

The Political Relevance of Foreign Events: Chinese Political Trust following U.S. Mass Shootings

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Abstract

Political evaluations respond to events for which the government is responsible, whether domestic or international. Citizens are also exposed to events abroad with little connection to their own political institutions, but less is known about how such events influence citizens' views of government. This study investigates whether foreign events affect domestic political trust in a state-controlled information environment. In the context of two U.S. mass shootings in 2012, the analysis compares Chinese survey respondents in the days before and after each event. Trust is unchanged following the Aurora theater shooting but increases following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. The effect is concentrated in central government trust and is not accompanied by increases in happiness or national pride. The results are consistent with cross-national benchmarking and suggest that the information environment shapes citizens' interpretations and responses to foreign events. The findings have implications for understanding authoritarian popularity.

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1 Introduction

Citizens evaluate government performance from a variety of domestic experiences that fall within the government’s responsibility, including economic conditions (Fiorina, 1978; Powell and Whitten, 1993), public goods provision (Harding and Stasavage, 2014), and crisis management (Healy and Malhotra, 2009). A separate literature shows that citizens also respond to international events such as conflicts (Oneal and Bryan, 1995), terrorism (Hetherington and Nelson, 2003), and sanctions (Frye, 2019). In these cases, home countries are directly involved and often experience rally-around-the-flag effects.

In contemporary information environments, citizens are regularly exposed to foreign events that are unrelated to their own country or government. Through media coverage and political discussions, elections (Chan, 2024, 2025a), referendums (Walter, 2021; Malet, 2022), economic performance (Kayser and Peress, 2012), public health emergencies (De Vries et al., 2021; Allen and Ahlstrom-Vij, 2025), and other critical events (Böhmelt et al., 2020; Chan, 2025b) in one country can affect attitudes and behavior in other countries. Whether cross-national influences extend to citizens’ evaluations of their own government remains understudied in authoritarian contexts, where state-controlled media frame foreign events for political purposes (Carter and Carter, 2023). This framing can justify policy choices (Alrababa’h and Blaydes, 2021; Wang, 2024), criticize alternative political systems (Deng, 2026), and reinforce the domestic political status quo (Huang, 2025).

Building on the cross-national benchmarking literature, this study argues that foreign events can affect domestic political evaluations by serving as reference points. Such events provide information about alternative political outcomes and may lead citizens to draw comparisons and reevaluate domestic government performance. The effects are likely to be contingent on how foreign events are reported and interpreted within the domestic information environment. Events that reflect underlying social and political conditions are

expected to affect citizens' evaluations of their own government.

To test this argument, the study examines Chinese political trust during two major U.S. mass shootings: the Aurora theater shooting in July 2012 and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in December of the same year. Both events received sustained coverage in China and were reported on *Xinwen Lianbo*, the most authoritative television news program, for about a week after each shooting. The program even broke the norm of covering domestic news before international news by opening its December 15 broadcast with the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting.

The empirical strategy uses an unexpected events during survey design that compares respondents interviewed in the days before and after each event (Muñoz et al., 2020). This approach establishes a baseline, and changes in attitudes can be interpreted as a response to the mass shootings. In 2012, the Chinese General Social Survey was in the field around the Aurora theater shooting on July 20, and later that year the World Values Survey overlapped with the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting on December 14.

The main outcome variable is political trust, which is distinguished between national and subnational institutions. Subject to wording differences and item availability in the two surveys, the former is measured by trust in central government officials, the central government, and the Party. The latter is measured by trust in local government, the civil service, and the police. The aim is to test whether the effects of foreign events on domestic political trust, if any, have spillover across national and subnational levels.

The analysis finds that trust is stable following the Aurora theater shooting and increases following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. The effect appears to concentrate at the national level, reflected by higher levels of trust in the central government and the Party, with no significant changes in trust in the civil service or the police. The results do not support an emotional spillover explanation, as there is no evidence of increases in happiness in either case or national pride in the Sandy Hook case. The findings are consistent with

a cross-national benchmarking interpretation, and suggest that the differences between the two cases may stem from how citizens interpret them, shaped by event characteristics and media framing.

This study contributes to our understanding of the domestic consequences of foreign events. The cross-national learning and benchmarking literature, mostly in democracies, shows that outcomes abroad can shape policy preferences (Böhmelt et al., 2020; Walter, 2021; Malet, 2022; Zhang et al., 2026), electoral behavior (Kayser and Peress, 2012; Chan, 2025b), and institutional evaluations (De Vries et al., 2021; Becher et al., 2024; Allen and Ahlstrom-Vij, 2025). Less is known about whether foreign events affect citizens’ perceptions of their own government in authoritarian contexts (Deng, 2026). By examining Chinese responses to two U.S. mass shootings, this study shows that certain public crises with no connection to the home country can shape political trust.

This study also contributes to our understanding of authoritarian politics. Information about foreign countries is a recurring feature in state-controlled media environments (Carter and Carter, 2023), and citizens factor in changing international conditions in their attitude formation (Huang, 2015, 2025). Relative to research on how propaganda operates through selective coverage (Otlán et al., 2023), agenda setting (Rozenas and Stukal, 2019; Alrababa’h and Blaydes, 2021), and framing (Wang, 2024; Zhong et al., 2025), evidence on whether exposure to foreign events translates into attitude change remains limited. The analysis examines how trust in government responds to foreign events using a natural experiment, complementing existing survey experimental evidence on affective and attitudinal responses (Gruffydd-Jones, 2019; Mattingly and Yao, 2022; Deng, 2026). The differences in findings between the two cases suggest that the domestic effects of foreign events may depend on how citizens interpret them within the domestic information environment (Stockmann, 2013; Chen, 2020; Huang, 2021; Rosenfeld and Wallace, 2024).

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Foreign Events and Cross-National Benchmarking

Citizens' evaluations of the government, including political trust, are rooted in their perceptions of how the government performs (Hetherington, 1998). The retrospective evaluation literature, broadly defined, focuses on domestic events, including economic conditions (Fiorina, 1978; Powell and Whitten, 1993), redistribution (Harding and Stasavage, 2014; Lü, 2014), corruption (Schwindt-Bayer and Tavits, 2016), crisis management (Healy and Malhotra, 2009), and everyday interactions between citizens and the state (Grossman and Slough, 2022). These outcomes are signals of performance because they are widely regarded as government responsibility.

International events in which the home country is directly involved can also affect citizens' political evaluations. Conflicts (Oneal and Bryan, 1995), economic sanctions (Frye, 2019), and terrorism (Hetherington and Nelson, 2003) are likely to generate rally-around-the-flag effects as citizens respond to external threats. These events are often emotional and also provide opportunities for citizens to infer government competence.

In addition to domestic and international events, citizens are also exposed to global events that are unrelated to the actions of their own government. Through the media, citizens can learn about elections and referendums, policy debates and innovations, and political and social movements in other countries. These developments, whether successes or failures, convey information about what is politically viable under different political contexts.

Evaluating government performance requires comparison. Citizens assess outcomes relative to expectations, which can be formed based on past experiences and outcomes abroad. Foreign events can be reference points and thus function as benchmarks against which citizens evaluate domestic governance (Kayser and Peress, 2012; De Vries et al., 2021; Allen and Ahlstrom-Vij, 2025). The range of comparable issues can mirror the contexts studied in the

retrospective evaluation literature.

This comparative evaluation process relates to a broader literature on cross-national learning, including policy diffusion and demonstration effects. At the institutional level, governments adopt policies or reforms after observing changes elsewhere (Graham et al., 2013). At the individual level, observing political violence in another country can reduce support for domestic far-right parties (Chan, 2025b). Electing populist leaders elsewhere can alter citizens’ trust in domestic elections and perceptions of democracy (Chan, 2024, 2025a). Moreover, Malet (2022) show that the France’s rejection of the European Constitution in 2005 lowered support for the same treaty and evaluations of the European Union in other European Union countries. Brexit also affected public opinion in peer countries about the feasibility of leaving the European Union (Walter, 2021).

With some exceptions, relatively few studies examine whether foreign events translate into evaluations of citizens’ own government. Kayser and Peress (2012) show that voters are aware of their country’s economic performance relative to other countries and incorporate this comparison into their vote choice. De Vries et al. (2021) find that COVID-19 lockdowns in Italy increased support for government parties in France, Germany, Poland and Spain. Furthermore, Allen and Ahlstrom-Vij (2025) show that exposing UK respondents to information comparing the UK’s high cumulative COVID-19 deaths to peer countries reduced perceived UK government performance. Together, these findings suggest that under certain conditions, foreign events can shape domestic political evaluations. However, the evidence remains scant, particularly on issues besides the economy and public health, and little is known whether these findings generalize beyond high-income democracies.

2.2 Foreign Events Under Information Control

In contrast to open and competitive media environments, information in authoritarian countries is heavily mediated by the state, including global news. Capable authoritarian

regimes exploit the international environment to reinforce the domestic status quo, which makes reporting on foreign events rarely politically neutral (Carter and Carter, 2023). The political consequences of events abroad depend not only on the events themselves but also on how they are covered and interpreted (Stockmann, 2013).

State-controlled information environments fulfill two critical functions: directing attention and providing interpretation. State media can manipulate salience by selectively covering some events while dismissing others. This strategy is consistent with diversionary politics, which suggests that increasing the salience of external events can redirect public attention away from domestic issues (Levy, 1989). Alrababa'h and Blaydes (2021) show that Syrian media strategically increase or decrease the salience of external threats to align with regime goals. Wang (2024) finds that Chinese media intensify coverage when the state tries to sway the public toward a more hawkish position in international affairs and soften coverage when it prefers a more dovish public response.

When exposed to a foreign event, citizens seek to make sense of the event and understand its causes (Weiner, 1985). Their understandings can be shaped by prior beliefs (Becher et al., 2024), elite cues (Zaller, 1992), and media framing (Iyengar, 1994). Research shows that authoritarian media not only selectively report foreign protests (Otlán et al., 2023), but also tend to frame them as riots and chaos (Zhong et al., 2025). They also use fear-inducing content to depict political and social conditions in democracies as unstable and chaotic, which fosters negative perceptions of democratic governance (Deng, 2026).

Citizens' interpretations, in turn, affect the domestic political consequences of foreign events. For example, politicizing foreign criticisms can shape individuals' perceptions of domestic conditions (Gruffydd-Jones, 2019). Linking unfavorable domestic outcomes, such as economic downturns, to external factors may deflect blame (Rozenas and Stukal, 2019; Elfstrom and Li, 2025). Although citizens do not passively accept official narratives (Rosenfeld and Wallace, 2024), state control over information facilitates cross-national comparison,

with bias in favor of the regime. This leads to my hypothesis:

H1. Exposure to negatively framed foreign events affects citizens' trust in government.

3 Background

3.1 Benchmarking in China

Political trust in China is performance-based (Chen, 2004; Tang, 2016). Evaluating performance, to a large extent, is comparative. The reference points for these comparisons can come from experiences where the government is responsible or from developments in other countries (Liu, 1996; Huang, 2021).

A growing literature examines how the public updates their evaluations of the government in response to a range of domestic events. On the one hand, trust or approval of the government declines following corruption investigations (Wang and Dickson, 2022), air pollution (Alkon and Wang, 2018; Ding, 2022), and public crises (Zhu et al., 2025; Sun, 2026). On the other hand, evaluations can improve with anti-corruption campaigns (Tsai, 2021), expansions in social welfare (Lü, 2014; Dickson et al., 2016), and government responsiveness (Heurlin, 2016; Gueorguiev, 2021). These events are direct signals of government competence and performance.

Citizens also draw on their perceptions of international conditions. They have estimates of living standards in other countries, and correcting misperceptions can change their views of government performance (Huang, 2015). Citizens also hold beliefs about how popular China is on the global stage, and providing survey results in other countries that contradict their beliefs changes their evaluations of the government (Huang, 2025).

Such comparisons are feasible because international news is common in China. State media play an important role in determining which foreign events receive public attention

(Stockmann, 2013). For example, the U.S. is the most frequently mentioned foreign country on *Xinwen Lianbo*, the most authoritative television news program in China. While some coverage is diplomacy-related, broadcasts also include stories about political scandals, domestic issues, and gun violence, as well as natural disasters such as floods and hurricanes in the U.S. (Xu and Clark, 2019).

Reporting on negative foreign events is sometimes framed as evidence of the flaws of alternative political systems, potentially encouraging citizens to compare China’s performance to other countries (Deng, 2026). While the content and framing of propaganda are observable, its effects on public opinion are less studied. To fill this gap, this study uses two widely reported foreign events in China as natural experiments to investigate changes in government trust.

3.2 The Aurora and Sandy Hook Shootings

In 2012, two major mass shootings occurred in the U.S. The first was the Aurora theater shooting on July 20, when a gunman opened fire during a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises* in Aurora, Colorado, killing 12 people and injuring 70 others. Less than five months later, on December 14, a gunman killed 28 people at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut, making it the second deadliest school shooting in U.S. history (Rogowski and Tucker, 2019).

On December 15, *Xinwen Lianbo* opened with the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, a rare departure from the convention of domestic news followed by international news. The only other deviation was the coverage of the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster in 1986.¹ Following President Hu’s condolence message to President Obama, the broadcast described the sequence of the event in detail, including the gunman killing his mother,

¹<https://web.archive.org/web/20121217235031/http://news.163.com/12/1216/05/8IQSI5QF0001124J.html>

carrying out the attack at the school, and taking his own life. It also cited President Obama’s call for action to prevent similar tragedies and referenced earlier school shootings, particularly the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, the deadliest in U.S. history.² Coverage continued for a week, emphasizing the scale of the tragedy, the prevalence of firearms in the U.S., and partisan gridlock over gun control.

In comparison, the Aurora theater shooting also received sustained coverage on *Xinwen Lianbo* for five consecutive days, but with less priority. The event appeared toward the end of the program along with other international news, and the reports largely focused on the incident itself with little discussion of broader social and political conditions in the U.S.³

These two cases are suitable for testing whether negative foreign events translate into changes in domestic political trust. Both were critical events in the U.S. that received sustained coverage in China. Their occurrence in the same year might increase the visibility of U.S. public crises to Chinese audiences, and the timing of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting at the end of the year further intensified coverage. Chinese outlets compiled year-end summaries of U.S. mass shootings in 2012, which presented gun violence not as isolated incidents but as a structural problem and could facilitate comparisons that portrayed the U.S. as dangerous and chaotic and China as safe and secure.

4 Empirical Strategy

To track attitude change during the two mass shootings, I exploit the timing of public opinion surveys that were in the field when the events occurred. This approach, known as the unexpected event during survey design (Muñoz et al., 2020), make a before-and-after comparison possible. The main advantage of this design is that respondents interviewed before the incidents form a natural baseline.

²<https://cctv.cntv.cn/lm/xinwenlianbo/20121215.shtml>

³<https://cctv.cntv.cn/lm/xinwenlianbo/20120720.shtml>

The Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) was conducted between June and December, 2012, with most interviews completed in the first two months.⁴ Figure 1a shows the timing of the Aurora theater shooting relative to interview dates. Respondents interviewed on or after July 21 could have exposure to news of the shooting, and those interviewed on or before July 20 could not anticipate the event.

Wave 6 of the World Values Survey (WVS) was fielded in China between November 2012 and January 2013 (Inglehart et al., 2018). Figure 1b shows the timing of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting relative to interview dates. Respondents interviewed on or after December 15 were likely to become aware of the shooting, and those interviewed on and before December 14 could not anticipate it.

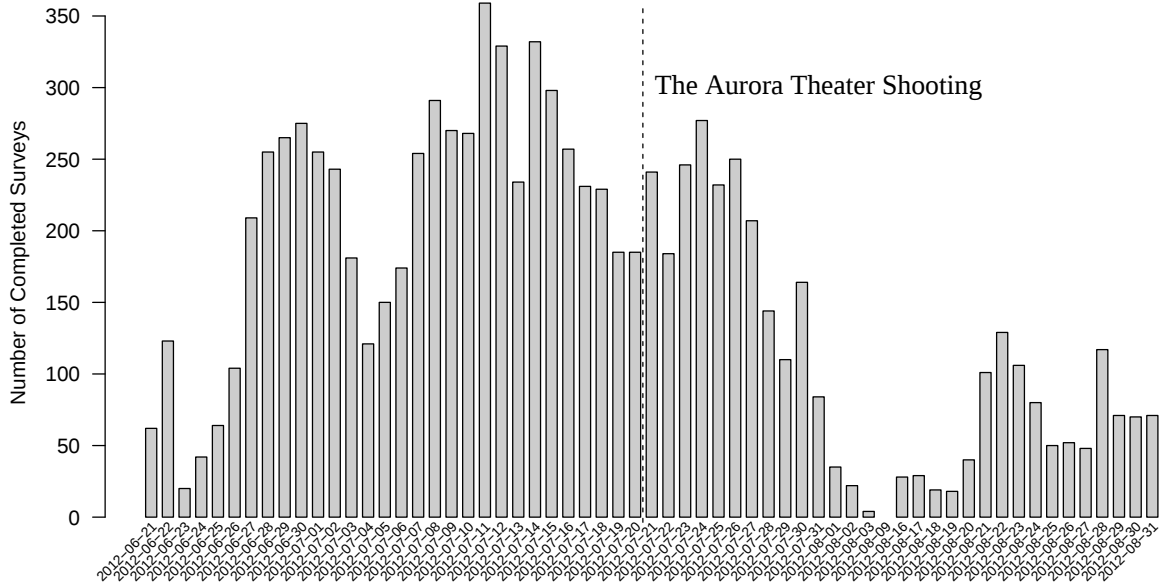
The sample consists of respondents surveyed during the 15 days before and after each event as the control and the treatment groups, respectively (Table A.1-Table A.2). The 15-day window captures public responses during heightened media attention and reflects constraints from survey fieldwork. The CGSS paused shortly after the Aurora shooting and resumed one month later, while the post-event window for the Sandy Hook shooting was limited by the New Year holiday. Public crises such as mass shootings in another country should be independent of survey implementation, which further supports the validity of comparing pre- and post-incident responses.

The main outcome variable is political trust, a standard proxy for regime support and an important concept on its own (Li, 2025). National-level trust is measured on a four-point scale by trust in central government officials in the CGSS and trust in the central government and the political parties as institutions in the WVS. While the question does not specify the parties, respondents are likely to interpret it as referring to the Chinese Communist Party.

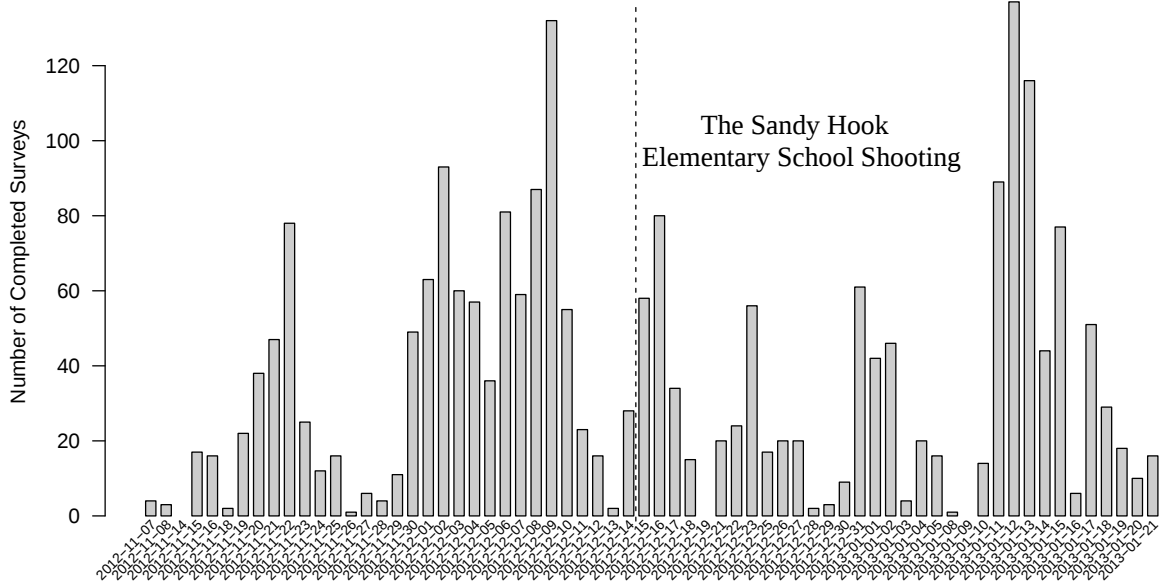
To test for potential spillover effects, the analysis also considers subnational-level trust. The CGSS measures trust in local government officials and the police, and the WVS measures

⁴The CGSS data are available at <http://cgss.ruc.edu.cn>

Figure 1: Survey Timing Relative to Events



(a) Chinese General Social Survey, 2012



(b) World Values Survey China, 2012

trust in the police and the civil service, all of which are conceptually linked to subnational state actors. The full question wording is in Appendix [section A](#).

The estimating equation is:

$$Y_{ip} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 PostEvent_i + \beta_2 X_i + \delta_p + \epsilon_{ip} \quad (1)$$

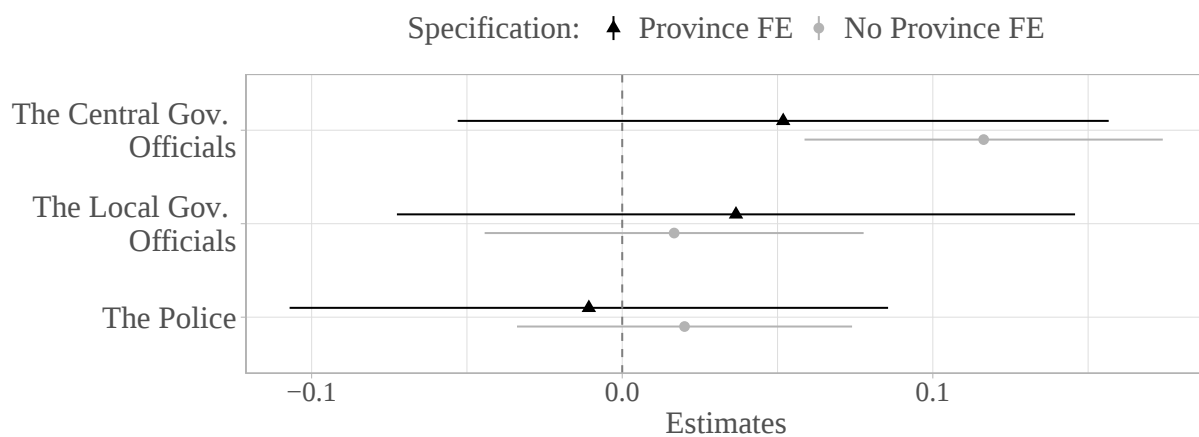
where β_1 is the quantity of interest; Y_{ip} represents the outcome variable; $PostEvent_i$ is an indicator that equals 1 if respondent i is surveyed after the shooting, and 0 otherwise; X_i is the vector of pre-treatment covariates, including gender, age, education, and party membership; and δ_p is province fixed effects. The main specification with province fixed effects improves the comparison between pre- and post-responses by accounting for baseline differences in political trust across provinces, but it reduces the effective sample size by half, as not all provinces are surveyed in both the pre- and post-incident periods. The analysis reports estimates from both specifications.

5 Results

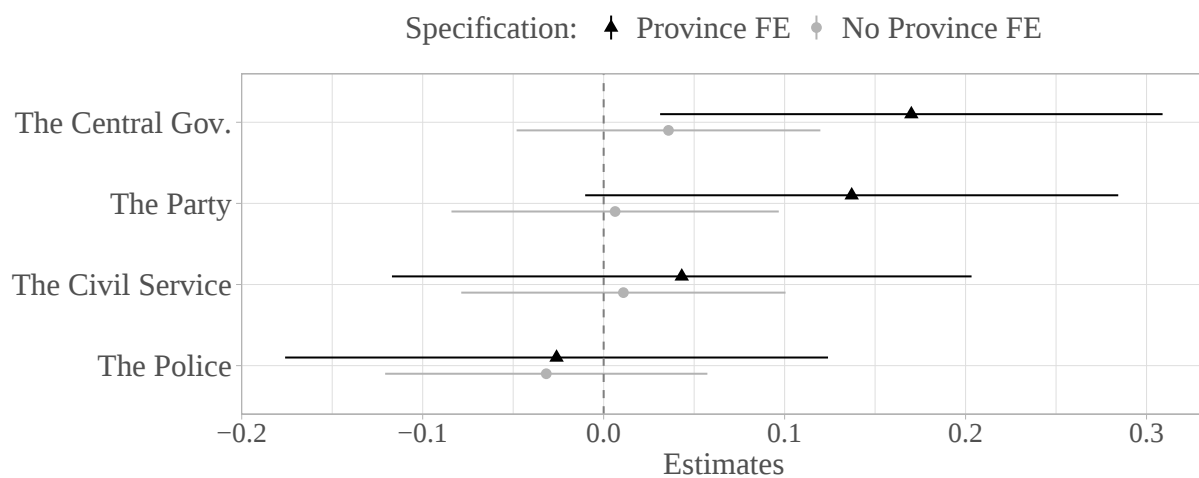
5.1 Political Trust

[Figure 2](#) reports my main results. For the Aurora case ([Figure 2a](#)), the estimated effects depend on model specification. Under the main specification with province fixed effects, the estimated changes on trust in central government officials, local government officials, and the police are small and not statistically significant. The estimates are somewhat different when province fixed effects are excluded. Trust in central government officials increases and reaches statistical significance, while trust in local government officials and the police remain unchanged. This pattern may reflect baseline differences in the provinces represented in the sample before and after the event. Under the main specification, the analysis does not detect

Figure 2: Changes in Political Trust



(a) Aurora Theater Shooting



(b) Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting

Notes: Lines are 95% confidence intervals.

a shift in political trust following the Aurora shooting.

For the Sandy Hook case (Figure 2b), the estimated changes also depend on model specification, but the pattern is reversed. When accounting for province fixed effects, post-incident respondents report higher levels of trust in the central government and the Party than pre-incident respondents. The coefficients on trust in the civil service and the police are close to zero and do not reach statistical significance. Without province fixed effects, the estimates across all outcomes are smaller, and the confidence intervals cross zero. Under the main specification, within-province comparisons provide evidence of increased national-level trust following the Sandy Hook shooting.

Their political updating does not appear to stem from a positive emotional spillover. Prior research shows that non-political events, such as sports, can affect political attitudes through mood (Busby et al., 2017; Chen and MacDonald, 2020). As shown in Figure B.4, no evidence indicates respondents' happiness increases following either shooting. If anything, self-reported happiness moderately declines, while national pride remains unchanged following the Sandy Hook shooting. The lack of mood change is unlikely to explain the increase in political trust.

The results show differences in public responses to the two mass shootings abroad. Political trust in China increases following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting but not the Aurora theater shooting. The effect appears to concentrate at the national level, with limited spillover to subnational institutions. While exploring heterogeneity in treatment effects would be desirable, the number of observations around the events limits statistical power for precise estimation. Substantively, the increase in central government trust is similar in magnitude to some domestic events, such as air quality improvements or offsetting a vaccine scandal (Alkon and Wang, 2018; Zhu et al., 2025).

5.2 Robustness Checks

To test whether the results are sensitive to a particular baseline, the analysis uses respondents surveyed during the 30 days before each event as an alternative control group. [Figure B.1](#) shows that the results are substantively unchanged. The estimates remain small and statistically insignificant across all outcomes for the Aurora case. For the Sandy Hook case, estimates for trust in the central government and the Party are similar and statistically significant, while trust in the civil service and the police are also positive but do not reach statistical significance.

To further examine the validity of the design, I conduct a placebo test that assigns a pseudo-treatment date that splits the control group. As shown in [Figure B.2](#), all estimates are small, with confidence intervals crossing zero in both the Aurora and Sandy Hook cases. The analysis does not detect spurious effects when no event occurs.

An alternative specification uses a sample that excludes respondents surveyed on the day before and on the event day, which accounts for potential misreported dates or ambiguity in news exposure immediately following the event. [Figure B.3](#) shows that, for the Sandy Hook case, the estimates for trust in the central government and the Party are larger as expected, while the estimates for trust in the civil service and the police remain close to zero.

The analysis tests interview conditions as placebo outcomes that should not be affected by the Sandy Hook shooting. The WVS includes interviewer's report on interview conditions, including whether other people were present during the interview and how interested the respondent appeared. Because these measures are unrelated to the treatment, they should remain constant. As shown in [Figure B.5](#), neither interview privacy nor respondent interest changes before and after the Sandy Hook shooting when accounting for province fixed effects. These tests increase confidence in the estimated effects on political trust.

6 Discussion

Why does the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting increase Chinese political trust while the Aurora theater shooting does not? I speculate that political evaluations respond to events abroad when they are seen as benchmarks of government performance. Compared to isolated incidents, events that citizens interpret as reflecting underlying social and political conditions are more likely to lead to cross-national comparisons.

Between the two cases, the Sandy Hook shooting involved young children in an elementary school and nationwide debates over gun control, and Chinese media emphasized recurring mass shootings and institutional deadlock in the U.S. Given these event characteristics and media framing, the public was more ready to interpret the Sandy Hook shooting as an outcome of systemic failure. By contrast, the Aurora shooting could be viewed as an isolated tragedy. Thus, the Sandy Hook case, including the event itself and subsequent media coverage, became a more effective benchmark that prompted Chinese respondents to update their trust in government.

An addition factor to consider is that the Sandy Hook shooting occurred on the same day as the Guangshan school knife attack in a village in Henan, China. Although the domestic incident received relatively limited coverage, their concurrence might increase the issue salience of school safety and facilitated comparisons between school violence in the U.S. and China. This interpretation should be viewed as suggestive because the analysis cannot disentangle the independent effects of the two events.

This argument helps to clarify findings between [Deng \(2026\)](#) and this study. One treatment in [Deng \(2026\)](#)'s survey experiments provides Chinese respondents with statistical information about gun violence in the U.S., and the results show more negative perceptions of foreign countries with no improvement in evaluations of the home country. This study finds that Chinese political trust does not increase following the Aurora shooting. These

results show that salience alone is not enough for foreign events to function as benchmarks.

Why do state media spend resources covering foreign events if not all of them produce political benefits? A simple possibility is that international news is sometimes filler, particularly in the absence of critical or contentious domestic news. The restraint of not politicizing every episode of foreign events has implications for understanding propaganda. As existing research indicates, propaganda may shape emotions (Mattingly and Yao, 2022), policy preferences (Yang and Zhu, 2025), and views of other countries (Deng, 2026), but its ability to shift deeper political support appears more constrained.

The results also hint at an additional explanation for the hierarchical trust pattern in China (Li, 2025). Existing explanations such as different conceptualizations of the government and media freedom (Chen, 2020; Li, 2025), focus on the domestic scope. In cross-national contexts, when foreign benchmarks are deemed favorable for the home government, they tend to increase national-level political trust.

7 Conclusion

In the context of two U.S. mass shootings, this study finds that Chinese political trust increases following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting but not the Aurora theater shooting. The results suggest that foreign events can change how citizens evaluate their own government, but only some lead to cross-national comparisons. Whether citizens see these events as benchmarks may depend on how they interpret them, which can be shaped by event characteristics and media framing in a state-controlled information environment.

While the analysis examines trust in government, it falls short of exploring other attitudinal outcomes, such as policy preferences and evaluations of the U.S. political system. Another limitation is that while the analysis rules out a positive emotional spillover, it cannot measure more specific emotions, such as anxiety or fear, which may be associated with political trust

in asymmetric ways. Having these measures would provide a more complete understanding of emotional responses during these emotionally charged events.

This study opens avenues for future research on the domestic political consequences of foreign events. One direction is to expand the range of events. Events in different issue domains, such as infrastructure failures, industrial accidents, and financial crises, as well as positive events, such as effective disaster relief, technological achievements, and record-high stock markets may vary in perceived relevance and the extent to which they lead to cross-national comparisons.

Another direction is to examine the cross-national context in which foreign events are interpreted. To Chinese audiences, the U.S. is a natural target of comparison for geopolitical reasons. In other cases, neighboring countries with similar demographic compositions or countries within a supranational entity, such as the European Union, may be more meaningful reference points (Malet, 2022). The effects of foreign events may depend on the countries involved.

A third direction is to explore the interaction between domestic and foreign events. Similar incidents may occur across countries, sometimes within the same period, such as weather-related disruptions. An important question is whether citizens apply consistent standards in evaluating government performance or instead engage in motivated reasoning based on prior beliefs or social identities (Rogowski and Tucker, 2019; Becher et al., 2024). Further understanding of foreign events can shed light on how citizens use global information to evaluate their own governments in both authoritarian and democratic settings.

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Appendix

A Variables and Summary Statistics

Table A.1: Summary Statistics of the Chinese General Social Survey
(± 15 Days Around the Aurora Theater Shooting)

	Control Group			Treatment Group		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
Trust in central gov.	2.033	0.745	1932	2.126	0.765	1038
Trust in local gov.	1.588	0.781	1950	1.569	0.816	1048
Trust in police	1.975	0.659	1947	1.981	0.729	1035
Male	0.556	0.497	3896	0.500	0.500	2200
Age	49.401	16.328	3896	48.217	16.358	2199
Education	4.440	2.878	3895	4.313	2.847	2200
Party member	0.114	0.318	3889	0.117	0.321	2189
Ethnic Han	0.833	0.373	3894	0.933	0.250	2197
Urban resident	0.378	0.485	3896	0.366	0.482	2200

Table A.2: Summary Statistics of the World Values Survey China
(± 15 Days Around the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting)

	Control Group			Treatment Group		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
Trust in central gov.	2.309	0.707	797	2.369	0.612	298
Trust in Party	2.152	0.749	769	2.196	0.631	276
Trust in civil service	1.921	0.686	730	1.973	0.614	263
Trust in police	1.917	0.738	787	1.907	0.645	291
National pride	2.130	0.597	707	2.048	0.599	250
Happiness	2.017	0.572	837	1.962	0.550	340
Male	0.496	0.500	841	0.487	0.501	349
Age	42.773	15.420	841	44.691	14.986	349
Education	2.337	1.252	841	1.986	1.197	349
Party member	0.120	0.326	839	0.052	0.221	349
Public sector employ.	0.215	0.411	841	0.198	0.399	349

Datasets

- CGSS: The 2012 Chinese General Social Survey.
- WVS: Wave 6 of World Values Survey in China.

Political trust

- How much trust do you have in the following people? Is it a lot of trust, trust, not very much trust, or no trust at all? (Central government officials, Local government officials, Police) [CGSS]
- How much trust do you have in the follow institutions? Is it a lot of trust, trust, not very much trust, or no trust at all? (Central government, Political parties, Civil service, Police) [WVS]

Emotions

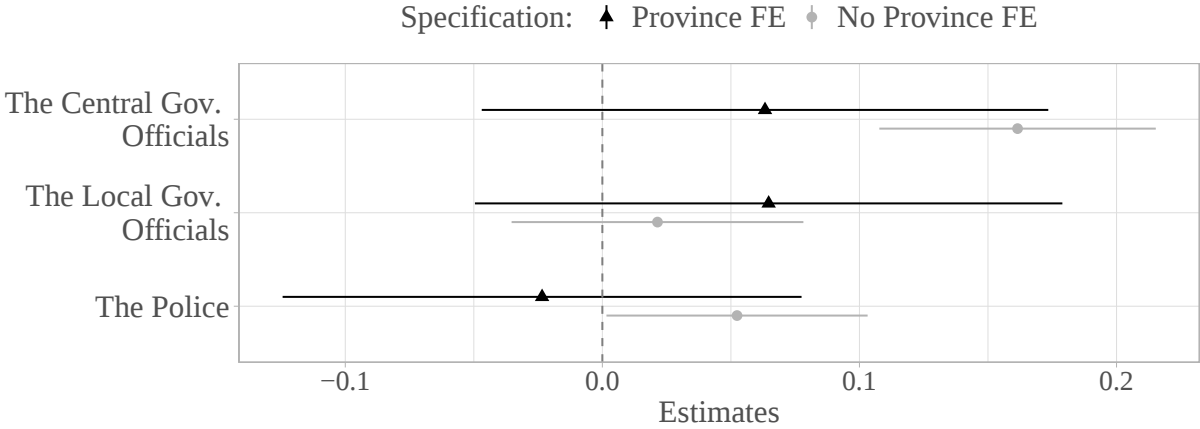
- Happiness: Overall , how happy do you feel about your life? (very unhappy, somewhat unhappy, neither happy nor unhappy, somewhat happy, very happy) [CGSS]
- Happiness: All things considered, are you happy with your life at present? (very happy, somewhat happy, not very happy, not happy at all) [WVS]
- National pride: As a Chinese, to what extent do you feel proud? (very proud, proud, not very proud, not proud at all) [WVS]

Interview Conditions

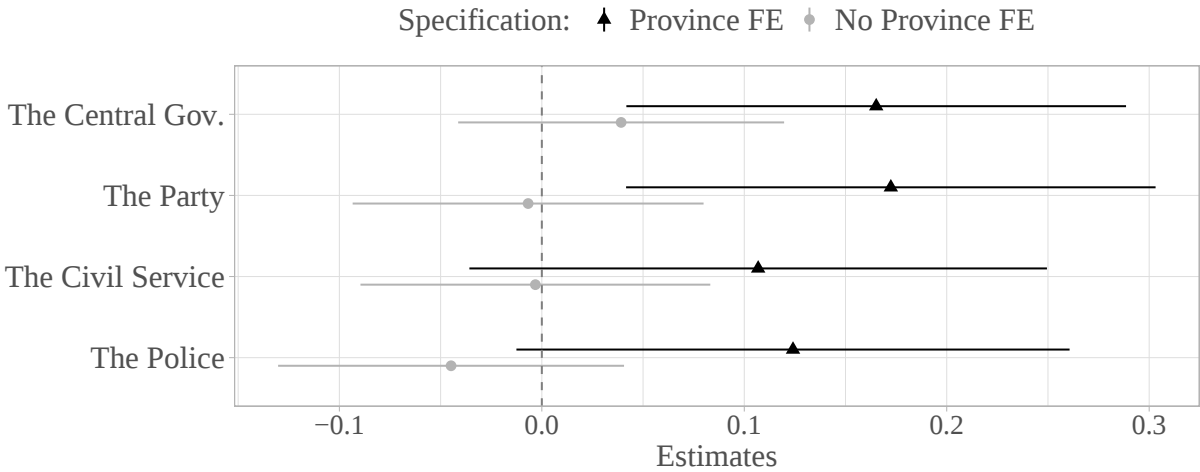
- Respondent interest: Overall, how interested the respondent was in the interview? (very interested, somewhat interested, not interested) [WVS]
- Interview privacy: Was anyone else present during the interview? (yes, no) [WVS]

B Further Results

Figure B.1: Changes in Political Trust Using an Alternative Baseline



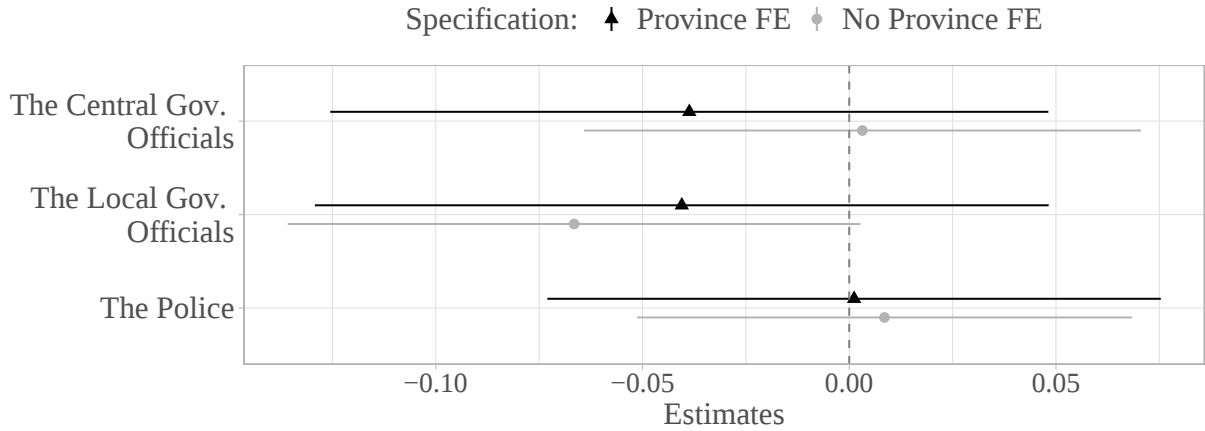
(a) Aurora Theater Shooting



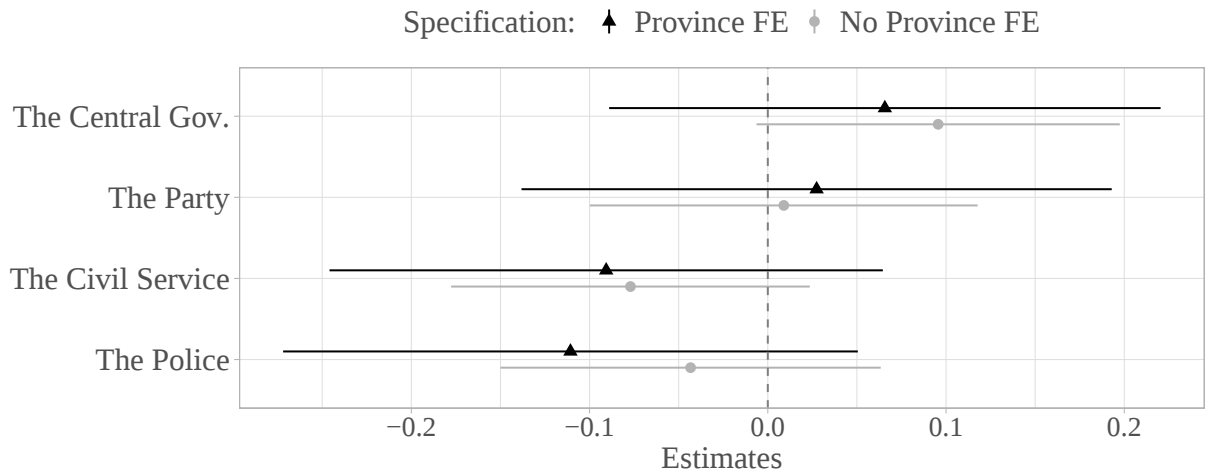
(b) Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting

Notes: The alternative baseline uses respondents surveyed 30 days before the event the control group, and the treatment group is unchanged. Lines are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure B.2: Placebo Test with a Pseudo-Treatment Date



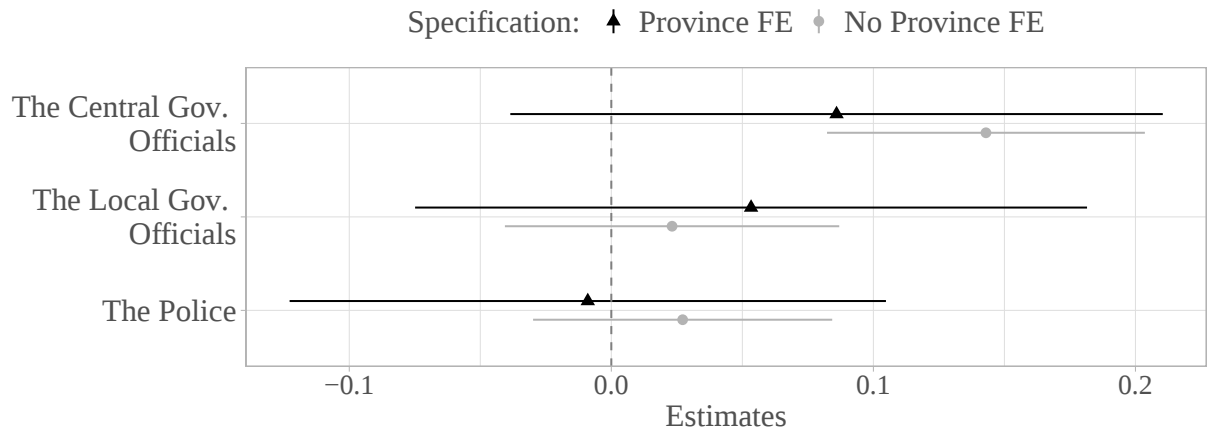
(a) Aurora Theater Shooting



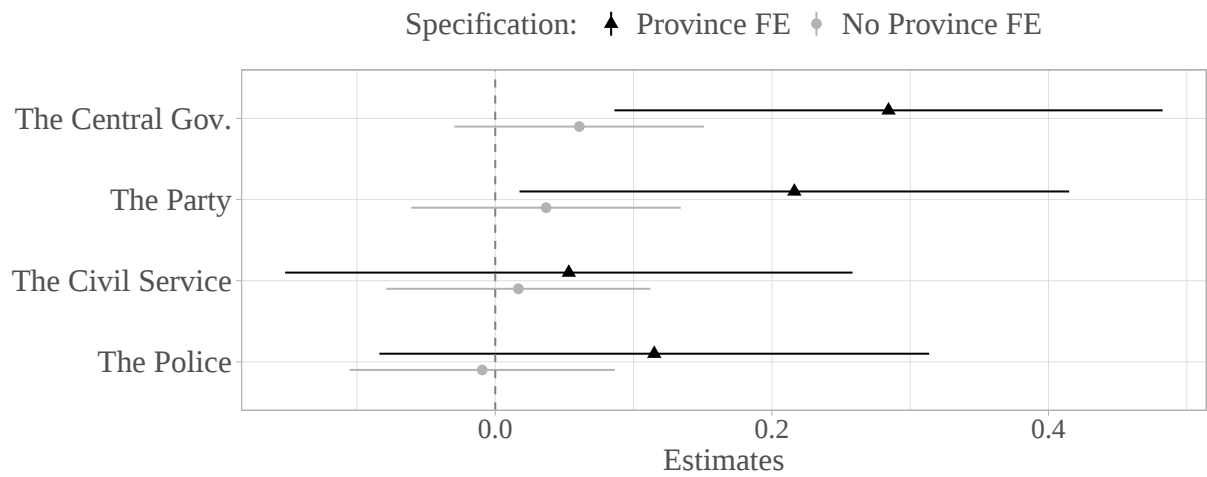
(b) Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting

Notes: The placebo tests use July 14 (Aurora) and December 8 (Sandy Hook) as pseudo-treatment dates and split the control groups into placebo control and placebo treatment groups. Lines are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure B.3: Changes in Political Trust Excluding Observations Around the Event Day



(a) Aurora Theater Shooting

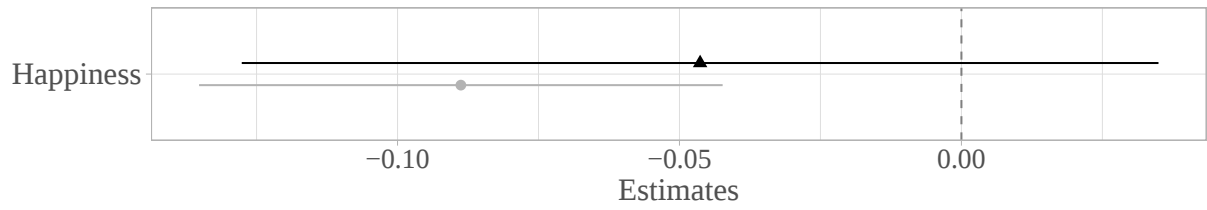


(b) Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting

Notes: The sample excludes respondents surveyed on the day before and event day. Lines are 95% confidence intervals.

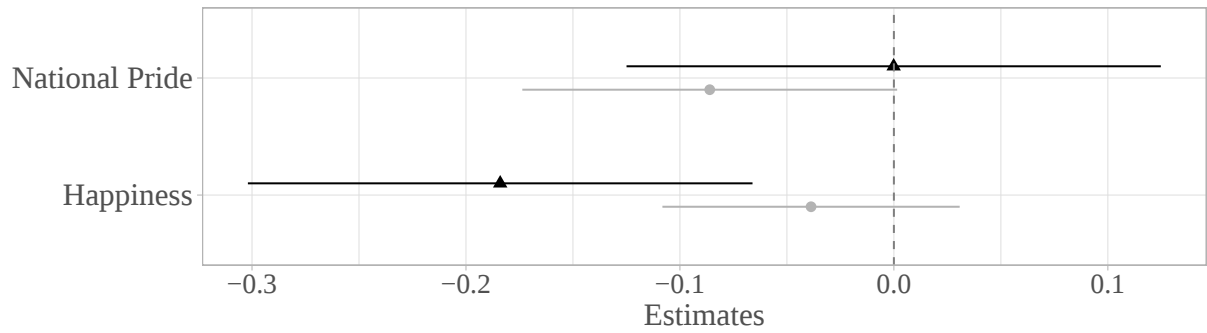
Figure B.4: Changes in Mood

Specification: ▲ Province FE ◆ No Province FE



(a) Aurora Theater Shooting

Specification: ▲ Province FE ◆ No Province FE

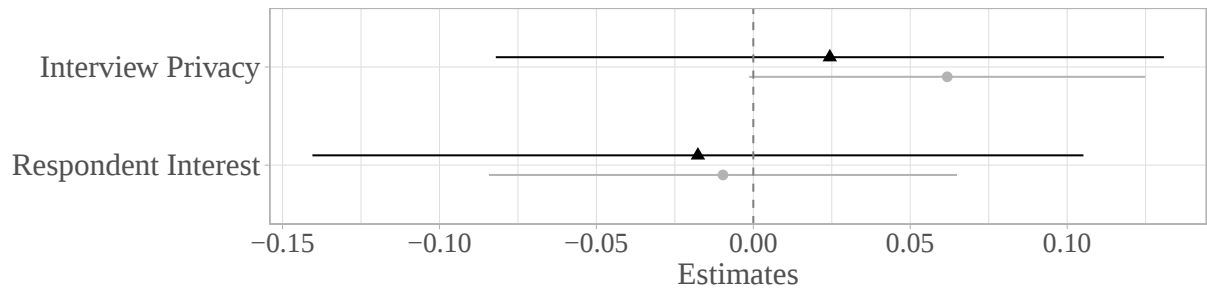


(b) Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting

Notes: Lines are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure B.5: Interview Conditions (Sandy Hook)

Specification: ▲ Province FE ◆ No Province FE



Notes: Lines are 95% confidence intervals.