Crisis, plunge, and recovery of public confidence in the police: Data from six national surveys

Jonathan Kelley

Principal Investigator, International Social Science Survey

kelley@InternationalSurveyCenter.org

MDR Evans

Professor of Sociology, University of Nevada, Reno

MariahEv2@gmail.com

C. Corday

Senior Researcher, International Survey Center

ccorday@InternationalSurveyCenter.org

Abstract

This paper depicts the trajectory of Americans' confidence in their police across five months before, during, and after the nation was riveted by Minnesota police murdering a Black civilian and the implications thereof for our civic community and our national commitment to equal protection. Data from the International Social Science Survey and the international WVS/EVS surveys show that Americans' confidence in their police is, on average, fairly typical of other advanced societies, coming 30th out of 110 nations worldwide. Within the US there was sharp political divergence. Democrats' confidence in the police plunged dramatically around the time of the killing, and then rebounded even more strongly later. But this was only among Democrats. Republicans' views were stable across the period. Regression analysis reveals that that this pattern holds controlling for social and demographic factors, including race. The patterns of change in confidence in the

police were replicated for trust in the police. In addition, Blacks and Whites were equally confident in the police across most of the period, except that shortly after the murder Black's confidence plunged briefly and temporarily lower than their White peers'; the subsequent rebound in confidence was especially large among Blacks. Further multivariate analysis reveals that the degree of confidence people feel in the government as a whole is by far the largest determinant of how much confidence they feel in the police. Sociodemographic factors other than race play no clear role. Racial prejudice is irrelevant. In short, all this is mainly party politics.

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INTRODUCTION

A wave of protests swept across the country in response to Minneapolis police killing George Floyd while arresting him on May 25th, 2020. The protests – sparked initially by outrage over Floyd's death, and gaining steam over the subsequent weeks -- have come to center around the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, protesting police violence against Black people and racism more generally.

While there have been previous waves of protests about police's treatment of Black people (for instance, those sparked by the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri), the recent protests have been exceptional in scope. So, too, has been the extent of national response from both government and the private sector, and perhaps in their impact on public opinion. The protests have spread to all 50 states (New York Times, 2020) and, unlike previous protests, have sparked large sympathetic protests in some 60 countries around the world. They have also led to an unprecedented response from both government (with, for instance, Mississippi voting to change their state flag to remove the Confederate flag from it) and the private sector (with a huge number of large corporations issuing statements in support of the movement). In addition, preliminary evidence suggests that public opinion on the protests *could* be different this time, with the Washington Post reporting polls showing that a much higher share of the public believe Floyd's death was a symptom of a larger problem in policing than believed the same thing in the 2014 police killings of Michael Brown and Eric Gardner (Washington Post, 2020).

Prior Research

Police Violence and Attitudes about the Police

Historically, publicized incidents of police violence have been generally shown to lower confidence in police, sometimes dramatically (Weitzer 2002; Kochel 2019). For example, St. Louis residents reported lower trust in the police and lower perceptions that the police treat people fairly immediately following Michael Brown's killing (Kochel 2019). In Los Angeles in the wake of the Rodney King incident, approval of the police plunged by more than 40 percentage points and other incidents of publicized police brutality in Los Angeles and New York lead similarly to dramatic drops in approval in their respective cities (Weitzer, 2002).

Intriguingly, this research *also* found that approval of the police bounced back with surveys 1-3 years after each incident finding substantially improved ratings. Since the timing of questions was constrained by survey availability, this raises the question of *when* do attitudes begin to return to normal -- did it take months or years to recover? And are there post-trough highs and aftershock lows? Moreover, since these effects are measured in the local cities in which shocking incidents of police brutality occur, the question remains of how much impact this will have nationally .

Protests and Attitudes about the Police

What impact the wave of protests – featuring both peaceful events and violent ones – on public perceptions is an open question: On political questions, violent and non-violent protests do not seem to have the same effects. For instance, in the 1960's wave of race-related protests, nonviolent protests seemed to modestly increase the Democratic vote share in neighboring areas while violent protests decreased it (Wasow, 2017). This raises the question of whether the current wave of protests which appear more widely violent – on both sides – than those surrounding the 2014 killings will have stronger, weaker, or contradictory impacts on public opinion because of this.

The current wave of protests also differs from the well-studied incidents of the 1960s/1970s in the unprecedented ubiquity of cell phone cameras, which make incidents of violence (both police brutality and violence by the protestors themselves) more evident and less disputable. Theoretically, the amplified images of police violence – for instance, the widely shared image of police in Buffalo pushing down Martin Gugino, a 75-year old man whose skull was fractured in the encounter – might decrease favorable attitudes towards the police. On the other hand, greater access to images of protestor violence and rioting – for instance, videos of protestors burning a police precinct building in Minneapolis – might increase trust in police as a needed protection against perceived lawlessness.

Prior literature on the likely impact of increased social media/video evidence of police/protestor conduct in the protests is limited and somewhat contradictory. Those who

consume more crime-related television news are more favorable to the police (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011), so it is not hard to imagine that news and social media coverage of rioting could have a similar effect. However, at least one study did not find any impact of consumption of media about a particular incident of police misconduct on general confidence in police (although media consumption did increase respondent's likelihood of believing the officers in question were at fault) (Chermak, McGarrell, & Gruenewald, 2006). Thus, the question of whether the increased availability of video evidence of violence on both sides will make this wave of protests different remains open.

Who has confidence in the police?

While belief that these deaths are a symptom of a larger political problem has increased across the political aisle, Democrats are still, unsurprisingly, substantially more likely to believe there is a systemic issue than Republicans are (Washington Post 2020). However, much of the research on the impact of police brutality on confidence in the police does not take into account political affiliations (eg Wu 2018; Kochel 2019). Given the highly politicized nature of the current wave of protests, this is an important question that remains to be answered.

Ethnic minorities, particularly Black people, are widely found to be less trusting of the police (Peck 2015) and this is associated with belief in racially unjust treatment/profiling by the police (Wu 2014). In particular, declines in confidence in the police in St Louis after the Michael Brown killings were found to be driven entirely by a substantial drop in confidence among Black respondents (Kochel 2019). Wu (2018) proposes two frameworks for explaining racial differences in support for the police: "sense of injustice" (following Myrdal 1944) – in which minorities perceive that the police are less just and thus have lower support and confidence in them – and "group position theory" (following Blumer 1958) – in which racial groups develop stable positions on the police based on their group identity, perception of threat to the group, and the potential of institutions to protect the status quo (seen as favorably by advantaged groups and unfavorable by disadvantaged groups (see also Wu et al 2009)). One intriguing weakness in this body of literature is the lack of control for political attitudes: we know that Black people are much more likely to be Democrats than White people, and given the politicization of law-and-order it is worth understanding whether some of these observed racial difference proxy for underlying political differences.

DATA AND MEASUREMENT

Data

International Social Science Survey (ISSS) Round 21

By a convenient coincidence the International Social Science Survey (ISSS) Round 21 fielded two large national surveys in April before these dramatic events, another at the end of May around a week after, one early in June, and two others later in June and toward the end of July. The surveys are part of an ongoing research project on the coronavirus epidemic which include questions on confidence in the police and confidence in various levels of government and other institutions. This neatly brackets Floyd's killing and the subsequent protests, giving an opportunity to empirically assess how these dramatic events have shaped confidence in the police in particular and confidence in government in general.

All of the surveys so far are Amazon 'Mechanical Turk' internet-based samples. These can be conducted without risk of contracting coronavirus and, moreover, are swift, convenient, and cost effective. Internet samples of this sort have been widely and successfully used during the pandemic (Cornesse and Blom 2020; Graham et al. 2020; (eg McFadden 2020; Liotta, Marazzi, Orlando, & Palombi 2020).

Extensive research shows that Mechanical Turk samples have proven remarkably accurate for multivariate analyses (Clifford, Jewell and Waggoner 2015; Springer et al. 2016; Weinberg, Freese and McElhattan 2014), specifically for political affiliations and attitudes (Clifford, Jewell and Waggoner 2015) and for science-related issues (Evans and Kelley 2011). We have found that as well, comparing our 2017-2019 internet samples to face-to-face samples in the US and many other countries (from the International Social Survey Programme's highly regarded "Inequality" series).

Moreover, estimates from Pew's carefully curated internet sample and the ISSS MTurk samples match closely on many COVID-related questions.

Sample representativeness

The sample is adjusted statistically to be representative of the United States in age, sex, and education (using the US census as benchmark). It is also adjusted statistically to be representative in political party preference and in liberal-conservative ideology (using the American National Election Study as benchmark). Finally, it is adjusted statistically to be representative of developed nations in religious belief and also – particularly important in this analysis – in racial prejudice (using the World Values Study/ European Values Study as benchmark). Details are in Appendix 3.

World Values Study/ European Values Study

To put American confidence in police in context, we provide a worldwide perspective using the well-known World Values Study. Data are from the World Value Study and European Values Study datasets (EVS 2011, WVS 2015) pooled for all available years (Díez-Medrano 2011). This is a splendid and highly regarded dataset, well documented on the two organizations' websites. In the full dataset there are over 340 surveys, over 100 countries, and over 500,000 individual respondents. The several questions analyzed here were asked in varying numbers of surveys with therefore varying numbers of respondents (described in the text). For this analysis, we all the available data except for dropping nations with less than 1 million citizens and one nation that did not ask the relevant questions (Israel).

MEASUREMENT

Dependent variable: Confidence in the police

In each of our US surveys we asked about confidence in the police and about trust in various levels of government (Jackson and Bradford, 2010). For measuring confidence, we used the tried-and-true question from the World Values/European Values survey. The verbatim question is...

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Could you tell me how much CONFIDENCE you have in each of these...
The police?
  31% A great deal of confidence
  43% Quite a lot of confidence
  20% Not very much confidence
   6% None at all
(Total 100%; N= 5,860)
(Mean= 66 points out of 100; standard deviation= 29)
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The numbers on the left are the percent distribution of the answers (respondents did not see them, nor the other material in parentheses in the bottom two rows.)

For simplicity and clarity, we score answers as points out of 100:

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100 points for "A great deal of confidence"
 67 points for "Quite a lot of confidence"
 33 points for "Not very much confidence"
  0 points for "None at all"
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This equal interval scoring is mathematically equivalent to conventional 1,2,3,4 Likert-style scoring – standardized results (such as standardized regression coefficients [sometimes called betas] and R-squared) are mathematically identical. Metric results (such as means, metric regression coefficients, and predicted values) differ by only a simple adjustment for the difference in scale (0 to 100 versus 1 to 4). We adopt the 0 to 100 metric because it is more intuitive.

Predictor/independent variables

The predictor/independent variables were chosen in light of prior research. **Political partisanship** is from a question asking who you would vote for "if an election were held today" with answer categories "Definitely vote for the Democratic candidate, Biden"; "Probably vote for Biden"; "Undecided, hard to say"; "Probably vote for the Republican candidate, Trump"; and "Definitely vote for Trump". The few respondents answering "Vote for someone else" or "Not vote at all" were dropped from the analysis. In the text we call those categories "strong Democrat", "leaning Democratic", "Independent", "leaning Republican" and "strong Republican".

The control variables for the regression analysis are measured conventionally. **Age** is measured in single years. **Black** and **Hispanic** are indicator/ dichotomous variables measured as 0=no and 1=yes. **Gender** is also scored as a dichotomy; female is the reference category. **Education** is scored as years completed. **Occupational status** (sometimes known as job quality) is scored using the SIOM system ranging in ten categories from 0 (farmer) through 1 (professional; Kelley 1990; Kelley and Evans 2018). **Family income** is measured in dollars, rounded to the nearest \$5,000.

DESCRIPTION

Confidence in the police compared to other American institutions

Confidence in the police spans the entire spectrum from "none at all" to "a great deal of confidence", with the balance of opinion clearly on the positive side. 74% report "Quite a lot of confidence" or "a great deal of confidence". Using the equal-interval scoring discussed in the Measurement section above, the mean is 66 points out of 100, very close to "quite a lot of confidence".

By way of comparison, confidence in the police is as high, or fractionally higher, than confidence in other institutions or confidence in the nation as a whole. Confidence in the courts, using the same measurement design, has a mean of 62 points out of 100.

Confidence in one's state government has a mean of 64, slightly above the Federal Government's 60. Public confidence in the nation, the "USA as a whole", has a mean of 65.

Confidence in the partisan components of the national government and in political parties is noticeably lower. The mean confidence rating for the US Senate and House of Representatives is 56, 10 points below the police. The mean rating for political parties is even lower, 51.

Thus, confidence in the police, despite the sorrow and the anger following the murder of Floyd, is at the top end of governmental institutions.

An international perspective

In a worldwide perspective, confidence in American police is rather higher than the average but not remarkably high. Here are comparable data from the World Values Survey/ European Values Survey asking the confidence question of almost half a million respondents in various years between 1981 and 2014 (Table 1), scored in the same 0 to 100 metric.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Table 1. Confidence in the police in international perspective. Mean points out of 100. World Values Survey/ European Values Survey pooled, various years 1981 to 2014.

Rank	(UN code) Country	(mean)	Cases	Rank	(UN code) Country	(mean)	Cases	Rank	(UN code) Country	(mean)	Cases
1	634. Qatar	91	1,060	41	12. Algeria	58	2,482	81	50. Bangladesh	46	3,025
2	704. Viet Nam	84	2,495	42	528. Netherlands	58	5,845	82	100. Bulgaria	46	5,607
3	400. Jordan	81	3,623	43	392. Japan	58	8,170	83	642. Romania	46	8,256
4	860. Uzbekistan	79	1,500	44	250. France	57	6,319	84	268. Georgia	46	6,210
5	208. Denmark	72	4,742	45	608. Philippines	57	3,600	85	703. Slovakia	45	5,537
6	246. Finland	72	5,764	46	504. Morocco	57	3,651	86	300. Greece	45	2,642
7	914. Bosnia	71	800	47	620. Portugal	57	3,738	87	422. Lebanon	45	1,200
8	372. Ireland	71	4,242	48	364. Iran	57	5,199	88	203. Czech Republic	44	7,909
9	197. Northern Cyprus	70	500	49	710. South Africa	57	16,786	89	499. Montenegro	44	2,816
10	578. Norway	69	5,532	50	800. Uganda	56	1,002	90	688. Serbia	44	3,992
11	124. Canada	69	7,079	51	630. Puerto Rico	56	1,884	91	417. Kyrgyzstan	42	2,543
12	352. Iceland	68	3,405	52	716. Zimbabwe	56	2,502	92	428. Latvia	41	4,622
13	818. Egypt	68	7,574	53	152. Chile	55	5,700	93	76. Brazil	41	4,768
14	414. Kuwait	67	1,303	54	70. Bosnia Herzegovina	55	2,712	94	231. Ethiopia	40	1,500
15	36. Australia	67	6,174	55	368. Iraq	54	6,226	95	440. Lithuania	40	4,527
16	702. Singapore	67	3,484	56	288. Ghana	54	3,086	96	51. Armenia	39	4,600
17	554. New Zealand	67	2,996	57	20. Andorra	53	1,003	97	891. Serbia & Mont.	39	1,220
18	646. Rwanda	67	3,034	58	410. South Korea	53	7,070	98	498. Moldova	38	4,589
19	915. Kosovo	66	1,601	59	56. Belgium	52	7,358	99	887. Yemen	38	1,000
20	344. Hong Kong	66	2,252	60	724. Spain	52	13,959	100	780. Trinidad & Tobago	38	2,001
21	792. Turkey	65	12,879	61	275. Palestine	52	1,000	101	643. Russian Federation	37	12,538
22	826. Great Britain	65	7,346	62	233. Estonia	51	6,085	102	566. Nigeria	37	6,778
23	458. Malaysia	64	2,501	63	854. Burkina Faso	51	1,534	103	862. Venezuela	37	2,400
24	466. Mali	64	1,534	64	360. Indonesia	51	3,015	104	804. Ukraine	36	8,013
25	470. Malta	64	3,362	65	158. Taiwan	51	3,245	105	484. Mexico	35	10,827
26	156. China	64	7,791	66	222. El Salvador	51	1,254	106	320. Guatemala	33	1,000
27	756. Switzerland	64	5,125	67	858. Uruguay	50	3,000	107	604. Peru	32	5,422
28	834. Tanzania	63	1,171	68	705. Slovenia	49	6,520	108	586. Pakistan	32	3,933
29	48. Bahrain	63	1,200	69	31. Azerbaijan	49	3,004	109	32. Argentina	32	6,398
30	840. United States	63	10,387	70	398. Kazakhstan	49	1,500	110	214. Dominican Rep.	28	417
31	752. Sweden	63	7,421	71	894. Zambia	49	1,500				
32	442. Luxembourg	62	2,821	72	616. Poland	48	7,644				
33	909. Northern Ireland	62	2,116	73	356. India	48	10,124				
34	40. Austria	61	4,432	74	191. Croatia	48	3,724				
35	434. Libya	60	2,131	75	348. Hungary	48	6,633				
36	788. Tunisia	60	1,205	76	170. Colombia	48	10,562				
37	196. Cyprus	60	3,050	77	218. Ecuador	48	1,202				
38	380. Italy	59	7,897	78	764. Thailand	47	2,734				
39	8. Albania	59	2,533	79	112. Belarus	47	6,127				
40	276. Germany	59	14,989	80	807. Macedonia	47	3,550				

These data show US police ranking 30th out of 110 nations, tied with Sweden and near Australia, Britain, Switzerland, and Northern Ireland. Most other English-speaking nations rank a little higher and some Scandinavian nations higher yet, around 10 points higher . Many of the larger European nations (Austria, Italy, Germany, France, Portugal) rank lower than the US, around half-a-dozen points lower. The median country (Iraq) is at 55 compared to 63 for the US at the time the international data were collected. Most South American countries are lower yet, as much as 30 points lower than the US.

The general pattern is that confidence in the police increases with socioeconomic development (Figure 1; the US is on the right, shown by a red square). The US fits the usual international pattern, with levels of confidence in the police that are entirely unexceptional – or were unexceptional some years ago, when these international data were collected.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1. Confidence in police and socioeconomic development (GDP per capita index). Scatterplot and OLS fit line. Data: WVS/EVS and World Bank. USA (red), other English-speaking nations (blue), Europe (green). Fit line for all nations, excluding the USA.

CONFIDENCE IN THE POLICE FOLLOWING FLOYD'S KILLING

How then has America's confidence in the police changed after a policeman killed George Floyd in May and following the dramatic protests and riots evoked by that followed over the next few months? To allow for strong differences by partisanship, we separate the results by party.

Among Republicans

Among Republicans in April before Floyd was killed, confidence in the police was high, just over 70 points out of 100 (Figure 2 and Appendix Table A1). As we have seen, that was higher than most Americans' level of confidence in the courts, state and Federal governments, and in the nation as a whole – and far higher than Americans' confidence in the US Senate and House of Representatives or their confidence in political parties. Note that, throughout the period, within each partisan group, there was considerable diversity in confidence in the police: the standard deviation was mostly in the 25 to 30 points out of 100 range.

In comparison with other nations, that puts US Republicans' views of police among the most favorable in the world ranking around number 10 out of 110 nations. That puts them near Denmark, Finland and Ireland, and fractionally ahead of Canada's highly regarded police (Table 1, above).

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2. Confidence in police according to political party preferences. Mean points out of 100. ISSS Round 21, April-July, 2020. N=5,827 American adults. Confidence in police dropped sharply, but only for a few weeks, and only among Democrats.

By the end of May, shortly after Floyd was killed, Republican's views had hardly changed, save perhaps hints of a tiny *increase* among strong Republicans and an equally minute

decrease among those only leaning toward the Republican Party (neither statistically significant).

Early in June, Republicans' views were virtually identical to what they had been before Floyd was murdered.

By late July, strong Republicans were actually some 5 or 6 points out of 100 *more* favorable to the police than they had been back in the mid-April before Floyd was murdered, a small but statistically significant difference ($t=2.47$, $p<.05$). Those leaning Republican were just 4 or 5 points more favorable, not quite a statistically significant difference ($t=1.94$, $p=.053$).¹

Thus, it is clear that Floyd's murder and its dramatic aftermath had little effect on Republicans' confidence in the police.

Among Independents

There are not enough political Independents in our sample ($N=763$ for all 6 time periods together) to make any strong claim about the consequences of Floyd's murder (Figure 2 and Appendix Table A1).

Independents look to be generally intermediate between Republicans and Democrats, as is to be expected. By late July they were 5 or 6 points *more* favorable to the police than they were in mid-April ($t=2.47$, $p<.05$).

Among Democrats

Democrats, especially strong Democrats who would "definitely vote for the Democratic candidate, Biden" rather than those only leaning toward the party ("probably vote for Biden"), took a very different view of the matter (Figure 2 and Appendix Table A1).

Strong Democrats' confidence in the police dropped sharply after Floyd's murder. It started around 60 points (in international perspective near Northern Ireland, Italy and Germany, some 30th to 40th in the world rankings). But in the weeks after Floyd's murder, it plunged almost 20 points to around 40 (near Ethiopia, Armenia and Russia, some 90th to 100th in world rankings, not all that far above Pakistan and Argentina at the very bottom worldwide).

After reaching that nadir in early June, strong Democrats' confidence in police rebounded to its former level by late June. There was even a kind of compensatory surge lifting strong Democrats confidence in police in late July and the first days of August a little higher than it had been in April, before Floyd's murder.

¹ These are two-tailed tests.

Among those only leaning to the Democrats, who would "probably vote for Biden", confidence in the police was consistently higher than strong Democrats' views, although not so favorable as Republicans' (Figure 2 and Appendix Table A1). In the wake of the Floyd murder, mild Democrats' views followed similar changes of direction at the same time as strong Democrats' views. But the mild Democrats views were muted in magnitude, dropping some 10 points after Floyd was killed and rising steadily thereafter. By the end of July these moderate Democrats were just as favorable to police as Republicans and still fractionally more favorable than strong Democrats.

Thus, after the Floyd incident and subsequent worldwide protests, confidence in the police plummeted in the first few weeks among strong Democrats, fell moderately among moderate Democrats, and did not fall at all among Republicans.

After the first few weeks, confidence in the police recovered dramatically among Democrats. By late July, confidence was much higher than it had been before Floyd among strong Democrats ($t=6.7$, $p<.001$) and significantly higher than before among those only leaning Democratic ($t=3.9$, $p<.001$).

By late July, confidence in American police was around 75 to 80 points for Democrats and Republicans alike. In international terms, that then put American police slightly above Finland and Denmark, roughly 4th or 5th in the world rankings.

Controlling for demographic and socio-economic variables

The results we have just seen take no account of other differences between Democrats and Republicans in background (age, sex, ethnicity) and socio-economic status (education, occupational status, income). Here we adjust for these differences by regression with a straightforward model predicting confidence in the police from party preference, controlling for background and SES:

$$\text{Eq. 1: } \text{ConfidenceInPolice} = \text{PoliticalParty} + \text{Age} + \text{Gender} + \text{Black} + \text{Hispanic} + \text{Education} + \text{Occupation} + \text{FamilyIncome} + e$$

We estimate Eq. 1 by OLS, separately for each of the six surveys. Measurement details were given above in the Measurement section. The results are shown in Figure 3 based on the regression estimates in Table 2. For clarity we focus on the strong Democrats and strong Republicans. For each of these groups, we show our single best estimates (the sample regression results) with the thick line and the range that we can be 95% confident includes the true figure in the population of all adult Americans in that partisan group, net of the effects of other influences. For example, in mid-April, our point estimate for confidence in the police among middle-aged, middle-status, middle-income strong Democrats is a bit below 65 (see the beginning of the thick red line). That is our sample results and it is our single best guess about the value in the population. But the intrinsic variability of the sampling process means that the true value in the population could well

be somewhat higher or somewhat lower: In this example we can be 95% confident that the true value in the population for this group at that time was somewhere between a bit below 60 and a bit below 70 (thin dotted red lines enclosing the thick red line). The results for the other time points can be interpreted similarly.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Figure 3. Confidence in the police over time by political party preference, net of background influences. Predicted means and confidence intervals from regression, net of background (from Eq. 1 and Table 2). Complete case analysis, N=4,789 adults; April-July, 2020.

Adjusting for background and socioeconomic status leaves the basic pattern virtually unchanged. Figure 3 shows predicted support for the police for a typical middling American (middle aged, middle status, middle income). It shows high confidence in the police before Floyd's killing and the subsequent protests, especially among Republicans. Among Republicans confidence continued more or less unchanged throughout our period, from late May through late July.

Among Democrats and net of background and socioeconomic factors, confidence in the police dropped sharply late in May and early in June during a period where there were widespread, well publicized protests in the US and elsewhere in the world. It started in the low 60s and reached a nadir of 46 points for middle aged, middle status, middle income Americans. In international perspective that dropped it from something around 30th in the

world, near Switzerland, Sweden, and the US as a whole, to something around 80th in world rankings, near Bulgaria and Romania. That is a huge drop.

But then confidence in police among Democrats recovered dramatically. By late July among middle aged, middle status, middle income Americans it had reached the mid-70s. In international terms that put Democrats' confidence in American police among the world's top 10. Quite a change.

Other aspects of the regression adjustments behind all this are unexceptional (Table 2). Higher income and higher occupational status people mostly have a little more confidence in the police, *ceteris paribus*. Men hardly differ from women, perhaps a tiny fraction more confident. Hispanics may be fractionally less confident, but not consistently and not reliably – our sample of Hispanics is too small for any firm conclusion (575 for all 6 time periods combined).

Table 2. Social differences in confidence in the police before and after the killing of George Floyd. OLS metric regression coefficients, estimated separately for each survey. ISSS Round 21, 6 surveys April-July. American adults, 2020.

Confidence	Before		After			
	mid-April (1)	late April (2)	end May (3)	early June (4)	late June (5)	late July (6)
Democrat (=1)	-10.4***	-11.2***	-20.5***	-29.5***	-14.8***	0.1
Controls						
Black (=1)	2.2	0.2	-13.3***	4.1	4.1	8.3***
Male (=1)	3.8*	1.8	1.2	2.6	4.3*	2.4
Hispanic (=1)	-1.9	-6.8	5.2	-6.5	-4.2	3.2
Age (years)	0.2*	0.2*	-0.0	0.0	0.1	-0.0
Education (years)	0.2	0.5	-0.1	-1.4	-0.1	0.1
Status (0 to 1)	4.0	19.0***	9.3	12.5	16.6***	11.1***
Income (\$5000s)	4.3***	2.3	3.4**	4.0	1.6	-0.3
(intercept)	55.4***	44.4***	68.9***	82.7***	61.4***	65.5***
Cases	978	767	725	321	959	1039
R-sq	0.064	0.080	0.115	0.172	0.071	0.035

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Confidence among Black Americans

Looking at Black Americans separately, confidence in police was high in April with a mean in the 60s in both surveys conducted before Floyd was murdered. But controlling for demographic and SES variables it was *not* significantly different from other Americans' views (Table 2, row highlighted in blue, columns 1 and 2). The situation a generation or two in the past may have been different.

Then after Floyd was killed in May, Blacks' confidence in the police dropped sharply, to 48 or 49 points. That would take them from around the US average before (30th in the world) to around 60th in the world afterward, near Spain or Uruguay. Controlling for

demographic and SES differences that was clearly and significantly *lower* than other Americans' views, a difference of fully 13 points ($p<.001$; column 3).

After that Black confidence in the police rose steadily, first to a mean of 58 (early June) and then to 70 (late June). Controlling for demographic and SES factors however, neither of these was significantly different from other Americans' views (columns 4 and 5).

Subsequently Blacks' confidence in the police again rose, reaching a mean of 83 points by late July. Controlling for demographic and SES differences that was significantly *higher* than other Americans' views, by 8 points ($p<.001$; column 6). That put their views of police among the most favorable half dozen in the world, higher than the esteemed police of Denmark, Finland, or Ireland.

So even after Floyd's killing and the subsequent protests, confidence in the police is *not* a matter of White versus Black, and not much a matter of rich versus poor. Instead where there are differences, it is more a matter of party politics.

Replication: An alternative measure – Trust in police

Confidence in police and trust in police are similar but by no means identical (Jackson and Bradford, 2010). To see whether the patterns we have seen for confidence are generalizable to trust, we replicate the analysis. The trust questions begin thus (we replicate the actual questionnaire appearance to illustrate the European style 0 to 10 metric which we used in order to be directly comparable with European surveys):

How much do you PERSONALLY trust these institutions...

>> 0 means you do not trust an institution at all and 10 means you have complete trust.

	0 No trust at all	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Complete trust	?? (Don't know)
Firstly, your city government?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Your STATE government?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The legal system?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The police?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

...etc. . .

These questions are scored in the obvious way, as numbers from 0 to 10. The last category, "Don't know", was rarely used; we dropped those few cases.

These results for partisan differences in patterns of change for "trust in the police" directly replicate those we have already seen for "confidence in the police" (Figure 4).

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

Figure 4. How much did TRUST in the police change over time? Mean trust in points out of 100 by political party preference. ISSS Round 21 Surveys, April-July 2020. N= 5,668 American adults. Trust in the police dropped only for a few weeks and only among Democrats.

It is important that the pattern of change in trust and in confidence move in parallel, because it suggests that the changes are real (rather than reflecting a potential peculiarity of the wording of the question).

Confirmation: Dogs that did not bark

The changes we have just seen probably do *not* reflect any broader, global shift in this period – so Floyd’s killing and the subsequent protests were not merely a happenstance in the midst of some other ongoing broad change. This is suggested by the utter lack of change in confidence in foreign nations (Figure 5). The public’s confidence in other advanced nations – Germany, Italy, France, the European Union, Japan, and Taiwan – is measured by a highly reliable scale (Alpha = .83) averaging together ratings for those six. These views did *not* change in our period.

Nor did trust in medical authorities (your doctor, doctors in hospitals, scientists of various sorts, CDC, etc.), show any sign of change mirroring Floyd’s killing and the subsequent protests. Instead a highly reliable scale averaging eight of these (alpha=.88) showed a slight upward trend through the relevant time period.

[Insert Figure 5 about here]

Figure 5. Confidence in foreign nations (purple) and iconfidence in govenment (red) did not change over the period for partisans of either major party, Democrats (solid lines) or Republicans (dashed lines).. Means (points out of 100) over time. ISSS Round 21, April-July 2020. N=5,827 American adults. .

The important point here is the confidence measure is sufficiently sensitive that it picks up different patterns for different topics. Hence, the patterns that we see for confidence in the police over time are not simply artifacts of our measurement instrument or some global shifts in confidence.

What generally drives confidence in the police?

Is it racism?

Much of the recent public debate about police treatment of Blacks suspects suggests that widespread aversion to Blacks on the part of Whites leads them to support police because police engage in hostile, rough and unfair treatment of Blacks. This aversion-dislike-prejudice-racism possibility raises many questions that would take an entire volume to address, but we can make a beginning by assessing whether there is an alignment between Americans' racial attitudes and their confidence in police. If the aversion-dislike-prejudice-racism hypothesis is correct, then we should find that Americans who are cooler to Blacks should be more confident in the police.

We measure aversion using the well-known, long established Michigan 'Feeling Thermometer' format:

How do you feel about...

Rich people?

Very warm 100

.

Fairly warm 70

.

Neutral 50

.

Fairly cold 30

.

Very cold 0

Blacks?

Very warm 100

.

Fairly warm 70

.

Neutral 50

.

Fairly cold 30

.

Very cold 0

Caribbean immigrants?

Very warm 100

.

Fairly warm 70

.

Neutral 50

.

Fairly cold 30

.

Very cold 0

. . . etc. . .

We asked for these "thermometer ratings" for over two dozen groups. Prejudice against Blacks would be shown by distinctly "cold or unfavorable" ratings of Blacks; prejudice against immigrants by especially unfavorable ratings of immigrant groups; and religious prejudice by especially unfavorable ratings of religions other than one's own.

Just where the boundary lies between a mild aversion (say "40 A bit more cold than warm" or "30 Fairly cold or unfavorable" on the feeling thermometer) and outright prejudice is arguable. Perhaps it is around "0 Very cold or unfavorable feeling". Prejudice in the traditional sense lies well toward the bottom of the thermometer or even below it. A minimal prejudice in Borgardus's (1947) classical scheme is "not like to have as neighbors"; the strongest, "would debar from my country" is clearly well below the thermometer's 0 point.

In 2020 there is very little variation in how Americans feel about different racial, religious, and ethnic groups (Table 3). Mean thermometer ratings range from a high of 55.7 for White Americans (nearest to "A bit more warm than cold" on the thermometer scale) down to 50.7 for Mormons (near "No feeling either way"). All of these are somewhere between mildly favorable and neutral.

Aversion this is not, much less prejudice.

Table 3. The general public's feeling thermometer ratings of various groups. For each group, mean thermometer rating and difference of that from the mean rating of Black Americans. ISSS Round 21, late July cohort. Ethnic groups in red font; Black groups highlighted. Religious groups in green font. Listed in order of thermometer rating. N>1000, varying slightly slightly from item to item.

Group (Race & ethnic in red; religion in green. Black groups highlighted)	Mean thermometer rating	Difference from Black Americans	Significance of difference
White Americans	55.7	1.6	**
Canadian immigrants	55.2	1.1	
Caribbean immigrants	54.5	0.4	
Jews	54.2	0.1	
Black Americans	54.1	0.0	
Hispanics	53.5	-0.6	
Polish Immigrants	53.4	-0.7	
Nigerian immigrants	53.3	-0.8	
English Immigrants	53.1	-1.0	
Russian Immigrants	53.1	-1.0	
Muslims	53.0	-1.1	
Devout Christians	52.9	-1.2	*
Mexican Americans	52.9	-1.2	*
Republicans	52.2	-1.9	**
Haitian Immigrants	52.2	-1.9	***
Mexican Immigrants	52.1	-2.0	***
Atheists	52.1	-2.0	**
Fundamentalists	51.6	-2.5	***
Chinese Americans	50.8	-3.3	***
Mormons	50.7	-3.4	***
Deliberately try to get COVID	49.9	-4.2	***
Ignore COVID precautions	49.4	-4.7	***

Source: ISSS Round 21, late July cohort. N>1000, varying slightly from item to item

* p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Devout Christians, Atheists, Fundamentalists, and Mormons (among others) are all rated lower than Black Americans, on average. This is by a small but statistically significant amount. Republicans are also rated lower than Blacks, again by a small but statistically significant amount. Indeed, the groups receiving the chilliest ratings in this collection were not ethno-religious groups, but groups behaving in disapproved ways.

In short, feelings about Blacks are closer to the more favorable end of Americans' rankings, not the less favorable, and far from the prejudiced end.

Do feelings about Blacks even correlate confidence in the police?

To address this question, we build on our earlier regression analysis that modelled the effects of political partisanship on confidence in police, controlling for demographic and socio-economic characteristics. We here augment that model with the thermometer measure of feeling about Blacks. To be consistent with discussions in politics and the literature, we reverse the thermometer scores so the higher the score the more antipathy or prejudice. The scores then run from 0 (no antipathy or prejudice) to 100 (extraordinarily high antipathy or prejudice).

The results show that racial antipathy towards Blacks as measured by the feeling thermometer is not connected to confidence in the police. Specifically, prejudice (antipathy towards Blacks) does not have a statistically significant effect on confidence in the police, net of the social and demographic influences previously discussed (Table 4).

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Table 4. Is anti-Black prejudice connected with confidence in the police? OLS regression results controlling for other influences; metric coefficients. ISSS, Round 21, Late July 2020 survey. N=1,039 American adults. Those prejudiced against American Blacks (col. 1) and those prejudiced against Black immigrants (col. 2) are not significantly more sympathetic to the police. American Blacks themselves are significantly *more* sympathetic to the police (row 3).

	Confidence in the police	
	(1)	(2)
Hostile to Black Americans	-0.05	
Hostile to Black immigrants		-0.05
Black (=1) vs other races	8.08***	8.08***
Intend to vote Democratic	-0.23	-0.15
Male (=1)	2.37	2.32
Hispanic (=1)	3.15	3.20
Age (years)	-0.01	-0.01
Education (years)	0.10	0.10
Occupation (low=0 to high=1)	11.29***	10.87**
Married (=1)	0.75	0.67
Income (\$5000s)	-0.45	-0.40
(intercept)	67.35***	67.83***
Number of cases	1030	1039
R-squared	0.038	0.037

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

As a sensitivity test in case the exact word "Blacks" was eliciting social desirability bias, we also asked about 3 groups of predominantly Black immigrants identified only by their places of origin: Caribbean, Nigerian, and Haitian. Attitudes towards these immigrants are strongly connected, so we combined them into one scale to enhance reliability (and hence the likelihood of finding a significant effect).

This prejudice measure failed to have a significant effect on confidence in the police. Indeed, although the effects are not significant, they are in the direction of prejudiced people being *less* confident in the police.

Thus, these results undermine the view that confidence in the police indicates racism. Racial antipathy appears to play no role.

This suggests that behavioral interventions and training are more likely than anti-prejudice attitude reform to ensure that, in practice, "Black Lives Matter".

What else, then influences public confidence in their police?

CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT AND CONFIDENCE IN POLICE

Police are very much a reflection of their government and of their society generally. Only rarely in history are police imposed from outside (like the vile Nazi police in occupied Holland in World War II, or the good British police in colonial Hong Kong). Instead, they are mostly shaped and controlled by the society in which they operate and the government which holds the purse-strings and the power. So, confidence in the police may well reflect confidence (or lack of confidence) in their political and governmental masters as well as the police's own virtues and vices. And the government's virtues and vices may well reflect on the police.

We assess this possibility by explicitly measuring confidence in government, specifically confidence in the state government, the federal government, the US Senate and House of Representatives, political parties, and the USA as a whole. Taken together these form a clear and highly reliable five-item scale (Alpha reliability=.85).

In the analyses that follow we assume a causal order, specifically that confidence in local, state, and federal government; in political parties, and the nation as a whole might together influence views about the police. The police are, after all, only one small part of a much larger whole, making up only a small fraction of government employment and a taking up an equally small fraction of the government's budget. In effect we are assuming that the dog wags the police tail, not that the police tail wags the dog.

That assumption may not be entirely true and Floyd's killing and the subsequent protests makes a plausible case for some reciprocal causation – the dramatic evilness of the Minneapolis police's actions undermining confidence in the Minneapolis local government (plausible); undermining confidence in the Minnesota state government (less plausible); undermining confidence in the US Senate and House of Representatives or the Federal Government as a whole (even less plausible); undermining confidence in American political parties; and (least plausible but not inconceivable) undermining confidence in the USA as a whole. These are all the elements in our "confidence in government" scale. Our causal assumption is that by and large and on the whole, the vices of the local Minneapolis

police do not greatly shape Americans' views about the rest of their society. Instead, if there is a connection, it is vice-versa.

Government may well be to blame for the police's actions – after all it does pay for and control the police – but insofar as views about the government are correlated with views about the police, we are assuming that is mostly views about the government shaping views about the police, and only to a negligible extent views about the police shaping views about the government. Our estimates may slightly exaggerate government's influence. But probably not by much.

On that assumption, our analysis shows that **confidence in government has a huge impact** on confidence in the police (Figure 6). On average, those who are least confident in government (in bottom 10%) will, other things being equal, rate the police only 43 points out of 100. In sharp contrast, those very confident in their government (the top 10%) will, other things being equal, rate the police at 87 points, on average. So, confidence in the police very much reflects Americans' confidence in their local, state, and federal governments, their political parties, and their nation as a whole.

[Insert Figure 6 about here]

Figure 6. Effect of confidence in government on confidence in police net of other influences. Standardized regression coefficients. ISSS, Round 21, USA; pooled surveys April through August 2020. N=5,878.

This implies that American's **confidence in their police will not change in any fundamental way from any one event**, even one as dramatic as Floyd's killing and the subsequent protests. Instead, confidence in the police reflects broader and deeper ties with American government, politics, and society more than it reflects the day-to-day behavior of a few policemen. Details are in Appendix Table A2.

CONCLUSION

Our findings allow us to draw several novel conclusions about the impact of George Floyd's killing and the associated protests: (1) these events only reduced confidence in police among Democrats; (2) the impact itself was short lived; and (3) this same large, short-term drop in confidence was particularly pronounced among Black respondents.

Perhaps our most important and novel finding is that the impact of the highly publicized killing – and widespread protests and riots in response to it – was strongly mediated by party politics. It is perhaps unsurprising given the polarized nature of today's politics and the differential public responses by both parties (with Democrats emphasizing concerns over police brutality and prejudice and Republicans the violence and lawlessness of the responding protests) that Democrats and Republicans would respond differently. But it is surprising that the difference would be so *absolute* with Republicans losing no confidence in the police at all (and perhaps even temporarily *gaining* a small amount of confidence) and Democrats (especially strong Democrats) losing substantial amounts of confidence in the police in the immediate aftermath of Floyd's death. This suggests that further research into the responses to police brutality must understand the political agenda. Furthermore, given the racial divide in politics (with Black people overwhelmingly aligning with the Democrats) controlling for political affiliation is key to properly understanding the sources of race differences in confidence in the police.

Another important insight – made possible by the frequencies of surveys over the immediate aftermath of Floyd's killing – is that the steep drop in confidence in police (among both Democrats and Black respondents) was extremely short lived with confidence reaching its nadir in early June and a starting to rebound within a month of his death (in the late June survey) and reaching higher levels than before by July. This suggests that even highly publicized and ongoing scandals over police brutality do not necessarily have a lasting effect on confidence in the police, although the effect may be dramatic in the short term.

Finally, the short-term drop in confidence in police was particularly pronounced among Black respondents. Given the explicit conversation around race and policing that Floyd's death sparked, this pattern is perhaps unsurprising. What is more surprising is that confidence in police bounced back even more strongly for Black respondents than it did for everyone else. Despite widespread protests, Black respondents were, net of other

demographic and SES factors, *more* confident in the police in July than non-Black respondents. Further research is warranted to explain this surprising finding.

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APPENDIX

Here are the details on confidence in the police by political party preference over time.

[Appendix Table A1 about here]

Appendix Table A1. Confidence in the police (mean points out of 100) by political affiliation, before and after Floyd was murdered. ISSS Round 21 surveys, April through July (6 surveys). USA 2020.

	Before			After		
	mid-April	late April	end May	early June	late June	late July
<u>Strong Republican</u>						
Mean	72.52264	71.91177	75.20988	72.62162	76.22707	78.13278
s.d.	26.69715	26.91866	24.18984	28.35475	25.62039	23.16173
cases	243	137	162	74	230	242
<u>Republican</u>						
Mean	72.9	68.15703	66.77483	70.66666	72.36126	77.53917
s.d.	24.05211	29.04107	27.28838	26.44441	24.5447	23.27651
cases	180	121	151	51	192	217
<u>Independent</u>						
Mean	67.02649	68.25373	63.26016	70.78788	63.1519	71.9441
s.d.	23.64768	25.56716	26.34445	27.39726	27.65096	25.74909
cases	151	134	123	33	160	161
<u>Democrat</u>						
Mean	72.03448	62.7957	58.76048	62.23077	68.86058	80.34601
s.d.	24.30202	29.44369	30.10208	28.91001	26.29294	21.11614
cases	204	186	168	52	210	265
<u>Strong Democrat</u>						
Mean	59.23952	58.50347	51.78541	41.63235	58.19792	75.97758
s.d.	28.54977	28.19988	31.95102	32.24118	33.52485	29.11014
cases	335	288	235	137	288	223

Next, we have the numerical results underlying Figure 6. These are the standardized regression coefficients of a model predicting confidence in the police from confidence in government, controlling for other influences previously discussed (Appendix Table A2).

[Insert Appendix Table A2 about here]

Appendix Table A2. Influence of confidence in government on confidence in police, controlling for many other potential influences. Standardized regression coefficients from OLS regression model. ISSS Round 21 surveys, April through July (6 surveys). USA 2020. N=4,789.

	Standardized regression coefficient
Confidence in govt. (0-100)	0.58***
Vote intention (0 to 1; strong Democrat high)	-0.09***
Times 3 & 4	-0.05***
Times 5 & 6	-0.03
Male (0 or 1)	-0.00
Black (0 or 1)	-0.01
Latino (0 or 1)	-0.02
Age (years)	0.07***
Education (years)	-0.03*
Occupational status (0-1)	0.05***
Family income (\$5000)	0.02
N	4789
R-Squared	0.369
Standardized beta coefficients	
* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001	

[end]