Policing Protest: An Examination of Support for Police Suppression of Protest

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The freedom of peaceful assembly is a key component of a healthy democracy. However, even democratic nations sometimes respond forcefully—and even violently—against demonstrations of public dissent. According to Barker, Baker, and Watkins (2021), in the United States, the state response to protests surrounding several highly visible incidents of police violence directed toward Black citizens illustrates the degree to which state force may be used to thwart peaceful protest. These responses are in contrast to the state response to violent protests aimed at overturning the results from the 2020 presidential election. They have heightened concerns that suppression of social protests varies depending on the racial background of the protesters involved (Chason and Schmidt 2021). Media reporting on demonstrations can profoundly affect the way the public reacts not only to protest but also the state response to protest. The extensive literature on media framing (see Chong and Druckman 2007 for a review) found that how the media choose to frame a story plays an important role in the public's evaluation of protestors and the reaction from authorities to the protests (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997) and institutional legitimacy (Nicholson and Howard 2003)—and even can shape how voters decide on ballot questions related to the relevant news (García-Perdomo, Harlow, and Brown 2022).

For this study, we considered the role that the media framing of protest events, issues, and race of protesters has on support for police suppression. Using a 3 (i.e., race of protester: white, Black, or Latina/o) x 2 (i.e., media frame: social order or free speech) x 2 (i.e., issue: policing or the environment) factorial experimental design, we find little evidence that the characteristics of protest events shaped support for police suppression. Instead, the race of the respondent had the strongest effect on attitudes toward protest suppression. White respondents reported significantly higher levels of support for police intervention than Black respondents. Latinas/os reported lower levels of support than white respondents but not as low as Black respondents. Ultimately, we conclude that whereas characteristics of a protest did not shape attitudes, the effect of the respondents' race likely reflects fundamental differences in the faith that each racial group places in police authority and, consequently, in their actions to suppress protest activities.

MEDIA FRAMING, ISSUES, AND THE RACE OF PROTESTERS

Existing evidence suggests that media frames shape citizens' orientation toward protest events. Citizens express less tolerance toward protests, particularly from socially vilified groups (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan) when presented with media frames that emphasize social order more than freedom of speech (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997). Moreover, the framing of social policies around concerns about crime and maintaining "law and order" have been shown to activate underlying racial bias among white Americans (Mendelberg 2001). Recent evidence demonstrates that media coverage framed around either concerns for "civil rights" or "social order" influences responses from the mass public and elites to Black protest (Wasow 2020; see also Kilgo and Mourão 2021; Reid and Craig 2021). Furthermore, frames that emphasize the experiences of marginalized subgroups within the Black community have been shown to demobilize Black Americans who are not part of the subgroup (Bonilla and Tillery, Jr. 2020).

Beyond the media framing of protests, certain issues are more polarizing than others and therefore are more likely to draw public opposition. For example, there is considerable evidence that race has had a profound impact on American politics—particularly in the twentieth century—and can polarize public opinion on racial issues as well as seemingly race-neutral issues (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Mendelberg 1997; Tesler 2012). There is evidence that sociocultural and moral issues similarly polarize the American public (Evans 2003).

In addition, the race of protesters is likely to shape support for thwarting protest activity. Social protest serves as a way for aggrieved, typically socially marginalized groups to increase the salience of their grievances, have their issues placed on the institutional agenda, and challenge oppressive structures (Buechler 1993). There is a long tradition of civil rights protests among racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States, from the Black civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, to the nationwide marches in support of immigration reform in 2006 (Voss and Bloemraad 2011), to the recent wave of Black Lives Matter protests in opposition to police shootings of unarmed Black citizens.

Although racial minority groups often rely on social protest to achieve institutional reform, polls show traditionally low levels of support for their exercise of free speech and assembly

(Phoenix 2020). Recent research reveals that when protesters are described as "all Black," the protests are more likely to be perceived as potentially violent than when the protesters are described as "all white," even when the former are depicted as nonviolent (Peay and Camarillo 2021). Furthermore, evidence shows that Black protests garner more police action than predominantly white protest events (Davenport, Soule, and Armstrong 2011). The derogation of Black protest has been attributed, in part, to media frames that privilege whiteness and minimize Black grievance and modern protest tactics, typically by contrasting current Black protests with a sanitized narrative of the Black civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s (Jackson 2021). This tendency is exacerbated by the traditional media model, which gravitates toward narratives that dramatize and oversimplify complex social events (García-Perdomo, Harlow, and Brown 2022). Outside of the domain of immigration, little research has explored the public response to protests with predominantly Latina/o protesters (Branton et al. 2015; Carey, Branton, and Martinez-Ebers 2014; Wallace, Zepeda-Millán, and Jones-Correa 2014; Zepeda-Millán 2017). This study advances the existing literature by comparing reactions to protest events among white, Black, and Latina/o protesters.

Finally, citizens may be less inclined to suppress protests from groups that share their own racial and ethnic background. Considerable evidence demonstrates that groups tend to mobilize around issues that appear to advance group interests (Dawson 1995; Sanchez and Masuoka 2010). Moreover, group members are "group-centric" in their policy support, which means that their support for policies depends on the group that is perceived to benefit the most from the policy (Nelson and Kinder 1996). Although the literature suggests that this increases opposition toward policies that are perceived to benefit unfavorable groups, group-centrism also implies that group members will support policies that are perceived to benefit in-group members.

Given the existing literature, our expectations were as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Protests framed around "free speech" will reduce support for protest suppression compared to protests described with a "social-order" frame.

Hypothesis 2: "Social-order" frames will result in more support for protest suppression against Black and Latina/o protesters than white protesters.

Hypothesis 3: The racial match between the race of respondents and the protesting group will reduce support for protest suppression.

DATA AND METHODS

To test our hypotheses, we used data from a population survey funded by the Knight Foundation to examine attitudes toward free speech and expression. The survey was fielded in the summer of 2021, and the sample included 5,299 US adults recruited from an online, probability-based Ipsos Knowledge-Panel.® Participants were given the option to complete the survey in English or Spanish. One benefit of the sample was that it included oversamples of 941 non-Hispanic Black respondents and 967 Latina/o respondents in addition to 2,443 non-Hispanic white respondents. The remaining respondents identified with other non-Hispanic racial groups or as multiracial. The substantial oversamples of Black and Latina/o respondents allowed for a more accurate assessment of how their attitudes are shaped by the experimental treatments. The analysis for this article was conducted on a split sample within the full sample of respondents. The split sample consisted of 2,411 respondents and included 1,125 non-Hispanic white respondents, 440 non-Hispanic Black respondents, and 393 Latina/o respondents (Carey and Cisneros 2022).

Another benefit of the survey was that we were allowed to embed an experiment that explores the influence of the framing of the protest, the issues, and the race of protesters. As a test of our key hypotheses, we conducted a preregistered experiment (see https://osf.io/6bcuf, EGAP Registration ID: 20210707AAA) with a between-subjects, 2 (i.e., media frame: free speech or social order) x 3 (i.e., race of protesters: white, Latina/o, or Black) x 2 (i.e., issue: policing or the environment) factorial design. Participants were assigned randomly to a condition in which they read a faux newspaper article that described a protest event. Half of the conditions used a frame that stressed the protest as a potential threat to social order; the other half used a frame that emphasized protesters' right to exercise their free speech. The manipulation was done in the headline. The social-order media frame read: "Mayor Vows to Keep Law and Order"; the free-speech frame was: "Mayor Supports Protesters' Right to Protest." The text of the article applied these distinct frames in several parts. First, in the description of the local police response, the social-order frame stated: "The police department brought in more officers to secure buildings and the city and county imposed a curfew." In contrast, the passage in the free-speech frame stated: "The police department released a press release supporting the right of the protesters to voice their concerns and shared there would be a light police presence during the event." Later, the social-order frame attributed a statement to the mayor in which he stated: "I intend to do everything in my power to ensure public safety. We will arrest and prosecute anybody who is engaged in disorderly conduct." Alternatively, in the

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free-speech frame, the mayor stated: "Peaceful protesters deserve the space and protections to make their voices heard."

The second factor in the experiment was the race of the protesters, described as either predominantly white, Latina/o, or Black. In addition, images of protesters were included in each treatment that matched the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the descriptions. To facilitate fair comparisons across each image, we chose images in which (1) protesters were actively protesting, (2) protests were visibly nonviolent, and (3) there was limited signage.[1] If signs were included in the image, they were in the background and protest-related so that potential confounds were not introduced into the treatment. We also included a third dimension for our experiment that manipulated whether the protest described in the treatment concerned policing or the environment. Some participants also were assigned to a control condition that did not expose them to any content. They were directed to answer the key dependent variable.

After exposure to the experimental treatments, participants were asked to respond to the key dependent variable, which measured support for police suppression of protests. Respondents were asked how much they agree with the following statement: "Sometimes police need to use force to suppress protesters."[2] They responded to the question using a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). We used ordinary least squares regression to test our hypotheses.

RESULTS

We tested the first hypothesis by exploring the main effects from the framing condition. Our expectation was that the free-speech frame would drive down support for police suppression relative to the social-order frame. Figure 1 illustrates the results from the experiment. Surprisingly, the framing of the protest had little influence on respondents' support for police suppression. There was a slight reduction in support for police suppression in both the social-order and free-speech frames relative to the control; however, the difference did not reach the level of statistical significance.

Next, we examined the second hypothesis, which proposed that social-order frames would increase support for the suppression of protests when respondents were presented with Black and Latina/o protesters. Figure 2 illustrates the findings from our analysis. Although there was a slight increase in support for police suppression of protest for Black protesters when the social-order frame was applied relative to the free-speech frame, the difference did not reach levels of statistical significance. In fact, support for police suppression of protests was not distinguishably different from the control in any of the conditions.[3]

With the race-matching third hypothesis, we expected that respondents would oppose police suppression when the race of protesters matched their own. Figure 3 illustrates the interaction between the race of the respondent and the race of the protesters. Again, the expected relationships did not emerge. There is no evidence that respondents supported less police suppression for protesters who shared their racial or ethnic identification. Instead, the results revealed that the race of the respondent had the strongest effect on support for police suppression of protest. Across conditions, white respondents had the highest levels of support. In contrast, Black respondents reported the lowest levels of support for police
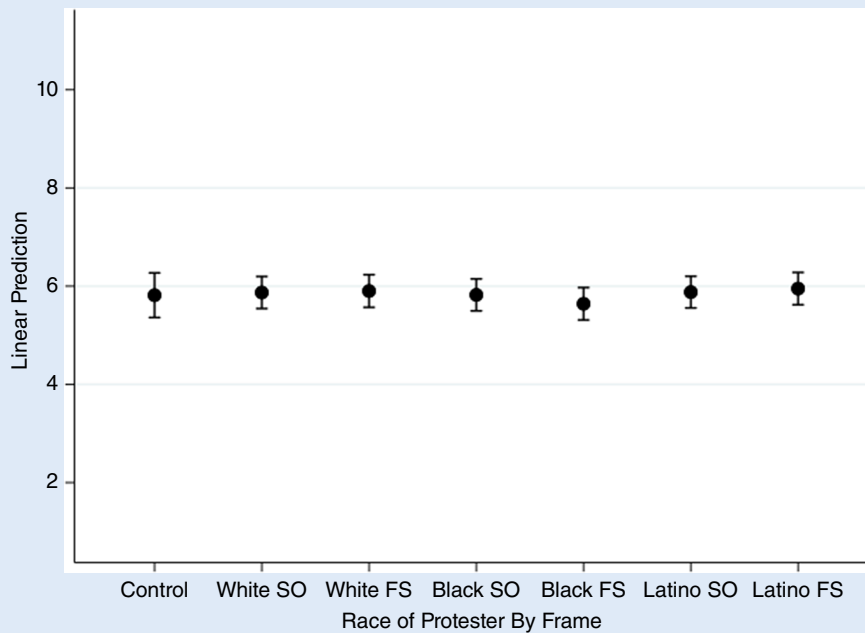
Figure 1
Effect of Frame Conditions on Support for Police Suppression
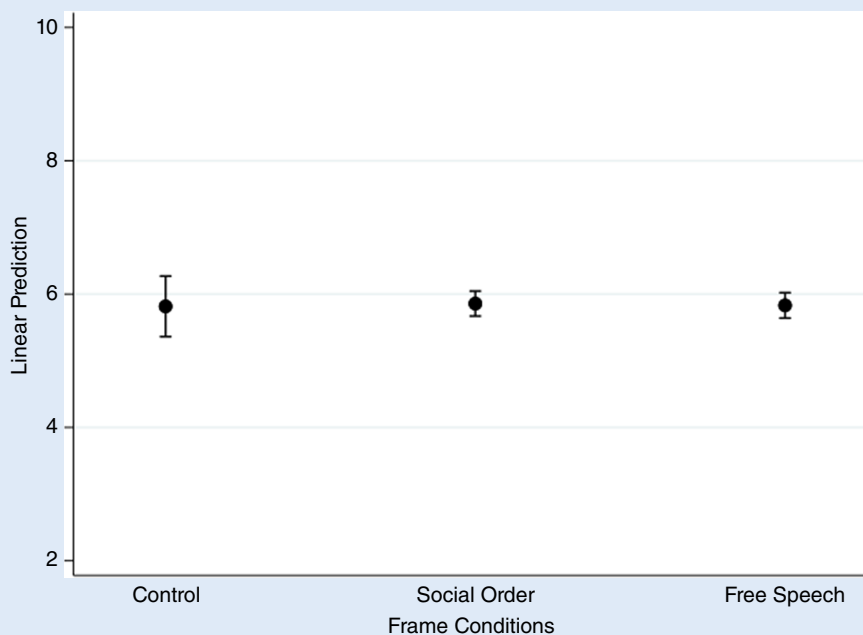
Note: Whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals.
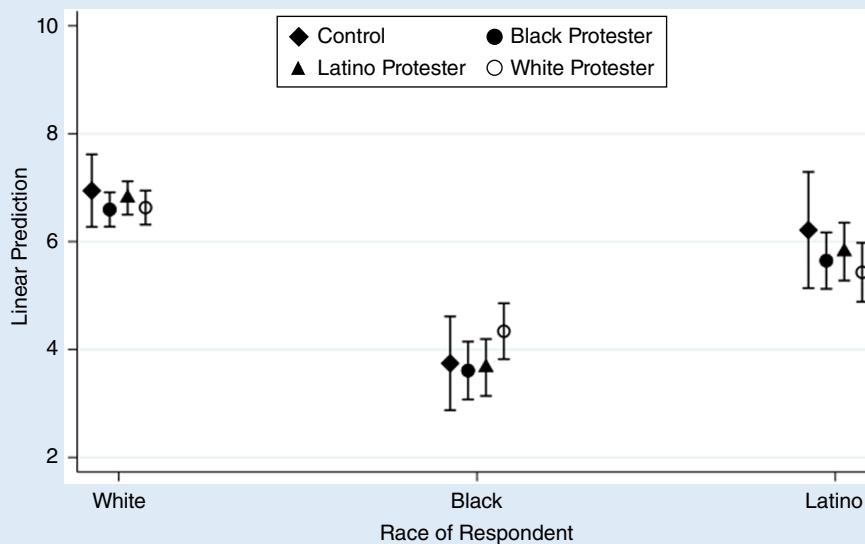
Figure 2

Effect of Race of Protester and Frame on Support for Police Suppression

Note: Whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 3

Effect of Race of Respondent and Race of Protester on Support for Police Suppression

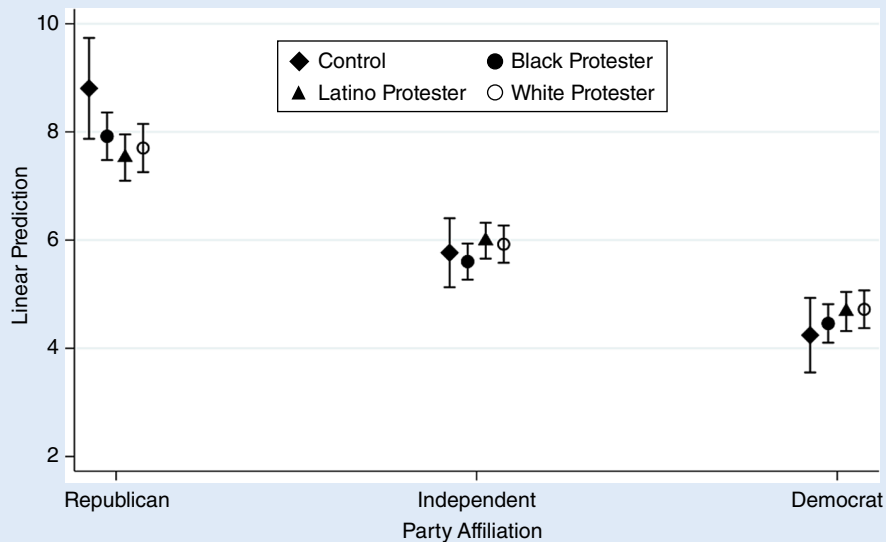Note: Whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals.

suppression across conditions. The difference between white and Black respondents reached conventional levels of statistical significance. In addition, other than the control condition, Latina/o respondents' support for police suppression of

protests was significantly lower than white respondents but not as low as Black respondents.

As an alternative to the respondents' race, we also considered whether the relationship between the experimental

Figure 4
Effect of Party Affiliation by Race of Protester Treatment

Note: Whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals.

conditions and support for police suppression would vary depending on respondents' party affiliation. Figure 4 illustrates the effect of party affiliation. There are clear main effects of party identification that are similar to what we observed for the race/ethnicity of the respondents. Democratic respondents reported lower levels of support for police suppression of protest than Republican respondents, without regard to the treatment. Independents' support for police suppression fell between that for Republican and Democratic respondents. Ultimately, our alternative hypothesis that party affiliation moderates the relationship between the race of protesters and support for police suppression of protests was unfounded.

DISCUSSION

Our experiment aimed to explore how media frames, issues, and race of protesters interact to shape support for police suppression of social protests. To our surprise, we found no evidence that our experimental treatments significantly shaped respondents' attitudes. However, we did find strong effects for the race of the respondents. White respondents, across all experimental conditions, reported significantly stronger support for the suppression of protests than Black Americans. Latina/o respondents tended to report less support than white respondents but more than Black respondents. We believe the effects of the race of respondents likely reflect differential preferences for race-based hierarchy, which has been maintained, in part, by police force (Sidanius and Pratto 2001). White Americans express stronger support for police than both Black and Latina/o Americans (Martinez-Ebers, Branton, and Calfano 2021; Tuch and Weitzer 1997); consequently, they may be more likely to endorse police actions against protest activity.

It is unclear what accounts for the null findings for the treatment effects. We consider three potential explanations. First, our findings may be due to the recency of protests for criminal-justice reform and the storming of the US Capitol by insurrectionists only a few months before this survey was fielded. Given the salience of these events, participants may have been motivated to self-monitor their response to the characteristics of the protest (Terkildsen 1993). Second, we cannot reject the possibility that the scenario-based experiment introduced potential confounds by altering participants' perceptions of other aspects of the scenario (Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey 2015). Third, the lack of treatment effects suggests that attitudes toward freedom of assembly may be more polarized than we expected and, therefore, less vulnerable to experimental manipulation (Peacock and Biernat 2022). We will advance this research in the future by moving away from evaluating protest attitudes among white, Black, and Latina/o respondents to examining the dynamics that shape support for protest suppression within each group.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/4RCJAC.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ◼

NOTES

1. The photographs used in the experiment were selected from a Google image search of recent protest events. Images for the race of protester conditions included some protesters with face masks; however, the image of white protesters included far more white protesters with face masks than represented in the Black and Latina/o conditions. We acknowledge that the disparity may exist as a potential confound.

2. Because the participants in the control condition were not exposed to the experimental treatment, the dependent variable does not explicitly reference the social protest in the treatment.

3. We also examined whether the influence of the race of protester and media frame varied by issue (i.e., policing or the environment). We found no evidence that the issues significantly shaped respondents' support for police suppression. Our findings are illustrated in figure 1A in the online appendix.

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