

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Police reform from the top down: Experimental evidence on police executive support for civilian oversight

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Abstract

The accountability of police to the public is imperative for a functioning democracy. The opinions of police executives—pivotal actors for implementing oversight policies—are an understudied, critical component of successful reform efforts. We use a pre-registered survey experiment administered to all U.S. municipal police chiefs and county sheriffs to assess whether police executives' attitudes towards civilian oversight are responsive to 1) state-level public opinion (drawing on an original $n = 16,840$ survey) and 2) prior adoption of civilian review boards in large agencies. Results from over 1,300 police executives reveal that law enforcement leaders are responsive to elite peer adoption but much less to public opinion, despite overwhelming public support. Compared to appointed municipal police chiefs, elected sheriffs are less likely to support any civilian oversight. Our findings hold implications for reformers: we find that existing civilian oversight regimes are largely popular, and that it is possible to move police executive opinion towards support for civilian oversight.

There is a legitimacy crisis in law enforcement today, resulting partly from highly-publicized use of force incidents and arguably inadequate institutional responses to them (McLean & Nix, 2021). In response, attention has turned to identifying reforms and oversight institutions that might shed light on and ultimately ameliorate these issues. Civilian review boards (CRBs) have been highlighted as a promising strategy to improve the responsiveness of law enforcement agencies to public oversight and input.

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While the effectiveness of CRBs is an open empirical question, there are *a priori* reasons to think that local oversight regimes are net improvements over the complicated federalist structure that currently (and largely ineffectively) monitors most local police. CRBs function as institutions that are arguably closer to these street-level bureaucrats than any others. They are presumably knowledgeable about the communities in which police operate and the idiosyncrasies of their local environment.

Yet, despite the ostensible benefits and frequent public calls for the establishment of CRBs, uptake in law enforcement has been slow and scattered (Fairley, 2020; Finn, 2001; Walker & Bumphus, 1992). Among approximately 18,000 policing agencies in the United States, there are currently fewer than 200 with active CRBs (Vitoroulis et al., 2021), heavily concentrated amongst the largest metropolitan police agencies (Fairley, 2020).

Further, while various actors—unions, municipal and state government leaders—may influence reform efforts, this paper argues that police executives play a critical role in determining whether a CRB will be established or discouraged in a given community: their decisions set the priorities, culture, and behavior of their agency and the employees within (Ingram et al., 2022; Mourtgos et al., 2024). Indeed, 20th-century police reforms have been most successful when spearheaded by cohorts of police executives rather than by Progressive-era reformers (Uchida, 2020). Baseline preferences amongst police executives, who are largely skeptical of civilian oversight, thus present significant obstacles to CRB adoption. However, these barriers may not be insurmountable and overcoming them may be necessary.

This paper implements the largest experiment to date of policing executives—police chiefs and sheriffs, collectively serving more than 44 million Americans—to understand what, if anything, can induce these pivotal actors to support democratic oversight regimes. We specifically focus on CRBs, an established oversight mechanism that allows civilians to investigate, and in some cases impose discipline upon, officers and agencies. Reformers have argued that CRBs are necessary to promote fair and transparent investigations, ensure accessible complaint processes, improve public trust and perceptions of procedural justice, and ultimately deter police misconduct through public accountability (De Angelis et al., 2016; Ferdik et al., 2013; Worden et al., 2018).

Our pre-registered experiment uses two realistic sources of information that police executives might use to form opinions on CRBs. In one arm, we provide respondents with state-level public opinion estimates of support for civilian oversight (from an original $n = 16,840$ survey commissioned for this purpose); in the other, we inform respondents that major city police agencies have in fact already established CRBs. We find that police executives' opinions are movable on the topic of civilian oversight. While the public opinion treatment does little to move respondents' support, information about major city agency adoption of CRBs as an oversight mechanism has a significant impact on police executives' opinions.

We also find two important sources of heterogeneity. First, sheriffs are the least responsive to all treatments, especially public opinion information. Second, agencies with currently functioning CRBs report an increased willingness to expand the scope of their CRB's oversight powers. These experimental findings thus suggest potential avenues for citizens, reformers, and scholars interested in studying and strengthening the democratic accountability of police. Finally, a key contribution of this paper is we devote attention to the significantly under-studied concept of policy learning in the context of policing, as well as to the role of police executives in this process.

INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND OF POLICE OVERSIGHT

As public officials, police executives—whether elected directly or appointed by an elected politician—bear the responsibility of integrating public input and needs into their decision-making processes (Maguire, 2003). This principal-agent dynamic mirrors other bureaucratic governance structures but poses distinct challenges in policing. For instance, the perception that police are exempt from

oversight may erode public trust, leading to the legitimization of undemocratic and even violent alternatives (Davis et al., 2018; Foa & Mounk, 2016).

However, police executives serve as agents to a variety of other principals as well, including local government officials such as mayors and city managers, unions, and professional organizations. The criminology literature understands this problem as one in which police executives act as “intermediaries” (Maguire, 2003) between their agency and a variety of actors, serving a set of “sovereigns” (Matusiak, 2016) who may each maintain distinct policy agendas. When police executives make determinations about reform, they are thus responsible for weighing considerations such as pressures from political elites, policy advocates, peers, and the public (Matusiak et al., 2017); evidence of policy effectiveness (Telep & Winegar, 2016); bargaining with police unions (Rad et al., 2023); and technical feasibility and financial constraints (Kingdon & Thurber, 1984). This produces a complex institutional environment in which police executives make decisions and determine policy, one that is understudied despite the applicability of conventional theories that can regard police as government actors (Soss & Weaver, 2017).

Critically, despite nearly 30 years of scholarly complaints that “Not much is known about police chiefs” (Hunt & Magenau, 1993, p. 3),¹ research on policing executives continues to lag far behind research on line officers and supervisors (Matusiak, 2016). That is, while scholars have produced evidence that police executives’ policy beliefs are shaped by their political ideology and social attitudes (Farris & Holman, 2015, 2017) and also generally shift in response to changes in the institutional environment (Matusiak et al., 2017), little is known about how police executives learn from or are accountable to different principals and institutional arrangements. Exploring police executives’ responsiveness to these competing influences (Bennett & Howlett, 1992; Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996) is necessary for understanding police accountability and how policy learning, transfer, and diffusion of policy innovations, such as those surrounding CRBs or other oversight mechanisms, occur in the context of policing.

Civilian oversight of policing

In line with core principles of democratic policing, such as accountability and transparency (Bonner, 2020; Hope, 2021), one commonly proposed reform is the creation of CRBs to enhance civilian oversight of law enforcement activities (Ali & Nicholson-Crotty, 2021; De Angelis et al., 2016; Fairley, 2020; Prenzler & Ronken, 2001). CRBs are “based on the premise that although the public has relinquished to the police the authority to enforce the law, the public retains the right to control the police bureaucracy externally, if the need arises” (Terrill, 1988, p. 199). A central motivation for the adoption of CRBs is a concern that police-led investigations into misconduct complaints are neither fair nor effective, whether in fact or in the eye of the public (Savage, 2013). In contrast, the dominant view within law enforcement is that police-led investigations are sufficient.

The composition and powers of CRBs are highly varied. Yet the traditional, and notably limited, powers exercised by CRBs (Ali & Pirog, 2019), include activities such as reviewing external complaints, recommending discipline for offending officers, and advising the chief or sheriff on policy matters. Still another under-theorized role of the CRB is that of raising alarms, specifically to bring state and federal attention to the locality (Ali, 2023). That is, the fractured, federalist nature of U.S. policing means that its 18,000 agencies operate through a dispensation of state power; police misconduct may thus remain relatively unknown outside a locality for years or decades before effective external oversight can be instilled (Winston & BondGraham, 2023).

While knowledge on the efficacy of civilian oversight is limited, recent research has begun to unpack the dynamics of police transparency and accountability, particularly in the context of citizen oversight and the release of body-worn camera (BWC) evidence. For instance, Ali and Pirog (2019) highlighted

¹ Bittner (1990) famously claimed police were the “best known and least understood” (p. 285) of governmental institutions, and this remains even more true for those at the elite levels of the institution.

the significance of social accountability mechanisms, including civilian oversight, in prompting institutional change within police departments. Their research underscores the importance of these boards in fostering a culture of accountability and responsiveness to public concerns, indicating a direct link between the presence of oversight mechanisms and improvements in police performance and subsequently public trust.

Yet an open question is why policing institutions and leaders vary in their acquiescence to public demands, even when public opinion is strongly on the side of adopting more transparency and accountability mechanisms. Ali (2023) identified factors that might influence the adoption of citizen oversight mechanisms. The study argued that the decision to implement such reforms is not merely a rational calculation of benefits versus costs, but is also deeply influenced by the cultural and institutional environment within which police executives operate. This perspective helps to explain the variability in the adoption (and effectiveness) of CRBs across different jurisdictions.

The strategic behavior of police executives in relation to transparency initiatives, such as the release of BWC footage, is also critically examined by Bromberg and Charbonneau (2021). They argued that police chiefs are more inclined to release BWC evidence to the public in environments where there is already significant public support for policing institutions. This finding thus suggests that the decision-making process around adoption of transparency measures is highly contingent on the perceived level of public backing, highlighting the nuanced relationship between police agencies and the communities they serve.

Finally, Ali and Nicholson-Crotty (2021) critically explored the accountability–performance nexus, presenting evidence that the implementation of broadly powered citizen oversight is associated with enhanced police performance, as evidenced by lower violent crime rates. Their study provides empirical support for the argument that effective oversight mechanisms, by holding police accountable, can lead to significant improvements in policing outcomes and strengthen the social contract between law enforcement and the public.

Responsiveness to the public

Decades of research indicate that the attitudes and behaviors of elites in the criminal justice system generally are responsive to public opinion, and that public opinion is a determinant of key outcomes such as the incarceration rate, sentencing in criminal trials, capital punishment, and expenditures (Enns, 2014; Pickett, 2019). For example, research has linked changes in elected judges' behavior to public views as retention elections draw closer (Aspin & Hall, 1993), and shown that judges and prosecutors are sensitive to public preferences when making decisions in death penalty cases (Baumgartner et al., 2008; Canes-Wrone et al., 2014). Thus, there are both theoretical and normative reasons to expect police executives, especially those who are elected, to make decisions or develop policy preferences in line with public opinion. We therefore hypothesize that:

Public Influence Hypothesis: When exposed to information on public support for CRBs, law enforcement leaders will be more supportive of CRBs.

Still further factors might affect the role and salience of public opinion for police chiefs and sheriffs (Tregle et al., 2022), for example, the nature of their selection (appointed or elected), their partisanship, or agency size (Farris & Holman, 2017; Thompson, 2020). We therefore examine how these characteristics impact responsiveness.

Elite peer influence

Even when public opinion matters, we do not know how it might be weighed in comparison to other sources of influence for police executives. One such key influence is peer influence, namely socially

oriented policy learning that occurs through participation in professional networks and epistemic communities, known to function as a powerful conduit for policy learning generally (Rose, 1991; Shjarback, 2022). Indeed, diffusion of practices through networks is well-documented in policing, as evidenced by the spread of crime mapping techniques (Chamard, 2003), professional accreditation (Doerner & Doerner, 2009), and the use of body-worn cameras (Nix et al., 2020; Young & Ready, 2015).

Yet while peer influence is known to have a significant effect on line officers (Ouellet et al., 2022; Quispe-Torreblanca & Stewart, 2019), less is known about how (or whether) that influence operates at the executive level.² Relatedly, police executives typically belong to strong and active professional organizations including the Major Cities Chiefs Association (MCCA), which collects and distributes information for police executives, such as how many of the largest policing agencies have adopted specific policies (Stephens et al., 2018). Thus, attitudes toward CRBs may be shaped as police executives in these networks learn from early adopters or imitate police agencies in larger cities, mechanisms known to matter for government entities such as transportation and health care agencies (Shipan & Volden, 2014). This leads to our second hypothesis:

Elite Diffusion Hypothesis: When exposed to information indicating that CRBs have diffused in elite peer institutions, police executives will be more supportive of CRBs.

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

To examine the impact of these potential public and peer influences on police executive preferences for CRBs, we conducted a pre-registered experiment embedded in a survey distributed to 13,287 U.S. police chiefs and sheriffs via email between February 1 and March 7, 2022.³ A total of 1,331 individuals completed the survey (a 9.98% response rate), and respondents are representative of the broader population of chiefs and sheriffs in the United States, and are also representative of chiefs and sheriffs who did not take our survey (Appendix Tables A3 and A2).⁴

To preview the experimental design⁵ that we describe in more detail below, we provided respondents with current evidence regarding either state-level public attitudes or peer adoption of CRBs in major policing agencies. To provide state-level public opinion data, we partnered with a national polling firm to survey 16,840 individuals about their support for CRBs both with and without independent disciplinary power, an essential distinction in the scope of CRB powers (De Angelis et al., 2016; Prenzler & Ronken, 2001). To provide data on peer adoption, we drew on information curated by the MCCA. We then measured impacts on general feelings toward CRBs, willingness to adopt CRBs, and preferences regarding appropriate powers for CRBs. We also explore whether support for CRBs is conditioned on other factors such as police executive position (chief versus sheriff), prior implementation and experience with a CRB, and partisanship. Through comparison to a control group, experimentally providing respondents with accurate and up-to-date public and peer information allows us to investigate how police chiefs and sheriffs engage in policy learning regarding the critical question of civilian oversight.

² We emphasize that our design examines how police executives learn from major city police agencies. Thus, for the average policing agency represented in our sample, relatively small in size, this would constitute a form of policy learning where one learns from *elite* peers rather than comparable peer agencies.

³ The survey was fielded using Qualtrics for approximately 5 weeks, with three reminder emails sent after the original recruitment email.

⁴ All appendices are available at the end of this article as it appears in JPAM online. Go to the publisher's website and use the search engine to locate the article at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

⁵ Additional details about our sample, treatments, outcomes, national polling on CRBs, and analysis strategy are provided in the appendix. Details about each pre-registered hypothesis are also included in the appendix.

Sample and representativeness

Our sampling frame was drawn from a database containing the individual contact details of law enforcement leaders in the U.S. across all levels of government. We created a subset of that larger dataset to include only municipal police chiefs and sheriffs with agencies larger than one officer and with a listed email address. In total, 1,331 individuals out of 13,287 completed the survey (9.98% response rate). The appendix includes additional information on power (Appendix Section A.1.4), as well as ethical considerations (Appendix Section A.1.5), for our study that was approved by multiple Institutional Review Boards.⁶

While police agencies take on many varied forms, they are led by a fairly homogeneous group. Among the surveyed sample, the average police executive is a White, male chief with 30 years of total law enforcement experience and has held his current position for just over 7 years. This average respondent is likely to have at least a bachelor's (33%) or master's degree (30%) and oversees an agency with fewer than 25 sworn officers (56%). As the sample was randomly assigned to different treatment conditions, we report balance across the treatment groups for key covariates of interest in Table 1.⁷ Balance across position (i.e., chief or sheriff) is provided in Appendix Table A5. Descriptive statistics for the sample are reported in Appendix Table A1, where we also further discuss the sample's representativeness.

In Table 2, we report descriptive statistics for our sample and compare it to other nationally representative data, such as that from the Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS) survey (Hyland & Davis, 2019), and the Police Executive Research Council (PERF, 2022). In addition, we provide sample information for other recent survey research on the police executive population (Matusiak et al., 2017; Nix, 2015; Seo et al., 2021). We also include a working paper (Ba et al., 2022) that examines the demographics of approximately 220,000 police officers from the 100 largest U.S. agencies. While the latter study does not directly look at police executives, it is helpful in that it provides an estimate of the population of *non-executive* officers to compare with our sample of policing executives.

Note that our sample and reporting are robust enough to serve as a benchmark for future research on policing executives. For example, many national surveys are restricted to data on members (as in the case of PERF), or only look at municipal policing (as in the case of LEMAS). The closest in terms of design comes from a dissertation (Nix, 2015), but in that survey, respondents include non-chiefs and non-sheriffs (construing "police executive" more broadly than we do here). In terms of understanding the demographic description of chiefs and sheriffs in the U.S., we believe our sample is the most robust available to date. We are able to report on partisan identification, for example, which other researchers have suggested should be associated with key behavioral outcomes of interest (Ba et al., 2022).

We also investigate the representativeness of our sample of policing executives that responded to our survey compared to the executives that did not respond. We find that for both chiefs and sheriffs, responding and non-responding agencies appear similar in terms of their community characteristics, such as population, racial composition, education, employment, income, and 2020 vote shares (see Appendix Tables A2 and A3). We also report the results of a linear model used to predict agency response (Appendix Table A4). The model suggests some differential response, with more populous agencies slightly more likely to respond, and municipal departments slightly more likely to respond compared to sheriff's departments, but overall, the difference in predicted probability of response is small.

⁶ The pre-registration can be found here: <https://osf.io/8zjq5>. This document also discusses the survey procedure, which included an opt-in consent form. Participants were told this was for research purposes and no deception was used in the survey.

⁷ We also conduct F -tests of global significance to assess whether any of the covariates predict treatment. Balance is achieved with insignificant F -test p -values of 0.786, 0.425, and 0.251 for the two public support treatment groups and control. The F -test p -value for the peer diffusion treatment group is 0.009 due to this group having slightly younger and more female executives, by random chance. As shown in the balance table, the differences between treatment groups for these variables are quite small in magnitude (e.g., 18 versus 11 women) and this is mostly a statistical artifact of small category sizes.

TABLE 1 Balance table across treatments.

Variable		Control		Public Support CRB		Public Support CRB + firing		Elite Peer Adoption	
		(N = 307)		(N = 324)		(N = 325)		(N = 323)	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Position	Chief	246	80.1	267	82.4	267	82.2	256	79.3
	Sheriff	61	19.9	57	17.6	58	17.8	67	20.7
Age	≤ 34	2	0.7	1	0.3	3	0.9	2	0.6
	35–44	21	6.8	25	7.7	27	8.3	39	12.1
	45–54	126	41.0	128	39.5	131	40.3	134	41.5
	55–64	96	31.3	102	31.5	93	28.6	88	27.2
	65–74	24	7.8	22	6.8	25	7.7	20	6.2
	75 +	1	0.3	0	0.0	2	0.6	1	0.3
Gender	Man	262	85.3	269	83.0	275	84.6	268	83.0
	Woman	11	3.6	11	3.4	8	2.5	18	5.6
Race	Asian/Pacific Islander	1	0.3	1	0.3	3	0.9	3	0.9
	Black	13	4.2	12	3.7	7	2.2	14	4.3
	Hispanic	16	5.2	5	1.5	12	3.7	3	0.9
	Other	8	2.6	9	2.8	12	3.7	8	2.5
	White	233	75.9	251	77.5	246	75.7	253	78.3
Partisanship	Strong Democrat	4	1.3	1	0.3	1	0.3	1	0.3
	Democrat	14	4.6	13	4.0	16	4.9	13	4.0
	Lean Democrat	14	4.6	14	4.3	8	2.5	16	5.0
	Independent	65	21.2	85	26.2	74	22.8	85	26.3
	Lean Republican	64	20.8	57	17.6	54	16.6	65	20.1
	Republican	77	25.1	78	24.1	88	27.1	74	22.9
Agency size	Strong Republican	26	8.5	21	6.5	26	8.0	21	6.5
	Fewer than 25	147	47.9	159	49.1	174	53.5	157	48.6
	Between 25 and 49	54	17.6	54	16.7	59	18.2	63	19.5
	Between 50 and 99	43	14.0	38	11.7	28	8.6	44	13.6
	Between 100 and 499	23	7.5	29	9.0	23	7.1	23	7.1
	Between 500 and 999	5	1.6	2	0.6	1	0.3	0	0.0
	More than 1000	2	0.7	0	0.0	2	0.6	3	0.9

Note: Survey conducted February 1 to March 7, 2022.

Public support estimates from a national poll

From August 25 to October 11, 2021, we worked with the polling firm Data for Progress to conduct a national survey of 16,840 U.S. adults, polling them on their support for CRBs.⁸ Within the survey, we asked two questions. First, we asked about support for establishing CRBs with the “power to

⁸ Appendix Section A.1.1 includes more detail about this sample.

TABLE 2 Comparison of samples of chiefs and sheriffs.

	Current study (NDLEA chiefs)	Current study (NDLEA sheriffs)	Current study (NDLEA combined)	Ba et al., 2022 (largest 100 police)	Nix, 2015 (NDLEA combined)	LEMAS 2016 (chiefs)	Matusiak, 2017 (TX chiefs) ^a	PERF 2021 (chiefs)	Tregle et al., 2022 (NDLEA chiefs)	Nix et al., 2020 (NDLEA command) ^b	Seo et al., 2021 (PA chiefs)
Sex											
Female %	4.26	4.35	4.28	16.8	5.8	2.9	3.3	9.3	3.7	—	1.6
Tenure (years)	6.84	8.77	7.2	—	—	—	—	4.8	—	—	9
Experience (years)	29.35	30.81	29.62	—	27	—	26	29.2	30	—	30
Race											
White %	87.98	91.13	88.56	56	94.2	89.6	79	73.4	87.1	—	98.9
Black %	3.86	5.42	4.14	16	—	4	—	14.3	3.3	1.3	0.5
Hispanic %	3.42	2.46	3.24	21	—	3.1	—	6.4	3.1	1.8	0.5
Asian/Pacific Islander %	0.88	0	0.72	4.9	—	—	—	1.5	0.83	—	—
Other %	3.86	0.99	3.33	—	—	2.4	—	4.4	1.6	—	—
Education											
PhD/JD %	3.87	2.94	3.7	—	—	—	—	5.5	0.42	—	—
Masters %	33.3	14.71	29.87	—	—	—	—	72.3	40.96	26.7	37.4
Bachelors %	32.96	30.88	32.58	—	—	—	—	20.1	30.98	—	33.2
Associate %	18.14	29.9	20.31	—	—	—	—	—	8.94	—	19.5
High School %	11.73	21.57	13.54	—	—	—	42.6	—	12.68	—	10
Age (years)	—	—	—	44	—	—	—	—	—	—	56
Age (bucket)											
% 25–34	0.77	0.49	0.72	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
% 35–44	10.47	8.25	10.06	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
% 45–54	48.07	40.29	46.63	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
% 55–64	33.3	37.38	34.05	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
% 65–74	7.17	12.62	8.18	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
% 75+	0.22	0.97	0.36	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Partisanship											
Republican %	58.2	71.07	60.56	37	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Democrat %	9.45	16.24	10.7	36	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Independent %	32.35	12.69	28.74	31	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
N	1040	243	1331	281,041	643	2135	912	347	675	665	190

Notes: (a) Matusiak (2017) - Education calculated from in-text statement that 57% of respondents had an associate's degree or higher. (b) Nix et al. (2020) - Approximately 27% of respondents were not the chief of their department, but over 80% of non-chiefs were command level (lieutenant and above). Reported "Trump voter" which we include here as Republican partisan ID.

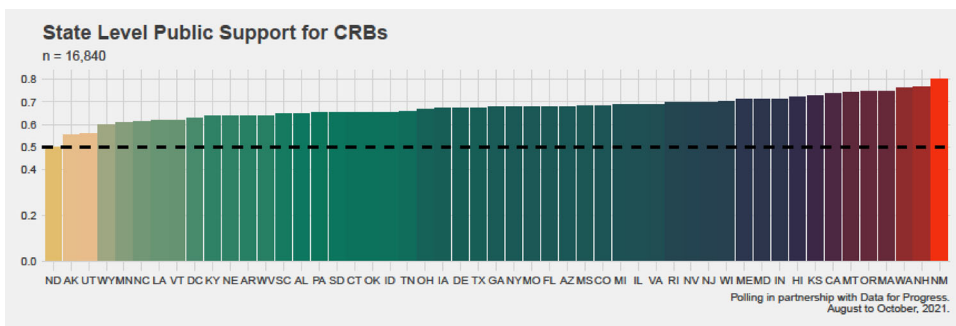


FIGURE 1 State-level support for CRBs.

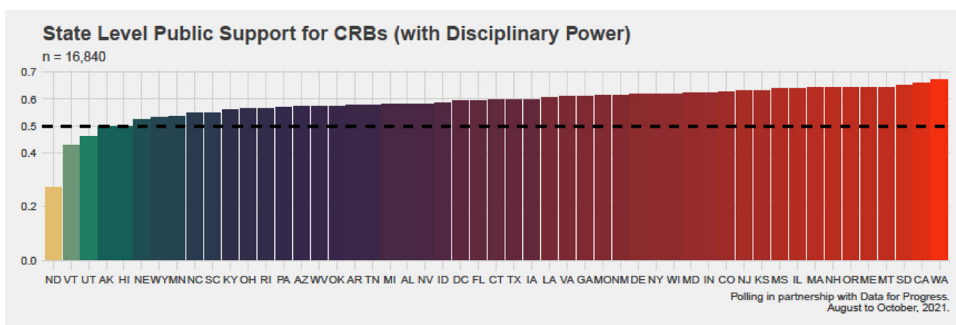


FIGURE 2 State-level support for CRBs with disciplinary power.

independently investigate police officers accused of inappropriate use of force or other misconduct.”⁹ We found that, on average, 68% of the public support and 24% oppose creation of a CRB with these powers. The second question asked about support for an additional disciplinary power: CRBs “with the power to independently investigate and discipline (such as firing) officers.” Figure 1 displays the state-level public support rates for CRBs without disciplinary power provided to respondents in the associated treatment group. Figure 2 displays the state-level public support rates for CRBs *with* disciplinary power provided to respondents in the associated treatment group.

The addition of disciplinary powers caused a drop in overall expressed support, with 60% supporting and 32% opposing the formation of CRBs with independent powers to both investigate officers and impose discipline. With a large number of respondents across the United States, we constructed pooled state-level estimates of public support and opposition to CRBs.¹⁰

Interpreting the public support estimates

It is important to consider how our survey participants—police chiefs and sheriffs—interpreted the public support treatments, as this impacts how researchers should interpret our study design and results

⁹ For a concrete example of such a policy, the St. Louis PD Civilian Oversight Board’s policy states its responsibilities include the right to: “Investigate, analyze, solicit input and make recommendations to the Board and the SLMPD related to issues or complaints affecting the community.” See for more information: <https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/public-safety/civilian-oversight/civilian-oversight-board/about.cfm>

¹⁰ See Appendix Section A.3 for a discussion of other options for measuring relevant public opinion.

in turn. Notably, the public support treatments are both provided at the state level, while police executives operate within smaller jurisdictions at the county and municipal levels. This raises the question of to what extent police executives view state-level public opinion as a relevant or appropriate proxy for the kind of public opinion that could conceivably matter to them.¹¹ Yet chiefs and sheriffs are unlikely to have access to quality public opinion polling for their jurisdictions generally, let alone on specific policy options they may be weighing. We provide accurate state-level public opinion in regard to CRBs.

We believe the related treatments indicating high levels of public support (on average there is higher support for CRBs at a state level rather than when disaggregated across smaller jurisdiction) thus form a conservative lower-bound for the impact of public opinion on shifts in policing executives' policy beliefs. In other words, if we had local opinion data, it is unlikely it would have a stronger impact on local officials.

Further, there is some reason to believe that state-level estimates may be more appropriate than local ones in the context of U.S. policing. This is because police powers are derived at the state level, and evaluations must therefore account for state-level differences (Stoughton et al., 2021). The chiefs and sheriffs in our sample all maintain their legitimate police power through their respective states, interact in state-level professional organizations, enforce state laws passed by state legislatures, and so on. Nonetheless, we produce local-level estimates of public support using multilevel regression with post-stratification (MrP; Caughey & Warshaw, 2019). Appendix Section A.3 demonstrates similarities between the state estimates and local estimates and provides additional details about the MrP procedure and estimates.¹² We prefer the state estimates, as the local-level estimates are less reliable for most of the sample due to small geographic areas. MrP estimates are usually produced for congressional districts or large counties, and even then, this technique usually aggregates over years of available survey data.

Moreover, it is important to note that the state-level public support estimates for CRBs without disciplinary powers are all above 50%, indicating majority public support for CRBs and providing a consistent signal in the treatments across states. While the public support estimates for CRBs with disciplinary powers admit to more variation, given the low levels of baseline support for CRBs amongst police executives, we expect even these treatments to serve as consistent positive signals compared to baseline attitudes. That is, we do not expect that public support is greater than police executive support in some jurisdictions, while the reverse is true in others, which would complicate the interpretation of how police executives update. We also report in Appendix Table A14 that higher levels of public support do not produce significantly different effects.

Informational treatments

Our survey experiment randomly assigned participants to either a control condition or one of three treatment conditions. Respondents assigned to the control condition received no information about public support for, or peer adoption of, CRBs. Responses from the control group thus represent baseline preferences for CRBs among chiefs and sheriffs. One treatment condition, which we call "Public Support CRB," provided respondents with accurate, state-specific public support data, drawn from our national survey described earlier. Respondents in this condition saw the informational vignette below, with the bracketed information representing the relevant state-level data:

¹¹ For example, one possibility is that police executives dynamically adjust the expected baseline of public support for their jurisdiction (e.g., correcting for their perception that their jurisdiction is more conservative or liberal than the state broadly), before updating on the public support information. While this possibility is intriguing, we expect it is less likely and leave this question for future research.

¹² Specifically, we first create county-specific measurements of public opinion, and we then create a variable that captures the difference for each county between the MrP measure and the state-level quantity. We interact this difference with the state public opinion treatments, capturing the idea that in places where these estimates differ substantially we may see systematically different responses to the treatments. The results demonstrate no interactive effects, however, and the main estimates remain the same as the primary results.

Civilian review boards (CRBs) can take many potential forms, with varying powers. In late 2021, we conducted a survey of 16,840 Americans on their support for various forms of CRBs. In your state, [STATE CODE], we found that [CRB SUPPORT PERCENT] of residents support, and [CRB OPPOSE PERCENT] oppose, the formation of a CRB with the power to independently investigate, but not impose discipline (such as firing), in cases where police officers are accused of inappropriate use of force or other misconduct.

In the next treatment condition, which we call “Public Support CRB + Firing,” we provided similar public opinion information, but for CRBs with additional disciplinary powers. We include this condition because independent disciplinary powers are often considered the most threatening to police executives, in terms of their own perceptions of appropriate power sharing and ability to manage their agencies. Moreover, CRBs with disciplinary power also represent a distinct, although less frequent, type of CRB structure (De Angelis et al., 2016; Fairley, 2020). The informational vignette for this condition mirrors that of the previous treatment condition, replacing the phrase “but not impose discipline” with “and impose discipline (such as firing).”

Finally, the last treatment condition, which we call “Elite Peer Adoption,” tests the impact of information about elite peer practices.¹³ We provided respondents with information regarding how CRBs have diffused throughout other policing agencies, using data collected from the Major Cities Chiefs Association (MCCA) by the Community Oriented Policing program (COPS) at the Department of Justice (DOJ). The MCCA, COPS, and DOJ are all well-regarded professional organizations that collect and distribute peer-level information to police executives, such as how many of the largest policing agencies have adopted certain policies. The informational vignette for this condition is similar to the Public Support CRB condition in that it references CRBs without the independent power to discipline. The informational vignette for this condition reads:

Civilian review boards (CRBs) can take many potential forms, with varying powers. The Community Oriented Policing Services (DOJ) recently surveyed members of the Major Cities Chiefs Association. They found that over 60% of U.S. law enforcement agencies surveyed have CRBs with the power to independently investigate complaints, but not impose discipline (such as firing), on officers.

Outcome measures

We use three outcome measures to identify three dimensions of police executive support for CRBs: generalized feelings, support for implementation, and powers deemed appropriate. To measure generalized feelings, we asked respondents, “In general, what is your feeling towards civilian review boards?” measured using a 5-point Likert scale from *Extremely negative* to *Extremely positive*. While police executives’ general perceptions of CRBs are valuable, chiefs and sheriffs sometimes implement policies that run against their personal preferences. To measure support for implementation, we asked respondents about their willingness to establish a CRB in their own agency: “Would you support the creation of a CRB for your agency?”

The creation of a CRB inherently demands power sharing. The contours of which powers are shared, and how they are shared, define the relationship between the police executive and the CRB. Our third outcome measure explores police executives’ preferences regarding that power-sharing relationship. The outcome question asks respondents to advise a hypothetical peer police executive: “Imagine you have been contacted by the chief or sheriff of a neighboring jurisdiction currently establishing a

¹³ Given that our peer treatment merely shares whether peers have adopted CRBs—not the success or outcomes of that adoption—the mechanism is arguably closer to policy imitation rather than more robust policy learning.

CRB. They are seeking advice. In providing advice, which of the following (if any) do you think are appropriate powers for the CRB? (Select as many or as few as you believe apply)."¹⁴

Respondents selected as many or as few powers as they deemed appropriate from the following list: Conduct independent investigations of complaints, Subpoena witnesses, Subpoena records, Recommend disciplinary actions, Impose disciplinary actions, Review disciplinary actions, Hear citizen appeals, Hear officer appeals, or None of these powers are appropriate. This outcome measure allows us to conduct two distinct types of analysis. First, we identify treatment effects on support for granting CRBs each individual power, based on the idea that different powers present differing degrees of power-sharing concern. Second, we identify treatment effects on the total number of powers that participating chiefs and sheriffs were willing to grant CRBs.

Identification of treatment effects

We use the following general model specification to identify treatment effects of interest:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Outcome} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Public Support CRB} + \beta_2 \text{Public Support CRB} + \text{Firing} \\ & + \beta_3 \text{Elite Peer Adoption} + \gamma X + \epsilon \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

where Public Support CRB, Public Support CRB + Firing, and Elite Peer Adoption correspond to the three treatments providing public opinion data on support for CRBs with investigatory powers, public opinion data on support for CRBs with investigatory and disciplinary powers, and data on CRB implementation across MCCA agencies, respectively.¹⁵

We identify treatment effects on the three outcome variables of interest described above, and X refers to the vector of covariates that we include, namely whether respondents are chiefs or sheriffs, whether respondents currently have a CRB for their agency, police executive partisanship, and police agency size.¹⁶ We note that agency size can serve as a partial proxy for some aspects of the broader jurisdictional context, such as population size and density.

RESULTS

Police executive responsiveness to public support and peer diffusion of CRBs

We find that police chiefs and sheriffs are highly responsive to information about elite peer adoption of CRBs, but are less responsive to public opinion regarding CRBs. Table 3 reports the results of regressing standardized versions of our outcomes of interest—feelings toward CRBs, willingness to establish a CRB, and number of powers deemed appropriate for a CRB—on individual treatment indicators and covariates.¹⁷ With standardized outcome measures, coefficients can be interpreted as standard deviation changes, and treatment effects can be more easily compared across outcomes. Across outcomes, we find that information about the diffusion of CRBs across elite peer law

¹⁴ Note that this outcome question differs from the other two in that it references a hypothetical agency rather than a police executive's own agency. This presentation encourages executives to reflect on general best practices and reduces anchoring based on their current practices or context.

¹⁵ For non-fully-specified models (i.e., models testing pooled conditions), the treatment indicator variables shown above are replaced with indicators for the corresponding pooled treatments.

¹⁶ For all models, the reference category represented by the intercept corresponds to chiefs without a current CRB in the control condition who are Democrats, new to their position, and serve an agency with fewer than 25 officers.

¹⁷ We include in the appendix alternative modeling specifications, specifically results using non-standardized outcome measures, without covariates, and with only the pre-registered covariates. Results do not differ substantively from what is presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3 Effects of informational treatments on police executive attitudes toward CRBs.

	Feeling	Establish	Appropriate powers
Treatment			
Public Support CRB	0.114 (0.082)	-0.043 (0.093)	0.181* (0.084)
Public Support CRB + Firing	-0.094 (0.082)	0.033 (0.093)	0.297*** (0.084)
Elite Peer Adoption	0.181* (0.081)	0.164+ (0.092)	0.240** (0.084)
Covariates			
Sheriff	-0.063 (0.078)	-0.193* (0.088)	-0.253** (0.080)
Current CRB	0.960*** (0.083)		0.549*** (0.086)
Independent	-0.448*** (0.104)	-0.117 (0.120)	-0.388*** (0.107)
Republican	-0.433*** (0.095)	-0.282* (0.110)	-0.419*** (0.099)
FTE 25-49	-0.056 (0.075)	0.099 (0.084)	-0.210** (0.077)
FTE 50-99	-0.022 (0.087)	0.447*** (0.100)	-0.102 (0.090)
FTE 100-499	-0.243* (0.110)	0.490*** (0.131)	-0.257* (0.113)
FTE 500-999	0.238 (0.338)	1.053+ (0.574)	-0.195 (0.349)
FTE 1000+	0.025 (0.360)	1.785*** (0.495)	0.035 (0.371)
Years in position	0.000 (0.005)	0.002 (0.006)	-0.001 (0.005)
<i>N</i>	1071	905	1069
R2	0.15	0.06	0.09
R2 Adj.	0.136	0.052	0.077
<i>F</i>	13.984	5.136	7.817

Notes: Public opinion treatments are state level public opinion. Survey February 1 to March 7, 2022. Reference categories: Chief; Democrat; Sworn Personnel < 25. + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

enforcement agencies—the Elite Peer Adoption treatment—increases police executives' feelings toward CRBs, willingness to establish a CRB, and support of more expansive CRB powers (such as the right to subpoena officers or review disciplinary actions). In particular, the Elite Peer Adoption treatment increased feelings toward CRBs by 0.18 standard deviations, perceptions of appropriate powers by a sizable 0.24 standard deviations, and willingness to establish a CRB by 0.16 standard deviations. These treatment effects are all statistically significant, except for the CRB establishment outcome.

This suggests that police executives' opinions on CRBs can be meaningfully shaped by the practices of peers, even if such a change is driven by policy imitation rather than more substantive policy learning.

As for the public support treatments, effects are more modest. Information about public support in chiefs' and sheriffs' own states for CRBs with merely investigatory and with disciplinary power—the Public Support CRB and Public Support CRB + Firing treatments, respectively—does not increase police executives' feelings toward CRBs or willingness to establish a CRB. Compared to the Elite Peer Adoption treatment, the Public Support CRB treatment has a statistically significant smaller impact on willingness to establish a CRB ($p = 0.03$), and the Public Support CRB + Firing treatment has a statistically significant smaller impact on feelings toward CRBs ($p < 0.001$).

However, public support does increase perceptions of appropriate CRB powers by 0.18 standard deviations (0.34 powers) and 0.30 standard deviations (0.56 powers) in the investigatory and disciplinary treatments, respectively. The fact that this signal of public support for particularly empowered (“disciplinary”) CRBs substantially and significantly increased the number of powers that police chiefs and sheriffs deem appropriate for CRBs is striking. This suggests that, while perhaps unyielding in their general affect and overall support of CRBs, police chiefs and sheriffs may be movable on some policy dimensions, constituting some evidence of policy bargaining or moderation of preferences in line with public opinion. The next section devotes attention to the question of which individual powers police executives supported at greater rates following treatment.

Table 3 also reveals a few noteworthy associations between police executive characteristics and attitudes toward CRBs. Of interest, sheriffs are marginally less willing to establish a CRB and are significantly and substantially less supportive of ceding power to CRBs. Additionally, police executives in areas with an existing CRB are much more positive in their feelings toward CRBs—by nearly 1 standard deviation—and are more supportive of granting power to CRBs by about half a standard deviation. We caution that unlike the average treatment effects derived from the randomized treatment groups, these associational results instead constitute conditional average treatment effects (CATEs), and though potentially suggestive regarding patterns of interest and future areas of exploration, are not causal. That is, as covariates are not randomly assigned, CATEs may merely reflect pre-existing associations between underlying police executive or agency characteristics and prior establishment of a CRB. Finally, Republican executives hold consistently less positive and supportive attitudes toward CRBs. We return to these characteristics in a subsequent section in which we discuss results for our pre-registered hypotheses regarding treatment heterogeneity.

Individual powers deemed appropriate for CRBs

Given the sizable increases in the number of powers that police executives deemed appropriate to grant to CRBs following treatment, we explored which individual powers experienced the greatest movement in support. Table 4 reports treatment effects on each proposed CRB power—powers to investigate complaints, subpoena witnesses, subpoena records, recommend discipline, impose discipline, review discipline, hear citizen appeals, and hear officer appeals.¹⁸ The coefficients in the first nine columns of Table 4 can be interpreted as percentage point changes in perceptions of the appropriateness of CRBs holding the associated power. The last column reports effects on the total number of powers deemed appropriate, corresponding to the last column of Table 3, although unstandardized here.

We find heterogeneous effects of the treatments on individual powers.¹⁹ The Elite Peer Adoption treatment increased support for CRB powers to: investigate complaints (12 percentage points), hear citizen appeals (17 percentage points), and hear officer appeals (12 percentage points). Similarly, the

¹⁸ These powers included in our study design are based on the list of CRB powers identified and investigated in a study by the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) within the U.S. Department of Justice (Stephens et al., 2018).

¹⁹ Note that we did not pre-register hypotheses regarding the effects of our treatments on particular powers. Therefore, the results presented in this section should be considered exploratory.

TABLE 4 Impacts on individual CRB powers deemed appropriate.

	Investigate complaints	Subpoena witnesses	Subpoena records	Recommend discipline	Impose discipline	Review discipline	Hear citizen appeals	Hear officer appeals	No powers	Total appropriate powers
Public Support CRB	0.078* (0.036)	0.019 (0.025)	0.011 (0.026)	0.010 (0.036)	0.003 (0.014)	-0.006 (0.042)	0.130** (0.042)	0.095* (0.041)	-0.074+ (0.041)	0.341* (0.159)
Public Support CRB + Firing	0.091* (0.036)	0.055* (0.025)	0.038 (0.026)	0.142*** (0.036)	0.006 (0.014)	0.012 (0.042)	0.108* (0.042)	0.107** (0.041)	-0.078+ (0.041)	0.559*** (0.159)
Elite Peer Adoption	0.122*** (0.036)	0.040 (0.025)	0.017 (0.025)	0.022 (0.036)	-0.019 (0.014)	-0.020 (0.042)	0.166*** (0.042)	0.123** (0.040)	-0.109** (0.040)	0.452** (0.158)
Sheriff	-0.089** (0.034)	-0.049* (0.024)	-0.058* (0.024)	-0.051 (0.034)	-0.005 (0.013)	-0.086* (0.040)	-0.085* (0.040)	-0.054 (0.039)	0.093* (0.039)	-0.478** (0.151)
Current CRB	0.018 (0.036)	0.092*** (0.026)	0.095*** (0.026)	0.130*** (0.037)	0.104*** (0.014)	0.217*** (0.043)	0.137** (0.043)	0.243*** (0.041)	-0.227*** (0.041)	1.035*** (0.161)
Independent	-0.140** (0.046)	-0.095** (0.032)	-0.076* (0.033)	-0.149** (0.046)	-0.031+ (0.018)	-0.056 (0.054)	-0.112* (0.054)	-0.073 (0.052)	0.134** (0.052)	-0.732*** (0.202)
Republican	-0.096* (0.042)	-0.112*** (0.029)	-0.087** (0.030)	-0.172*** (0.042)	-0.041* (0.016)	-0.089+ (0.050)	-0.099* (0.050)	-0.094* (0.048)	0.142** (0.048)	-0.789*** (0.186)
FTE 25-49	-0.084* (0.033)	-0.051* (0.023)	-0.044+ (0.023)	-0.052 (0.033)	-0.015 (0.013)	-0.021 (0.039)	-0.050 (0.039)	-0.079* (0.037)	0.071+ (0.037)	-0.396** (0.145)
FTE 50-99	-0.080* (0.038)	0.026 (0.027)	0.022 (0.027)	-0.058 (0.039)	-0.019 (0.015)	0.064 (0.045)	-0.045 (0.045)	-0.101* (0.043)	-0.029 (0.043)	-0.192 (0.170)
FTE 100-499	-0.128** (0.048)	-0.049 (0.034)	-0.049 (0.034)	-0.022 (0.049)	0.014 (0.019)	0.025 (0.057)	-0.144* (0.057)	-0.132* (0.054)	0.154** (0.054)	-0.484* (0.213)
FTE 500-999	0.116 (0.149)	-0.023 (0.104)	-0.032 (0.106)	0.039 (0.150)	-0.101+ (0.058)	-0.030 (0.175)	-0.100 (0.175)	-0.237 (0.168)	-0.088 (0.168)	-0.368 (0.657)
FTE 1000+	0.051 (0.158)	0.176 (0.111)	0.180 (0.113)	0.298+ (0.160)	-0.058 (0.062)	-0.420* (0.187)	-0.010 (0.186)	-0.151 (0.179)	0.124 (0.179)	0.066 (0.699)

(Continues)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

	Investigate complaints	Subpoena witnesses	Subpoena records	Recommend discipline	Impose discipline	Review discipline	Hear citizen appeals	Hear officer appeals	No powers	Total appropriate powers
Intercept	0.311*** (0.050)	0.153*** (0.035)	0.153*** (0.036)	0.355*** (0.050)	0.063** (0.020)	0.470*** (0.059)	0.430*** (0.059)	0.370*** (0.057)	0.258*** (0.057)	2.305*** (0.221)
<i>N</i>	1069	1069	1069	1069	1069	1069	1069	1069	1069	1069
R2	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.06	0.07	0.04	0.04	0.06	0.07	0.09
R2 Adj.	0.029	0.035	0.027	0.045	0.054	0.029	0.03	0.049	0.055	0.077
<i>F</i>	3.467	4.013	3.254	4.899	5.731	3.443	3.56	5.246	5.769	7.817

Note: Public opinion treatments are state-level public opinion. Survey February 1 to March 7, 2022. Reference Categories: Chief; No Current CRB; Democrat; Agency Size < 25. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$

Public Support CRB treatment increased support for CRBs to: investigate complaints (8 percentage points), hear citizen appeals (13 percentage points), and hear officer appeals (10 percentage points). Note that treatment effects are concentrated on the more modest exercises of power, i.e., involving investigating and hearing complaints.

However, results are more striking for the Public Support CRB + Firing treatment, which again emphasized public support for CRBs with investigatory and disciplinary power. While this treatment did not increase support for granting CRBs the power to impose or review discipline, it did significantly increase support for granting CRBs the power to recommend discipline (14 percentage points) and to subpoena witnesses (6 percentage points). Movement on these especially controversial powers may again constitute evidence of implicit policy bargaining wherein police chiefs and sheriffs update their policy preferences more forcefully when responding to especially distant public opinion.

Heterogeneity by position, current CRB status, and partisanship

Drawing on interactive model specifications, we ask whether additional characteristics of police executives and their agencies are associated with different responses to information about public support for and peer adoption of CRBs. We first hypothesized that sheriffs, who are almost all elected, would respond more strongly to information about public support for CRBs than appointed police chiefs. That is, we expected that the nature of sheriffs' selection and their resultant concerns regarding elections (Farris & Holman, 2017; Mughan et al., 2020; Thompson, 2020) would lead them to update more strongly in favor of CRBs when presented with information about public support. We find no support for this hypothesis. As depicted in Figure 3(a), police chiefs and sheriffs responded similarly to the informational treatments: neither public support treatment produced differences in chiefs' and sheriffs' feelings toward CRBs, willingness to establish a CRB, and number of powers deemed appropriate.²⁰

This lack of responsiveness of sheriffs to public opinion may be driven by the relative security of sheriffs' positions (despite being elected) due to uncontested elections, large incumbency advantages, and low turnout in local elections (Zoorob, 2022).²¹ However, we also acknowledge a limitation of our experiment: we do not have measures of local support, only state support. While the MrP estimates (see Appendix A.3) provide valuable insights and help to assuage concerns about the salience of state-level measures for respondents, they do not fully eliminate the concern. It is possible that sheriffs' lack of responsiveness could be attributed to the reduced salience of state-level public opinion information. Furthermore, another possibility is that sheriffs perceive unsatisfied voters as less of a threat compared to other concerns.

Next, we conducted an exploratory investigation into whether police executives in areas with existing CRBs respond differently to the treatments about public support and peer adoption than police executives in areas without CRBs. Figure 3(b) presents results. We find that our informational treatments do not differently affect the feelings of police executives with and without current CRBs ($p = 0.28$ for Public Support CRB, $p = 0.67$ for Public Support CRB + Firing, and $p = 0.52$ for Elite Peer Adoption). However, police executives with current CRBs do deem more powers appropriate for CRBs as a result of treatment than police executives without CRBs. In particular, the Public Support CRB treatment increased the powers deemed appropriate by police executives with current CRBs by a sizable 0.57 standard deviations more than police executives without CRBs ($p = 0.02$). Additionally, the Elite Peer Adoption treatment increased the powers deemed appropriate by police executives with

²⁰ Although not directly the topic of interest for this hypothesis, we also find no difference in the responses of police chiefs and sheriffs to information about peer adoption of CRBs ($p = 0.66$, $p = 0.66$, and $p = 0.27$ for each of the three outcomes).

²¹ In Appendix Section A.9 we present some open-ended responses in our survey from sheriffs suggesting this explanation – specifically, that they believe they are already responsive to their voters since they were elected by them. Interestingly, chiefs also report that the fact that they were appointed by elected officials is an extant oversight mechanism. Future research would benefit by examining differences in the electoral connection between chiefs and sheriffs.

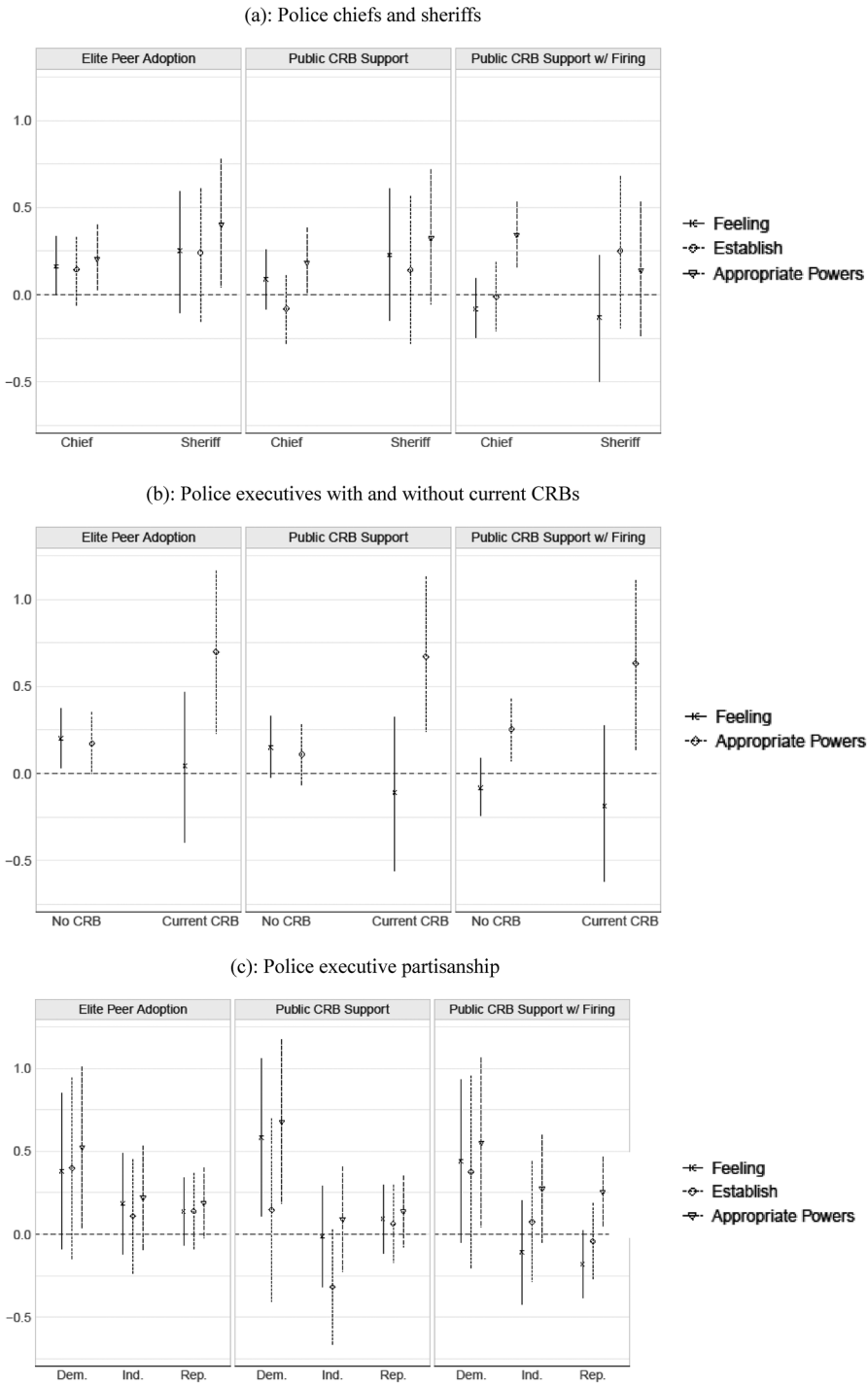


FIGURE 3 Heterogeneous responses to informational treatments.

Notes: The results used to create these figures are displayed in full in Appendix Tables A10 through A12. Public opinion treatments are state level public opinion.

current CRBs by 0.52 standard deviations ($p = 0.04$). However, the Public Support CRB + Firing treatment had no significant differential effect ($p = 0.14$). Overall, these results raise the possibility that feed-forward effects may play a role in police accountability reform and institution-building. Once structures and procedures for civilian oversight such as CRBs are established, police executives may be more likely to support and invest additional power into such institutions in the future. However, we again caution that these conditioned results are not causal and may instead reflect different underlying predispositions of police executives with and without current CRBs.

Finally, we investigated whether there were partisan differences in the impacts of the public opinion and peer adoption treatments on police executives. Figure 3(c) reports results. Compared to Independents, we find that Democratic police executives were more responsive to information about public support for CRBs: The Public Support CRB treatment increased Democratic executives' feelings by 0.60 standard deviations more ($p = 0.04$) and support for appropriate powers by 0.59 standard deviations more ($p = 0.05$) than it did for Independents. We do not find any differences between Republicans and Independents in responses to the public support treatments, nor do we find statistically significant partisan differences in response to the peer adoption treatment.

DISCUSSION

Given a relative lack of social science research on police as government agents (Soss & Weaver, 2017), the small (if growing) body of knowledge here has not shed much light onto the oversight institutions that might ameliorate the well-documented problems of police misconduct (e.g., Cook & Fortunato, 2022; Knox et al., 2020; Mummolo, 2018). As an extension of existing theories of oversight in bureaucratic settings (McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984), we argue that civilian review boards are a promising institutional design with potential for welfare-improving outcomes through police oversight. In line with this argument, our results indicate that 1) police executives' opinions are movable towards supporting CRBs, suggesting establishing CRBs in the first place is possible; and 2) agencies that already possess a CRB are supportive of expanding their power. Generating initial buy-in from police executives, as research recommends (Matusiak, 2016), should facilitate CRB adoption and expansion of powers—even if the initial version is relatively weak. Even weak CRBs might be a net improvement, as they may lead to additional oversight and encourage learning and diffusion across additional agencies.

Our results build especially upon Ali (2023), which examined the adoption of citizen oversight of police as a case of culturally contentious innovations. The findings revealed that the process of adopting reforms like CRBs involves navigating a complex landscape of cultural norms, institutional pressures, and public expectations. Ali's analysis underscores the importance of understanding these cultural and institutional factors to effectively implement and sustain oversight mechanisms that may initially face resistance or skepticism.

Our findings extend evidence that the diffusion of reforms may be influenced by a myriad of factors, including the existing institutional culture, the level of public demand for oversight, and the political landscape. Our study provides additional evidence around the impact of policy learning vis-a-vis public opinion and adds a new dimension of interest, learning from the behavior of elite peer agencies. Such insights are critical for police executives and policymakers as they weigh the potential benefits of oversight reforms against the challenges of cultural integration and acceptance.

Our experiment demonstrates that police executives are willing to shift their policy beliefs, even on a contentious issue marked by low levels of executive support historically and in the present. Yet how and why these important decision makers shift their policy beliefs depends on which information they are exposed to and, critically, which actors are the source of that information. Overall, police executives are closely attentive to the behavior of large peer agencies adopting CRBs, but much less moved by public attitudes.

It is noteworthy that the respondents to our survey were largely unmoved by public support for CRBs, as these individuals may be the most willing to engage with the public as evidenced by their

willingness to take our survey. We might therefore expect even greater reluctance to heed public opinion amongst the general population of police executives. In open-ended responses to our survey (Appendix Section A.9), we find that a number of respondents feel they are already responsive to public opinion—but an insulated version. As public appointees (specifically chiefs), a number of executives highlight in their comments that they believe the fact that their city-level principals are elected is enough civilian oversight. These findings also begin to solve an important puzzle in suggesting why law enforcement agencies, enabled and supported by the broad public, are nonetheless difficult to popularly constrain. Ironically, chiefs' and sheriffs' preferences on democratic oversight in policing are not themselves especially shaped through the democratic mechanism of public opinion. In a parallel study, we specifically investigate the attitudes reflected in these open-ended responses, and whether they are likewise amenable to treatment (Mourtgos et al., 2024).

Regarding peer influence, we found that when presented with information on major city police agency adoption of CRBs, chiefs and sheriffs were more positive in their feelings about CRBs, more willing to establish a CRB in their own agency, and more willing to support granting CRBs independent powers, such as the ability to investigate complaints and hear appeals from citizens and officers. We also found that police executives who already had a CRB in their agency were significantly more likely to support CRBs and to recommend more power for CRBs following treatment. The traditional functions of CRBs—as represented in our CRB powers analysis—are more acceptable to police executives who already work with a CRB. In fact, these executives are more likely to support increasing (7.1%) rather than decreasing (1.7%) CRBs' powers.

One possibility is that police executives recognize that the alarm functions of CRBs (such as exposing local police practices to federal oversight) are potentially damaging and difficult to manage (Ali, 2023). Therefore, an initial story consistent with our experimental results is that police executives may prefer to help design and shape the local functioning of CRBs rather than risk uncontrolled intervention. That is, CRBs might operate not only as complements to external oversight by state and federal powers, but potentially also as substitutes. Police executives may find it more palatable for CRBs to hold investigatory powers than for these same powers to be wielded from the outside. We encourage further research into this possibility.

Implications for reform and oversight

Taken together, these results suggest that the shortest path to policy reform may involve professional associations and concentrated attention to the largest agencies (such as those who make up the Major Cities Chiefs Association). The prospect of enacting national policy change through influencing the largest agencies may be good news for reformers who are frustrated by the fractured federalist nature of law enforcement in a country with 18,000 independent police departments.²² As such, advocacy through professional associations and policy diffusion through major cities may serve as viable inroads for reform, constituting a simplified influence strategy as compared to separately targeting the many thousands of independent police departments. As large agencies continue to lead these policy shifts, reformers could then concentrate on extending those reforms to smaller and nearby agencies.²³ Potential avenues for this work include trade publications from professional organizations, such as *Police Chief*, and practitioner conferences such as the annual conference of the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

Conversely and of equal importance, our results caution against reformers relying solely on appeals based on public opinion. Neither of our public opinion treatments were successful in moving chief

²² Indeed, while just 3% of U.S. police agencies serve jurisdictions of more than 100,000 people, these agencies employ 52% of the officers in the country (Hyland & Davis, 2019).

²³ We test for effect heterogeneity by agency size, and report results in Appendix Table A18. Results suggest that there is no treatment heterogeneity, although data sparsity in the interacted cells cautions against drawing strong conclusions from this test.

or sheriff feeling towards CRBs, nor their willingness to establish a CRB in their own agency. This finding is concerning because a movement toward democratic accountability in policing should be responsive to democratic means of influence, such as public opinion.²⁴ Yet, accurate state-specific public opinion information successfully shifted respondents' willingness to grant CRBs independent powers. Interestingly, the "strong" version of the public opinion treatment, which recommended more controversial disciplinary powers for CRBs, had a greater effect on policing executives than the weaker version of public opinion. Specifically, the weak version of public opinion shifted support for the same powers as the peer influence treatment. This similarity suggests that CRBs' powers to investigate complaints and hear appeals from citizens and officers are the most generally palatable to chiefs and sheriffs, another important note for researchers and advocates. Yet, the strong version of public opinion pushed chiefs and sheriffs even further, even leading them to support granting CRBs the power to recommend discipline. This suggests that, despite general reluctance to follow public opinion, exposing police executives to topics with greater distance between their preferences and public attitudes can generate windows for potential policy reform. However, understanding how police executives respond to divergent preferences of the public through bargaining or moderation is a topic for further investigation.²⁵

Importantly, in no case did any treatment arm successfully encourage police executives to support a CRB power to impose discipline on officers. This finding suggests that there are limits to executive support of public oversight, even though this expansive power is a key focus of reformers worried about ineffectual CRBs. Further, it is important to note that increased civilian oversight does not necessarily correspond with specific policy outcomes, such as reformers' expectations regarding stricter discipline of officers. For example, a recent report points out that in cases where Los Angeles Police Chief Michel Moore fired officers for misconduct, a CRB overruled his decisions more than 70% of the time (Rector, 2021). In doing so, the CRB effectively led to 11 officers remaining active despite a highly respected executive with over 40 years of experience arguing they were not fit to continue serving. The relationship between oversight, accountability, and specific reform goals is not necessarily linear, an important fact for both advocates and critics of CRBs to consider.

Beyond our primary results, our study also draws attention to a lack of an institutional difference where theory would expect it. We find no evidence that *elected* sheriffs are more attentive to public opinion compared to *appointed* chiefs. This may suggest that both chiefs and sheriffs perceive their role as that of trustees rather than delegates, despite their very different paths to position, or it may highlight the weakness of elections as a meaningful accountability check on sheriffs. This contradicts previous studies that find the elected status of sheriffs results in different policy choices (Mughan et al., 2020; Zoorob, 2022), but aligns with other scholarship showing that sheriffs from different political parties make broadly similar policy choices despite their partisan leanings (Thompson, 2020).

Indeed, notwithstanding growing scholarly attention to the differences between police chiefs and sheriffs, our results point to a more nuanced picture in terms of public responsiveness. While we expected the electoral connection of sheriffs to result in them responding more strongly to public opinion, our results do not support this conclusion. Scholars have pointed to reasons police chiefs might also respond to public opinion (Ali, 2023; Bromberg & Charbonneau, 2021), which may mean this mechanism is simply not as relevant to the broadly posed question. More theory and evidence are clearly needed, and our results point to some interesting paths forward. For the most part, both groups demonstrate similar responses regarding their feelings about CRBs and willingness to establish one in their own agency. However, when it comes to increased measures of power sharing with a CRB,

²⁴ While the role of unions in democratic policing reform should be the subject of further study, we think police executives are at least as influential and less well understood. As a preliminary analysis, Appendix Table A17 evaluates whether states with state-level police union agreements are differentially influenced by our treatments. We find insubstantial and insignificant effects.

²⁵ In Appendix Section A.9 we include some open-ended responses we received post-treatment in our survey. These add some context to this question: particularly, many police executives are concerned about the expertise and biases of people who will make up these boards. Examining variation in board structure and, specifically, who serves on them is another topic worth future study.

sheriffs are significantly less likely than chiefs to support granting that shared power. In the context of the principal-agent problem facing police, this result is particularly interesting: Chiefs, who are agents to more principals and further removed from voters, are unexpectedly *more* open to power sharing. Sheriffs, who are directly elected and report that their voters already constitute a form of civilian review, are less likely to respond favorably to the prospect of additional oversight. While on its face, viewing elections as a form of oversight is sensible, in reality sheriffs face little electoral competition once they gain incumbency status, creating the conditions for significant agency loss (Farris & Holman, 2017). When and why chiefs and sheriffs attend to public opinion and are willing to relinquish power, enabling more robust democratic oversight, are rich and publicly-significant research questions for further study.

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COMPETING INTERESTS


The authors declare no competing interests.


DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT


The data that support the findings of this study are openly available at Open Science Framework (OSF) at <http://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/RQ7FP>, reference files within “JPAM Replication Folder.”


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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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