Public Fear of Protesters and Support for Protest Policing: An Experimental Study

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Abstract: As protests erupted across the United States in recent years over politically polarized issues (e.g., Black Lives Matter, COVID-19 restrictions), so too did questions about when and how police should respond. The context of these protests and how police reacted to them varied substantially, with limited understanding of relevant public attitudes. Public opinion is double-edged; it is critical for police legitimacy and influences criminal justice policy, but it also often reflects racial animus. We hypothesized that disruptive, dangerous, or unlawful protest tactics would increase support for police control, by elevating public fear, but also that support for repression would be higher when protest goals conflict with preexisting racial beliefs. To test our hypotheses, we embedded an experiment in a nationwide survey fielded in 2020, after George Floyd's killing sparked the broadest protests in U.S. history. We randomized protest tactics (e.g., weapon carrying, violence) and goals, as well as other contextual characteristics (e.g., protest size). We found that the public generally opposed repressive protest policing. However, certain protest tactics increased support for repression by increasing public fear. Protest goals (e.g., pro-Black Lives Matter, anti-COVID-19 restrictions, or pro-confederate monuments) also impacted support for repression, but the effect depended on respondents' racial beliefs.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter, COVID-19, policing, protests, public opinion

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Public protests are at the forefront of academic, social, and policy discourse (Brown, Block, & Stout, 2020; Cobbina, 2019). They were a central issue of debate in the 2020 presidential election and influenced voting in past elections as well (Drakulich, Wozniak, Hagan, & Johnson, 2020; Wasow, 2020). Over the past year alone, concerns over ICE raids and immigrant detention centers sparked pro-immigration and anti-ICE protests. After the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, protests erupted against police violence and in support of Black Lives Matter (BLM). These protests were “the broadest in U.S. history,” and spread even to “white, small town America” (Putnam, Chenoweth, & Pressman, 2020, p. 1). While some police officers appeared in solidarity with protesters, other videos showed officers using batons, tear gas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets to disperse the crowds (Szabo, Hancock, McCoy, Slack, & Waner, 2020). The BLM movement included calls to remove confederate monuments and flags, inciting counter-protests to this goal. The continued spread of COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) and resulting stay-at-home and social distancing orders provoked anti-restrictions protests, many involving armed protesters. The media called attention to differential police treatment and political reaction to BLM protests versus rightwing protests (e.g., against COVID-19 restrictions). Referencing BLM protesters, President Trump stated, “They’re not protesters. Those aren’t protesters. Those are anarchists, they’re agitators, they’re rioters, they’re looters” (Mason, 2020). Referencing armed, right-wing protesters, President Trump said, “these are very good people” (Ecarma, 2020).

As evidenced by recent protests and police reactions, there exists wide variation across the country in policies and procedures for regulating protesters, with police responses often varying depending on protest characteristics (Maguire & Oakley, 2020). While protest policing has evolved over time (Rafail, Soule, & McCarthy, 2012), current approaches, especially

following the Occupy movement in 2011, are seen by some as disrespectful to Americans' First Amendment right to peacefully assemble and over-reliant on use of force, control, and arrest (Maguire & Oakley, 2020, p. 10). In today's climate of increased protest activity, often in reaction to police behavior, and broader debates about police reform, the critical question that arises is: when and how should police respond to protests?

Answering this question requires assessing relevant public attitudes for several reasons (Meares & Tyler, 2020). First, police legitimacy depends on how the public evaluates officers' behavior (Mazerolle, Antrobus, Bennett, & Tyler, 2013). Second, for better or worse, policymakers and criminal justice practitioners are responsive to public opinion (Pickett, 2019; Enns, 2016). Public opinion, however, has a "dark side" (Brooks & Manza, 2007) that is driven by racial anxiety and animus (King and Wheelock, 2007; Ramirez, 2013; Stults & Baumer, 2007), giving rise to policies and practices that are harsh and discriminatory (Duxbury, 2020a, 2020b). Understanding when and how this happens is important for ensuring distributive justice in policing and the criminal justice system more broadly. Third, protests that garner public support can serve to legitimize social movements and facilitate social and political change (Feinberg, Willer, & Kovacheff, 2020; Gillion, 2013; Mazumder, 2018; Wouters, 2019). By contrast, those that foster public fear may have the opposite effect (Wasow, 2020). Fourth, Huff and Kruszewska (2016) emphasize that when responding to social movements, authorities need to consider how the people they represent will interpret their response. Protest policing tactics that lack public support may have political consequences for government officials (Drakulich et al., 2019), as well as contribute to the erosion of police-community relations (Mullinix, Bolsen, & Norris, 2020).

Few research areas are as interdisciplinary as protests, and the extant literature is expansive (Brown et al., 2020). Yet, limited evidence exists about the extent to which the public fears protests and desires police involvement. Most existing studies are observational and focus on the associations between contextual factors of past protests and the likelihood of police presence and use of force (Davenport, Soule, & Armstrong II, 2011; Earl, Soule, & McCarthy, 2003). Although important, this research does not directly examine public attitudes towards protests or policing strategies. Some observational studies evaluate general support for specific protests (e.g., pro-BLM) but do not examine attitudes toward protest policing (Updegrave, Cooper, Orrick, & Piquero, 2020). Prior experimental studies focus mainly on public support for protests, finding greater support for those that are peaceful (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Edwards & Arnon, 2019; Gutting, 2020; Hsiao & Radnitz, 2020; Huff & Kruszewska, 2016; Simpson, Willer, & Feinberg, 2018). Two experimental studies examine attitudes toward protest policing within the US context, but both rely on crowdsourced data (Amazon Mechanical Turk) collected before the killing of George Floyd (Edwards & Arnon, 2019; Hsiao & Radnitz, 2020). The timing is relevant because the Floyd protests were unprecedented in size, duration, and diversity, and in terms of institutional actors publicly choosing sides (Fisher, 2020). These protests prompted change in public opinion on policing (Tesler, 2020). Prior experiments also do not fully delve into the effects of different protest characteristics (e.g., goals, tactics, size, duration). None test whether such protest characteristics increase public fear of protesters or whether racial attitudes moderate the effect of protest goals on support for police repression.

The current study contributes to the interdisciplinary literature on protests. We analyze data from an experiment embedded in a national survey administered by a leading polling company at an important juncture in time—during the COVID-19 pandemic and after George

Floyd’s killing, when protests with different goals and varying police responses were happening throughout the country. We test experimentally the effects of multiple protest characteristics, including goals, duration, size, and whether the tactics involved are disruptive (traffic delays), dangerous (armed protesters), and/or unlawful (property damage, violence). We focus on four protest goals that motivated recent protests: (1) pro-BLM and against police violence, (2) against COVID-19 social distancing ordinances and stay-at-home orders, (3) against the removal of confederate monuments and memorials, and (4) against immigration detention centers and arrests of undocumented immigrants. We measure respondents’ fear of protesters, as well as their support for specific protest policing practices. Finally, we test for an interaction between protest goals and racial beliefs in influencing support for police repression. Before turning to our data and findings, we begin by reviewing the theory and research that informs our hypotheses.

1. THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

Recent public opinion polls indicate that Americans are generally supportive of protests (Parker, Horowitz, & Anderson, 2020). The Public Religion Research Institute found that most (61%) Americans agreed that “when Americans speak up and protest unfair treatment by the government, it always makes our country better” (Jones, Jackson, Orcés, & Huff, 2020, p. 48). Most (52%) also agreed that it makes our country better “when Black Americans speak up” (Jones et al., 2020, p. 48). Additionally, the Pew Research Center found that most (55%) Americans see protests and rallies as an effective strategy for supporting the goals of the Black community (Parker et al., 2020). This support coincides with negative feelings about forceful police responses. Although not focusing specifically on protest policing, Mullinix and colleagues (2020) found that controversial police use of force prompts “nontrivial public opinion effects,

even among people who do not directly experience it” (p. 15). Similarly, Edwards and Arnon (2019) acknowledged that state repression can backfire in certain protest situations and elevate support for social movements over the state. In this context, it seems that the public is unlikely to overwhelmingly fear protesters or to support the use of repressive policing tactics during protest events. We delineate our first hypothesis to this effect.

H1: In general, Americans will not be fearful of protests and will oppose the use of repressive policing tactics.

Prior research found that authorities respond differently to protests when protesters are being disruptive or unlawful (Davenport et al., 2011; McCarthy, Martin, & McPhail, 2007). In observational studies of past protests, violent tactics and property damage were associated with increased police presence and use of force (Earl et al., 2003; Davenport et al., 2011; McCarthy et al., 2007). Additionally, Wasow (2020) analyzed black-led protests between 1960 and 1972 and found that violence garnered greater news coverage and congressional speeches emphasizing riots, as opposed to civil rights, and that subsequent public opinion polls showed an increase in the perceived need for social control. He concluded that violence by protesters risks “alienating potential allies and provoking even greater social control” (p. 657).

In past experimental studies, conducted both in the United States and internationally, peaceful protests were perceived as more legitimate and morally advantageous, resulting in greater public support (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Hsiao & Radnitz, 2020; Huff & Kruszewska; Schock, 2005; Thomas & Louis, 2014). The use of disruptive or unlawful tactics by protesters reduced identification with social movements and their goals (Feinberg et al., 2020; Simpson et al., 2018). These tactics included responding with violence following provocation (Gutting, 2020), displaying or using firearms (Edwards & Arnon, 2019), and causing traffic

delays (Feinberg et al., 2020). In some contexts, such tactics appear to lead observers to attribute less morality to the social movement (Orazani & Leidner, 2019), report less support for protesters (Feinberg et al., 2020; Gutting, 2020; Orazani & Leidner, 2019; Simpson et al., 2018; Thomas & Louis, 2014; Wouters, 2019), become less willing to join social movements (Feinberg et al., 2020; Orazani & Leidner, 2019), and become more supportive of punitive policies as a response (Hsiao & Radnitz, 2020).

The evidence about the effects of other protest characteristics, such as protest size or duration, is mixed. In their observational study, for example, Earl and colleagues (2003) found that larger protest size was associated with increased police presence and use of force. However, Davenport and colleagues (2011) did not find an association between protest size and police presence, and when the police responded to large protests, the officers seemed to exercise more restraint unless protesters were unruly. Focusing on public reactions to protest size, Wouters (2019) claimed that larger numbers actually portrayed an attractive collective identity. Using a video experiment involving BLM protesters, he found that the number of protesters led to increases in support for the movement, especially among Blacks, although these effects were only marginally significant. Nevertheless, based on both the extant theory and research, it is clear that isolating the effects of protest tactics and goals requires controlling for other potentially related protest characteristics, such as protest size. Unfortunately, this is something that most prior survey experiments have not done, which raises concerns about construct confounding (or information leakage) (see Dafoe, Zhang, Caughey, 2018).

Additionally, although prior studies explored public opinion about protests, most focused on how protest tactics influenced overall support for social movements and their goals. As such, we do not know how protest tactics or other characteristics influence fear of protesters. Also,

only four experimental studies (to our knowledge) examined support for social control responses. Two of these experiments are tangentially related to our focus. They used non-US samples and explored support for government repression (versus negotiation) and human rights abuses in response to opposition movements (Huff & Kruszewska, 2016; Lupu & Wallace, 2019). The other two experiments focused on the US context but used crowdsourced data collected before George Floyd's killing and examined only a small number of protest characteristics (Edwards & Arnon, 2019; Hsiao & Radnitz, 2020). However, both found that threatening and unlawful protest tactics increased threat perceptions and support for police repression (e.g., arresting protesters), although neither examined fear of protesters specifically. Building on this research, we derive the following hypothesis:

H2: Protest tactics that are disruptive, dangerous, or unlawful will increase fear of protesters and support for police control.

Several prior studies considered the pathways by which threatening tactics can lead to protest opposition (Feinberg et al., 2020; Oranzani & Leidner, 2019; Simpson et al., 2018; Thomas & Louis, 2014). In the context of support for police repression specifically, the only mediating mechanism previously considered was perceived levels of violence (Hsiao & Radnitz, 2020). However, people are not just fearful of violence—people are also afraid of property victimization and disruptions to their daily lives (Farrall, Jackson, & Gray, 2009; Ferraro, 1995). Additionally, sociological and criminological research demonstrates that fear is distinct from risk perceptions (Ferraro, 1995; Jackson, 2011), a proximate source of criminal justice policy attitudes (Baker, Metcalfe, Berenblum, Aviv, & Gertz, 2015; Simmons, 2017), and a contributor to policing and punishment in America (Duxbury, 2020b; Stults and Baumer, 2007). Based on this literature, we derive a hypothesis that recognizes fear as a potential mediator.

H3: Disruptive, dangerous, and unlawful protest tactics will indirectly increase support for police control by increasing fear of protesters.

One of the strongest and most consistent predictors of public attitudes toward criminal justice policies is racial animus (Brown & Socia, 2017; Unnever & Cullen, 2000). Racial animus is associated with greater support for harsher sanctions, such as the death penalty (Brown, Socia, & Silver, 2019; Drakulich, 2015; Simmons, 2017). It is associated with greater support for spending on law enforcement (Morris & LeCount, 2020) and aggressive and even abusive policing (Carter & Corra, 2016; Carter, Corra, & Jenks, 2016; Silver & Pickett, 2015). Racial animus also appears to be associated with attitudes toward protests. Two recent studies found that racially prejudiced respondents were less supportive of BLM protesters, although neither study examined views about policing protests, and one study surveyed college students (Ilchi & Frank, 2020; Wouters, 2019). Nevertheless, it is reasonable to expect that racial animus will shape support for protest policing in a similar way as it shapes attitudes toward criminal justice policies more generally. Thus, the fourth hypothesis that we test is as follows:

H4: Racial animus will be positively related to support for police control.

Past experiments found little evidence that protest goals (or the type of protest) affect public support (Feinberg et al., 2020; Hsaio and Radnitz, 2020; Orazani & Leidner, 2019; Wouters, 2019). However, there are reasons to expect that protest goals interact with racial animus to influence attitudes toward policing in the United States (Cobbina, 2019; Soss & Weaver, 2017; Updegrove et al., 2018). Racially threatening situations are most threatening to racially prejudiced Americans and tend to affect their criminal justice attitudes the most (Soss, Langbein, & Metelko, 2003). Drakulich et al. (2020) found that views of the BLM movement

interacted with racial resentment to affect Americans' voting behavior. As those authors emphasized, "social movements advocating for racial equality present direct threats to status quo race relations" (p. 274), and "some Americans may ... see the police as defenders of a *racial* order" (p. 376, emphasis in original). Consistent with this understanding of police, observational studies found that police were more likely to be present, make arrests, and use force at Black protests, at least in some years (Davenport et al., 2011; Earl et al., 2003). Also, one recent experiment found that people were less supportive of outgroup protests (Jones et al., 2020). Another found that people were more supportive of repressing protests by outgroups than ingroups, even when they perceived them to be similarly violent (Edwards & Arnon, 2019). Taken together, this theoretical and empirical work provides the basis for our final hypothesis:

H5: Racial animus will moderate the effect of protest goals on support for police control, such that protests advocating for the rights of racial and ethnic minorities will increase support for police repression more among those with greater animus.

2. DATA AND METHODS

To test our hypotheses, we embedded an experiment in a survey fielded by YouGov to a sample of 1,000 American adults (18 and older) in October 2020, a few months after the killing of George Floyd sparked "unprecedented and historic" protests (Countryman, 2020) that "changed public opinion about race and policing" (Tesler, 2020, p. 1). Our survey also occurred after several armed anti-social distancing protests and about two weeks after the first presidential debate. In the two years before our survey, Occupy-ICE protests occurred in many cities. At the time of our survey, the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing in the United States, having killed over 200,000 Americans, and protests against racial bias in policing were active across the country. In short, our survey was administered at a time of historical importance, when the issues

of protesting, COVID-19, racism, and policing were not only publicly salient but also subjects of intense political disagreement. To ensure the accuracy of respondents' answers, we used a computerized self-administered mode, the best for minimizing social desirability bias (Tourangeau, Conrad, & Couper, 2013).

The survey company that fielded our survey, YouGov, administers the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Ansolabehere & Rivers, 2013), and is a leading platform for academic survey research (Simmons & Bobo, 2015), having provided data for numerous studies of public opinion about criminal justice (Enns & Ramirez, 2018; Norris & Mullinix, 2020; Simmons, 2017; Socia, Rydberg, & Dum, 2019). YouGov's sampling methodology is designed for model-based inference and involves using matching with a synthetic frame constructed via stratified sampling from the American Community Survey to select respondents from an opt-in panel of millions of Americans (Ansolabehere & Rivers, 2013). Selection is assumed to be ignorable given the matching variables, and the evidence supporting the methodology is strong (Ansolabehere & Schaffner, 2014; Graham, Pickett, & Cullen, 2020; Simmons & Bobo, 2015). Even when much weaker online sampling methods are used, however, experimental findings normally still generalize to the US population (Coppock, 2019; Mullinix et al., 2015), because sizable heterogeneous treatment effects across levels of the specific variables influencing sample selection are uncommon (Coppock, Leeper, & Mullinix, 2018).

1. Experimental procedure

The experiment was a between-subjects, $2^4 4^2$ fully-crossed factorial design. Given the targeted (and achieved) sample size, the design ensured greater than 80% statistical power to detect medium-sized effects of the six factors (the factor-specific group sizes ranged from 244 to

510 respondents). Each respondent read a vignette describing a protest, and we randomized the protest's characteristics, including goals (or type), duration, size, traffic delays, presence of weapons, and level of violence and/or property damage.¹ For the protest type manipulation, we used four goals, two were right-wing and two were left-wing (and in support of racial and ethnic minorities). Table 1 shows the vignette question wording and the levels of the six factors.

Including the six randomized factors was important not only for theoretical reasons, but also to prevent information leakage (or construct confounding), whereby insufficient vignette descriptions cause respondents to fill in missing details based on levels of a specified factor (Dafoe et al., 2018). For example, if the vignette only described the protest type, respondents might use that information to infer its duration, size, or how the protesters were behaving. Specifying these potential confounders as separate factors—a covariate control design—controls for this possibility and permits an analysis of their independent effects (Dafoe et al., 2018). Other strengths of factorial vignettes are that they increase realism and reduce social desirability bias (Auspurg and Hinz, 2015), while allowing researchers to use “smaller sample sizes than would otherwise be needed” to test multiple treatments (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002, p. 263). Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto (2015) demonstrated the validity of responses to factorial vignettes.

[Table 1 about here]

2. Dependent variables

There were two dependent variables in our analysis, which we measured after respondents read the experimental vignette. For the first, *Fear of Protesters*, the survey question was: “If this protest were happening in your community, how afraid or unafraid would you be?”

¹ Although typically associated with right-wing protests, armed protesters have appeared in many types of protests, including those supporting the Black Lives Matter movement (Dunne, 2020; Woolston, 2020).

The five response options ranged from “very unafraid” (coded 1) to “very afraid” (coded 5). For the second dependent variable, *Support Police Control*, we used five questions. One question asked the respondents to “rate the need for police involvement in this protest” on a 0-10 scale, “where 0 indicates the police should leave the protest alone, with no officer involvement, and 10 indicates the police should shut down the protest entirely.” The other four questions asked how much the respondents supported (1 = strongly oppose, 5 = strongly support) using specific policing tactics to control the protest: 1) “sending officers in riot gear to monitor the protest,” 2) “establishing borders to control protest boundaries,” 3) “using non-lethal force (e.g., tear gas, rubber bullets) to disperse the protest,” and 4) “dispersing the protest by arresting protesters.” Responses to the four tactics items and to the global question about police involvement loaded on a single factor (loadings: .650 to .888), and thus we combined them into a standardized mean index ($\alpha = .907$).

3. Moderating variable

Other than the experimental manipulations, there was one other focal independent variable in our analysis: racial animus, which we operationalized as *Racial Resentment*. To measure this concept, we followed previous research (Nix, Ivanov, & Pickett, 2020; Wouters, 2019; Unnever & Cullen, 2010) and used several Likert items (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) adapted from the symbolic racism scale (Henry & Sears, 2002; Sears & Henry, 2003): 1) “It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder, they would be just as well off as Whites”; 2) “There is a lot of discrimination against Blacks in the US today, limiting their chances to get ahead”; 3) “Irish, Italians, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same

without any special favors”; 4) “Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve”; 5) “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class.” We recoded responses to the items so that higher scores indicated greater resentment, and then combined them into a standardized mean index (factor loadings: .757 to .859, $\alpha = .918$).

4. Control variables

In the models including *Racial Resentment*, an observational predictor, and in the tests for indirect effects of the experimental manipulations via *Fear of Protesters*, a nonrandomized mediator (MacKinnon & Pirlott, 2015), we also controlled for potential confounders that prior research suggests may influence views about race and policing (Jackson & Sunshine, 2007; Nix, Wolfe, Rojek, & Kaminski, 2015; Silver & Pickett, 2015; Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). These controls included standardized mean indices measuring political ideology (*Right-Wing Politics*, $\alpha = .805$), involvement in religious activities (*Religiosity*, $\alpha = .855$), perceptions of police behavior (*Procedural Justice*, $\alpha = .962$), anxiety about victimization (*Fear of Crime*, $\alpha = .931$), perceptions of neighborhood social control (*Collective Efficacy*, $\alpha = .837$), and perceptions of neighborhood social and physical incivilities (*Neighborhood Disorder*, $\alpha = .934$). Appendix A provides the question wording for each of the items in these indices.

In addition to the above indices, we controlled for respondents’ race and ethnicity (1 = *White*), Age (in years), sex (1 = *Female*), Education (1 = no high school degree, 6 = graduate degree), Income (1 = less than \$10K, 16 = \$500K or more), employment status (1 = *Unemployed*), marital status (1 = *Married*), religious affiliation (1 = *Born-Again Protestant*),

Urbanicity (1 = rural, 5 = big city), and region of residence (1 = *Southerner*).² Finally, we included two dichotomous controls measuring whether the respondent had personal or vicarious (family member, close friend) experience working in a police agency (1 = *Police Experience*) or had participated personally in any protest in the past year (1 = *Protest Experience*). Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics for all the variables included in the analysis.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

5. Analytic strategy

Following best practices for experimental research (Freedman, 2008; Lin, 2013), we first evaluated the effects of the manipulations without including control variables. Then, we estimated full models that included racial resentment and the controls. One outcome variable was ordinal (*Fear of Protesters*) and the other was continuous (*Support Police Control*). However, recent methodological research demonstrated that in experiments with categorical outcomes, linear regression is appropriate (Gomila, 2020; Huang, 2019). Additionally, linear regression is advantageous for testing moderation (Mood, 2010). Therefore, we estimated all of the models using ordinary least squares regression with robust standard errors.³ YouGov provided survey weights, but weight association tests showed that weighting did not significantly improve model fit or change the parameter estimates (Bollen, Biemer, Karr, Tueller, & Berzofsky, 2016). We therefore reported the more precise unweighted estimates, per methodologists' recommendations (Winship & Radbill, 1994; Solon, Haider, & Wooldridge, 2015).⁴

3. RESULTS

² As is normal in surveys, some respondents (11%) skipped the income question. We imputed item-missing income data using scores on the other variables. This did not alter the main findings.

³ The key findings were unchanged when we used ordered logistic regression for the *Fear of Protesters* outcome.

⁴ The weighted analyses yielded the same key findings.

In accordance with our first hypothesis, only a third of respondents said they would be afraid or very afraid if the described protest was happening in their community. Additionally, support for policing protests depended on the tactics used by police. Figure 1 shows the distribution of responses for each of the protest policing items in the full sample (the line labeled “total”) and by respondents’ level of fear (the bars labeled “unafraid” or “afraid”). Several findings were notable. First, only a minority of respondents (17%) supported shutting the protest down entirely (top panel). Second, the least supported protest policing tactics were the most repressive: arresting protesters and using non-lethal force to disperse the protest, with each receiving support or strong support from only 33-34% of respondents. The only protest policing tactic that most (65%) respondents supported was also the least repressive: establishing borders to control protest boundaries. One key takeaway, then, was that most respondents wanted police to take a supervisory rather than repressive approach to policing protests—they wanted officers to keep protests orderly while allowing them to continue—which mostly aligned with our first hypothesis.

Another key takeaway from Figure 1, and one that was consistent with our theoretical expectations, was that attitudes toward protest policing varied substantially depending on respondents’ level of fear. Overall support for police involvement in the protest was significantly higher among respondents who were afraid versus unafraid of the protesters ($d = 1.35$, $t = 17.94$, $p < .001$).⁵ Similar findings emerged for each of the specific protest policing tactics. Fearful respondents were significantly more supportive of sending riot officers to control the protest ($r = .45$, $Z = 12.04$, $p < .001$), establishing a border around the protest ($r = .33$, $Z = 8.75$, $p < .001$),

⁵ For these comparisons, the “afraid” group included respondents who answered “afraid” or “very afraid,” and the “unafraid” group included those who said “unafraid” or “very unafraid.” Respondents who answered “neither afraid nor unafraid” were excluded, although they were included in the total distributions shown by the line in Figure 1.

using non-lethal force against the protesters ($r = .46$, $Z = 12.24$, $p < .001$), and arresting the protesters ($r = .45$, $Z = 12.08$, $p < .001$).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

What characteristics of a protest make people afraid and increase support for policing? Figure 2 presents the marginal effects of the experimental manipulations on both outcomes, *Fear of Protesters* and *Support Police Control*, from the baseline models excluding controls. The results in the first column show that disruptive, dangerous, and unlawful protest tactics increased public fear, which supported our second hypothesis. Independent of the protest's goals, duration, and size, public fear increased significantly when protesters were delaying traffic ($b = .163$, $p = .031$), carrying firearms ($b = .253$, $p = .001$), and damaging property and assaulting civilians ($b = .512$, $p < .001$). These same factors also had significant effects on *Support for Police Control* (second column), again supporting the second hypothesis. Public support for protest policing increased significantly when protesters were delaying traffic ($b = .173$, $p = .001$), carrying firearms ($b = .136$, $p = .011$), and damaging property and assaulting civilians ($b = .323$, $p < .001$). It seemed, then, that the protest characteristics that make people feel afraid also increased their support for involving police to control protesters.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Table 3 presents the full regression results for both outcomes. The models explained 24% of the variance in *Fear of Protesters* and over 50% of the variation in *Support Police Control*. The effects of the experimental manipulations were mostly the same as in the baseline models shown in Figure 2, with two small differences. First, protesters delaying traffic significantly increased support for protest policing ($b = .148$, $p < .001$), but did not significantly increase fear ($b = .121$, $p = .084$). Second, all three forms of unlawful behavior by protesters significantly

increased fear, as well as support for protest policing, including damaging property ($b = .238, p = .020$; $b = .198, p = .001$), committing violence ($b = .224, p = .027$; $b = .126, p = .024$), and both damaging property and committing violence ($b = .520, p < .001$; $b = .350, p < .001$). As in the baseline models, armed protesters significantly increased fear ($b = .202, p = .004$) and support for police control ($b = .105, p = .007$).

Turning to the other variables, we see that the association between racial resentment and fear of protesters was weak and non-significant ($b = .013, p = .844$). However, four control variables had sizable and significant associations with this outcome. Female respondents were significantly more fearful ($b = .305, p < .001$), as were those who were afraid of crime in general ($b = .367, p < .001$). Respondents residing in disordered neighborhoods were also significantly more fearful ($b = .140, p = .009$). Interestingly, respondents who perceived that the police were procedurally just were significantly more afraid of protesters ($b = .197, p < .001$), perhaps because they had a harder time understanding why people would protest against governmental institutions or authorities.

Although racial resentment was not significantly associated with fear of protesters, it was strongly and significantly associated with support for protest policing ($b = .311, p < .001$). As hypothesized, respondents who were more racially resentful were much more likely to want police to control protesters. The strong relationship between racial resentment and support for police repression is notable given that racially resentful respondents were not significantly more fearful of protestors. Five of the control variables were also significantly associated with protest policing attitudes. Support for protest policing was significantly higher among respondents with right-wing political views ($b = .206, p < .001$), those who perceived police to be procedurally just ($b = .194, p < .001$), those with personal or vicarious policing experience ($b = .125, p$

= .009), those who were afraid of crime in general ($b = .080, p = .002$), and residents of disordered neighborhoods ($b = .081, p = .003$).

[Insert Table 3 about here]

We used the full model for *Support Police Control* (Model 2, Table 3) to test whether *Fear of Protesters* mediates the effect of the experimental manipulations on attitudes toward protest policing. This helped to reduce the risk of confounding in the mediator-to-outcome relationship (MacKinnon & Pirlott, 2015). When *Fear of Protesters* was included in the full model (not shown), its coefficient was sizable and significant ($b = .216, p < .001$), indicating that fear was positively associated with support for protest policing, independent of the controls. The coefficients for the previously significant experimental effects were also reduced. To conduct the formal tests for indirect effects, we used Hicks and Tingley's (2011) causal mediation procedure with bootstrapping. In support of our third hypothesis, the results showed that four experimental manipulations had significant indirect effects on support for protest policing via fear: protesters carrying weapons ($b = .044, 95\% \text{ CI} = .012 \text{ to } .080$), protesters damaging property ($b = .051, 95\% \text{ CI} = .012 \text{ to } .097$), protesters committing violence ($b = .048, 95\% \text{ CI} = .010 \text{ to } .092$), and protesters both damaging property and committing violence ($b = .112, 95\% \text{ CI} = .065 \text{ to } .167$). Additionally, these indirect effects were quite robust to potential violations of the sequential ignorability assumption ($\rho = .389$).

The final portion of our analysis tested our interaction hypothesis (the fifth hypothesis), and the relevant results are reported in Model 3 of Table 3. Recall that racial resentment significantly predicted support for controlling protests, but not fear of protesters. Thus far, however, the type of protest (or its goals) did not have a significant effect in any model. To examine whether racial resentment moderated the effect of protest goals on attitudes toward

protest policing, we included the relevant product terms in the full model (Model 3, Table 3). In support of our fifth hypothesis, racial resentment significantly moderated the effects of both types of protests for racial and ethnic minorities—pro-immigrant protests ($b = .156, p = .027$) and pro-BLM protests ($b = .235, p < .001$). Figure 2 presents the adjusted predictions for both interactions, setting other variables at their means. Compared to pro-confederate protests, and controlling for protesters’ weapon possession and behavior, pro-immigration protests increased (reduced) predicted support for police control of protesters among those high (low) in racial resentment. The effects were even larger for pro-BLM protests, which also increased (reduced) support for police control of protesters among those high (low) in racial resentment. In supplementary models, we examined these interactions separately for Whites and non-Whites. Both interactions were larger and were only statistically significant among White respondents.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Within the past year, protests spanning the political spectrum erupted around the country and came to the forefront of public discussion. Protesters expressed opposition to immigrant arrests and detention centers, police violence, removal of confederate flags and monuments, and COVID-19 restrictions. President Trump was vocal in supporting some protesters but condemning others, especially those involved in minority social movements. Police also showed dramatic variation in their responses to protests, trying to balance safety concerns with Americans’ First Amendment right to peacefully assemble. Although police sometimes supported protesters, other times they went so far as to shoot protesters in the head or neck with rubber bullets, even against their own departments’ rules (Szabo et al., 2020). Increased protest activity and differential police reactions prompted questions about when police should get

involved in protests, how protesters should be policed, and where the public stands on these issues (Jones et al., 2020; Parker et al., 2020).

Expanding on prior experimental studies focused on public support for protests, we turned attention to public fear of protesters and attitudes toward protest policing. Our survey experiment manipulated the goals, tactics, and other characteristics of protests. We found that respondents were generally not afraid of protesters and supported more supervisory, rather than repressive, protest policing. The most supported protest policing practice was establishing a border around the protest, and the least supported was using non-lethal force (e.g., rubber bullets, tear gas) to disperse protesters. When protesters were delaying traffic, carrying firearms, or behaving unlawfully (damaging property and/or assaulting citizens), fear of the protesters increased, which in turn increased support for police repression. Additionally, racially resentful respondents were more supportive of police repression, just as they tend to be more supportive of harsh criminal justice policies and aggressive policing (Carter & Corra, 2016; Unnever & Cullen, 2000). We also found that racial resentment moderated the effect of protest goals on support for police repression. When protesters advocated for the rights of racial and ethnic minorities, support for repression increased among those high in resentment but declined among those with low resentment, indicating that how members of the public evaluate protests depends in part on their preexisting attitudes (Edwards & Arnon, 2019; Hsia & Radnitz, 2020).

The findings from our study have implications for both social movements and policing. Focusing first on social movements, a primary goal of protest is agenda seeding, whereby activists try to influence public opinion, and ultimately politics, by garnering greater media coverage and influence (Wasow, 2020). The results from our experiment align with prior research supporting nonviolent resistance as a more effective means of gaining support for a

cause than violent resistance (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Edwards & Arnon, 2019; Hsiao & Radnitz, 2020; Schock, 2005). Protests that involve tactics supported by the public and that do not induce fear are likely to be more effective in bringing about the desired social and political change (Feinberg et al., 2020; Gillion, 2013; Mazumder, 2018; Wouters, 2019). Ultimately, the success of a social movement's goals is better achieved through approaches that "foster feelings of common identity with observers" (Feinberg et al., 2020, p. 1087; see also Wouters, 2019). Our results suggest that this will be difficult when protest tactics are disruptive, dangerous, or unlawful, because such tactics foster public fear and support for repression. In this sense, the results of our experiment lend credence to the conclusions from Wasow's (2020) recent observational analysis of past protests.

Still, the media may frame certain types of nonviolent resistance efforts as more violent than they are. Media coverage does not always track reality (Beckett, 1997; Shi, Lu, & Pickett, 2020). Additionally, as Wasow (2020) explains, "media attention...can be sympathetic or hostile" (p. 641). Our study found that respondents' racial attitudes conditioned how they responded to different protest goals. Similarly, past research demonstrated that different types of people respond differently to news stories (Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018; Simmons, 2017). The US media is also increasingly polarized (Jurkowitz, Mitchell, Shearer, & Walker, 2020). In this context, negative media frames of protests playing on preexisting racial animosities may contribute to opposition toward certain social movements and support for police repression, especially among racially resentful viewers. As Hsiao and Radnitz (2020) recognize, preconceived notions about certain groups of people can shape assessments of protest situations. The media may exploit these preconceived notions, and the results may be particularly consequential for social movements of perceived outgroups, potentially resulting in disparate

support for control of certain types of protests over others. There is evidence that media coverage can affect police behavior (Mastorocco & Ornaghi, 2020). An important direction for future research, then, is to explore media coverage of protests, testing both for audience effects and impacts on police responses.

Regarding the policing of protests, the implications of our findings are clear. Most respondents were not supportive of repressive protest policing—specifically, they were not in favor of dispersing protests through arrests or other use of force. In fact, even when some protesters were behaving unlawfully (damaging property and assaulting people), less than 40% of respondents supported dispersing the protest with tear gas or rubber bullets. Perhaps respondents were concerned that officers would use force indiscriminately, targeting innocent protesters, not just those behaving unruly. Such a concern would be understandable based on recent events (Szabo et al., 2020). Respondents might also be concerned about harm to protesters. Over 2% of protesters shot with rubber and plastic bullets die, and about 15% suffer permanent disabilities (Haar, Iacopino, Ranadiv, Dandu, & Weiser, 2017). In just this past year, numerous Americans lost eyes and suffered fractured skulls because of repressive protest policing, which was often recorded and disseminated by news outlets, along with gruesome images of injuries, resulting in both public outrage and lawsuits (Szabo et al., 2020). To make matters worse, officers sometimes used force against protesters unnecessarily. As one person who was shot explained, “the police knew it was a peaceful protest ... I did not hear any instructions or commands from police. It went from protest to shooting, just like that” (Szabo et al., 2020, p. 2). At another protest, officers were caught on video laughing at protesters after they shot them, saying “beat it little fucker” and asking, “did you see me fuck up those motherfuckers?” (Nehamas & Blaskey, 2020).

The lesson from past policing experiments is that police policies and practices that are not favored by the public, especially those that are perceived as unfair or unjust, are counterproductive (Maguire, Lowrey, & Johnson, 2017; Mazerolle et al. 2013; Reisig, Mays, & Telep, 2018). This finding is important because public support and perceptions of procedural justice are critical for police legitimacy, civilian cooperation, and crime prevention (Kirk & Matsuda, 2011; Wolfe et al., 2016; Tyler & Jackson, 2014). Additionally, Mullinix, Bolsen, and Norris (2020, p. 14) showed “that when controversial use of force cases ‘go public,’” which happened in many cases of repressive protest policing, “they have a remarkable effect on citizens’ beliefs about police, potentially undermining the perceived legitimacy of a major governmental institution.” The evidence from our survey, when considered along with past findings, clearly indicates that police should avoid, when at all possible, using repressive protest policing practices, such as dispersing protesters with rubber bullets or tear gas (Maguire & Oakley, 2020). Instead, police should focus on supervisory practices, such as establishing boarders around protesters, and target enforcement efforts against protesters who behave disruptively or unlawfully. In this regard, Maguire and Oakley (2020) suggested that the principles of community policing should be considered in developing protest policing strategies. Based on our findings, there should be an awareness of the potential for discriminatory policing practices as well, given that racial animus can affect attitudes toward certain social movements.

Another downside to the use of repressive tactics by the police is that these tactics can instigate violence by protesters, thereby escalating the situation. For some social movements, like the BLM movement, police violence fueled the desire for collective action in the first place (Bonilla & Tillery, 2020; Laniyonu, 2019). Further repressive tactics in response to this collective action may facilitate the transition to riots and insurrections. History shows that

displays of dominant force by the police in protest situations have mostly failed (Maguire & Oakley, 2020). In fact, Ackerman and Kruegler (1994) explain that violent repression not only fails, but typically has unintended consequences, such as escalating conflict. Alternatively, “fair and effective protest policing strategies attempt to secure voluntary compliance without triggering defiance or rebellion among protesters,” and include a focus on learning the social identities of the groups protesting, allowing peaceful forms of collective action, and maintaining communication with protest groups (Maguire & Oakley, 2020, p. 11).

While our study fills an important gap in the literature by providing the first experimental evidence about public fear of protesters and support for protest policing in the era after George Floyd’s killing, several additional avenues of inquiry remain for future research. First, it is possible that other elements of the protest event may influence public fear and policing attitudes. Based on the work of Tilly (1995, 1999, 2004), Wouters (2019) identified five elements of an attractive collective identity within social movements that can influence public attitudes—worthiness, numbers, unity, commitment, and diversity. Our study measured the first two elements, operationalized via protest tactics and size. However, the latter three elements were not directly considered, although the duration of the protest, which we did manipulate, likely taps into commitment. Subsequent studies should examine alternative operationalizations and explore whether unity or diversity—perhaps operationalized as the racial and ethnic composition of protesters—have independent effects.

Unity, in particular, deserves additional theoretical and empirical attention. It involves the protest group sending a clear, focused message. While we manipulated protest goals, the way these goals are framed—in terms of the message activists are sending—can influence public attitudes (Bonilla & Tillery, Jr., 2020). Wouters (2019) found that BLM protest scenarios framed

to show greater unity in the message fostered more support. In addition, diversity may be consequential in protest framing. The reality, however, is that people are exposed to multiple, competing frames, that can nullify individual framing effects (Druckman, 2004; Druckman & Nelson, 2003). Consideration should thus be given to the effect of exposure to protesters' frames, as well as competing frames from media or political elites, or perhaps from criminal justice actors, such as police chiefs. Over the past year, for example, the frames used by protesters and police to describe social movements varied, often in conflicting ways (Szabo et al., 2020). In our study, perceived procedural justice was associated with greater fear of protesters and support for police repression. It may be that those who perceive the police as procedurally just are more sensitive to police (versus protester) frames.

Additionally, in our experiment, we did not introduce counter-protesters into the scenario. However, counter-protesters might influence public perceptions. For example, Simpson et al.'s (2018) experiment included White Nationalist protesters and Anti-Racist counter-protesters, showing that violence by one group increased support for the opposing group. Future research might explore whether the effects of counter-protester violence extend to attitudes toward protest policing. Finally, additional experiments are needed that explore the effects of different protest policing tactics on public attitudes. Our study did not manipulate police responses to the described protest, because it focused on attitudes about what police responses were appropriate. However, in international research, Lupu and Wallace (2019) manipulated both the tactics used by the protesters and government. They found that government violence reduced support for government repression, although the effect was only significant in Argentina. Studies are needed that explore whether similar effects emerge in the United States, especially in the post-Floyd era.

To conclude, our experiment provided initial evidence about public opinion toward protest policing post-Floyd and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Public opinion is important not only because it influences criminal justice policy (Pickett, 2019), but also because it is indispensable for effective policing (Mazerolle et al., 2013; Tyler & Jackson, 2014) and determines the outcomes of social movements (Wasow, 2020; Wouters, 2019). One takeaway from our study is that public fear and support for police control increase when protesters' behavior is disruptive, dangerous, or unlawful, net of protest size and duration. Another key finding is that preexisting beliefs, particularly racial beliefs, moderate the effect of protest goals on support for police repression. To the extent that authorities are responsive to (or share) the public's attitudes, this may help explain why politicians and police sometimes respond differently to protests with varying goals. From a policy standpoint, the evidence herein suggests a need to reconsider repressive protest policing strategies, as well as how biases, like racial animus, may lead to differential policing of protests related to particular goals. We hope that future research builds on our study by continuing to examine public fear and support for protest policing, both in the United States and internationally. As Brannen, Haig, and Schmidt (2020) explained, "we are living in an age of global mass protests that are historically unprecedented in frequency, scope, and size" (p. 1). Accordingly, understanding public opinion about protests and how to police them is critical.

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TABLE 1 Experimental vignette

Introductory Text
Below, we describe a hypothetical protest. We would like to know what you think the police should do about this protest, if anything. Please read the text below and then answer the questions that follow.
Vignette Text
A protest [Manipulation A] has been going on for [Manipulation B]. It has about [Manipulation C] protesters in attendance. The protest is going on downtown in a large city, [Manipulation D]. The protesters are [Manipulation E]. [Manipulation F].
Manipulation A: Protest Type
1) ...against the removal of confederate monuments (statues) and memorials 2) ...against COVID-19 social distancing ordinances and stay-at-home orders 3) ...against immigration detention centers and the arrest of undocumented immigrants 4) ...against police violence and in support of Black Lives Matter
Manipulation B: Protest Duration
1) ...one day 2) ...several days
Manipulation C: Protest Size
1) ...25 2) ...100
Manipulation D: Protest Impact
1) ...but is not delaying traffic 2) ...and is delaying traffic
Manipulation E: Protest Weapons
1) ...unarmed 2) ...mostly unarmed, but some are carrying weapons legally
Manipulation F: Protest Behavior
1) So far, no civilians have been hurt and no property has been damaged 2) So far, no civilians have been hurt, but there has been some damage to nearby buildings and cars 3) So far, a few civilians have been pushed or hit by the protesters, but no property has been damaged 4) So far, a few civilians have been pushed or hit by the protesters, and there has been some damage to nearby buildings and cars

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics

Variables	Mean	SD	Range
Support police control ^a	.00	.85	−1.56–1.39
Fear of protesters	2.91	1.20	1–5
Racial resentment ^a	.00	.87	−1.28–1.60
White (%)	73.70	—	0–1
Age	49.48	17.74	18–93
Female (%)	54.70	—	0–1
Education	3.58	1.46	1–6
Income	6.31	3.42	1–16
Unemployed (%)	12.50	—	0–1
Married (%)	47.10	—	0–1
Right-wing politics ^a	.00	.91	−1.62–1.54
Religiosity ^a	−.00	.88	−1.36–1.46
Born-again Protestant (%)	17.30	—	0–1
Procedural justice ^a	.00	.92	−2.28–1.21
Police experience (%)	17.00	—	0–1
Protest experience (%)	10.90	—	0–1
Fear of crime ^a	−.00	.88	−1.39–1.83
Collective efficacy ^a	.00	.82	−2.96–1.86
Neighborhood disorder ^a	−.00	.81	−.56–3.67
Urbanicity	3.09	1.29	1–5
Southerner (%)	36.13	—	0–1

Note:

SD = standard deviation.

^a Standardized mean index.

FIGURE 1 Attitudes toward protest policing, by fear of protesters

Note: Figure shows proportions and 95% confident intervals.

None = “police should leave the protest alone, with no officer involvement,” and Full = “police should shut down the protest entirely.” SO = strongly oppose, O = oppose, N = neither support nor oppose, S = strongly support, and SS = strongly support.

FIGURE 2 Marginal effects of protest characteristics on fear and support for police controlling the protesters

Note: Figure shows the marginal effects (and 95% confidence intervals) from regressing fear of protesters and support for police control on the experimental manipulations, without controls. N = 1,000.

TABLE 3 Full regressions predicting fear and support for protest policing (N = 963)

Variables	Model 1: Fear of Protesters		Model 2: Support Police Control		Model 3: Support Police Control	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Racial resentment	.013	.064	.311***	.037	.209***	.057
Interactions						
Anti-Social D. X Resentment	—	—	—	—	.014	.071
Pro-immigrants X Resentment	—	—	—	—	.156*	.070
Pro-BLM X Resentment	—	—	—	—	.235***	.065
Protest Type						
Pro-confederate (ref.)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Anti-social distancing	-.023	.104	-.005	.058	-.003	.057
Pro-immigrants	-.155	.097	-.095	.057	-.096	.057
Pro-Black Lives Matter	-.118	.097	-.060	.054	-.061	.054
Protest Length						
One day (ref.)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Several days	.073	.070	.018	.038	.033	.038
Protest Size						
25 protesters (ref.)	—	—	—	—	—	—
100 protesters	.062	.071	-.013	.039	-.016	.039
Protest Impact						
None (ref.)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Delaying traffic	.121	.070	.148***	.039	.145***	.039
Protest Weapons						
Unarmed (ref.)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Some armed legally	.202**	.070	.105**	.039	.102**	.039
Protest Behavior						
Lawful (ref.)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Property damage	.238*	.102	.198**	.057	.202***	.057
Violence	.224*	.101	.126*	.056	.122*	.055
Damage and violence	.520***	.098	.350***	.055	.343***	.055
Control Variables						
White	.136	.086	.028	.047	.037	.046
Age	.001	.002	.001	.001	.001	.001
Female	.305***	.074	.077	.040	.071	.040
Education	-.007	.026	-.018	.014	-.019	.014
Income	.007	.013	-.005	.007	-.005	.007
Unemployed	-.104	.125	-.033	.065	-.029	.065
Married	.034	.079	.081	.045	.090*	.044
Right-wing politics	.107	.060	.206***	.033	.209***	.032
Religiosity	.070	.048	.052	.027	.046	.027
Born-again Protestant	-.063	.105	-.016	.058	-.009	.057
Procedural justice	.197***	.053	.194***	.029	.194***	.029
Policing experience	-.153	.097	.125**	.047	.131**	.048
Protest experience	-.118	.125	-.035	.062	-.015	.062
Fear of crime	.367***	.048	.080**	.026	.081**	.026
Collective efficacy	.072	.053	.020	.028	.014	.027
Neighborhood disorder	.140**	.053	.081**	.028	.080**	.028
Urbanicity	.007	.029	.012	.016	.012	.016
Southerner	-.057	.076	-.041	.042	-.044	.042
<i>R</i> -squared	.242		.541		.551	

p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001 (two-tailed).

FIGURE 3 Interaction of racial resentment and protest type

Note: Figure shows adjusted predictions with 95% confidence intervals. “Low” and “high” racial resentment are defined as 1 SD below and above the mean. Other variables are set at their means.