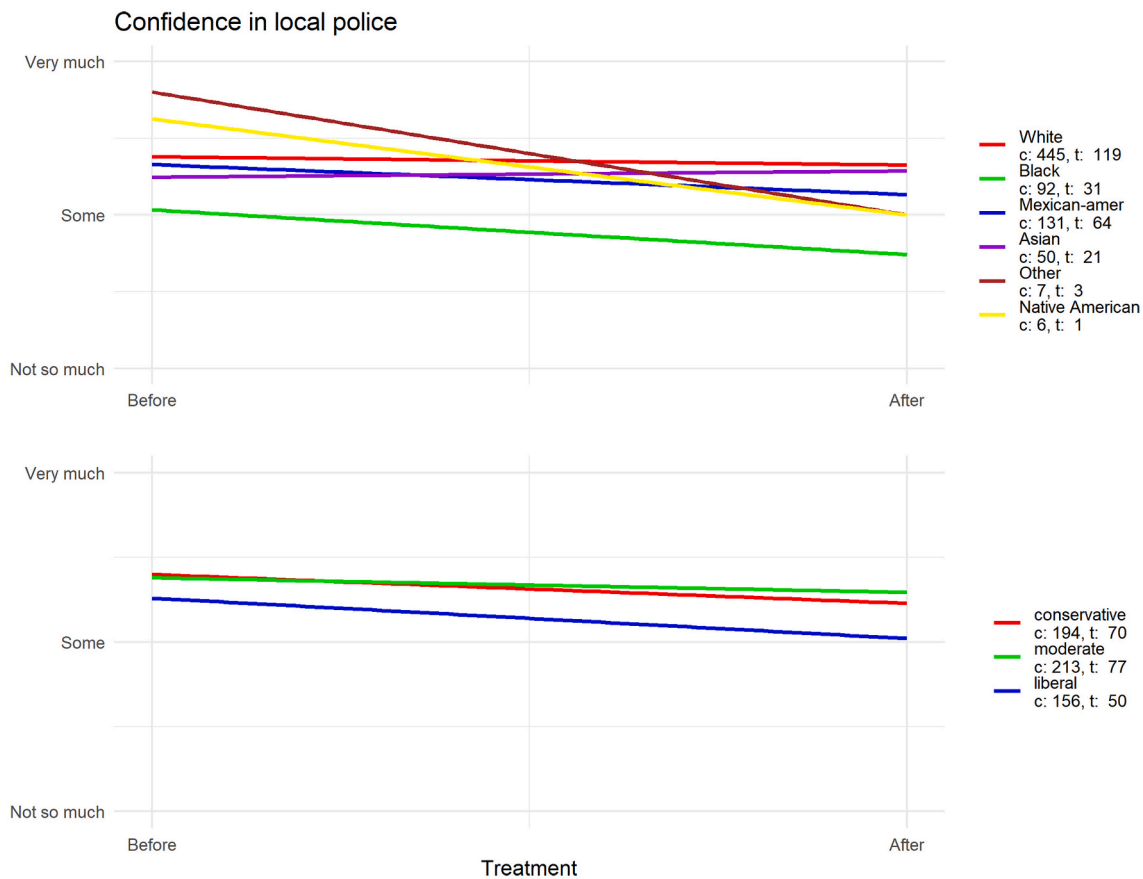


Fig. 3. Visualization of interaction effects among all included ethnic groups. Southern California Social Survey [SCSS] (1991). Legend provides sample sizes in control and treatment condition.

coded the two variables in a different way and presented the results in Fig. 3. The above panel implies that there is indeed some variation in effects across ethnicities.<sup>3</sup> As expected, the “Black” category shows the steepest decline (mean difference =  $-0.291$ ,  $t = 2.176$ ,  $p = 0.034$ ), followed by Mexican-Americans (mean difference =  $-0.195$ ,  $t = 2.002$ ,  $p = 0.047$ ). The before and after difference among White individuals is not statistically different from zero (mean difference =  $-0.053$ ,  $t = 0.740$ ,  $p = 0.46$ ) suggesting that the loss of confidence in the local police demonstrated in the main effects in Table 2 was most likely driven by Black and Mexican-American respondents. On the lower panel, however, it shows that the distinction between “liberal,” “moderate” or “conservative” political attitudes did not make a difference in confidence in the local police after the incident. While these additional analyses indicate some variation in the treatment effect regarding ethnicity, we want to stress the limited number of observations which reduces statistical power to identify these heterogeneous effects.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, we examine the robustness of our results concerning the causal inference assumptions. As mentioned above, we highlight those

<sup>3</sup> From the outset, our analysis plan envisaged using the ethnic and political moderator as binary variables. While this may mask the presence of covariation, splitting up the variables also reduces the statistical power to test the hypotheses. Note that, “Native Americans” and people in the “Other” category show a greater loss of confidence after the incident. These effects are due to the small number of respondents in these two categories and are therefore completely spurious (see sample sizes in the legend).

<sup>4</sup> Another possible heterogeneous effect could be due to the respondent's respective county of residence. We explored whether the effect would vary alongside residence in LA, Orange County, or Ventura. There was no sign for a significant difference among treatment effects between those regions.

results from sensitivity analyses that do not clearly underline the robustness of our findings. All robustness checks can be found in the Appendix.

Regarding ignorability, our robustness checks generally support the reliability of the design as evidenced by imbalance analyses and robustness to covariate adjustment. Non-response could be a problem when certain respondents are, on average, interviewed earlier during the fieldwork period which would introduce systematic bias. This could be due to reachability since it might be easier for interviewers to reach certain respondents early in the fieldwork period (e.g., older respondents who are more likely to be at home during the day and answer the phone). Looking at the histogram in Fig. 1, it seems unlikely that this is the case. Even though the number of interviews before and after the video release fluctuates from day to day, there is little reason to believe that this variation before and after the video release is non-random. Still, as mentioned before, there were no interviews being conducted on the two days before the video was released. While this does not automatically imply a source of bias, we want to stress that we cannot completely rule out potential bias due to response patterns.

The lack of variability in socio-demographic characteristics depicted in Table 1 give us further confidence that the dynamics we are measuring are more likely to be caused by the video release than by characteristics of the fieldwork design. We also explored whether the effect might depend on the chosen time window. Indeed, when we successively add one day to the time window, starting with a time window of 1 day after the video release, the effect only becomes significant at  $p < 0.05$  after 6 days. This could either be due to limited power or because it took several days for respondents to be exposed to the news about the Rodney King beating (see Fig. 4 for a graphical depiction).

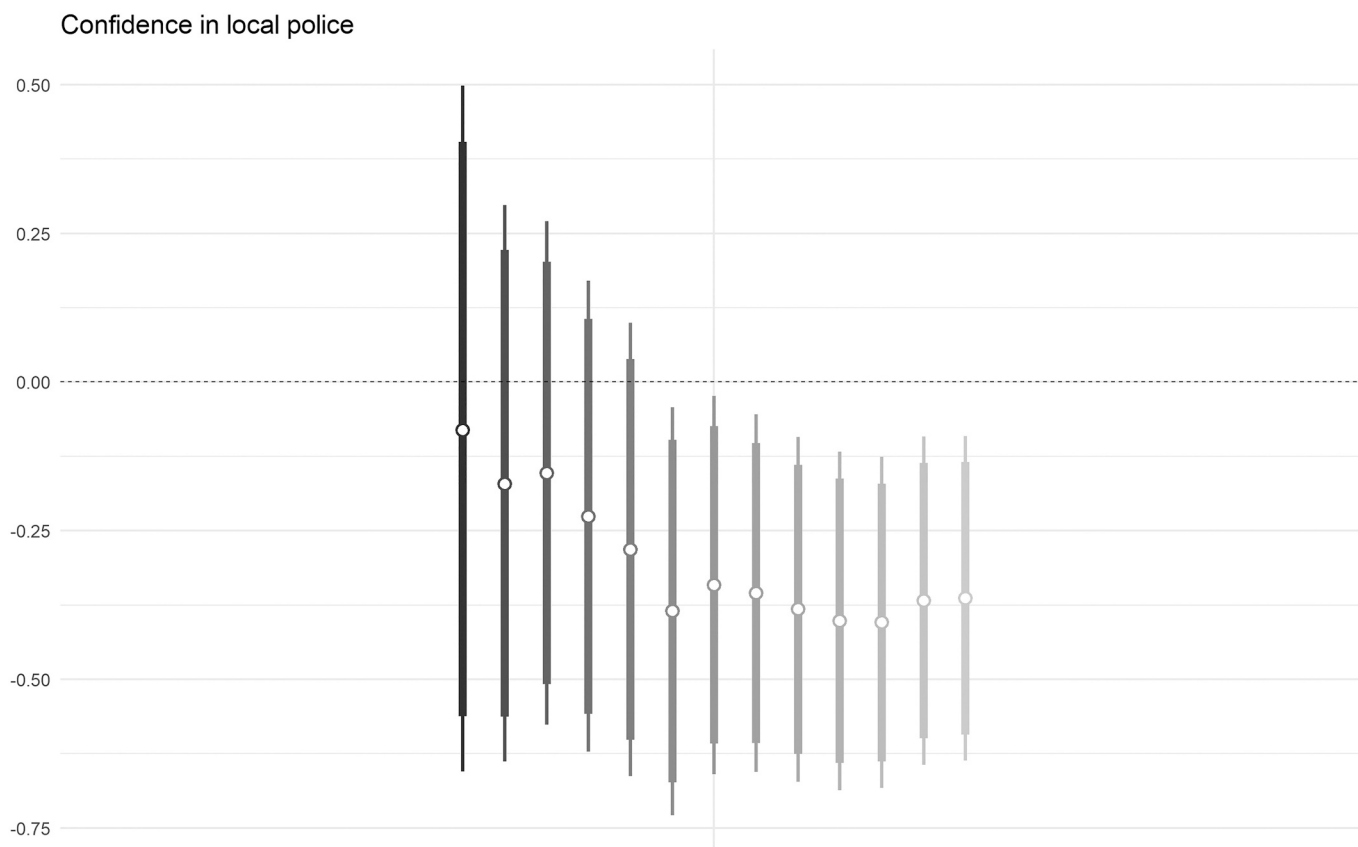


Fig. 4. Treatment coefficient represents a model adding an additional day to the time window, starting 1 day after the video release. Control group uses the complete pre-event time window. Covariates not included. Southern California Social Survey [SCSS] (1991).

In regard to the excludability assumption, we tested for placebo treatments in the middle of the control group (no effect, see Fig. A1), for pre-existing time trends (no significant time trends in the outcome variable, see Fig. A2) and falsifications tests on unrelated outcomes (see Fig. A3). We found placebo effects at  $p < 0.10$  on confidence in the federal government (negative), and confidence in public schools (positive). While this could be an indication that another event could have taken place that might influence these items, we believe that those findings are likely to be spurious and potentially a function of running many tests.

Unfortunately, we were not able to access other datasets than those from 1991 and 1992 that included the relevant variables. Accordingly, it was not possible to design a placebo test using a different study cohort and the same outcome to assess potential seasonal patterns.

Overall, these sensitivity analyses provide robust evidence for the main effect. Concerning our interaction effects, it appears that our original coding strategy hides some of the albeit limited variation across different ethnic groups, while there is no evidence of variation across political orientation.

### 6.3. Study 2 – the verdict

The analysis strategy for Study 2 mirrors Study 1. However, a few different specifications were necessary since the LACSS 1992 data did not include all the items that were previously included in the SCSS 1991 data. For our analysis this has three implications: The LACSS did not ask respondents whether they had been a victim of a violent crime in the past 12 months. The closest proxy we could use was the following item: “How likely do you believe it is that you or any members of your household will be the victim of a crime in the next 12 months?” with answers ranging from 1 “Very likely” to 4 “Very unlikely”. Secondly, the

LACSS 1992 data included fewer items on confidence in different US institutions. Accordingly, we could run fewer falsification tests on other outcomes. Thirdly, ethnicities were recorded somewhat differently in the LACSS 1992. Instead of “Mexican-American”, the LACSS recorded “Hispanic,” the “Asian” category also included “Pacific Islanders” and Native Americans shared one category with Alaskan Natives. Apart from that, the analysis presented in Study 1 could be replicated with the LACSS 1992 data. As mentioned above, we included all tables for Study 2 in the appendix, but we present the most important figures in the manuscript.

Comparing imbalances on observables before and after the Rodney King verdict on April 29th, 1992, reveals two significant differences (see Table A2 in the Appendix). There are significantly more males (mean difference =  $-0.067$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) than females in the post event group. Additionally, people interviewed after the verdict were significantly less likely to believe that they themselves or a household member would be a victim of a violent crime in the next 12 months (mean difference =  $0.207$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Accordingly, we should base our inferences on models including those covariates. Plotting the outcome variables over time in Fig. 5 clearly demonstrates that there is a substantial pre-existing time trend before the verdict.

This gives reason to believe that confidence in the local police decreased not necessarily because of the verdict but due to some dynamics preceding the event. We then analyzed the same models presented in Table 2 with the LACSS data and the respondents interviewed after the verdict as the binary treatment indicator. Our results indicate that respondents interviewed after the verdict report significantly less confidence in the local police than respondents interviewed before the event. Considering the model with covariates but without interaction terms reveals that the odds of having more confidence in the local police (i.e. “Very much” or “Some” as opposed to “Not so much”) are 25% ([1-



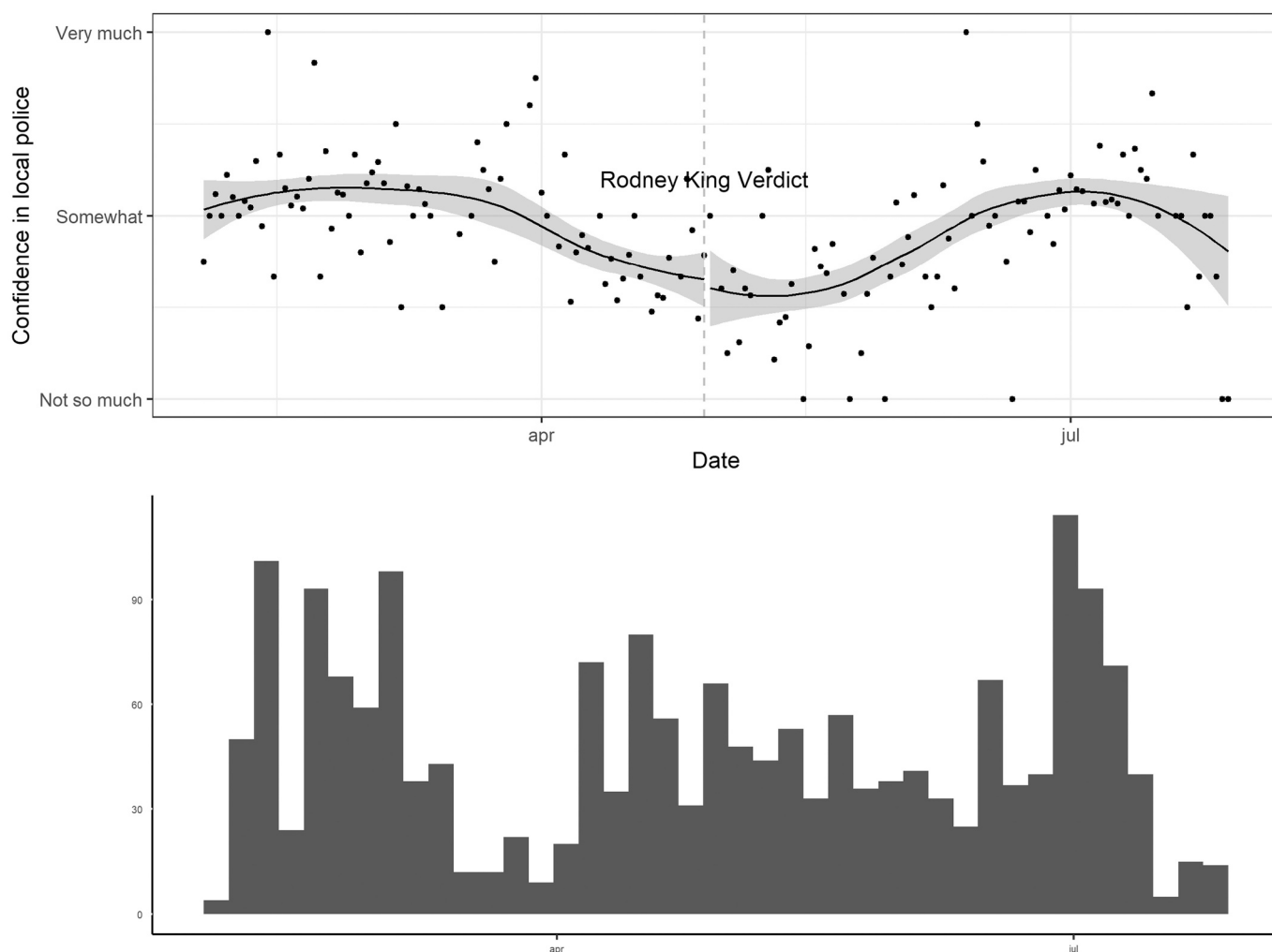


Fig. 5. Development of confidence in local police before and after the Rodney King verdict. Histograms represents daily number of interviews. Los Angeles County Social Survey [LACSS] 1992.

$e^{-0.288} \cdot 100\%$ ) lower than for respondents interviewed before the video release ( $p = 0.002$ ). The loss of confidence after the verdict was thus somewhat smaller in size compared to the loss in confidence after the actual incident. Again, we cannot fully reject the assumption made in H2a (see Table A3 in the Appendix).

When estimating the potential interaction effect, both respondents with a liberal attitude as well as Black respondents do not significantly differ from their reference category after the acquittal of the four police officers. Hence, we fail to reject the null hypothesis implied by H2b and H2c.

#### 6.4. Robustness checks for Study 2

Similar to Study 1, our results do not change when estimating the models by way of ordinary least squares (i.e., linear probability models, see Table A4 in the Appendix). To more closely investigate whether our coding strategy could hide heterogeneity in the treatment effect in the way it did in Study 1, we again plotted the before/after comparison for every ethnic group included in the LACSS 1992. Results can be seen in Fig. 6.

There is no significant variation before and after the verdict across ethnic groups, as the above panel shows. The parallel lines in the lower panel show that there is no difference for respondents with a liberal as compared to a conservative political orientation, and both before and after comparisons are not significantly different from zero. However,

respondents with a moderate political orientation show a steeper decline in confidence in the local police after the verdict (Mean difference =  $-0.018$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ). Hence, there is indeed some limited variation according to political ideology, as moderate respondents lost more confidence in the local police as compared to liberal or conservative respondents.

Regarding the assumptions for causal inference, the histogram in Fig. 5 demonstrates that nonresponse is unlikely to have affected the results since the number of interviews before and after the verdict shows no varying patterns. It is important to stress that the before and after groups differ on at least two important observed characteristics: there are more males and less people considering themselves likely to be a victim of a violent crime in next 12 months in the post event group. Next, we subsequently added one day to the analysis time window, which reveals an opposing trajectory to what we observed in Study 1. The effect is substantially negative and significant for all time windows but decreases in size over time, whereas in Study 1 it took several days for the effect to reach statistical significance. This further suggests that some preceding dynamic and not the verdict itself might be responsible for the observed effects. This interpretation of our findings is substantiated by the following placebo checks.

To test whether the excludability assumption might be violated, we ran a placebo regression in which we used the middle of the control group as the binary treatment indicator. Indeed, we identified a significant placebo effect (see Fig. A5 in the Appendix). When studying the

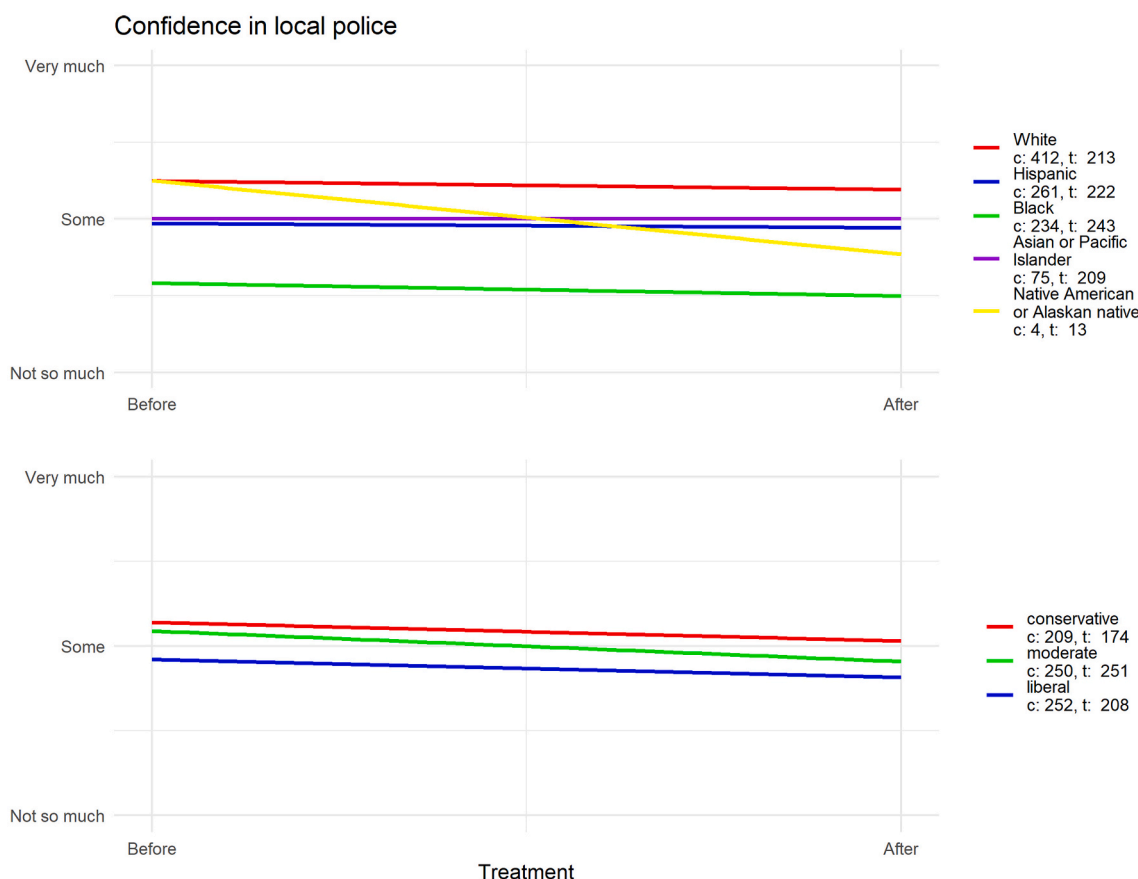


Fig. 6. Visualization of interaction effects among all included ethnic groups Los Angeles County Social Survey [LACSS] 1992. Legend provides sample sizes in control and treatment condition.

pre-event group for a potential pre-existing time trend in Fig. A6, we found a significant negative effect even before the verdict. All these findings underline our interpretation that it was not the verdict itself but a previous negative trajectory in confidence in the local police that was responsible for the significant decrease in this survey item. As a final robustness check, we used the three other items on confidence in state institutions as a falsification check on other outcomes. We identified a negative effect on confidence in the federal government when including covariates ( $p < 0.100$ ) but no effect on confidence in state or local government (see Fig. A7 in the Appendix).

As a final robustness check we performed a regression discontinuity design (RDD). This was not possible in Study 1 because there were not enough observations directly before the event. For Study 2, such a design is feasible. The RDD is a design-based causal inference technique in which we estimate the differences in intercepts between two regression models, one before and after a cut-off-point, which in our case is the day of the verdict (Skovron & Titiunik, 2015). Respondents who were interviewed just before that day should theoretically be comparable to respondents who were interviewed just after the verdict was published, given that the interview timing is essentially random. Hence, all other things equal, any difference in their assessment of the local police should be attributable to the verdict. The number of days before and after the cut point (i.e., the bandwidth) is determined by a completely data-driven algorithm that approximates the smallest Mean Square Error (MSE) of the local average treatment effect (LATE), which is the difference of the intercepts in the regression models, and thus finds the optimal bandwidth (Imbens & Kalyanaraman, 2012). As can be seen in table A5 in the Appendix, the estimates are negative but statistically non-significant. This again, supports our assumption that the verdict does not appear to have had a clear causal effect on public attitudes

towards the police.

These sensitivity analyses make us question the clear causal role that the verdict could have had in forming public perceptions of police since the negative mean differences appear to be attributable to a preceding negative time trend. In a similar vein, this affects the robustness of the interaction effects. Irrespective of this, there is only a very limited heterogeneity in the treatment effect. Contrary to our findings in Study 1, a closer inspection of these effects reveals that there is some modest variation according to political orientation but no variation at all according to different ethnic groups.

### 7. Discussion & conclusion

In this paper we set out to investigate two historical data sets from the early 1990s to study opinion-mobilizing effects of the Rodney King Beating (Study 1) and the subsequent acquittal of the involved police officers one year later (Study 2). While the Rodney King incident itself had, to the best of our knowledge, never been studied with the SCSS 1991 data before, the verdict had only been explored with a limited methodological design not specifically accounting for threats to causal inference (Bobo et al., 1994). Regarding the incident, we find robust evidence for a negative causal effect on confidence in the local police that is in line with previous non-quasi-experimental assessments of the event (Lasley, 1994; Rohlich, 1991; Sonenshein, 1994; Weitzer, 2002). This finding adds some validity to the preceding studies' claims, but we believe that the most important implications can be derived from the (non-) heterogeneity of this effect. Although we do not find clear support for our hypotheses H1b and H1c, we still encounter some slight variations that are worth highlighting. For Black and Mexican-American respondents, the negative effect of the incident was somewhat stronger

than for the other included ethnic groups. Adding Mexican-Americans to the “Non-Black” category in Table 2 obscured this variation in the treatment effect in the original regression models. These effects, however, are modest in size and difficult to identify in this particular design due to the limited number of observations.

A more robust null finding is the lack of variation we see among different political orientations. In contrast to contemporary research on the George Floyd incident in 2020 (Reny & Newman, 2021), we find no evidence that partisanship plays any significant role in shaping attitudes towards the police after the Rodney King incident. A final important finding from Study 1 relates to the development of the effect over time. Our findings show that the negative effect took 6 days to become significant which could be attributed to the delayed media response. Unlike today, with social media facilitating almost “instant” dissemination of news (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018), it might have taken respondents more time to effectively become exposed to those events in the early 1990s. An alternative explanation that cannot be completely ruled out is, of course, the limited power for the samples directly after the event.

The second study presented in this paper took a closer look at the question of whether the verdict on the Rodney King Beating did have a negative causal effect on public perceptions of the Los Angeles Police Department. Our results, which are based on more recent advances in causal inference with observational survey data, contradict previous research in important ways. While in contrast to Bobo et al. (1994), we find a negative effect on confidence in the local police after the verdict, a more rigorous assessment of the causal inference assumptions reveals that a simple before/after comparison will lead to biased results. First, the ignorability assumption is violated as the before and after groups vary significantly on important exogenous covariates (i.e., gender and expectation of potential victimization). Secondly and arguably more importantly, there is evidence of a pattern of autocorrelation in the outcome before the event, indicating a potential pre-existing time trend that might have affected public opinion even before the acquittal. Previous research on media coverage before the verdict in 1992 concluded that media outlets tried to ensure a fair trial (Solomon, 2004) by not covering specifics of the questionable police-friendly interpretations of the events by the defense attorneys (Crenshaw & Peller, 1993; Rabinowitz, 2015; Solomon, 2004; Stuart, 2011). However, the mere “revival” of the 1991 events through the news coverage in the days and weeks leading up to the acquittal might have contributed to the deterioration of attitudes towards the LAPD even prior to the verdict on April 28, 1992. Again, this points out the pivotal role that traditional media might have played during this historical event. More contemporary research has found that increased consumption of print media, TV, and radio does not exacerbate the effect of misconduct on trust in police (Nägel & Lutter, 2021). This suggests that traditional media likely plays a lesser role in shaping public opinion today compared to social media (Intravia, Thompson, & Pickett, 2020).

It is important to note that threats to causal inference in Study 2 also apply to our findings regarding H2b and H2c. Still, we want to highlight that while we find no variation in effect among ethnic groups, there is some variation regarding political orientation, whereas moderate respondents showed a steeper decline in confidence than conservatives or liberals. Notwithstanding problems relating to causal inference, these differences are very small in size.

Before we arrive at our conclusion, we underline the limitations of our two studies. There is an enormously productive body of research on the specifics of measuring attitudes towards the police (Jackson et al., 2010, 2011; Jackson & Gau, 2016; Tankebe, 2013; Tankebe, Reisig, & Wang, 2016). The three-level item used here is limited in terms of construct validity. Apart from this limitation, however, our item has the advantage of international comparability (Cao, Lai, & Zhao, 2012) and simple and intuitive comprehensibility (Nägel & Lutter, 2021), which may even be advantageous in the present design. Nevertheless, we do not want to presume to measure a complex construct like police legitimacy, as we are ultimately restricted by the composition of the two data

sets.

Secondly, while Study 1 appears to be robust to our sensitivity analysis, this is less true for Study 2. There are serious violations of both ignorability and excludability. While these limitations bias all inferences drawn from this “natural experiment,” outlining these methodological problems can also be understood as one of our contributions as previous research did not consider the specific threats to causal inference with this dataset (Bobo et al., 1994). Another source for bias is that the effects of the protests in the aftermath of both events, but especially after the verdict, could be responsible for driving opinions. Methodologically, this points to a violation of the excludability assumption since the uprisings could be considered collateral events.

We also want to point out that collecting information on the survey data was unusually difficult. A lot of details concerning the data collection and sampling procedures employed in these two surveys were not available from the Harvard Dataverse. While we were able to gather the most crucial information mainly through other academic papers using the same data, we want to stress the importance of detailed metadata for posterity of data and the quality of historical analyses.

Finally, these two studies represent case studies with limited external validity. Only through continued historical and contemporary research with similar designs can we arrive at a comprehensive understanding of how police actions influence public assessment of this institution.

Taken together, our main contribution to the extant literature is twofold: First, our findings illustrate a limited amount of variation in terms of ethnicity and political orientation in the response to the focal events regarding confidence in the local police. Previous research had already suggested that the disapproval of the incident was almost ubiquitous across demographic characteristics (Lasley, 1994), but these studies were limited by methodological constraints in the study design. This is also true for the modest differences we can observe among African Americans and Mexican-Americans and the other included ethnic groups (Weitzer, 2002). When these findings are compared to contemporary research showing strong ethnic and political heterogeneity in opinion-mobilizing effects after high-profile cases of police misconduct (Nägel & Lutter, 2021; Reny & Newman, 2021), one possible explanation could be attributed to the well-documented increase in affective polarization in the United States (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019; Iyengar, Leikes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019; Mason, 2015). In other words, the almost universal response to the egregious violence committed against Rodney King, as opposed to the heterogeneous negative effects of contemporary cases of police violence might be an indication that the US was less polarized in the early 1990s compared to today. This interpretation is in line with modern political science research on political polarization (Phillips, 2022), and illustrates the importance of studying historic episodes from a contemporary perspective.

As Reny and Newman (2021) note, attitudes towards BLM and the police play a dominant role in contemporary racial politics and represent an integral part of partisan sorting and polarization (Tesler, 2016). It can be argued that the presence of fewer highly organized minority protests such as the BLM movement in the early 1990s serves as an explanation of the lower levels of polarization among racial and political groups at that time compared to today. It is worth noting that a confluence of factors likely contributed to increasing racialization and polarization of US policing, such as the emergence of organized counterprotests to the evolution of BLM like ‘Blue Lives Matter’ and ‘All lives Matter’ (Banks, 2018), the increasing normalization of aggressive police strategies unevenly applied to people of color (Alexander, 2012; Mumolo, 2018), the evolving scholarly attention to the development of punitive crime polices centered on race (Soss & Weaver, 2017; Weaver, 2007), as well as ongoing ‘bad apple’ narratives issued by police departments to justify police wrongdoing and deny institutional racism. Comparisons of incidents today with historical examples should always consider that the political environment of partisanship has changed radically in the past thirty years.

Second, our placebo checks in Study 2 suggest that the verdict itself did not influence public attitudes as much as a pre-existing trend in confidence in the local police, which again could have been triggered by increased media salience prior to the verdict. Alongside the evidence of a delayed public response to the incident itself, this illustrates the significant role traditional media played in disseminating these “vicarious experiences” at the time. Technology and social media have now taken over this role to a large extent and “democratized” the dissemination of news and information (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012; K. Miller, 2016). These findings highlight the close public scrutiny and “new visibility” of police in society today, and the widespread implications police misconduct can have on public trust and legitimacy. Since uncensored hate speech can travel faster through online communities (Álvarez-Benjumea and Winter, 2018) it is likely that conclusions from videos of police misconduct disseminated through social rather than traditional media are drawn more quickly. Due to the increasing political polarization in the US, they might also be based more often on an inadequate amount of objective information typically influenced by one's political perspective.

Relating to the broader literature employing natural experiments with survey data in a criminological/policing context, our findings from Study 1 are in line with a range of other studies in very diverse contexts. Revkin (2022) and Curtice (2021) find that repression decreases attitudes towards police in Iraq and Uganda respectively, while Frye and Borisova (2019) demonstrate that allowing (peaceful) government protests can increase trust in the police in Russia. All these studies suggest that “vicarious (positive and negative) experiences can shape public trust in police” (Nägel & Nivette, 2022b, p. 17). On the other hand, not all high-profile events drive public opinion equally. Hohl, Stanko, and Newburn (2013) (London, England), Nägel and Nivette (2022a) (Stuttgart, Germany), and White et al. (2018) (Baltimore, US) largely report null findings of seemingly comparable major events. Accordingly, it is important to consider case studies from different cultural, political, socio-contextual, and historical perspectives in order to learn when and in how far public perceptions of police are sensitive to high-profile events. On a methodological note, authors should engage closely with the technical UESD literature on exploiting these quasi-experiments (Muñoz et al., 2020; Nägel & Nivette, 2022b). Our results from Study 2 clearly show that naïve before/after comparison can lead to rash findings when causal inference assumptions and their underlying tests, such as pre-existing time trends, are not assessed and addressed appropriately.

From a policy perspective, the most important takeaway from these two interrelated studies emerges when comparing our historical findings to contemporary research. Stark differences in attitudes towards policing between ethnic and political groups are apparently more strongly exacerbated by high-profile events today as compared to the historical episodes presented here. Accordingly, there is a need for policies overcoming these differences. One fruitful recommendation might be increased police diversification regarding gender, race (Ba, Knox, Mummolo, & Rivera, 2021), or even political attitudes to decrease police violence and improve confidence.

Overall, this paper highlights the importance of historical criminology in using the past to explain the present (Lawrence, 2019). The Rodney King incident and the subsequent verdict are part of a long history of discriminatory and racially disparate policing practices in American society (Braga, Brunson, & Drakulich, 2019; Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Owusu-Bempah, 2017). Examining these events sheds light on how the “new visibility” of police misconduct can lead to further distrust and estrangement from legal institutions among ethnic minorities (Bell, 2017).

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2022.101989>.

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