

Exposure to Mass Shootings and Voting Directly on Gun Policy

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Recent scholarship finds that exposure to mass shootings has no effect on Democratic vote shares. This outcome, however, reflects myriad issue concerns, with guns being just one issue typically dwarfed in importance by the attention given in electoral campaigns to jobs and the economy. In short, voting for a Democratic candidate may not be what citizens do when in want of “doing something” following a mass shooting. Our research improves the issue-domain correspondence between treatment and outcome by analyzing voting directly on gun policy. We leverage a mass shooting that occurred in Washington state shortly before residents voted on a ballot measure to regulate firearms. Critically, a previous measure on firearms appeared on the ballot in Washington two years prior, enabling our analysis to control for pretreatment support for gun control. Across various model specifications, we find that proximity to the shooting was associated with increased support for gun control.

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INTRODUCTION

Agrowing vein of research explores the effect of local exposure to mass shootings on electoral behavior (Garcia-Montoya et al. 2022; Hassell et al. 2020; Kantack and Lassi 2023; Marsh 2023; Yousaf 2021). The underlying hypothesis tested in this work is that, by increasing the salience and palpability of gun violence, living near a mass shooting will generate action to reduce the ravages of firearms. Following an extensive and rigorous analysis of the effect of school shootings on county Democratic party vote shares rendering null results, Hassell et al. (2020) state “Our results help to show...that there are not electoral implications for gun violence” (pg. 1383) and that “Simply put, school shootings do not affect elections in the U.S.” (pg. 1382). In the midst of competing studies claiming evidence that mass shootings augment Democratic (Garcia-Montoya et al. 2022) and diminish Republican (Yousaf 2021) vote shares, Hassell and Holbein (2024) reanalyze these data and

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firmly demonstrate that, after accounting for liberal trending in areas experiencing shootings, mass shootings *do not* generate increases in Democratic vote shares. Hassell and Holbein (2024) conclude “mass shootings are of little substantive consequence for election outcomes” (pg. 42). This scholarly exchange leaves us convinced that mass shootings do not affect local Democratic vote shares. This null result, however, *does not* necessarily mean that mass shootings do not influence voting behavior.

In this letter, we enter this scholarly exchange by offering a simple critique: these past works search for an effect of mass shootings on a behavior that we view as having a tenuous connection to the issue domain of the treatment (gun violence and firearms regulation), rendering it unlikely to be how citizens channel their desire to “do something” about gun violence. Assuming mass shootings generate the desire among citizens to engage with the political process in pursuit of heightened restrictions on firearms, which is not an unfounded assumption (Goss and Lacombe 2023; Reny et al. 2023; Sato and Haselswerdt 2022), it is doubtful that this desire would be funneled toward turning out to vote for a Democratic candidate. While the Democratic and Republican party take distinct positions on gun policy (Fleming et al. 2018), their platforms vary on a host of issues (Coffey 2011) and their candidates for elective offices take up positions on half a dozen or more issues in any given race (Sides 2007). Americans’ choice between the two parties is driven by myriad factors, including group identity, perceived candidate traits, and preferences over a range of issues (Aldrich et al. 2023; Lewis-Beck et al. 2009). As the product of an array of factors, Democratic vote share is arguably a weak proxy for voter demand for heightened gun control.

Situating Democratic vote share as an indicator of voter support for gun control should require some demonstration that voters use candidates’ positions on guns to decide their vote. In reviewing available survey data on the matter, one thing is strikingly clear: voters largely *do not* use guns in deciding their vote. Table 1 presents findings from national and statewide polls asking respondents to report the most important issue to them in deciding who to vote for in federal and state elections. Americans rarely report using guns as the focal issue in deciding their vote; instead, and unsurprisingly, they rely most strongly on issues that are typically the centerpiece of electoral campaigns: jobs, the economy, taxes, and healthcare. One may be tempted to interpret the lack of decision-making priority given to guns by voters as further evidence that “there are not electoral implications for gun violence”

TABLE 1. Most Important Issue in Deciding Vote in Federal and State Elections

<u>Federal Elections</u>	
Your vote for Congress in 2014 Midterm Election? [National]	
- Guns control / rights	2%
- Vote for preferred Party / Get rid of out-Party	27%
- Candidate's Platform	18%
- Economy and Jobs	17%
Your vote for Congress in 2018 Midterm Election? [National]	
- Guns	5%
- Economy and jobs	20%
- Healthcare	17%
- Immigration	17%
Your vote for Senate in 2018 Midterm Election? [NV / FL]	
- Gun policy	8 / 14%
- The economy	23 / 23%
- Healthcare	28 / 26%
- Immigration	23 / 15%
Your vote for Congress / Senate in 2022 Midterm Election? [National / GA]	
- Gun policy	7 / 8%
- Abortion	15 / 17%
- The economy and inflation	51 / 48%
- Voting rights and election integrity	9 / 12%
Your vote for President in 2024? [National / NH]	
- Gun violence / control	4 / 3%
- The economy	33 / 17%
- Preserving / future of American democracy	26 / 30%
- Immigration	8 / 24%
<u>State Elections</u>	
Your vote for Governor in 2013? [NJ]	
- Gun issues	3%
- Economy and Jobs	39%
- Taxes	43%
- Education and Healthcare	29%
Your vote for Governor in 2018? [NV / FL]	
- Gun control	9 / 7%
- The economy	20 / 22%
- Education and Healthcare	45 / 39%
- Taxes	8 / 12%
Your vote for Governor in 2022? [PA / OH]	
- Gun control	16 / 9%
- The economy	26 / 38%
- Abortion	10 / 12%
- Education and Healthcare	10 / 16%
Note: See SI-A for information about surveys and samples. Brackets indicate national or state sample	

(Hassell et al 2020, 1383); however, other survey data strongly militate against this interpretation. Table 2 demonstrates that most Americans view gun violence as a problem and believe it important to prevent mass shootings. Moreover, large shares of Americans are concerned about being a victim of a mass shooting or having one occur in their community. Importantly, Americans believe mass shootings occur because of access to firearms and that stricter gun laws would reduce their occurrence. Critically, the final rows in Table 2 reveal that Americans view Congress as failing to do enough to prevent mass shootings and are skeptical about the federal government taking future action to redress gun violence.

TABLE 2. Survey Findings about Gun Violence and Mass Shootings

How much of a problem is gun violence in the country today? - October 2016 - September 2018	“Very big” + “Moderately big” = 81% 75%
Personally worry about being victim of mass shooting?	“Yes” = 46%
How worried that a mass shooting happens in your community?	“Great deal” + “Somewhat” = 61%
How concerned about mass shooting at your child’s school?	“Very” + “Somewhat” = 57%
How important to you is preventing mass shootings? -July 2022 -August 2023	“Extremely” + “Very” = 86% 85%
Why do mass shootings happen more in U.S. than other countries? [open ended] -Lack of gun laws / access to guns / assault weapons -Mental health issues / lack of treatment -Broad cultural problems	41% 15% 4%
If it were harder to legally obtain guns, would there be fewer mass shootings?	“Many” + “Somewhat” fewer = 58%
Congress is not doing enough to prevent mass shootings -February 2018 -April 2018	“Strongly” + “Somewhat” agree = 76% 70%
Do you expect lawmakers in D.C. to take action on reducing gun violence in next year?	“No” = 68%
Note: See SI-A for information about surveys and samples.	

In sum, voters do not use guns in deciding their vote over candidates in major elections. The conclusion by Hassell et al. (2020) that mass shootings “do not place electoral pressure on elected officials” (pg. 1382) seems correct; however, this does not mean that voters will not use the ballot to influence policy in the wake of a mass shooting. Quite the contrary, research on direct democracy has long upheld that the initiative process serves as an alternative outlet for voters when competition between parties and candidates, and politician-centered policy-making, has failed to redress a societal problem (Matusaka 2005). Table 2 suggest precisely these conditions: Americans want to address gun violence but do not see action by elected officials as the remedy. Firearms have appeared on the ballot roughly 36 times across 26 states, giving residents the opportunity to vote *directly* on gun policy. Analyzing ballot measures on firearms may mitigate the aforementioned limitations with using Democratic vote shares because it increases the issue-domain correspondence between the treatment (gun violence) and outcome (vote choice on gun laws) and promises policy enactment in the event

of passage—thus alleviating voters’ despondency about addressing gun violence through action by elected officials.

The literature on “focusing events” (Birkland 1997), which provides a theoretical framework used by scholars exploring the political effects of mass shootings, contends that sudden, unexpected, and visible events causing harm can push event-relevant issues to the top of the political agenda and generate demand for change to policies related to the event. Implied within this framework is an issue-domain correspondence between the treatment event and the outcomes under study. In other words, scholars seeking to test whether an event focused political attention and action should set their sights on an outcome related to the treatment event. Examples of research possessing such correspondence include: the effect of an oil spill on attitudes toward oil drilling (Bishop 2014), the effect of wildfires on voting on climate-related ballot measures (Hazlett and Mildenerger 2020), or the effect of police killings on voting on criminal justice reform ballot measures (Ang and Tebes 2021). The research question we pose: does exposure to a mass shooting increase voter support for an initiative to restrict access to firearms? The focus on Democratic vote shares in prior work leaves us without an answer to this question, and thus, in want of an empirical test.

BALLOT INITIATIVE 1491 IN WASHINGTON STATE

Washington (WA) state offers an unrivaled opportunity for an empirical test. On September 23, 2016, a 20 year old male armed with a semi-automatic rifle entered the Cascade Mall in Burlington, WA, and opened fire on shoppers and mall employees, killing five people. Less than 7 weeks later, on November 8, 2016, voters in the state cast a vote on Initiative 1491 (I-1491), a law authorizing courts to issue extreme risk protection orders to remove an individual’s access to firearms—otherwise known as a “red flag law.” This initiative passed with roughly 69.4% of the vote. The Cascade Mall shooting and I-1491 possess several features rendering it a strong test case on theoretical and methodological grounds.

First, given suggestive evidence that the effect of mass shootings on electoral behavior dissipate with time (Kantack and Lassi 2023; Marsh 2023), the closeness in time between the Cascade Mall shooting and vote on I-1491 renders it a “most likely” case (Gerring and Cojocararu 2016) for observing

an effect. Second, the initiative was certified for the ballot before the shooting occurred¹, removing concerns surrounding the shooting influencing the data generating process (e.g., mobilization around the initiative and the success of the petition drive) and the presence of an outcome to observe. Third, a previous gun control measure appeared on the ballot (and passed) in WA state in the 2014 General Election—Initiative 594 (I-594), which proposed universal background checks for gun purchases. I-594 offers a measure of revealed preferences on gun control that is pretreatment and close in time to I-1491 in 2016. Finally, the votes on these ballot measures took place during an era when fine-grained (i.e., precinct-level) state-wide election results data has been regularly gathered and made publicly available. Aside from WA, we were unable to identify any other state where (1) a vote on a firearms measure occurred soon after a mass shooting, (2) the measure was approved for the ballot before the shooting, (3) a pre-shooting vote on a firearms measure occurred close in time to the post-shooting vote on firearms, and (4) precinct-level election results data were collected and available. Supporting Information section B (SI-B) lists other state ballot measures on firearms and documents the grounds for their ineligibility as usable or equivalent test cases. A second public mass shooting occurred in Mukilteo, WA on July 30, 2016 and we replicate our findings with this second event (SI-C).

DATA AND METHODS

We retrieved state-wide precinct-level election results for all federal general elections between 2010 and 2016 from the WA Secretary of State's Office². Precinct is the smallest level of geographic aggregation available for observing vote choice and the administrative data we retrieved includes reported results for $N = 7,070$ election precincts in 2016. The dependent variable in our analysis is the %*Yes* of the votes cast on I-1491 in each precinct.

Our use of precinct enables a more spatially granular and precise analysis with respect to measuring the proximity or “exposure” of sets of voters to the treatment than achieved in prior research using county-level election results data (Garcia-Montoya et al. 2022; Hassell and Holbein 2024; Yousaf 2021). Counties can be relatively large and heterogeneous geographic units and prior work using county-level

¹Certified on July 27, 2016 (see Ballotpedia.com)

²<https://www.sos.wa.gov/>

data have to define an entire county as treated with a mass shooting despite the possibility that shootings may differentially affect county residents depending on their proximity to the location of the shooting. Research exploring the effect of exposure to various types of location-based treatments (e.g., demolished public housing, police killings, wildfires) demonstrates that treatment effects can dissipate within a few miles distance from treatment sites (Ang and Tebes 2021; Hazlett and Mildenerger 2020; Enos 2016). Using precincts enables us to study smaller and more homogeneous sets of voters and to evaluate changes in support for I-1491 on a more granular scale of distance from the shooting under investigation. To ensure that low-population precincts do not bias estimates, we weigh precincts based on population.³

To capture exposure to the Cascade Mall shooting, we measured the distance of the centroid of each precinct to the location of the Cascade Mall. To ensure our findings are not sensitive to different distance cutoffs, we constructed three alternative dichotomous variables that define a precinct as “treated” if its centroid is 5 ($n=53$), 10 ($n=82$), or 15 ($n=122$) miles or less from the Cascade Mall. In our primary analysis, we use regression models to estimate the relationship of proximity to the mall shooting on precinct %Yes on I-1491. We use three separate models to estimate the coefficient for each of the three dichotomous distance-from-shooting variables. We also present results using dichotomous variables measuring mutually exclusive 5-mile intervals of distance from the Cascade Mall in a single model to illustrate distance-decay effects.

Our models control for an exhaustive set of precinct-level covariates. First and foremost, we use %Yes on I-594 in the 2014 General Election to capture precinct voters’ pretreatment revealed preferences on gun control, which itself explains 85.5% of the variance in the I-1491 vote. In addition, we control for support for Obama in 2012, a proxy for firearm prevalence,⁴ median income, college education, home ownership, gender and racial composition, age of residents, and population density.⁵

³Our findings hold when population weights are not included (SI-D).

⁴We use the number of licensed firearm dealerships as of September 2014 in the overlapping zip codes based on data from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

⁵These data are pretreatment and from the 2010 census and 2010-2014 ACS. We use block level data for variables available in the census and block group level data with aerial interpolation (using the ‘areal’ R package) to estimate precinct-level demographic variables

Critically, given that mass shootings tend to occur in areas trending liberal (Hassell and Holbein 2024), we control for precinct-level partisan trends using the change in Democratic presidential vote share between 2012 and 2016.⁶ This modeling approach is exceptionally rigorous—the estimated coefficients for our distance-from-shooting variables are net of precinct voters’ standing preferences on gun control, the prevalence of firearms, an exhaustive set of demographic factors, prior partisan preferences, and trends in partisan preferences.

To complement our primary analysis, we use three alternative analytic strategies and model specifications to explore the relationship between precinct proximity to the Cascade Mall shooting and support for I-1491. First, we use gradient-boosted propensity score matching to match precincts to their “nearest neighbor” using the ‘twang’ R package (Ridgeway et al. 2022). Second, to account for the possibility that our results are driven by proximity to a mall versus a mass shooting, we perform an analysis where we subset the data to only precincts within 5, 10, or 15 miles from malls in Washington state and compare “treated” precincts near the Cascade Mall only to precincts near other shopping malls. This helps us to rule out the possibility that our primary findings are due to the characteristics of voters living near malls. Third, we estimate the difference in support for gun control between those close to and further away from the Cascade Mall prior to the shooting (based on I-594 in 2014), the difference in support for I-1491 following the shooting, and the difference between these differences. We estimate a two-stage difference-in-differences (DiD) to illustrate the robustness of findings to different estimation strategies and not to support causal claims⁷.

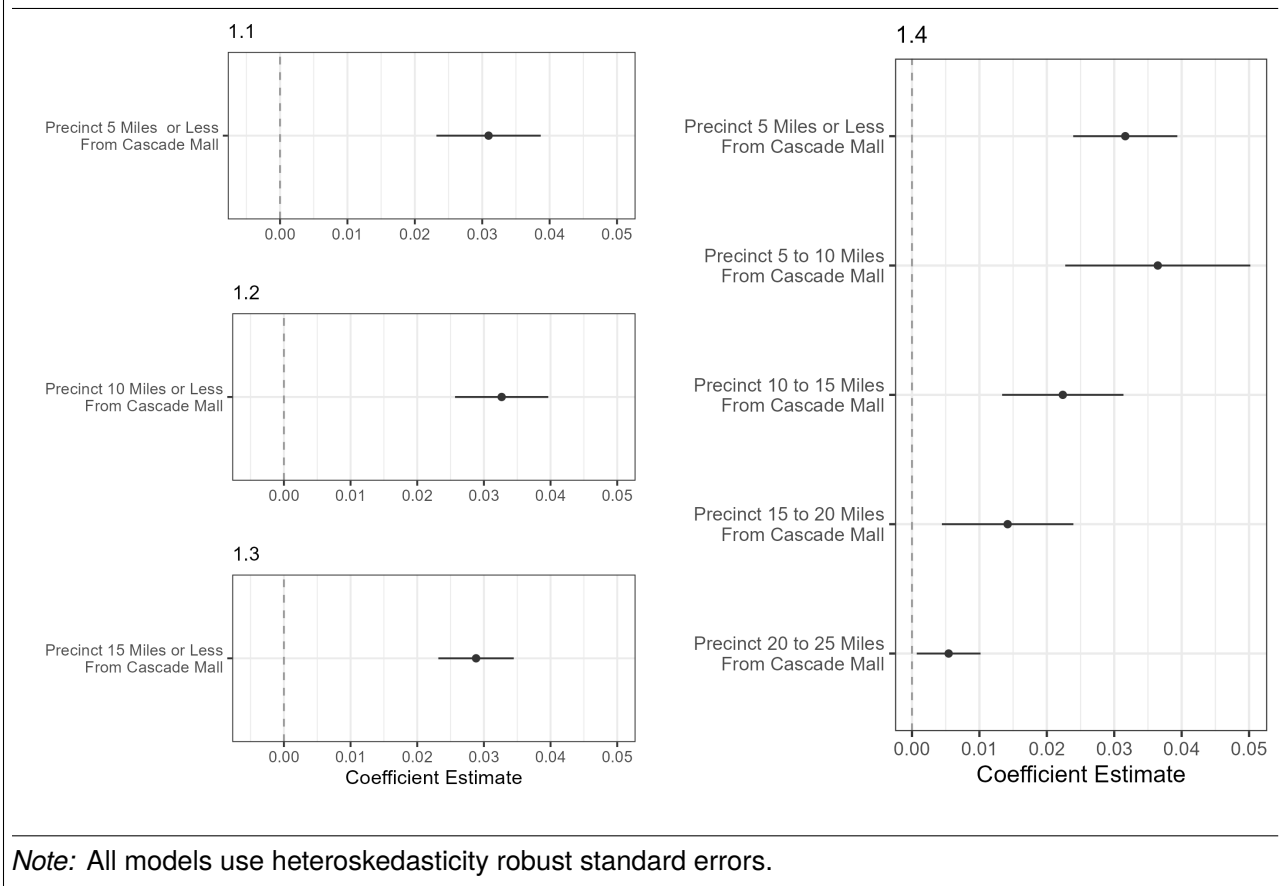
⁶Results are robust when using change in Democratic Senatorial vote share between 2010 and 2016 instead (SI-E). Moreover, covariate balance tests (SI-F) reveal that precincts within 5, 10, and 15 miles of the Cascade Mall shooting were *less* supportive of I-594 in 2014, *less* supportive of Obama in 2012, and trending *less* Democratic between 2012 to 2016. These voting patterns *decrease* the likelihood that support for gun control in 2016 would increase in precincts near the Cascade Mall shooting due to the trends uncovered by Hassell and Holbein (2024).
⁷The absence of gun control measures prior to 2014 prevents assessment of parallel trends and the 2014 and 2016 firearms measures in WA are distinct enough to merit caution in situating them as indicators of the same latent preference.

FINDINGS

Figure 1 plots the effect of proximity to the Cascade Mall shooting on support for I-1491 for the three models analyzing the different distance-from-shooting measures (left-side graphs) and the 5-mile intervals (right-side graph).⁸ The findings strongly suggest that the Cascade Mall shooting increased proximal voters' support for gun control, that the results are not sensitive to minor differences in distance cutoffs, and that those living closer to the shooting were most affected. Figure 1.1 shows that support for I-1491 was 3.1 percentage points higher in precincts within 5-miles of the shooting compared to those more than 5 miles away. Figures 1.2 and 1.3 indicate that support for I-1491 was 3.3 and 2.9 percentage points higher in precincts within 10 and 15 miles of the shooting, respectively, compared to precincts further away. All three distance-from-shooting measures are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$ and the R^2 is just over .93 in these models. Figure 1.4 provides an illustration of distance-decay effects, with the estimated coefficients for each successive 5-mile distance-from-shooting indicator variable steadily attenuating toward zero. According to this model, support for I-1491 was 3.2 percentage points higher in precincts within 5 miles of the shooting compared to precincts more than 25 miles away. On the other hand, support for I-1491 was only 1.4 percentage points higher in precincts 15 to 20 miles away and 0.5 percentage points higher in precincts 20 to 25 miles away compared to precincts more than 25 miles away.

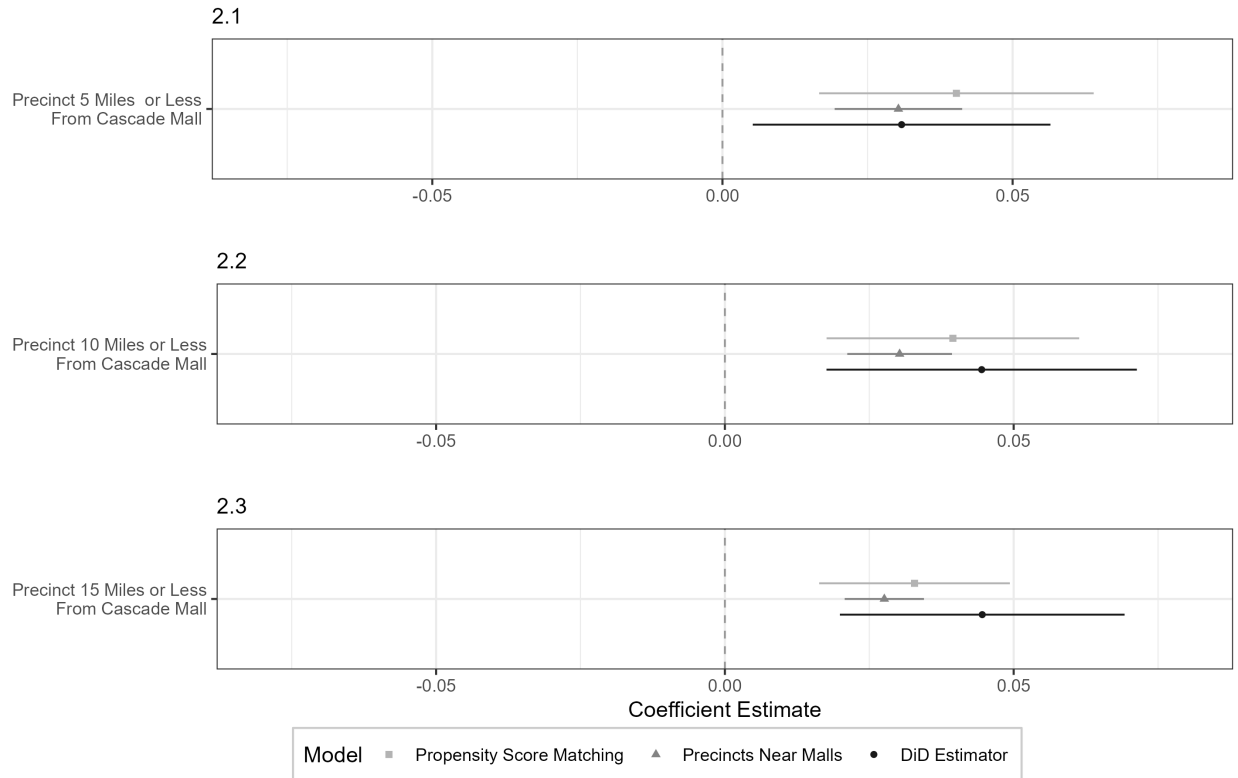
Figure 2 plots estimates for the 5, 10, and 15 mile distance-from-shooting measures using alternative analytical strategies and model specifications, revealing that the findings reported in Figure 1 are robust. Propensity score matching (i.e., comparing precincts near the Cascade Mall to only the most similar precincts based on observed covariates) suggests that support for I-1491 was 4 percentage points higher in precincts within 5 or 10-miles of the shooting and 3.2 percentage points higher in precincts within 15 miles of the shooting compared to politically and demographically similar precincts further away, again showing that proximity is associated with elevated support for I-1491. Next, we compare support for I-1491 among precincts near the Cascade Mall shooting only to other precincts equally close to malls (e.g., precincts 5-miles or less from the Cascade Mall shooting are only compared to precincts 5-miles or less from another mall in WA). Our findings do not appear to be driven simply by proximity

⁸Full model results are available in SI-G.

FIGURE 1. Proximity to the Cascade Mall Shooting and Support for I-1491

to a mall: across all three models, support for I-1491 was about 3 percentage points higher in precincts near the Cascade Mall shooting compared to precincts close to other malls. Finally, we turn to the DiD estimates. The models suggest that support for gun control at the ballot increased between 2014 and 2016 by 3.4 percentage points more among voters 5-miles or less from the shooting compared to those further away ($p < 0.01$), and by about 4.5 percentage points more among voters 10 or 15-miles or less from the shooting ($p < 0.001$).

The SI offers additional robustness tests that reinforce and complement the findings in Figures 1 and 2. First, our results hold when using a continuous measure of proximity to the shooting (SI-H). Second, we demonstrate that our results hold when estimating simple models controlling only for pretreatment support for gun control (SI-I). Third, the results from a sensitivity analysis (Cinelli and Hazlett 2020) suggest our findings in Figure 1 are insulated from omitted variable bias (SI-J). We find that an omitted variable would have to possess over $2\times$ ($3\times$) the strength of association of %Yes on I-594 to %Yes on I-1491 to reduce the positive and significant estimate for our 5-mile (10-mile) distance-from-shooting

FIGURE 2. Robustness Tests Using Alternative Modeling Specifications

Note: All models use heteroskedasticity robust standard errors.

variable to zero. It is theoretically difficult to identify an omitted variable that would explain precinct support for gun control in 2016 over two-to-three times better than precinct support for gun control in 2014. Fourth, we demonstrate that, while associated with support for I-1491, proximity to the Cascade Mall shooting is not consistently associated with increased support for liberal positions on non-gun related ballot initiatives such as minimum wages, carbon taxes, tough-on-crime policies, and electric vehicle subsidies (SI-K). Fifth, while associated with heightened support for I-1491, proximity to the shooting is not associated with support for Clinton in 2016 (SI-L)—highlighting the need for further caution about using Democratic vote share to measure support for gun control. Finally, we fail to observe significant heterogeneity in the estimated relationship of proximity to the mall shooting on I-1491 support by prior precinct partisan or gun control preferences (SI-M).

CONCLUSION

The availability of over-time county-level election results data and their amenability to use with a difference-in-differences model likely account for use of Democratic vote share as the outcome analyzed in recent studies of the political effects of mass shootings. Pragmatic concerns like data availability and compatibility with preferred methods, while important, can lead practitioners to overlook important theoretical or issue-domain mismatches between a treatment under study and the chosen outcome. Past research credibly demonstrates little-to-no effect of mass shootings on Democratic vote shares. The goal of this letter is to demonstrate the *possibility* of effects for mass shootings when analyzing *voting directly on guns* and, to a lesser extent, using precinct-level data enabling greater granularity and precision in measuring treatment exposure. The findings in this letter warrant replication and future research—especially in regions of the nation with different political cultures than the Pacific Northwest. We replicate our findings with the Cascade Mall shooting using the 2016 Mukilteo shooting (SI-C); however, both shootings occurred in western WA, begging the question about whether our findings would materialize in more conservative areas of Eastern WA or in different regions of the nation. While further replication of our findings is limited by the unavailability of comparable test cases (SI-B), additional cases may become available as firearms measures continue to appear on state ballots and mass shootings, unfortunately, seem to be an unrelenting tragedy of American society.

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