

# Voting with Their Guns: An Integrated Framework of How Police Politically Administer Violence


Hernán Flom

Most analyses of the intersection of police, politics, and violence—which center on the police’s use of force as a means to control subordinate classes, repress political dissidents, or confront non-state armed actors—conceptualize the police as an instrument of political incumbents. In this paper, I problematize the relationship between the police and its political principals by focusing on how police administer violence as a political response in compliance or defiance of political incumbents. While elected officials may enact policy changes that restrain or incite police violence, police forces can either abide with or disregard these directives. Building on this interaction of policy shifts and police responses, I develop a typology of four variants of police administration of violence: peacekeeping, punishing, shirking, and sabotaging. I illustrate this typology with various examples from developed and developing democracies.

The use of violence is integral to the relationship between police and politics. Police are central to the Weberian state’s fundamental mission of exercising the monopoly of legitimate coercion and constitute the quintessential violent bureaucracy given the frequency of their interactions with citizens (Weber 1978). Most social science analyses on the relation between police, violence, and politics have centered either on the police’s “control of overtly political behavior” (i.e., high policing) or on routine law enforcement and street-level order maintenance (i.e., low policing) (Brodeur 1983; Bowling, Reiner and Sheptycki 2019). While the former focuses on how police suppress political or social dissidents or combat major security threats such as terrorism or organized crime, the latter depicts how police routinely discipline, contain, coerce, and repress individuals, particularly those of “race-class subjugated communities” (Soss and Weaver

2017). In this latter approach, “police decisions are political in the sense that they influence, if not determine, the impact of formal social controls and the allocation of justice” (Brown 1981, 6). Both approaches assume that police are an instrument of political incumbents, meting out violence in accordance with politicians’ mandates. However, police are not unproblematic agents of incumbents. They have their own incentives and preferences, particularly when it comes to enforcing the law and utilizing violence.

In this paper, I propose a novel, integrated perspective of how police, politics and violence intersect, examining how police administer violence as a political response to democratically elected officials. I develop a typology of the political administration of violence by police that does not assume that the preferences of politicians and police will necessarily align. In this typology, politicians can either restrain or incite police violence through various policy initiatives, while police can either comply with or defy those mandates. Police can support incumbents—and even bolster their popularity—by enforcing politicians’ tough-on-crime policies, or by implementing crime prevention strategies that restrain the use of force. Conversely, they can undermine an administration by sabotaging politicians’ attempts to curb institutional violence or by disregarding incumbents’ calls for aggressive policing. In this sense, as citizens vote with their feet and investors with their pocketbooks, police officers vote with the tool most associated with their fundamental function: their guns.<sup>1</sup>

Hernán Flom  is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Political Science at Trinity College ([hernan.flom@trincoll.edu](mailto:hernan.flom@trincoll.edu)). He holds a Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley and was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Kellogg Institute for International Studies (University of Notre Dame). His research centers on policing, illegal markets, and criminal violence in Latin America. His first book is *The Informal Regulation of Criminal Markets in Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, 2022). He has also published articles in *Comparative Politics*, *Latin American Politics and Society*, *Governance*, and *the Journal of Urban Affairs*.

## 234 Perspectives on Politics

doi:10.1017/S1537592724000653

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of American Political Science Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

Recent research has shed light on police brutality in developed and developing democracies alike (Fassin 2013; González 2020; Zimring 2017). While multiple studies have illuminated the various political, institutional, or structural factors that fuel or constrain police brutality (Arriola et al. 2021; Brinks 2008; Sherman 2020), I show how police violence relates both to political choices and the decision by police to fulfill or disregard these mandates. I develop a framework conceptualizing this interaction between police and politicians, distinguishing between four types of police administration of violence. I illustrate these types using examples from both developed and developing countries.

This paper makes two main contributions. First, my framework illustrates that, while police always embody “the state on the streets” (Hinton 2006; Lake 2022), their administration of violence does not always align with the preferences of governing politicians—i.e., the elected and appointed officials in the executive branch that oversee the police.<sup>2</sup> Thus, my framework highlights two scenarios relatively under-examined by the literature. First that police can utilize violence *against* political mandates; and second, the rarer but plausible situation in which politicians incite violence but police *abstain* from such mandates. Subsequently, this framework enhances existing bureaucratic theories, especially principal-agent approaches, by reconceptualizing the types of police responses to political directives (Brehm and Gates 1999; Wilson 1968). It also lays the ground for future hypothesis testing on the interactions between politicians and police concerning the use of violence. In short, this paper problematizes the assumption that police are always aligned with incumbent politicians to recast what is political about police violence.

Second, my framework pools related yet often disjointed literatures that tackle the politics of police violence from different angles. These studies have focused either on the application of violence in routine law enforcement, order maintenance, and social control (low policing), or its (initially) exceptional use when confronting non-stated armed actors such as organized criminal groups and repressing political dissent (high policing). My framework, by contrast, develops an integrated theory of when and how police resort to violence across these varied contexts, providing a tool to comprehensively examine policing in contemporary democracies.

In the next section, I review existing analyses on the intersections of police violence and politics. The third section develops my framework, outlining police and politicians’ respective incentives and decision sets. The combination between policy shifts and their respective responses by police generates four types of administration of violence: *peacekeeping*, *punishing*, *sabotaging*, and *shirking*. The fourth section illustrates these four types with examples from developing and established democracies across multiple regions, revealing this framework’s generalizability. The final section proposes avenues for future research.

## Police, Politics, and Violence

In the aftermath of the Third Wave of democratization and post-conflict transitions, several studies interpreted lingering police violence as a legacy of authoritarianism, civil war, or colonial rule (Hinton and Newburn 2009; Tankebe 2008), a symbol of democracy’s contradictions (Caldeira and Holston 1999) or a token of the state’s unequal enforcement of the rule of law (O’Donnell 1993). Subsequent scholarship demonstrated that, while inimical to democratic values, police violence is highly compatible with democratic regimes (Arias and Goldstein 2010; Brinks 2008; González 2020). In other words, authoritarian policing exhibited democracy’s flaws and limitations, but not necessarily a clash between police and democratically elected politicians.

My framework fits into the latter discussion that sees police violence as compatible with democracy but expands it by further problematizing the relation between police and their political superiors. My approach blends principal-agent theories of police bureaucracies with analyses of police violence, building on their theoretical and empirical contributions while addressing some of their gaps.

On the one hand, theories of bureaucratic discretion grounded on principal-agent models suggest that top-down control of street-level bureaucrats by elected officials is severely limited. Instead, they focus on the adverse selection and moral hazard problems police supervisors face in obtaining compliance from rank-and-file officers and on the intrinsic motivations behind officers’ fulfillment of agency goals (Brehm and Gates 1999; Lipsky 2010; Wilson 1989). This literature provides a key conceptual background to my framework, as it distinguishes between the outcomes of police compliance and defiance (sabotage and shirking). However, it overlooks the different forms in which police compliance might take place—i.e., by increasing or restricting the use of force—as well as the divergent preferences between police and politicians, the mechanisms by which government officials can extract police compliance, and the political motivations of police defiance, elements which are central to my framework.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, many sociological, criminological, and political science theories of police take its alignment with governing officials for granted. Police are either the instrument through which incumbents seek to repress political opponents or maintain a given socioeconomic order (Bittner 1970; Brodeur 1983; Soss and Weaver 2017). More concretely, studies of tough-on-crime policies in both developed and developing democracies have shown that politicians’ have sanctioned punitive policing to gain an electoral advantage (Holland 2013), avoid blame for high-profile crimes or being labeled soft-on-crime (Flom and Post 2016; Gunderson 2022) or exploit media-driven

social anxiety (Bonner 2019; Roberts et al. 2002). While police have mostly followed through on incumbents' punitive mandates, that does not mean they always will.

Similarly, the literature on criminal violence also typically assumes police compliance with political incumbents in meting violence against organized crime and non-state armed actors. Increases in police violence hence result from unconditional repression (Lessing 2017), police militarization (Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021) or the (lack of) coordination between authorities of different government tiers (Dell 2015; Snyder and Durán-Martínez 2009; Trejo and Ley 2020). However, these studies do not problematize the extent to which police abide with government mandates to adopt more or less bellicose responses to organized crime (see Durán-Martínez 2017 as a partial exception). Therefore, they omit that police may sabotage incumbents by acting more aggressively than what politicians demand, igniting spirals of violence with organized criminal groups (OCGs) and undermining support for governing officials.

The main exception to this pattern is the literature on police and criminal justice reform. Political incumbents have introduced reforms to bring police under the rule of law, reduce its human rights violations, and increase citizen confidence. Many studies have highlighted the various forms of police resistance that have undermined reform processes (see Arias and Ungar 2009; Cruz 2011; Eaton 2008; González 2020; 2023; Hinton and Newburn 2009; Skogan 2008; and Tankebe 2010, among others). However, even this literature does not contemplate scenarios in which police defy politicians' mandates not by ramping up violence (i.e., sabotage) but by refraining from more aggressive enforcement, i.e., shirking.

In sum, the most relevant literatures on police violence do not sufficiently problematize the relationship between police and government officials, assuming police compliance with political mandates and overlooking different police responses. By contrast, my framework underscores the less examined scenarios of police administration of violence in defiance of its political principals (sabotage and shirking), providing a fuller picture of how police manage violence to buttress or undermine incumbents, in other words, to influence politics.

Additionally, my framework bridges various police violence literatures, which alternatively focus on routine or exceptional use of force. While the former focuses on tough-on-crime policies intended to combat "ordinary" crime, the latter concentrates on state confrontations with organized crime. However, this distinction is mostly artificial (see Lake 2022). For one, conventional crimes, such as theft, extortion, and homicides, often supply illicit markets or result from competition between OCGs. Moreover, the same police forces—except for some elite units—usually respond to all these incidents. Even in developed democracies, police tactics formerly reserved for major

security threats such as terrorism or serious organized crime are increasingly applied to address "relatively mundane neighborhood crime" (Bowling, Reiner and Sheptycki 2019, 15). Furthermore, these police forces are subject to the same political principals. Thus, the policy decisions that fuel or restrain police violence against organized criminals probably also hold for its more ordinary interventions. This paper thus presents an integrated framework that theorizes police compliance or defiance toward political incumbents regarding the administration of multiple types of violence.

This integrated framework can thus generate hypotheses that address some empirical gaps in these literatures. For instance, the fact that police militarization—defined as "a combination of equipment, tactics, and culture developed for theaters of war" applied by law enforcement (Mummolo 2021, 1)—does not necessarily translate into higher police lethality. Colombia and Perú, which possess highly militarized national police forces, exhibit relatively low lethal interventions compared with the rest of Latin America. Similarly, while all Brazilian states have a Military Police in charge of street patrol and crime repression, there is significant subnational variation in their respective lethality rates.<sup>4</sup> In other words, militarized police might behave more or less violently depending on their incentives to comply with incumbents' demands for more proactive enforcement. This framework could also complement analyses of the relationship between security sector institutional designs and police violence. For example, while Arriola and his co-authors argue that a more fragmented police apparatus will increase violence due to lack of coordination and information sharing between forces (Arriola et al. 2021), police violence can vary over time as well as within countries under identical institutional designs. Consequently, we should also pay attention to levels of police compliance with governing politicians in those institutional settings.

In the following section, I outline a theoretical framework that conceptualizes police administration of violence as the outcome of strategic interactions between politicians and police, whereby the former can either incite or restrain violence, and the latter can either comply with or defy such directives. Four different types of police responses emerge: *peacekeeping*, *punishing*, *sabotaging* and *shirking*. Using illustrations from multiple national and subnational cases, I show how this typology constitutes a novel, integrated approach to the politics of police violence and a new lens to understand variation in this outcome.

## An Integrated Theoretical Framework of Police Politics and Violence

### Defining Police and Violence

I treat the police as a unified actor. This includes street-level police officers who constitute the bulk of the

organization, are the ones most likely to encounter (and engage in) violence, and “comprise the most visible face of the state for many civilians” (Lake 2022, 858), as well as the high-ranking officers who most frequently engage with political superiors and make the first crucial choice to abide or defy their mandate. While I recognize that police commanders and rank-and-file have different incentives and their own principal-agent problems (Brehm and Gates 1999), I consider them as a singular actor in this simplified framework to center on their general organizational incentives to comply with or defy political incumbents. I will describe how this assumption may be relaxed in the final section.

This framework intentionally neglects officers whose main duties involve criminal investigations—except when they use torture when questioning a suspect (Ralph 2020)—intelligence operations, and administrative tasks, such as training, bookkeeping, technical support, and internal oversight, since they are not as frequently put in positions where they need to resort to violence. It also excludes other agencies that carry out policing functions—such as the military, customs, and border patrol—since these have different institutional mandates, socialization processes, and relations with politicians and the public. Finally, this framework also sidelines non-state actors who, whether due to state absence, forbearance, or complicity, maintain a given social order within their communities through surveillance and the threat of sanction, such as neighborhood patrols, self-defense groups, vigilantes, and organized criminal groups (Arias 2017; Bateson 2021; LeBas 2013; Moncada 2021). While these actors can engage in *policing*, being outside the state releases them from certain requirements that are fundamental to the *police* as a differentiated, specialized institution (Bowling, Reiner, and Sheptycki 2019, 5–8). Unlike the police, they are not “equipped, entitled and required to deal with every exigency in which force may have to be used” (Bittner 2001, 299).

Violence is quintessential to police work. As Bittner (1970) has stated, the potential to use violence, even if its application is almost always unnecessary, “constitutes the quotidian power of policing.” Similarly, Seigel claims that the potential (use of) violence is the essence of [police] power (2018, 9). The centrality of violence to policing explains why politicians, democratic or authoritarian, would be strongly interested in harnessing that potential, whether to mitigate or exacerbate it. Where my framework differs from these sociological analyses is that it problematizes the role of police within the state, given the conflict it might have with governing politicians. I also focus on a narrower definition of police violence as the realm in which these potential conflicts manifest.

I define police violence as the use of force by on- or off-duty police officers that results in the death or injury of an individual. While building on the World Health

Organization’s definition of violence,<sup>5</sup> mine is more restricted in three ways. First, it does not include the threat to use force, which is less observable, frequently unreported, and more likely to be (mis)construed by officers as appropriate “warnings.” Second, I focus on the direct physical effects on victims and thus exclude potential manifestations of violence such as “psychological harm, maldevelopment and deprivation,” because these could arise from indirect as well as direct exposure to police brutality, making it difficult to ascertain how many individuals should be considered victims of police violence. Third, I focus on violence against individuals rather than groups or communities. While individuals are often victimized by police because of their real or perceived association with certain groups, this is not always apparent or easy to corroborate. Furthermore, individuals can possess multiple identities. In short, a police force is more violent than another—or when compared with itself over time—if its members resort to interventions involving bodily harm against individuals more frequently and systematically.

This definition is agnostic to the purpose for which police employ force and its legitimacy, which is usually defined *ex post* and is highly contested. While this paper’s empirical analysis mostly focuses on one form of police violence, that is, lethal interventions by police officers,<sup>6</sup> the framework can also apply to other non-lethal forms, such as non-fatal shootings, beatings, torture, and repression of social protests.

The definition encompasses off-duty as well as on-duty police officers. When off-duty officers apply violence, whether they identify themselves as law enforcement agents or act covertly, that use of violence is related to their occupation. For instance, off-duty officers can kill individuals when intervening to stop a robbery by using their service weapon, which, in many countries, they can carry home with them (Fyfe 1980). When intervening, they will resort to the practices and techniques acquired during their training and socialization. While off-duty officers can perhaps more easily defy politically enacted restrictions on the use of force because not being in uniform weakens their supervision and increases their impunity, off-duty police can also apply violence in compliance with formal or informal political mandates. For instance, off-duty police can form or join militias or death squads that seek to wipe out presumed criminal elements, which are often sanctioned, if not lauded, by politicians (Cruz 2016). Consequently, in many cases a high share of police killings are carried out by off-duty police officers,<sup>7</sup> who are also killed at high rates.

### ***Politicians Incite or Restrain Violence***

This framework’s other protagonists are national and subnational democratic politicians, that is, elected or appointed government officials in the executive branch



charged with supervising the police, who can either incite or restrain police violence. Examples of these politicians are presidents or prime ministers, governors, mayors, and their respective secretaries or ministers of security, justice, the interior, or defense, depending on the police's position in the government structure. Even in contexts where politicians have limited operational control over the police, they can still designate authorities, approve their budget, enact criminal and procedural codes, and outline strategic security goals, all of which can shape police behavior.

Politicians typically respond to (and subsequently shape) citizens' insecurity concerns by expanding or reducing police discretion to use force, inciting or cracking down on police extralegal violence, and tolerating or combating police participation in non-state armed criminal groups (Cruz 2016). Certainly, citizen interactions with police can affect how the latter carry out their jobs. However, in this two-actor model, citizens only play an indirect role in shaping security policies, as they can influence politicians' decisions through electoral choices, public opinion polls, lobbying, or protests.

Two clarifications are in order regarding this framework's scope conditions. First, I center on politicians in *democratic* regimes, who, in principle, face stronger constraints in their resort to police violence, whether from political opponents, the press, the judiciary, civil society organizations, or the broader public. On average, democratization improves respect for human rights and decreases state repression (Davenport and Armstrong 2004), although this does not negate the presence of authoritarian policing in formally democratic contexts (González 2020). I also focus on democratic settings because clashes between politicians and police over the application of violence are likely more frequent than in authoritarian regimes, where police might have stronger incentives to comply with incumbents, as defiance can result in imprisonment, torture, or even death.

Second, this framework applies to democracies with varying levels of insecurity and violence. While factors such as homicide levels and the power of organized criminal groups surely influence the design and enforcement of policing strategies, similar policies to incite or restrain police violence have been implemented in myriad contexts irrespective of these indicators. The reproduction of broken-windows policing, on the one hand, and community policing, on the other, both originated in the United States and exported to generally more violent Latin American countries, constitute but two examples. More generally, security policies are not intrinsically related to levels of violent crime.

*Policy shifts: Changes in police power.* This paper focuses on policy changes that have the potential to alter the police's core functions, internal procedures, and accountability, subsequently modifying police discretion and its

relative power over citizens and vis-à-vis politicians. These shifts occur as politicians become more involved in determining the criteria by which police will recruit, train, equip, promote, and punish officers, as well as in deciding what the police will do and how they will do it. I focus on politicians' attempts to *modify* regulations that affect the police's propensity to use force, which requires an intention to alter the status quo. When there is no attempt to change policy, I consider politicians as tolerating existing levels of police violence. Governing politicians may issue symbolic gestures to condemn an act of police violence, or to demand greater discretion for police to control crime. However, these actions will not be considered unless accompanied by concrete attempts to modify police functions, accountability mechanisms, or procedural guidelines.

Politicians can change police functions by altering the range of situations in which police should intervene and the guidelines by which those interventions should occur. For instance, politicians can determine that multidisciplinary crisis intervention teams instead of police officers will resolve incidents involving homeless individuals, persons under the effects of psychotropic substances, or persons with mental illnesses (Taheri 2016). Contrarily, they might decide that the police should be the first (and perhaps the only) agency responding to these situations (Stuart 2016). Politicians may also militarize their police, a shift that includes acquiring military equipment, such as automatic weapons, Kevlar vests, or armored vehicles, as well as changing police doctrine, tactics, training and the like. Militarization usually incites police violence, as it projects a "signal from the state that violence is an acceptable means of public control" (Stavro and Welch 2023, 2) and instills officers with a warrior mentality (Mummolo 2018a). Politicians can also informally tolerate or mandate that police abstain from repressing several crimes, from squatting to drug dealing, whether to use their resources more efficiently or to capture rents from these activities (Holland 2017; Flom 2022). Finally, politicians can also alter the broader criminal justice system in which police operate by changing penal or penal procedural codes. They may designate new activities as crimes or decriminalize existing offenses and either expand or limit police prerogatives to arrest, interrogate, and hold suspects in custody (Hausman and Kronick 2021; Magaloni and Rodriguez 2020).

Politicians can also enact policies that affect the police's internal procedures, such as recruitment, training, promotion, and discipline. These are crucial processes that mold police culture and behavior. Politicians can distance themselves from these procedural decisions, including those in relation to the use of force, which police have often used to expand their discretion and shield abusive officers. By contrast, political interventions can, in principle, align police procedures with democratic criteria, for instance,

by ensuring diversity in recruitment and promotion. Of course, political proactiveness can also condone more aggressive law enforcement, such as when politicians promote officers with controversial human rights records.

Finally, politicians can also establish (or eliminate) oversight bodies—such as internal affairs units, auditing offices, ombudspersons, or judicial courts—to monitor police behavior. When adequately equipped, these oversight institutions can have a significant impact in reducing the frequency of human rights violations by the police (Hu and Conrad 2020). However, not all monitoring mechanisms are equally effective. Body-worn cameras that record police interactions with citizens have not reduced the frequency of police use of force (Lum et al. 2020), despite this being one of their primary objectives. Citizen security forums, while theoretically aligned with democratic values, can reinforce exclusionary stereotypes, unequal social relations, and violent policing practices (González and Mayka 2023). In short, the aforementioned policy shifts can serve to either restrain or incite police violence, depending on how they are implemented, and the extent to which police comply with them.

*Politicians' incentives.* Politicians have multiple incentives to enact these various policy shifts. Adopting tough-on-crime positions can deploy a valence issue that attracts various constituencies or helps politicians avoid blame for high-profile crimes (Flom and Post 2016; Holland 2013; Roberts et al. 2002). Easing regulations on the use of force could also gain politicians the trust and support of police officers who cherish greater discretion to deal with criminals or suspects. Officers (and their families) might then rally in support of such politicians come election time (Papanicolaou and Papageorgiou 2016). In some countries, politicians might also enact these changes in search of, or retribution for, contributions from police unions to their campaigns (Zoorob 2019).

Nonetheless, inciting police violence can also be costly for political incumbents. Given police officers' often subpar preparation, the stressful situations they routinely encounter, and the inevitable agency costs involved in monitoring them, incidents involving "unjustifiable" police violence are highly probable. Civil society organizations, rival politicians, and the media can blame incumbents for these incidents, especially when these are perceived as "disproportionate" relative to the risk posed by the victim or harm "innocent bystanders." Subsequently, politicians may face street protests, media probes, legislative inquiries, and even judicial investigations impugning their expansion of police discretion. González has shown how police scandals can unify typically fragmented societal views on policing and ignite reform (González 2020). Furthermore, police brutality can spark violent responses from criminal actors, undermining citizen safety and withering the incumbent's approval.

Restraining police violence is not without costs, either. It requires implementing various policies that increase political supervision of police activities, which demand significant fiscal costs, require trained professionals, and sour police since they reduce its autonomy. Implementation is thus costly and imperfect. Political mandates may be acquiesced by the leadership but then ignored by street-level officers. Reformist politicians have often also faced more aggressive opposition by police, including work stoppages, authorizations to underworld acolytes to commit crimes, and personal threats. Police have even murdered prosecutors and security officials investigating their complicity with organized crime (Cruz 2016, 375). Moreover, public opinion may still criticize incumbents for lingering incidents of police violence or demand more aggressive policing if violent crimes are perceived to increase.

Finally, politicians can also benefit from restraining police violence. Police abuse of force most often targets the poor as well as racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, who may be a key constituency of most politicians—not just center-left progressives. As Wilkinson has shown, Indian politicians are more likely to mandate that police protect Muslim minorities from violence by Hindu majorities when they face more competitive elections or when these minorities are part of their constituency or that of their coalition partners (Wilkinson 2006). Finally, restraining police violence could increase police legitimacy by expanding citizen cooperation with police and increasing its effectiveness (Mazerolle et al. 2013), which can benefit the incumbent by enhancing citizen safety.

### *Police Comply with or Defy the Incumbent*

Police are not unproblematic agents of elected politicians. This judgment does not just apply to rank-and-file officers, who as "street-level bureaucrats" have great discretion to deal with the situations they encounter (Lipsky 2010). Higher-ranking officers can also deviate significantly from politicians' mandates.

The general incentive for police, especially high-ranking officers, to comply with politicians' preferences is straightforward: it can make or break their careers and affect their organization's budget, consequently influencing their subordinates' loyalty. In contexts where politicians can decide or influence police promotions, transfers, or removals, especially where such decisions are typically arbitrary and obscure, it certainly helps officers' careers to have political support—or at least not to have stepped on any major politician's toes. Moreover, politicians can sign off on police budgets, and while the margin to cut police salaries or pensions is likely low, they can impose hiring freezes, cut overtime pay, or slash funds earmarked for upgraded technology, equipment, or infrastructure. Finally, in weakly institutionalized contexts, where police—and

sometimes politicians—partake in illicit enterprises, politicians can offer judicial immunity to police in return for a cut of the rents they extract from crime or the operations they carry out against political opponents (Faull 2007; Flom 2022; Verma 1999).

Given this incentive structure, why and how would police defy politicians and deviate from their mandates? Police may defy incumbents when they perceive that political subservience would harm their individual career trajectory or organizational well-being, whether in terms of material interests, social prestige, or corporate cohesion (Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas 2010). For instance, police can perceive increased political supervision as interfering with their capacity to collect rents from criminal activities, which can be a substantial share of their informal budget. Alternatively, police may interpret the standard goals of punitive policies, such as more arrests, seizures, or clearance rates, as impinging on the flexibility they require to regulate crime (Muir 1979, 10). They may also perceive that punitive policies undermine their social legitimacy and reduce citizens' willingness to cooperate with them, which is fundamental to solve crimes (Denny et al. 2022). Finally, police commanders may worry that political mandates, either inciting or restraining violence, will spark dissatisfaction or dissent amongst their subordinates, thus reducing the organization's cohesion.

When police do not view political mandates as legitimate, they can resist in multiple ways. When politicians incite violence, police can drag their feet, pretending to follow instructions while effectively ignoring them, thus undermining the administration and waiting for a politician more favorable to their interests to come to power (shirking). Alternatively, when politicians seek to restrain violence, police may control crime more aggressively than mandated, whether by engaging in more discretionary stops, searches, and seizures—which are more likely to result in human rights abuses—or by confronting with non-state armed actors (sabotage). In short, while both shirking and sabotage challenge politicians' authority, they involve different actions by the police.

Shirking and sabotaging might be more convenient for police than protesting, which requires greater collective action and produces identifiable ringleaders. Additionally,

the informational advantage that police agents have over their political principals makes shirking and sabotaging more appealing. Negative outputs of police work such as homicides or police brutality can be masked as unavoidable amid confrontations with criminals, or concealed altogether, such as when victims are disappeared. In this sense, my typology sheds light on two understudied scenarios of police defiance against politicians: when they disobey mandates to restrain violence (sabotage) and the less likely but still plausible scenario, where police defy incumbent mandates of punitive policing (shirking). Table 1 shows how the interaction between political decisions and police responses yields four different types of police strategies to administer violence, in other words, to use violence for political purposes.

I label these four types of police administration of violence as 1) peacekeeping, 2) punishing, 3) sabotaging, and 4) shirking. If these outcomes were understood as equilibria, compliance scenarios should be more stable than defiance scenarios. When police comply with politicians, external factors such as societal mobilization against police violence or electoral turnover are necessary for government officials to modify security policies and, subsequently, for police to reevaluate their compliance. Meanwhile, under the police defiance scenarios, conflict should not persist for long. Either politicians will prevail and force police compliance by removing the leadership, changing statutes, and modifying strategies or tactics, or the police will prevail, and politicians will have to modify their initial position, such as by changing cabinet officials, or, more rarely, resigning from office. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the factors that cause political mandates or police compliance (or lack thereof). However, I will address some potential explanations, as well as permutations of this strategic interaction, in the final section.

## Types of Police Administration of Violence

I illustrate this typology using examples of national and subnational governments from formally democratic regimes across developed and developing countries. I use quantitative and qualitative evidence to analyze the extent to which different cases approximate each of these types.

**Table 1**  
**Police administration of violence: types and empirical predictions**

Politicians	Police	
	Comply	Defy
<b>Restrain</b>	<i>Peacekeeping</i> Decrease in police violence	<i>Sabotaging</i> Increase in police violence
<b>Incite</b>	<i>Punishing</i> Increase in police violence	<i>Shirking</i> Decrease/no change in police violence

Source: Author's elaboration.

To classify the cases, I rely on government statistics on police violence—particularly, incidents of lethal force—as well as reports from government offices, human rights organizations, and existing literature. I also draw on interviews with police and politicians conducted between 2012 and 2015 in Buenos Aires and Santa Fe (Argentina) and Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo (Brazil). The emphasis on Argentina and Brazil is significant because they often display similar types, despite significant variation in their respective criminal (and police) violence, strength of organized crime, and underlying socio-economic factors, which suggests the relatively low relevance of these variables in shaping security policies and police compliance. These patterns of police administration of violence occur in various other developing and established democracies, with both high and low levels of insecurity, demonstrating the generalizability of this framework. I use the data to map out a) the most relevant policy decisions concerning police use of force – thus classifying politicians as seeking to restrain or incite these practices; b) the level of police violence, particularly lethal interventions, that follows policy decisions; and c) whether such violence follows or defies government mandates.

This section does not seek to formulate a causal argument, but to demonstrate the utility of this typology in covering police violence as a political response and, subsequently, as a factor influencing—and influenced by—the power dynamic between police and politicians. While most police departments exhibit features of multiple types, the typology is still useful in that several relevant cases can be found at (or near) each extreme type.

### ***Peacekeeping (Preventive Policing)***

The first type, *peacekeeping*, covers contexts in which police comply with politicians' mandates to restrain the use of force. In this type, politicians instruct police to avoid continuous confrontation with criminal actors and forgo, or at least limit, aggressive crime control strategies. To this end, politicians may reduce the scope of situations addressed through forceful tactics, establish de-escalation procedures as the norm for police interactions with citizens, deploy police strategically to minimize confrontations with criminal actors, and promote organizational changes to strengthen relations between police and the community. If the police comply with these policies, one would expect a decrease in the deaths and injuries caused by police as well as in the number of police raids, arrests, and deployment of tactical units.

One of the foremost examples of peacekeeping is the Pacification Police Units (UPP in Portuguese) program carried out in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, which features one of the most violent police forces in the world. This program was most successful between 2008 and 2013, before succumbing to the state's political and fiscal

crises. With newly incorporated police trained in human rights and de-escalation settling permanently in various *favelas*, the state government managed to decrease homicide rates but accomplished an even greater reduction in police lethal interventions. Police, while initially resistant, complied with the government's policy shifts, unlike in other moments in Rio's history. The partisan alignment between the state, local, and federal government<sup>8</sup> ensured political and financial support for this program, thus decreasing motivation for police resistance. As one police commander told me, "If the governor decides he wants to put all the police in the UPP, what can the commander do? He has to obey, otherwise he's out."<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the fact that new recruits were ushered in directly from the academy to the UPPs meant that they would not—in theory—be tarred by the shady practices of veteran officers. The program had a massive impact. Magaloni and her coauthors (2020) estimate that police killings fell by 40% in neighborhoods where UPPs were installed. Throughout the state, police killings decreased from 1330 in 2007 to 400 in 2013. During this period, largely due to the perceived effectiveness of the UPP, the governing party (the PMDB) won three consecutive gubernatorial elections.

Rio offers another effective, albeit more limited, instance where governments successfully restrained police violence. In 2020, the state government enforced a mandate by the Brazilian Supreme Court that suspended police raids into favelas after a fourteen-year-old was killed by the police. Trudeau (2022) reveals that, in the five months after the order was enacted, police lethal interventions decreased by more than 60%. Similarly, in the United States, Mummolo (2018b) reports that police largely complied with changes in protocols for stopping, questioning, and frisking criminal suspects, aimed at decreasing police arbitrary stops which predominantly targeted individuals from racial and ethnic minorities. Several other transitional democracies, including Georgia (Light 2014), Nicaragua (Cruz 2011), and South Africa (Altbeker 2009), successfully reformed their police's organizational structure and operating procedures, and managed to—at least temporarily—reduce police lethality and human rights abuses. Whether through criminal justice or police reforms that restrict police's use of torture during interrogation (Magaloni and Rodriguez 2020), changes in policing strategies—such as in Rio's Pacification program—or temporary suspensions of aggressive tactics, governments *can* effectively extract police compliance and restrain its violence, even where it was previously rampant.

### ***Punishing (Punitive Policing)***

*Punitive policing*, often referred to as tough-on-crime, "mano dura," or law-and-order policies, involves politicians inciting police violence by granting the police more



discretion to use force, and police complying with such directives. In this scenario, politicians may change the criminal justice code or departmental regulations to ease restrictions on police brutality, while also using the bully pulpit to rouse aggressive police behavior. Punitive policing usually results in higher arrest and incarceration rates, as well as increased reports of torture, beatings, and lethal interventions, without decreasing criminal violence or increasing police legitimacy (Braga and Kennedy 2020).

Punitive policing was a recurring security policy in Rio de Janeiro before the advent of the previously described Pacification program. In the mid-1990s, Rio's governor, Marcello Alencar, instituted a system known as "Faroeste" (Far West), which rewarded officers who engaged in more "courageous" actions—including the use of lethal force—with bonuses and promotions. As a former Military Police captain told me, "[Faroeste] rewarded the police force's repressive actions: seizures, arrests, and confrontations, even if they resulted in the death of the criminal; it increased police salaries. *That really mobilized the military police apparatus*, where the value of promotions is huge."<sup>10</sup> This policy shift led to an immediate surge in state violence: police killings in Rio increased by 63% the first year Faroeste was in place, as officers complied with the government's incitement to use (lethal) force (Cano 1997).

Politicians from other countries have enacted similar policy shifts, adopting the rhetoric of zero tolerance policing. When running for the governorship in the province of Buenos Aires, Peronist politician Carlos Ruckauf campaigned (and won) on a security platform that promised to "put bullets into criminals" (López Echagüe 2000). Once in office, he reversed the criminal justice reforms introduced by his predecessor and granted police more discretion to detain, interrogate, and use force against suspects. Reports of police beatings, torture, and killings increased dramatically during his tenure. Many other developing and established democracies have also resorted to punitive policies, expanding criminalization and police discretion, leading to mass incarceration and more casualties of police violence (Bonner 2019; Newburn 2007; Roberts et al. 2002).

Punitive policing is still pervasive across the world. The most extreme contemporary examples are El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele (2019–present) and the Philippines under former president Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2022). In El Salvador, Bukele has tested the boundaries of democracy by declaring a state of exception and suspending various constitutional rights. He has authorized police to lash out against presumed gang members, instituting daily arrest quotas (Renteria 2022), and filling up prisons with detainees, many of whom are still awaiting trial (Phillips 2022).<sup>11</sup> Police compliance has, in this case, proven highly convenient to Bukele, whose popularity sits above a whopping 80% (Galdamez 2022).

This paradigm is not new in El Salvador as in the 1990s, Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA in Spanish) politicians expanded the definition of "gang membership" and deployed mass detentions and incarcerations to harness electoral support (Holland 2013; Wolf 2017).

Meanwhile, in the Philippines, former president Rodrigo Duterte unleashed a no-holds-barred war on drugs since taking office in June 2016. On the eve of his electoral victory, he announced: "You drug pushers, holdup men, and do-nothings, you better get out because I'll kill you" (Baldwin and Marshall 2017). He appointed an officer from his hometown of Davao as the head of the national police and "gave him free rein to roll out Davao's crime fighting model across the Philippines" (Bouckaert 2017). Duterte's war on drugs has led to more than 12,000 killings to date, of which at least 2,555 are attributed to the national police (Jensen and Hapal 2018). Like Bukele, Duterte was not the first to adopt this approach in his country but took it to an unprecedented scale.

### ***Sabotaging (Active Police Defiance)***

Most of the literature on police violence has focused on the previous two types—peacekeeping and punishing—assuming police compliance with governing officials. By contrast, the typology introduced in this paper expands our understanding of police violence as a political response by also exploring how police may administer it *in defiance* of political incumbents, whether through sabotaging or shirking.

*Sabotaging* implies that politicians seek to restrain police violence, but police disobey this directive. In this case, politicians enact restrictive measures, while police officers, whether at the instigation of their commanders or due to internal revolt, adopt unsanctioned aggressive behaviors. This police strategy sabotages politicians' objectives not just because it deviates from the mandate of those who—unlike police—have electoral legitimacy, but also because it increases levels of state—and potentially criminal—violence in the incumbent's district, sparking discontent from civil society, the media, and rival politicians, and undermining the incumbent's support. In other words, police sabotage produces a "negative output" regarding the government's purported goal of decreasing violence and ensuring security (Brehm and Gates 1999). Police sabotage might also compel politicians to remove appointed security officials, reverse their policy course, or even resign their position. In short, this type of administration of violence involves the police actively defying political orders and ramping up violence against civilians (or even politicians themselves) to undermine or destabilize the incumbent.

Sabotage was a frequent reaction by police to the myriad reform attempts promoted by politicians in transitional democracies during the 1980s and 1990s, as they sought

to cleanse departments from the violent and corrupt reputation they had (appropriately) gained during the preceding dictatorships. Reformist politicians often encountered active resistance from the police when they attempted to restrain its use of lethal force. In Rio de Janeiro, populist governor Leonel Brizola (1982–1986) attempted to democratize the state’s Military Police by prioritizing the protection of human rights, changing training modules, and restricting police operations in marginalized neighborhoods. Subsequently, he endured not just police protests but also a flurry of police killings and acts of criminal violence authorized by police to undercut his effort (Hollanda 2005; McCann 2014). The ensuing violence sapped Brizola’s popularity and aided the election of his rival, Wellington Moreira Franco, who reversed his predecessor’s security policies and expanded police discretion to raid favelas and apply lethal force (Arias 2017, 67). The governor of neighboring São Paulo, Franco Montoro (1982–1986), faced similar sabotage ploys from the Civil and Military Police to derail his reform efforts in the early 1980s (Caldeira 2000; González 2020; Mingardi 1992).

Meanwhile, in Argentina, the police of the province of Buenos Aires carried out similarly destabilizing maneuvers against reformist politicians in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In response to government interventions, which included widespread police purges, crackdowns on police rackets, and greater political supervision, police threatened politicians, enabled their underworld associates to commit violent crimes, and increased use of deadly force against alleged criminals (Saín 2004; 2008). Their strategy seemed to work as, between 1996 and 2004, Buenos Aires’ three governors shuffled fourteen security ministers, some of whom remained in office for only a few months and most of whom left due to police resistance to their authority. A former security minister described the police’s intimidatory practices following the onset of reform at length:

I faced great opposition, with tons of criticisms in the sense of underground stuff. I was public enemy number one. When the police chief left, they had a dinner in which they placed a doll with my face at the end of the table and urinated on it. We had to raid police stations to sequester documents, with police we trusted. How did that end: with threats, phone calls ... I had moved and three days later the front of my house was shot. It was a threat because they knew I wasn’t there. They took pictures of one of my kids.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, in the neighboring Argentine province of Santa Fe, various security officials of two Socialist administrations (2008–2016) recounted the pressures and intimidation they faced during their attempts to reform the police. One former security minister told me that he found notes in his desk that said, “Get out, usurper,” was constantly followed, and stopped going to the cafeteria for fear that police had poisoned his food.<sup>13</sup> He resigned after suffering a near heart attack. Another former minister

described the police’s intimidatory capacity quite graphically: “Hitting these guys in the head requires a big dick. The police know everything about you.”<sup>14</sup> The failure of their intended reforms, in large part due to police resistance, did not directly increase police violence, but enabled the proliferation of drug trafficking rackets with police complicity, which contributed to a doubling of homicide rates in the province between 2008 and 2013 that undermined the government’s popularity.

Many other cases of police reforms succumbing to violent police resistance have been documented. Tankebe has argued that some African police forces have used violence in defiance of the incumbent to enhance their own legitimacy among the population (Tankebe 2010). Cruz has shown that police in Honduras have even murdered prosecutors and political officials who were investigating their corrupt practices (Cruz 2016).

The police’s unsanctioned use of violence, whether directed against citizens or politicians themselves, sends a clear political signal of the extent to which the force will tolerate changes that threaten its interests and power, including its rent extraction from criminal enterprises. While perhaps less frequent than non-violent resistance, it is a recurring strategy used by police to oppose, undermine, and even destabilize the political principals they supposedly serve.

### *Shirking (Passive Police Defiance)*

Finally, police can deviate from politicians’ mandates by not abiding with incumbents’ orders to carry out more aggressive enforcement. I refer to this strategy as *shirking* or *passive police defiance*. In this scenario, police commanders might prefer to maintain their institutional legitimacy and protect their officers’ physical integrity rather than follow controversial political mandates. While politicians may incite police violence through policies and discourse, police can exploit informational asymmetries or policy ambiguities to avoid or minimize confrontation with organized criminal actors, aggressive crime control, or brutal repression of social protests (Brehm and Gates 1999; Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas 2010, 396). While politicians might turn a blind eye toward police defiance if police are able to maintain acceptable levels of social order, this equilibrium might not endure if police passivity leads to dramatic increases in violent crime. In such cases, politicians are likely to change police authorities and modify institutional incentives to seek greater police compliance.

This response is the rarest for multiple reasons. Police officers often self-select into an occupation that involves the exercise of violence (Dharmapala, Garoupa, and McAdams 2016). Therefore, they are more likely to align with (and obey) politicians who espouse punitive policies. Furthermore, politicians might try to conceal situations

where police officers question their authority. They might, therefore, reframe their directives to police commanders or shift their public stance.

A highly controversial episode involving police violence in Argentina illustrates the dynamics of police shirking. In 2018, center-right president Mauricio Macri (2016–2019) and his security minister Patricia Bullrich publicly congratulated a police officer who had shot and killed a fleeing criminal while off-duty. Bullrich subsequently expanded the federal security forces' authorization to use firearms, further legitimating this officer's actions—and signaling greater tolerance of aggressive enforcement to other officers.<sup>15</sup> This was not the first time that the administration had sided with security forces amid allegations of human rights violations or expressed support for a tougher stance on crime.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, according to the human rights organization Center for Legal and Social Studies (CELS), police killings in Greater Buenos Aires—which is under jurisdiction of the Federal security forces as well as the police of the province and the city of Buenos Aires, all of which were governed by members of Macri's center-right party—decreased by 21% from 116 in 2018 to 91 in 2019, whereas they had been stable the previous two years (117 and 107, respectively) (Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales 2023). There was also a 25% drop in the number of police killed that same year (from 31 to 23), which could indicate that officers were evading riskier encounters. The fact that Macri's administration was in its final year and declining in popular support due to the growing economic crisis could be an explanation for this police response.

Police shirking in law enforcement can also be observed in how some forces respond to social protests. While these demonstrations frequently break the law, police will often take an arm's length approach or use "velvet gloves" rather than "iron fists" to handle these events, thus avoiding confrontations with activists and potential repercussions for themselves (Earl 2011). In this vein, Bolkvadze and Lindvall show that police in London and Paris have frequently chosen to manage or stand back from protests rather than repress them. For instance, during the 2011 London riots following the murder of a British man of African-Caribbean descent, police refrained from repression partly because they were "worried about accountability should they act improperly in the lens of the media" (Briggs 2012, 388–89, quoted in Bolkvadze and Lindvall 2022, 27). While the government may initially be supportive of tougher enforcement, police might not trust that the government will uphold that stance in the face of media scrutiny. They might also fear that they will be investigated and disciplined by the political opposition or the courts, regardless of the incumbents' support.<sup>17</sup>

In some cases, police shirking can also prove destabilizing toward administrations. When former Bolivian president Evo Morales ordered police forces to repress protests

against his controversial victory in the 2019 elections, the police not only refused to follow this mandate but ultimately joined the protesters against the government (Collins 2019). This institutional refusal paved the way for Morales' undemocratic ousting from office. Former Peruvian President Pedro Castillo experienced a similar fate when he tried to impose a self-coup in late 2022 (Buschschluter 2022). Although there is no counterfactual, one can assume that the costs of police repression, not just in terms of lives lost but also of political legitimacy, would have been substantial, perhaps also leading to the president's early exit from office.

Despite the punitive mandates of executive politicians, officers' self-selection toward violent occupations, and the level of conflict and risk they encounter, police forces have repeatedly deviated from carrying out politicians' calls for greater violence. Like the military, which can opt to not repress civilian uprisings, defying politicians' orders—and thus seriously undermining their power—police can also challenge mandates of aggressive enforcement when they perceive them to conflict with their individual or collective interests.

## Avenues for Further Research

This paper has developed a typology that illustrates how police use violence politically. This typology is premised on the fact that politicians can incite or restrain police violence and police can either comply with or defy these mandates. The resulting police responses (*peacekeeping*, *punishing*, *sabotaging*, and *shirking*) can boost or undermine the popularity of elected officials, aiding their reelection prospects or forcing them to alter their policy course. In other words, police can administer violence as a tool to influence political processes and outcomes. To conclude, I outline potential theoretical extensions and empirical applications of this framework.

One first line of future research could involve identifying the factors that lead to each scenario in the typology. In other words, what causes police to abide with or defy politicians' mandates to restrain or incite violence? This line of research could focus on factors such as institutional fragmentation, political competition, or police cohesion. First, scholars could explore whether police compliance is more or less likely in centralized or decentralized institutional contexts and examine this interaction as a multi-level game, where politicians in one government tier have the option to rely, at least temporarily, on another security provider, such as federal forces, if their own police rebel. Second, researchers could examine if politicians are more or less capable of controlling police use of force when facing stronger external veto players, internal divisions, or proximity to elections. Police, like any political actor, observe and interpret the incumbent's relative power and are likely to respond strategically, with greater compliance when the incumbent is stronger and higher defiance when

it is weaker. Third, further research can also relax the assumption presented here of police as a unitary actor, examining how potential tensions between lower- and higher-ranking officers and the force's cohesion (or lack thereof) can affect its compliance and use of violence.

Future research might also use this framework to develop and test various hypotheses involving different modalities of police violence, whether as an outcome or explanatory factor. In either case, there is a pressing need for more data on the evolution of police violence over time, across national and subnational contexts. Presently, despite the magnitude of this phenomenon, this information is wanting, partly due to governmental incentives to conceal this data and diverging definitions of police violence—even of what constitutes lethal encounters—across contexts. Furthermore, greater disaggregation between different types of police violence, such as beatings, torture, repression of social protests, and forced disappearances, and more detailed information on when, where, and how these incidents occur, and who is involved, whether as a perpetrator or victim, is also required. With this data, scholars could test multiple hypotheses regarding the social, institutional, and political determinants of police violence.

Finally, this framework can ignite a discussion on police as organized actors and on the relation between police discretion, and administrative and political control. Police departments are often considered cohesive entities given the combined influence of hierarchical chains and solidarity bonds. At the same time, classical police studies contend that there are multiple types of police officer personalities in terms of their expectations, motivations, and behavior (Brown 1981; Muir 1979; Wilson 1968). How these dissimilar police personas coalesce into a cohesive collective response that can influence politicians' behavior demands further inquiry.

Violence is not the only mechanism through which police respond to or seek to influence politics. Police can also lobby the government through formal and informal means, run for elective office (Novaes 2023), emit declarations through their unions—where these exist—and organize strikes, street protests, and work stoppages to pressure incumbents or obstruct policy changes (Jauregui 2022). Future studies could also evaluate what makes police shift from non-violent to violent organizational responses and the respective effectiveness of those strategies.

Forthcoming studies of the internal politics of the police could thus engage with three questions. First, what are the mechanisms connecting the actions of individual officers with those of their peers and superiors, and with the institution as a whole? Second, how and why do police forces vary in their internal cohesion? And finally, how do police adjudicate between violent and non-violent strategies to manifest their opposition to the government?

Answering these questions might not just enhance theories on policing but also serve policymakers and activists seeking to address the negative political and social effects of police violence.

Across democracies in Latin America, Asia, Africa, or the United States, how and to what extent the police apply force is a crucial yet still under-examined question. The potential to use violence in the name of the state against its own citizens is a defining attribute of police forces. However, police deployment—or withdrawal—of violence often contravenes the interests and demands of governing politicians. In other words, sometimes the state's legitimate monopoly of violence is challenged not by non-state armed actors but by conflicts within the state itself. This paper has presented a typology of police's administration of violence, either in compliance with or defiance of political mandates, to nurture this discussion.

## Acknowledgments

I sincerely thank the editors and four anonymous reviewers for their gracious and insightful comments to this manuscript. Belén Milmanda deserves special credit for her extremely helpful reviews over numerous iterations of this paper. For their wonderful inputs on earlier versions, I am grateful to Juan Albarracín, Leonardo Arriola, Marcelo Bergman, Mariela Daby, Lucía Dammert, Leslie MacColman, Marcelo Saín, Lucía Tiscornia, and participants at the 2023 APSA and IPSA conferences. All remaining mistakes are my own.

## Notes

- 1 I acknowledge that police can exercise violence through other means beyond firearms. However, this is the instrument most specific to police officers and most likely to result in greater casualties.
- 2 Examples of these politicians are presidents or prime ministers, governors, or mayors—depending on the decentralization of police forces—and their respective secretaries or ministers of security, justice, the interior, or defense, depending on where the police fit in the government structure.
- 3 My framework also engages with applications of principal-agent theory to human rights violations (see DeMeritt 2015; Mitchell 2004).
- 4 Between 2012 and 2020, the average rate of police killings ranged between 0.3 per 100,000 in the Federal District and 6 per 100,000 people in Pará (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2021).
- 5 The World Health Organization defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death,



- psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation" (Krug et al. 2002, 5).
- 6 Police lethal interventions are also the easiest type of police brutality to quantify. Nonetheless, many countries do not systematically compile this data and, where it exists, it is subject to multiple issues of reliability.
  - 7 In Brazil, for example, off-duty officers were responsible for around 60% of deaths from police interventions between 2012 and 2020 (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2023).
  - 8 The dominant party at the municipal and state-level, the PMDB, was a key partner in the Workers' Party's federal governing coalition.
  - 9 Author interview with former Military Police colonel, Rio de Janeiro, September 19, 2014.
  - 10 Author interview with former Military Police captain, Rio de Janeiro, September 4, 2014, emphasis added.
  - 11 Between March 27 and June 27, 2022, the police arrested over 43,000 people, jailing more than 1% of the country's population.
  - 12 Author interview with Eduardo De Lazzari, former Buenos Aires security secretary, July 7, 2012.
  - 13 Author interview with Daniel Cuenca, former Santa Fe security minister, Rosario, November 20, 2013.
  - 14 Author interview with Leandro Corti, former Santa Fe Security minister, Santa Fe, November 14, 2013.
  - 15 Resolution 956/2018, approved on November 27, 2018.
  - 16 The most dramatic episode occurred in August 2017, when Minister Bullrich squarely defended the National Gendarmerie against accusations that they had "disappeared" an activist in the southern region of Patagonia. The activist's body was found two months later. The autopsy ruled that no external actors were involved in his death.
  - 17 This logic might also have applied in the Argentine case described in the Shirking subsection. Chocobar's judicial prosecution might have weighted more on the minds of other officers than the support he received from Macri and Bullrich in influencing his peers' behavior.
- ## References
- Altbeker, Antony. 2009. "The Building of a New South African Police Service: The Dynamics of Police Reform in a Changing (and Violent) Country." In *Policing Developing Democracies*, ed. Mercedes Hinton and Tim Newburn, 260–79. London: Routledge.
- Arias, Enrique D., and Daniel M. Goldstein, eds. 2010. *Violent Democracies in Latin America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Arias, Enrique D., and Mark Ungar. 2009. "Community Policing and Latin America's Citizen Security Crisis." *Comparative Politics* 41(4): 409–29.
- Arias, Enrique Desmond. 2017. *Criminal Enterprises and Governance in Latin America and the Caribbean*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Arriola, Leonardo R., David A. Dow, Aila M. Matanock, and Michaela Mattes. 2021. "Policing Institutions and Post-Conflict Peace." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65(10): 1738–63.
- Baldwin, Clare, and Andrew R.C. Marshall. 2017. "How a Secretive Police Squad Racked up Kills in Duterte's Drug War." *Reuters*, December 19. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/philippines-drugs-squad/>.
- Bateson, Regina. 2021. "The Politics of Vigilantism." *Comparative Political Studies* 54(6): 923–55.
- Bittner, Egon. 1970. "The Functions of the Police in Modern Society: A Review of Background Factors, Current Practices, and Possible Role Models." November. Chevy Chase, MD: National Institute of Mental Health.
- . 2001. "Florence Nightingale in Pursuit of Willie Sutton." *Deviance et Societe* 25(3): 285–305.
- Bolkvadze, Ketevan, and Johannes Lindvall. 2022. "Policing Protests: Theory and Evidence from Paris and London." *Working Paper*. Presented at Public Services in Comparative and Historical Perspective Workshop, Gothenburg University, October 27–28.
- Bonner, Michelle D. 2019. *Tough on Crime: The Rise of Punitive Populism in Latin America*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Bouckaert, Peter. 2017. "License to Kill." *Human Rights Watch*, March 2. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/03/02/license-kill/philippine-police-killings-dutertes-war-drugs>.
- Bowling, Benjamin, Robert Reiner, and James W. E. Sheptycki. 2019. *The Politics of the Police*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Braga, Anthony A., and David M. Kennedy. 2020. *A Framework for Addressing Violence and Serious Crime: Focused Deterrence, Legitimacy, and Prevention*. Elements in Criminology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brehm, John O., and Scott Gates. 1999. *Working, Shirking, and Sabotage: Bureaucratic Response to a Democratic Public*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Briggs, Daniel. 2012. *The English Riots of 2011: A Summer of Discontent*. Hook, Hampshire, UK: Waterside Press.
- Brinks, Daniel M. 2008. *The Judicial Response to Police Killings in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Brodeur, Jean-Paul. 1983. "High Policing and Low Policing: Remarks about the Policing of Political Activities." *Social Problems* 30(5): 507–20.
- Brown, Michael K. 1981. *Working the Street: Police Discretion and the Dilemmas of Reform*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

- Buschschluter, Vanessa. 2022. "Pedro Castillo: Peru's Leader Ousted over 'Rebellion Attempt.'" *BBC News*. December 8. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-63899457>.
- Caldeira, Teresa P. R. 2000. *City of Walls : Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Caldeira, Teresa P.R., and James Holston. 1999. "Democracy and Violence in Brazil." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41(4): 691–729.
- Cano, Ignacio. 1997. *Letalidade Da Ação Policial No Rio de Janeiro*. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: ISER.
- Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales. 2023. "Violencia policial: datos estadísticos". Retrieved Jan. 5, 2024. <https://violenciapolicial.org.ar/violencia-policial/#!#datos-est>.
- Collins, Dan. 2019. "Bolivian Police in La Paz Join 'mutiny' against Evo Morales." *The Guardian*. November 9. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/09/bolivian-police-in-la-paz-join-mutiny-against-evo-morales>.
- Cruz, José Miguel. 2011. "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America: The Survival of the Violent State." *Latin American Politics and Society* 53(4): 1–33.
- . 2016. "State and Criminal Violence in Latin America." *Crime, Law and Social Change* 66(4): 375–96.
- Davenport, Christian, and David A. Armstrong. 2004. "Democracy and the Violation of Human Rights: A Statistical Analysis from 1976 to 1996." *American Journal of Political Science* 48(3): 538–54.
- Dell, Melissa. 2015. "Trafficking Networks and the Mexican Drug War." *American Economic Review* 105(6): 1738–79.
- DeMeritt, Jacqueline H.R. 2015. "Delegating Death: Military Intervention and Government Killing." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59(3): 428–54.
- Denny, Elaine K., David A. Dow, Wayne Pitts, and Erik Wibbels. 2022. "Citizen Cooperation with the Police: Evidence from Contemporary Guatemala." *Comparative Political Studies* 56(7): 1072–110.
- Dharmapala, Dhammika, Nuno Garoupa, and Richard H. McAdams. 2016. "Punitive Police? Agency Costs, Law Enforcement, and Criminal Procedure." *Journal of Legal Studies* 45(1): 105–41.
- Durán-Martínez, Angélica. 2017. *The Politics of Drug Violence: Criminals, Cops and Politicians in Colombia and Mexico*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Earl, Jennifer. 2011. "Political Repression: Iron Fists, Velvet Gloves, and Diffuse Control." *Annual Review of Sociology* 37:261–84.
- Eaton, Kent. 2008. "Paradoxes of Police Reform: Federalism, Parties, and Civil Society in Argentina's Public Security Crisis." *Latin American Research Review* 43(3): 5–32.
- Fassin, Didier. 2013. *Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Faull, Andrew. 2007. "Corruption and the South African Police Service. A Review and Its Implications." *Institute for Security Studies Papers*, September 1. 150: 20–40.
- Flom, Hernán. 2022. *The Informal Regulation of Criminal Markets in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Flom, Hernán, and Alison E. Post. 2016. "Blame Avoidance and Policy Stability in Developing Democracies: The Politics of Public Security in Buenos Aires." *Comparative Politics* 49(1): 23–42.
- Flores-Macías, Gustavo, and Jessica Zarkin. 2021. "The Militarization of Law Enforcement: Evidence from Latin America." *Perspectives on Politics* 19(2): 519–38.
- Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública. 2021. "Dados Gerais." Retrieved July 15, 2022. <https://forumseguranca.org.br/>.
- Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública. 2023. "Anuário Brasileiro de Segurança Pública." São Paulo: FBSP.
- Fyfe, James J. 1980. "Always Prepared: Police Off-Duty Guns." *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 452(1): 72–81.
- Galdamez, Eddie. 2022. "Nayib Bukele Approval Rating. 87.8% Approval in the Latest Survey!" El Salvador Info. December 13. <https://elsalvadorinfo.net/nayib-bukele-approval-rate/>.
- González, Yanilda M. 2020. *Authoritarian Police in Democracy: Contested Security in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2023. "Reforming to Avoid Reform: Strategic Policy Substitution and the Reform Gap in Policing." *Perspectives on Politics* 21(1): 59–77.
- González, Yanilda M., and Lindsay Mayka. 2023. "Policing, Democratic Participation, and the Reproduction of Asymmetric Citizenship." *American Political Science Review* 117(1): 263–79.
- Gunderson, Anna. 2022. "Who Punishes More? Partisanship, Punitive Policies, and the Puzzle of Democratic Governors." *Political Research Quarterly* 75(1): 3–19.
- Hausman, David, and Dorothy Kronick. 2021. "When Police Sabotage Reform by Switching Tactics." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, February. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3192908>
- Hinton, Mercedes S. 2006. *The State on the Streets: Police and Politics in Argentina and Brazil*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Hinton, Mercedes S., and Tim Newburn. 2009. *Policing Developing Democracies*. London: Routledge.
- Holland, Alisha. 2013. "Right on Crime? Conservative Party Politics and Mano Dura Policies in El Salvador." *Latin American Research Review* 48(1): 44–67.

- Holland, Alisha C. 2017. *Forbearance as Redistribution: The Politics of Informal Welfare in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hollanda, Cristina Buarque de. 2005. *Polícia e Direitos Humanos: Política de Segurança Pública No Primeiro Governo Brizola (Rio de Janeiro, 1983-1986)*. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Editora Revan.
- Hu, Shengkuo, and Courtenay R. Conrad. 2020. "Monitoring via the Courts: Judicial Oversight and Police Violence in India." *International Studies Quarterly* 64(3): 699–709.
- Jauregui, Beatrice. 2022. "Police Worker Politics in India, Brasil, and Beyond." *Policing and Society* 32(3): 271–90.
- Jensen, Steffen, and Karl Hapal. 2018. "Police Violence and Corruption in the Philippines: Violent Exchange and the War on Drugs." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 37(2): 39–62.
- Krug, Etienne G., Linda L Dahlberg, James A Mercy, Anthony B Zwi, and Rafael Lozano, eds. 2002. *World Report on Violence and Health*. Genève: Organisation mondiale de la santé.
- Lake, Milli. 2022. "Policing Insecurity." *American Political Science Review* 116(3): 858–74.
- LeBas, Adrienne. 2013. "Violence and Urban Order in Nairobi, Kenya and Lagos, Nigeria." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 48(3): 240–62.
- Lessing, Benjamin. 2017. *Making Peace in Drug Wars: Crackdowns and Cartels in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Light, Matthew. 2014. "Police Reforms in the Republic of Georgia: The Convergence of Domestic and Foreign Policy in an Anti-Corruption Drive." *Policing and Society* 24 (3):318–45.
- Lipsky, Michael. 2010. *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- López Echagüe, Hernán. 2000. *El Hombre Que Ríe: Biografía Política de Carlos Federico Ruckauf*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana.
- Lum, Cynthia, Christopher S. Koper, David B. Wilson, Megan Stoltz, Michael Goodier, Elizabeth Eggins, Angela Higginson, and Lorraine Mazerolle. 2020. "Body-Worn Cameras' Effects on Police Officers and Citizen Behavior: A Systematic Review." *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 16(3): e1112.
- Magaloni, Beatriz, Edgar Franco-Vivanco, and Vanessa Melo. 2020. "Killing in the Slums: Social Order, Criminal Governance, and Police Violence in Rio de Janeiro." *American Political Science Review* 114(2): 552–72.
- Magaloni, Beatriz, and Luis Rodriguez. 2020. "Institutionalized Police Brutality: Torture, the Militarization of Security, and the Reform of Inquisitorial Criminal Justice in Mexico." *American Political Science Review* 114(4): 1013–34.
- Mazerolle, Lorraine, Sarah Bennett, Jacqueline Davis, Elise Sargeant, and Matthew Manning. 2013. "Procedural Justice and Police Legitimacy: A Systematic Review of the Research Evidence." *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 9(3): 245–74.
- McCann, Bryan. 2014. *Hard Times in the Marvelous City: From Dictatorship to Democracy in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mingardi, Guaracy. 1992. *Tiras, Gansos e Trutas: Cotidiano e Reforma Na Polícia Civil*. São Paulo: Scritta Editorial, Open Page Publisher.
- Mitchell, Neil James. 2004. *Agents of Atrocity: Leaders, Followers, and the Violation of Human Rights in Civil War*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Moncada, Eduardo. 2021. *Resisting Extortion: Victims, Criminals and States in Latin America*. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Muir, William K. 1979. *Police: Streetcorner Politicians*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mummolo, Jonathan. 2018a. "Militarization Fails to Enhance Police Safety or Reduce Crime but May Harm Police Reputation." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115(37): 9181–86.
- . 2018b. "Modern Police Tactics, Police-Citizen Interactions, and the Prospects for Reform." *Journal of Politics* 80(1): 1–15.
- . 2021. "Re-Evaluating Police Militarization." *Nature Human Behaviour* 5(2): 181–82.
- Newburn, Tim. 2007. "'Tough on Crime': Penal Policy in England and Wales." *Crime and Justice* 36(1): 425–70.
- Novaes, Lucas M. 2023. "The Violence of Law-and-Order Politics: The Case of Law Enforcement Candidates in Brazil." *American Political Science Review* 118(1): 1–20.
- O'Donnell, Guillermo. 1993. "On the State, Democratization and Some Conceptual Problems: A Latin American View with Glances at Some Postcommunist Countries." *World Development* 21(8): 1355–69.
- Papanicolaou, Georgios, and Ioannis Papageorgiou. 2016. "The Police and the Far Right in Greece: A Case Study of Police Voting Behaviour in Athens." *Crime, Law and Social Change* 66(4): 397–419.
- Phillips, Tom. 2022. "El Salvador to Escalate Its Security Crackdown after Death of Police Officers." *The Guardian*, June 29. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/29/el-salvador-nayib-bukele-security-crackdown-gangs>.
- Pion-Berlin, David, and Harold Trinkunas. 2010. "Civil Praetorianism and Military Shirking during Constitutional Crises in Latin America." *Comparative Politics* 42(4): 395–411.

- Ralph, Laurence. 2020. *The Torture Letters: Reckoning with Police Violence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Renteria, Nelson. 2022. "In El Salvador's Gang Crackdown, Quotas Drive 'Arbitrary' Arrests of Innocents." Reuters, May 16. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/el-salvadors-gang-crackdown-quotas-drive-arbitrary-arrests-innocents-2022-05-16/>.
- Roberts, Julian V., Loretta J. Stalans, David Indermaur, and Mike Hough. 2002. *Penal Populism and Public Opinion: Lessons from Five Countries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Saín, Marcelo Fabián. 2004. *Política, Policía y Delito: La Red Bonaerense*. 1st ed. Buenos Aires: Capital Intelectual.
- . 2008. *El Leviatán azul: policía y política en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores Argentina.
- Seigel, Micol. 2018. *Violence Work: State Power and the Limits of Police*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sherman, Lawrence W. 2020. "Evidence-Based Policing and Fatal Police Shootings: Promise, Problems, and Prospects." *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 687(1): 8–26.
- Skogan, Wesley G. 2008. "Why Reforms Fail." *Policing and Society* 18(1): 23–34.
- Snyder, Richard, and Angelica Durán-Martínez. 2009. "Does Illegality Breed Violence? Drug Trafficking and State-Sponsored Protection Rackets." *Crime, Law and Social Change* 52(3): 253–73.
- Soss, Joe, and Vesla Weaver. 2017. "Police Are Our Government: Politics, Political Science, and the Policing of Race–Class Subjugated Communities." *Annual Review of Political Science* 20: 565–91.
- Stavro, Martin, and Ryan M Welch. 2023. "Does Police Militarization Increase Repression?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027231187301>
- Stuart, Forrest. 2016. *Down, Out & Under Arrest: Policing and Everyday Life in Skid Row*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Taheri, Sema A. 2016. "Do Crisis Intervention Teams Reduce Arrests and Improve Officer Safety? A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Criminal Justice Policy Review* 27(1): 76–96.
- Tankebe, Justice. 2008. "Colonialism, Legitimation, and Policing in Ghana." *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* 36(1): 67–84.
- . 2010. "Legitimation and Resistance: Police Reform in the (Un)Making." In *Roots, Rites and Sites of Resistance*, ed. Leonidas K. Cheliotis, 197–219. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Trejo, Guillermo, and Sandra Ley. 2020. *Votes, Drugs, and Violence: The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Trudeau, Jessie. 2022. "Limiting Aggressive Policing Can Reduce Police and Civilian Violence." *World Development* 160. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2022.105961>
- Verma, Arvind. 1999. "Cultural Roots of Police Corruption in India." *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* 22(3): 264–79.
- Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wilkinson, Steven. 2006. *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India*. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilson, James Q. 1968. *Varieties of Police Behavior: The Management of Law and Order in Eight Communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 1989. *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*. New York: Basic Books.
- Wolf, Sonja. 2017. *Mano Dura: The Politics of Gang Control in El Salvador*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Zimring, Franklin E. 2017. *When Police Kill*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zoorob, Michael. 2019. "Blue Endorsements Matter: How the Fraternal Order of Police Contributed to Donald Trump's Victory." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 52(2): 243–50.