

# The Opinion Mobilizing Effect of Social Protest Against Police Violence: Evidence from the 2020 George Floyd Protests

TYLER T. RENY *Washington University in St. Louis*

BENJAMIN J. NEWMAN *University of California, Riverside*

**D**oes social protest following the police killing of unarmed Black civilians have a widespread “opinion mobilizing” effect against the police? Or, does the racialized nature of these events polarize mass opinion based on standing racial and political orientations? To answer these questions, we utilize a large dataset comprised of weekly cross-sections of the American public and employ a regression discontinuity in time (RDiT) approach leveraging the random timing of the police killing of George Floyd and ensuing nationwide protests. We find that the Floyd protests swiftly decreased favorability toward the police and increased perceived anti-Black discrimination among low-prejudice and politically liberal Americans. However, attitudes among high-prejudice and politically conservative Americans either remained unchanged or evinced only small and ephemeral shifts. Our evidence suggests that the Floyd protests served to further racialize and politicize attitudes within the domain of race and law enforcement in the U.S.

Word Count: 4884

## INTRODUCTION

Lethal and unaccountable police violence against Black civilians is one of the defining political issues of the 21st century in the United States. The past decade has witnessed repeated outbreaks of large-scale social protest following the killing of unarmed Black civilians by police officers. The 2014 Ferguson uprising propelled prior social media activism using the hashtag *#BlackLives-*

*Matter* into a mass protest movement holding street demonstrations throughout the nation. The recurrence of social protest following continued incidents of police violence against Black civilians since 2014 has rendered Black Lives Matter (BLM) a leading proponent of civil rights, racial justice, and police reform. More recently, the eruption of protest following the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020 stands as the largest episode of social protest in both the catalogue of the BLM movement and the longer history of Black resistance against dehumanization and state violence in the U.S. (Lebron 2020).

Tyler Reny is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Weidenbaum Center for the Economy, Government, and Public Policy at Washington University in St. Louis (reny@wustl.edu)

Benjamin J. Newman is an Associate Professor in the School of Public Policy & Department of Political Science at the University of California, Riverside (bnewman@ucr.edu)

The authors thank the participants of the American Politics Workshop at Washington University in St. Louis, Marcel Roman, Hakeem Jefferson, and the anonymous reviewers and editors for feedback and suggestions.

The BLM movement has reinvigorated interest in political science in studying social protest (APSR Editors 2020), with one long-standing line of inquiry being assessment of the success of protest in exerting desired effects on public opinion (Lee 2002; Mazumder 2018; Wasow 2020). Applied to the BLM movement and its focus on systemic and unaccountable police violence against Black Americans, this letter asks whether or not instances of large-scale social protest against police violence shift public atti-

tudes toward law enforcement and elevate awareness of racial injustice? According to prominent reports, public confidence in the police notably dropped following mass protest over the police killings of Eric Garner and Michael Brown in 2014 (Drake 2014; Jones 2015). Such reports, however, are descriptive in nature and are limited by relying on snapshots of public opinion provided by national surveys conducted several months (or even years) before and after the 2014 protests, leaving it open to question whether or not such protest events actually cause immediate or sustained shifts in public opinion, how large the effects are, and among whom attitudes change?

Theories of activated opinion suggest that minority-led protest can serve as a grassroots “bottom-up” factor that mobilizes liberal shifts in public opinion on racial issues (Lee 2002). Complementing this is work on “focusing events” (Birkland 1998), which argues that sudden, unexpected, and visible events causing harm to a specific sub-population can push event-relevant issues to the top of the public agenda and provoke shifts in public opinion. Together, these frameworks suggest that instances of social protest against the police, such as the 2020 Floyd protests, should exert widespread effects on public opinion. This expectation is supported by evidence that minority-led protest can shape news agendas and framing (Wasow 2020), lead to liberal shifts in voting on minority-relevant policies by members of Congress (Gillion 2012) and White voters (Enos et al. 2019; Wasow 2020), instigate persisting changes in Whites’ partisanship, prejudice toward African Americans and support for affirmative action (Mazumder 2018), and influence the political attitudes of co-ethnic bystanders (Branton et al. 2015; Wallace et al. 2014). Adding to this, the fact that recent instances of lethal police violence against unarmed Black civilians are recorded, available for public viewing, and display visible use of excessive force, may add to their capacity to generate ubiquitous shifts in public opinion.

However, existing literature also suggests that social protest following recent police killings of Black civilians may have negligible or limited

effects on public opinion. Research on political socialization contends that learned attitudes toward social groups are deeply ingrained, durable, and highly resistant to persuasion (Krosnick and Petty 1995; Sears 1993). Indeed, most political attitudes, particularly group-centric ones, show an impressive amount of aggregate stability over time, particularly if elites do not change their public positions on group-related issues (Zaller 1992). This research is relevant to the present study because of the two groups involved: Black Americans and the police, with the former representing a longstanding affectively-charged attitude object (Lodge and Taber 2005) and the latter becoming increasingly charged in the wake of the 2014 Ferguson uprising and evolution of BLM into a mass protest movement (Horowitz and Livingston 2016). As such, there are several reasons to expect that racial and partisan orientations have become increasingly important in structuring views toward the police. First, racial attitudes have played an integral part of contemporary partisan sorting and polarization (Tesler 2016), with attitudes toward BLM and the police playing a central role in the process. Second, while events such as the deaths of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and George Floyd involve the use of excessive force against unarmed civilians by the police, we have witnessed the emergence of counter-frames about these events focusing on victim resistance to police orders, “bad apple” narratives that belie claims of systemic racism in law enforcement, and the emergence of “Blue Lives Matter” counter-protests (Banks 2018). The presence of these counter narratives and protests suggests that attitudes toward BLM and the police have become racialized and partisan issues (especially among Whites), where individuals’ racial attitudes and political orientations structure their perception of episodes of Black protest following instances of police violence against Black civilians.

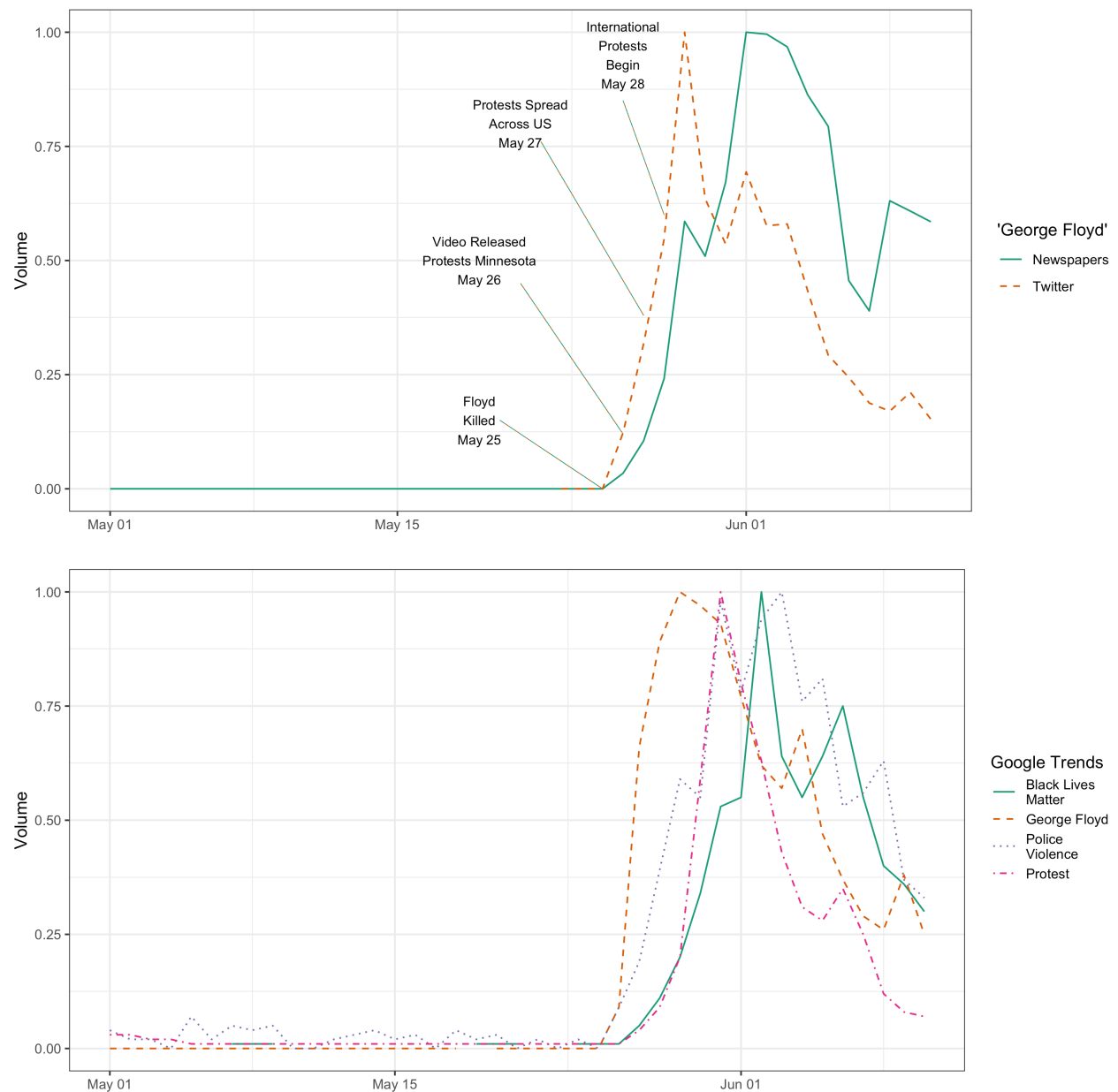
In the end, the police are a well-known and widely trusted institution of local government, at least among White Americans (Pew Research Center 2019). As such, attitudes toward the police may be highly stable over time and resistant to change. Added to this possible attitude inertia is

evidence that views toward the police—especially among Whites—may be increasingly subject to racial and partisan orientations. Recent scholarship demonstrates that a significant amount of the observed racial divide in Americans’ reactions to police killing of Black civilians derives from anti-Black prejudice among Whites (Jefferson et al. 2020). This finding is complemented by a historical study of the 1965 Watts uprising, where White residents in Los Angeles who harbored prejudice toward Blacks were more likely to express negative views toward the uprising and endorse punitive measures against participants (Jeffries and Ransford 1969). With respect to partisanship, past research finds that Americans identifying with the Republican party, as well as those residing in heavily Republican-voting states, are more likely to oppose the BLM movement (Updegrove et al. 2020). With these findings in mind, one distinct possibility is that episodes of social protest in response to police violence against Black civilians fail to exert a ubiquitous opinion mobilizing effect among the American public; instead, such events only facilitate attitude change among those already sympathetic to the plight of Black Americans (e.g., low-prejudice and politically liberal Americans). Critically, among racially prejudiced and politically conservative Americans, such events may either exert no effect on views toward the police and awareness of racial injustice or may trigger a reactionary shift in opinion comprised of elevated support for the police and repudiation of discrimination against Black Americans.

We subject these competing expectations to an empirical test using the case of the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020. Several features of the Floyd protests render it unique in the universe of protest events (e.g., rapid mobilization, unprecedented scale and media coverage, and international spread). However, the Floyd protests possessed important shared characteristics with other episodes of protest in the catalogue of the BLM movement and the annals of 20th century Black uprising against police violence that scholars use to classify protest events (McAdam et al. 2021; Nam 2006), such as the inciting incident

(e.g., police violence against a Black civilian, acquittal of perpetrating officers), target of protest (e.g., the police), and purpose of protest (e.g., achieve justice/accountability, address systemic racism and police violence, promote reform). Additionally, from the vantage point of the concept of “most-likely” cases (Gerring and Cojocaru 2016), several of the attributes of the Floyd protests that make it unique (e.g., scale and media coverage) also arguably render it more likely than other episodes of protest to exert the broad effects on public opinion suggested by theories of activated public opinion and focusing events. If we fail to observe broad changes in public opinion following protest of the scale of the Floyd protests, the most-likely case framework suggests that contemporary social protest against police violence—and especially instances of smaller scale than the Floyd protests—may overall fail to exert broad opinion mobilizing effects and particularly fail to shift the attitudes of racially prejudiced and politically conservative Americans. Finally, our use of the Floyd protests to study the effect of social protest is consistent with the growing case-driven literature in political science using unique or extreme events to gain insight about the effect of broad categories of events, such as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill to study environmental disasters (Bishop 2014), 9/11 to study terrorism (Huddy et al. 2005), the 2008 Financial Crisis to study economic recessions (Margalit 2013), the Syrian refugee crisis to study human migration (Hangartner et al. 2019), and COVID-19 to study public health crises (Warsaw et al. 2020). Focusing specifically on social protest, over half a dozen articles concentrate on a single unique protest event—the 2006 Immigration Rallies (e.g. Barreto et al. 2009; Branton et al. 2015; Wallace et al. 2014)—and notable other works utilize extreme episodes of ethnic uprising (Enos et al. 2019; Hager et al. 2019).

Our analysis of the Floyd protests adds to existing literature on 20th century minority protest (Gillion 2012; Lee 2002; Mazumder 2018; Wasow 2020) and growing scholarship on public support for the BLM movement (Arora and Stout 2019; Bonilla 2020; Updegrove et al. 2020). Prior research has explored Americans’ reactions to real

**FIGURE 1. George Floyd Media Coverage, Social Media Posts, and Search Behavior**

*Note:* Lines indicate re-scaled major newspaper and social media trends for “George Floyd” (top) and Google search trends for related keywords (bottom). Major newspaper article counts come from Media Cloud transcripts of the 50 newspapers with the largest circulation in the United States.

(Boudreau et al. 2019) and hypothetical (Jefferson et al. 2020; Porter et al. 2018) police killing of Black civilians; however, this work focuses on differences in attitudes caused by information provided in survey experiments and focuses on reactions to the killings themselves rather than social protest in response to killings. Moreover,

research analyzing the causal effect of a prominent episode of social protest—the 1992 Los Angeles uprising—focuses on changes in White voting behavior, not public opinion, and focuses on an event and outcome within a single urban area (Enos et al. 2019). In short, what is missing from the literature is a study of the effect of social protest

of police violence against Black civilians that focuses specifically on public attitudes toward the police and perceived anti-Black discrimination, is national in scale, and enables the estimation of the causal effect of the event on real-time public opinion. This letter provides such a test using data and an analytic strategy uniquely suited for the task.

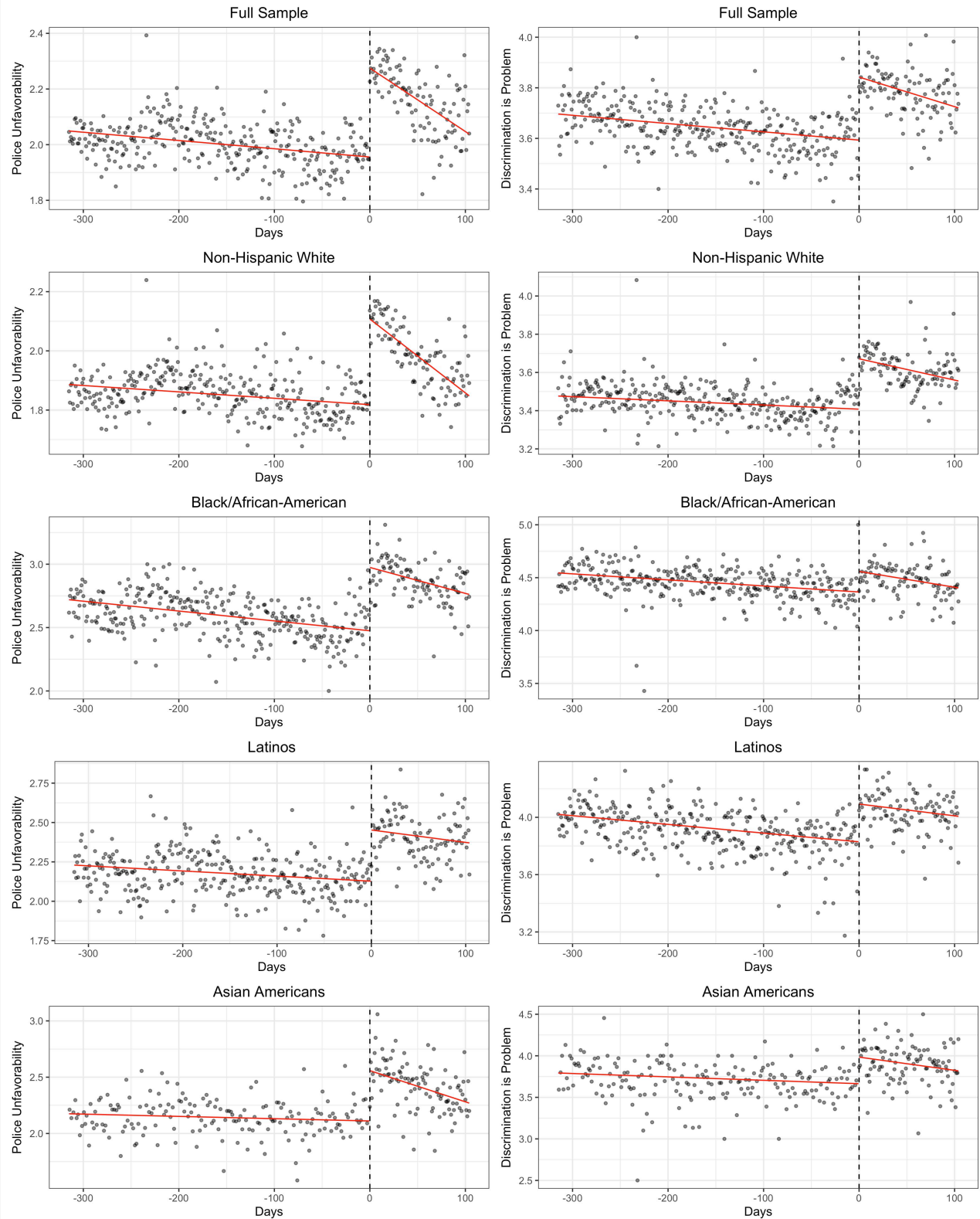
## DATA AND METHODS

One challenge in analyzing the effect of episodes of social protest, like the 2020 George Floyd protests, is having sufficient survey data immediately before and after events occur. To meet this challenge, we utilize the Nationscape survey (NS) conducted by the Democracy Fund and UCLA (Tausanovitch and Vavreck 2020). The NS is an ongoing weekly survey ( $N \sim 6,250$  per week) that began in July 2019 and is weighted to reflect the national adult population (Tausanovitch et al. 2019). Because the NS is in the field daily, averaging about  $N=900$  respondents per day, we can precisely estimate fluctuations in attitudes as a function of discrete events. We utilize the first 60 waves of the NS (July 2019 to September 2020), rendering a total sample of  $N=378,507$ . We analyze two outcome variables in the NS: (1) favorability toward the police, and (2) perceptions of discrimination against Black Americans in the U.S. Each variable is measured using four- and five-point Likert scales and recoded so that “4” indicates more unfavorable attitudes toward the police and “5” perceptions of greater levels of discrimination against Black Americans. Appendix A provides information about question wording and variable measurement.

Our analytic strategy involves leveraging the random timing of the police killing of George Floyd and ensuing nationwide protests and the use of a regression discontinuity in time (RDiT) approach to estimate change in favorability toward the police and perceived anti-Black discrimination just before and after this event. The random timing of these events assuages concerns about “anticipation effects” present with other RDiT designs focusing on planned interventions (Haus-

man and Rapson 2018), as the police killing of Floyd was neither planned nor anticipated and the BLM protests erupted rapidly after Floyd’s death. Regression discontinuity designs (RDD) leverage as-if-random variation around an arbitrary cutoff to estimate local causal effects that correspond well to RCT treatment effects (Wing and Cook 2013). The “running variable” we use is time—the number of days before (which take negative values) and after (which take positive values) the spread of massive protests in the wake of the Floyd killing.

We set the cutpoint (where the running variable=0) to May 28th, the first day after the outbreak of nationwide protests following the killing of Floyd. While Floyd was killed on May 25, the cellphone video of his killing—and thus public knowledge of the event—didn’t emerge until May 26th when protesters took to the streets in Minneapolis. The following day, May 27th, protests spread across the U.S., engendering a spike in media coverage, as is shown in Figure 1. Thus, we expect the full “treatment” of the protests to be initiated and reflected in public opinion data by the 28th, which we choose as our cutpoint. Importantly, we find no evidence of an increase in survey response following Floyd’s killing (Figure A.1) and that the NS data is balanced on key demographics on either side of this cutpoint (Table A.1). Together, these checks suggest that any observed effects of the police killing and protests are not driven by event-initiated changes in survey response. Following best practices (Cattaneo et al. 2020), we model the running variable using a polynomial of order 1, which is least likely to over-fit the data, though we show that our results are robust to other specifications (Figure A.2). We use a triangular kernel which, with a mean squared error (MSE) optimal bandwidth, yields a point estimator with optimal properties. Finally, we chose the bandwidth using a standard non-parametric approach that minimizes the MSE of the local polynomial RD point estimator given our choice of polynomial order and kernel.

**FIGURE 2. Police Unfavorability and Perceived Discrimination Against Black Americans**

*Note:* Points indicate daily average unfavorable attitudes toward police and perceptions that Black Americans face discrimination in the United States. Full estimates in Appendix Table B.1.

## RESULTS

We begin in Figure 2 by first plotting daily mean attitudes toward the police (column 1) and perceptions of discrimination against Black Americans (column 2) for our full sample, and separately for White, Black, Latino, and Asian respondents. As can clearly be seen in the plots, the Floyd protests had a substantial effect on public attitudes: within the full sample, the event increased police unfavorability by .28 points ( $p < 0.01$ ), or 27% of a standard deviation, and increased perceptions of discrimination against Black Americans by .19 points ( $p < 0.01$ ), or 16% of a standard deviation. Disaggregating the data by White, Black, Latino, and Asian respondents, shown in rows 2 through 5, reveal similar trends. Full RD results, including estimates with bias-corrections, can be found in Appendix Table B.1. While these shifts were rapid and substantively meaningful, the data suggests that attitudes among White Americans shifted back toward their pre-Floyd baseline means over time. Shifts in attitudes among Black, Latino, and Asian Americans, on the other hand, appear more durable in the post-treatment period.

The results presented in Figure 2 suggest there was a ubiquitous shift in public attitudes. However, we have yet to assess whether the overall effects mask underlying cleavages between those higher or lower in prejudice or between Republicans and Democrats—two of the strongest cleavages in American politics. Given that we are primarily interested in uncovering possible gaps in opinion by prejudice and partisanship, we estimate ordered probit models on weekly data predicting each outcome as a function of racial attitudes, partisanship, and a host of controls. In Figure 3, we plot both the coefficient and 95% confidence intervals for indicators of prejudice (rows 1 and 2) and partisanship (row 3), which allows us to assess both whether attitudes are becoming more racialized and partisan as well as estimate whether this polarization in attitudes is driven by movement solely among those lower in prejudice (or strong Democrats), those higher in prejudice (or strong Republicans), or both. We utilize two indicators of prejudice included in the NS survey:

(1) a Black-White favorability differential, which subtracts Black from White favorability Likert scales, and (2) the “generations” item from the well-known racial resentment scale. For partisanship, we utilize the standard 7-pt scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican. See Appendix A for more information on these items.

Beginning with the coefficient plots in column A, we find strong evidence of increased racialization and partisan polarization of attitudes. Pre-treatment waves indicate that these attitudes were already polarized by racial and partisan orientations, though in all cases the coefficients significantly increase following Floyd’s death.

In column B, we plot the probability of reporting a “very unfavorable” view of the police as a function of respondents’ prejudice and partisanship; these figures reveal that almost all of the movement in attitudes is among those lower in prejudice and among strong Democrats. These analyses suggest that the Floyd protests facilitated attitude change primarily among those who were already sympathetic to the BLM movement and failed to exert a meaningful effect on attitudes among those higher in prejudice and political conservatives.<sup>1</sup> Further, our analysis suggests that the size of the shift in mean attitudes among those lower in prejudice and strong Democrats shrank considerably over the following weeks, suggesting that, absent sustained protest, effects may decay. This said, it is clear that even with this observable decay, mean unfavorability toward the police among low-prejudice and strongly Democratic Americans nonetheless remained higher than pre-Floyd means several months post-Floyd, suggesting a possible durable shift in the intermediate term. We show similar results for perceived discrimination against Black Americans in Appendix Figure B.1. Further, we show in Table B.4

<sup>1</sup>It is not possible without panel data to confidently assess how much of the heterogeneous shifts in attitudes in Figure 3 are driven by true attitude change versus shifts in composition of those making up these subgroups. This said, we find no substantively meaningful effect of these protests on partisanship or prejudice, suggesting that sorting is not the primary driver of these results (see Appendix Table B.2).

that a difference in discontinuity approach yields substantively identical findings to the modeling approach used here.

## ROBUSTNESS AND MECHANISM CHECKS

While the results from our RDiT analysis are compelling, we conduct a series of additional checks to bolster our confidence. First, we show in Table B.3 that results remain unchanged when we cluster our standard errors by day or week. Second, we demonstrate in Table C.1 that the Floyd protests had little effect on event-irrelevant attitudes, such as favorability toward Jews, Evangelicals, socialists, Whites, and Barack Obama.

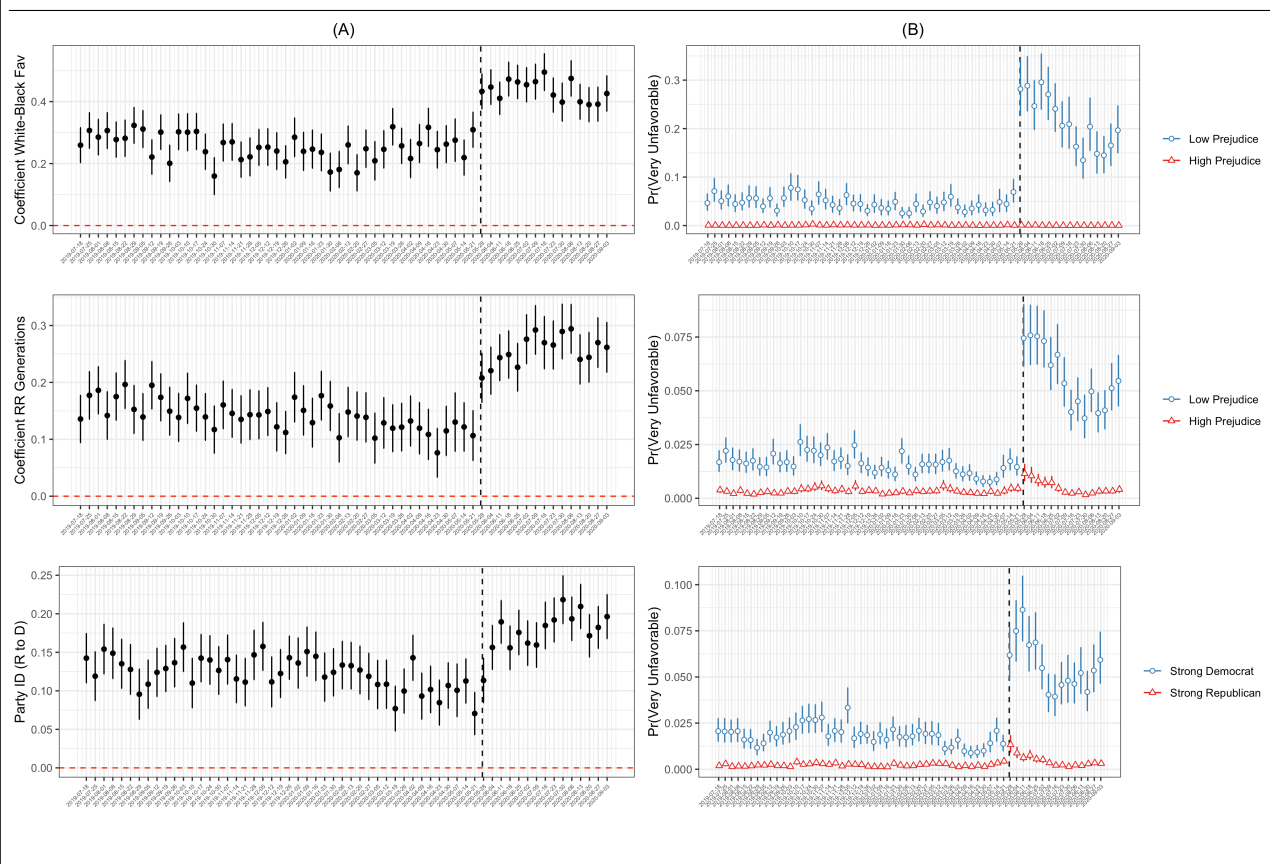
In addition to these checks, we performed a series of exploratory analyses intended to offer insight about potential mechanisms linking the Floyd protests to attitude change. First, Appendix Figure C.1 explores shifts in opinion toward the police associated with 15 other police killings of unarmed Black civilians that occurred prior to Floyd and while the NS was in the field but that *did not* trigger nationwide social protest or significant national news coverage. Figure C.1 reveals little to no changes in attitudes toward the police surrounding these 15 other killings, suggesting the importance of social protest as a mechanism linking incidents of police violence to attitude change. On this point, the effect of social protest may in turn rely on subsequent intervening processes that facilitate changes in mass opinion. Prior research suggests that (a) physical proximity to the location of street protests, and (b) media exposure, serve as potentially important mechanisms linking social protest to attitude change (Branton et al. 2015; Enos et al. 2019; Wallace et al. 2014; Wasow 2020).

We present in Figure 4 results from subgroup RDiT analyses that explore the conditioning role of self-reported attention to politics and media use, as well as residential proximity to the Floyd protests, on attitude shifts toward the police (details in Appendix A). We find little evidence that living near the location of the protests (Panel A) played a noteworthy role in conditioning attitude

change, as the RDiT estimates are nearly identical regardless of the amount of protest activity (e.g., “No Protests” vs. “More than 2 Protests”) in respondents’ county of residence. However, Figure 4 provides suggestive evidence that attention to politics and media consumption served as potential mechanisms generating attitude change from the Floyd protests, as we fail to observe statistically significant RDiT estimates among respondents who did not pay attention to politics or reported no media consumption whatsoever. In contrast, we only find significant RDiT estimates among respondents who reported interest in politics and active consumption of news and social media. Further, in Figure 4 Panel B, we show evidence that partisan media consumption matters (Kilgo and Mourao 2019): attitude shifts among those who consume primarily liberal media (i.e., MSNBC but not Fox) is of greater magnitude and durability than those who consume primarily conservative media (Fox but not MSNBC). When combined with the lack of effects observed for the 15 police killings that did not generate large-scale protest (Figure C.1), our findings overall suggest a causal process where an instigating event (i.e., police killing) leads to protest activity and media coverage, which then affects public opinion.

## CONCLUSION

The findings in this letter are of theoretical and practical importance. Theoretically, they illustrate that theories of activated mass opinion developed in the context of 20th century minority-led protest apply in part to an extremely notable episode of 21st century social protest. However, consistent with accounts of the reactionary counter-mobilization of racially conservative Southern Whites in response to Civil Rights era Black protest (Lee 2002; Wasow 2020), as well as recent literature on White backlash (Parker and Barreto 2013), we find that such effects are not observed among racially prejudiced and politically conservative Americans. Indeed, we find that mass protests over the killing of George Floyd further divided the attitudes of low and high prejudice Americans, as well as Democrats and Republicans.

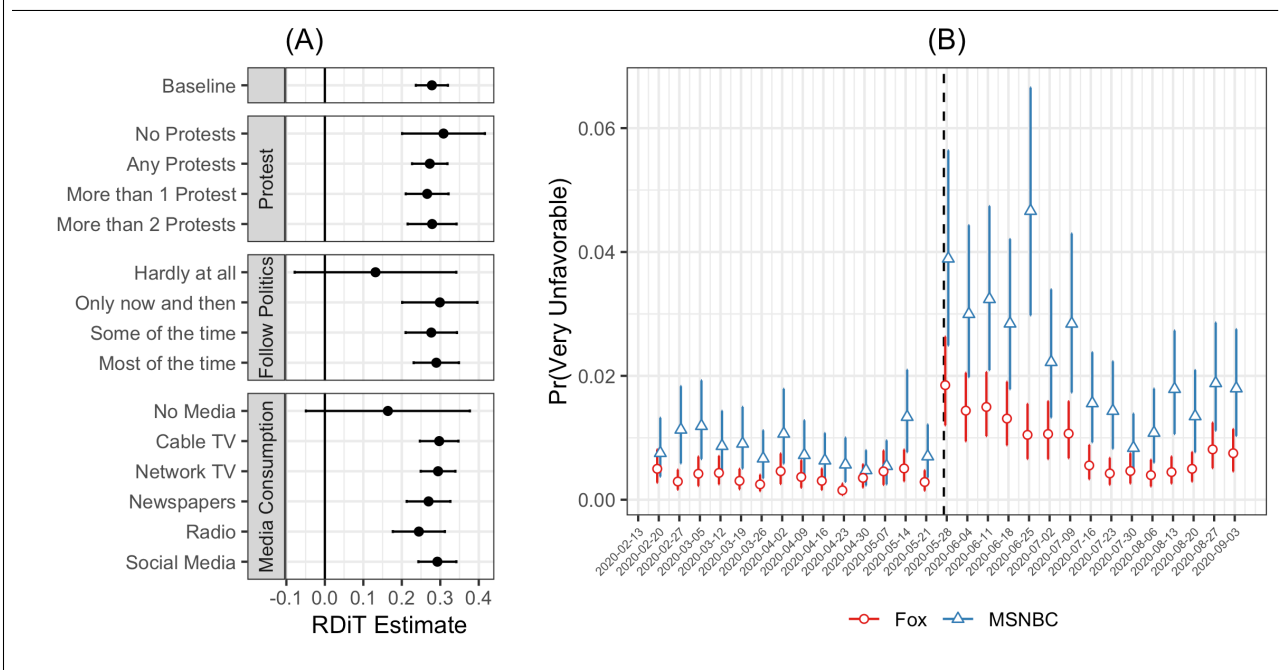
**FIGURE 3. Coefficient and Predicted Value Plots for Prejudice and Partisanship**

**Note:** Ordered probit coefficient (column A) and predicted probability of evaluating police “very unfavorably” (column B) by prejudice as measured by White-Black favorability ratings or racial resentment (generations item) and partisanship with 95% CIs. Ordered probit models are run on each weekly independent cross-section and control for education, gender, age, race, household income, partisanship, and ideology, which are held at their means in simulations.

These findings are of practical importance to the activist and reform community, as they suggest that social protest following tragic incidents of lethal police violence against Black civilians can create a favorable opinion climate for pursuing reforms aimed at redressing racial bias in policing (e.g. Arora and Stout 2019). However, our findings also suggest that persuading segments of the population predisposed against the cause of protesters may require preemptive frames designed to defuse reactionary counter-narratives that activate prejudice and partisanship.

While the findings in this letter are based on an analysis of a single and noteworthy episode of social protest against police violence, there are reasons to expect protest events of similar or

greater magnitude in the future. For example, many expert observers view the rapidity and scale of the Floyd protests as the product of mounting frustration and years of movement building, and thus, as an amplified version of prior BLM protests (Politico Magazine 2020). Indeed, evaluation of media coverage of BLM protests in response to the killing of Eric Garner, Michael Brown and Tamir Rice in 2014, Walter Scott and Freddie Gray in 2015, and Alton Stirling and Philando Castile in 2016, suggests a snowballing effect (see Appendix Figure C.2), with each subsequent episode of protest garnering greater amounts of media attention. Absent wide scale reform of the institutions of policing and criminal justice, it is likely that the U.S. will continue to witness

**FIGURE 4. Proximity to Protests and Exposure to News and Social Media**

*Note:* RDIT estimates with 95% CIs for unfavorability toward police via county-level exposure to protest, attention to politics, or self-reported media consumption (Panel A); and predicted probability of evaluating police “very unfavorably” by partisan media usage (Panel B). Ordered probit models are run on each weekly independent cross-section and control for prejudice, education, gender, age, race, household income, partisanship, and ideology, which are held at their means in simulations.

police killings of unarmed Black civilians and the exoneration of those involved. Increasing frustration and exasperation in the American public, and Black Americans in particular, coupled with greater BLM brand recognition, more robust resources and networks, and increasingly sophisticated organizing techniques, suggest continuing and potentially larger protests in the future.

The authors affirm that this research did not involve human subjects. The authors declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the APSR Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/A2XDZP>.

## REFERENCES

- APSR Editors (2020). Notes from the Editors. *American Political Science Review* 114(4), V–Vii.
- Arora, Maneesh and Christopher T Stout (2019). Let-  
ters for Black Lives: Co-ethnic Mobilization and Support for the Black Lives Matter Movement. *Political Research Quarterly* 72(2), 389–402.
- Banks, Chloe (2018). Disciplining Black activism: post-racial rhetoric, public memory and decorum in news media framing of the Black Lives Matter movement. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 32(6), 709–720.
- Barreto, Matt A, Sylvia Manzano, Ricardo Ramírez, and Kathy Rim (2009). Mobilization, Participation, and Solderidad. *Urban Affairs Review* 44(5), 736–764.
- Birkland, Thomas A. (1998). Focusing Events, Mobilization, and Agenda Setting. *Journal of Public Policy* 18(1), 53–74.
- Bishop, Bradford H (2014). Focusing Events and Public Opinion: Evidence from the Deepwater Horizon Disaster. *Political Behavior* 36, 1–22.
- Bonilla, Tabitha (2020). Which Identity Frames Boost

- Support for and Mobilization in the #BlackLives-Matter Movement? An Experimental Test. *American Political Science Review* 114(4), 947–962.
- Boudreau, Cheryl , Scott A Mackenzie, and Daniel J Simmons (2019). Police Violence and Public Perceptions: An Experimental Study of How Information and Endorsements Affect Support for Law Enforcement. *Journal of Politics* 81(3), 1101–1110.
- Branton, Regina , Valerie Martinez-Ebers, Tony E. Carey Jr., and Tetsuya Matsubayashi (2015). Social Protest and Policy Attitudes: The Case of the 2006 Immigrant Rallies. *American Journal of Political Science* 59(2), 390–402.
- Cattaneo, Matias D , Nicolas Idrobo, and Rocio Titiunik (2020). *A Practical Introduction to Regression Discontinuity Designs*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Drake, Bruce (2014). Ferguson highlights deep divisions between blacks and whites in America.
- Enos, Ryan D. , Aaron R Kaufman, and Melissa L. Sands (2019). Can Violent Protest Change Local Policy Support? Evidence from the Aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles Riot. *American Political Science Review* 113(4), 1012–1028.
- Gerring, John and Lee Cojocararu (2016). Selecting Cases for Intensive Analysis: A Diversity of Goals and Methods. *Sociological Methods & Research* 45(3), 392–423.
- Gillion, Daniel Q (2012). Racial and Ethnic Minority Protests in the District. *Journal of Politics* 74(4), 950–962.
- Hager, Anselm , Krzysztof Krakowski, and Max Schaub (2019). Ethnic Riots and Prosocial Behavior: Evidence from Kyrgyzstan. *American Political Science Review* 113(4), 1029–1044.
- Hangartner, Dominik , Elias Dinas, Moritz Marbach, Konstantinos Matakos, and Dimitrios Xefteris (2019). Does Exposure to the Refugee Crisis Make Natives More Hostile ? *American Political Science Review* 113(2), 442–455.
- Hausman, Catherine and David S Rapson (2018). Regression Discontinuity in Time: Considerations for Empirical Applications. *Annual Review of Resource Economics* 10, 533–552.
- Horowitz, Juliana Menasce and Gretchen Livingston (2016). How Americans view the Black Lives Matter movement.
- Huddy, Leonie , Stanley Feldman, Charles Taber, and Gallya Lahav (2005). Threat, Anxiety, and Support of Antiterrorism Policies. *American Journal of Political Science* 49(3), 593–608.
- Jefferson, Hakeem , Fabian G Neuner, and Josh Pasek (2020). Seeing Blue in Black and White: Race and Perceptions of Officer-Involved Shootings. *Perspectives on Politics*, 1–19.
- Jeffries, Vincent and H. Edward Ransford (1969). Interracial Social Contact and Middle-Class White Reactions to the Watts Riot. *Social Problems* 16(3), 312–324.
- Jones, Jeffrey M. (2015). In U.S., Confidence in Police Lowest in 22 Years.
- Krosnick, Jon and Richard Petty (1995). Attitude Strength: An Overview. In R. Petty and J. Krosnick (Eds.), *Attitude Strength: Antecedents and Consequences*, pp. 536. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associated.
- Lebron, Christopher J. (2020). *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lee, Taeku (2002). *Mobilizing Public Opinion: Black Insurgency and Racial Attitudes in the Civil Rights Era*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lodge, Milton and Charles S Taber (2005). The Automaticity of Affect for Political Leaders, Groups, and Issues: An Experimental Test of the Hot Cognition Hypothesis. *Political Psychology* 26(3), 455–482.
- Margalit, Yotam (2013, feb). Explaining Social Policy Preferences: Evidence from the Great Recession. *American Political Science Review* 107(1), 1–24.
- Mazumder, Soumyajit (2018). The Persistent Effect of U.S. Civil Rights Protests on Political Attitudes. *American Journal of Political Science* 62(4), 922–935.
- McAdam, Doug , John McCarthy, Susan Olzak, and Sarah Soule (2021). Dynamics of Collective Action.

- Nam, Taehyun (2006). What You Use Matters: Coding Protest Data. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39(2), 281–287.
- Parker, Christopher S. and Matt A. Barreto (2013). *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*. Princeton University Press.
- Pew Research Center (2019). Why Americans Don't Fully Trust Many Who Hold Positions of Power and Responsibility. Technical report.
- Politico Magazine (2020). It Really Is Different This Time. *Politico Magazine*.
- Porter, Ethan V , Thomas Wood, and Cathy Cohen (2018). The public's dilemma: race and political evaluations of police killings. *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 9(1), 1–28.
- Sears, David O. (1993). Symbolic Politics: A Socio-Psychological Theory. In *Explorations in Political Psychology*, pp. 113–149.
- Tausanovitch, Chris and Lynn Vavreck (2020). Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape.
- Tausanovitch, Chris , Lynn Vavreck, Tyler Reny, Alex Rossell Hayes, and Aaron Rudkin (2019). Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape Methodology and Representativeness Assessment.
- Tesler, Michael (2016). *Post Racial or Most Racial*. Chicago Ill.: University of Chicago Press.
- Updegrove, Alexander H , Maisha N Cooper, Erin A Orrick, and Alex R Piquero (2020). Red States and Black Lives: Applying the Racial Threat Hypothesis to the Black Lives Matter Movement. *Justice Quarterly* 37(1), 85–108.
- Wallace, Sophia J. , Chris Zepeda-Millán, and Michael Jones-Correa (2014). Spatial and Temporal Proximity: Examining the Effects of Protests on Political Attitudes. *American Journal of Political Science* 58(2), 433–448.
- Warshaw, Christopher , Lynn Vavreck, and Ryan Baxter-King (2020). Fatalities from COVID-19 are reducing Americans ' support for Republicans at every level of federal office. *Science Advances* 6, 1–4.
- Wasow, Omar (2020). Agenda Seeding: How 1960s Black Protests Moved Elites, Public Opinion and Voting. *American Political Science Review* 114(3), 638–659.
- Wing, Coady and Thomas D Cook (2013). Strengthening the Regression Discontinuity Design Using Additional Design Elements: A Within-Study Comparison. *Methods of Policy Analysis* 32(4), 853–877.
- Zaller, John (1992). *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge University Press.

# Appendix A

## Nationscape Data

### A.1 The Survey

Nationscape is a large, weekly online survey conducted by Lucid for the Democracy Fund and researchers at UCLA that was designed to collect weekly snapshots of the American electorate throughout the 2019-2020 primary and general elections. This cross-sectional survey is in the field every day of the week and includes weekly collections of about  $n=6,250$  responses. While the sample is opt-in, a representativeness assessment of the data finds that the samples are comparable to those collected by well-known pollsters like Pew and YouGov (Tausanovitch et al., 2019). More information on the survey can be found at <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/nationscape>.

Lucid is an automated marketplace that connects researchers with respondents from a variety of network survey panel companies. Many of these are double opt-in panels where respondents are invited to partake in research via emails, push notifications, in-app pop-ups, or other means. Respondents are incentivized in a variety of ways depending on the supplier. Lucid takes a variety of steps to increase quality of respondents from these survey panel providers including: 1) blocking users from taking surveys multiple times via cookies, IP addresses, or other unique identifiers; 2) screening the quality of respondents through attention check questions and open-ended questions; 3) using third party bot detection services like Google’s reCaptcha to block bots; and 4) publishing and providing information on the quality of all their data suppliers. Existing research finds Lucid samples to be of high quality (Coppock and Green, 2016; Coppock and McClellan, 2019), and when properly weighted, provide samples that are similar in quality to respected survey respondent panels like Pew’s American Trends Panel (Tausanovitch et al., 2019).

## A.2 Question Wording

### A.2.1 Dependent Variables

- **Attitudes Toward Police** “Here are the names of some groups that are in the news from time to time. How favorable is your impression of each group or haven’t you heard enough to say? - The Police” (4=very unfavorable; 3=somewhat unfavorable; 2=somewhat favorable; 1=very favorable; NA=haven’t heard enough to say) (mean=1.99, sd=1.01).
- **Discrimination Against African Americans** “How much discrimination is there in the United States today against each of the following groups? - Blacks” (1=None at all; 2=A little; 3=A moderate amount; 4=a lot; 5=a great deal) (mean=3.64, sd=1.21).

### A.2.2 Moderating Variables

- **Protest** We collected data on the geolocation of all Black Lives Matter protests following the killing of George Floyd from <https://www.creosotemaps.com/blm2020/>, a crowd-sourced effort led by a GIS analyst to identify and document all Black Lives Matter protest activity that has occurred since May 25, 2020, the day of Floyd’s killing. Latitude and longitude coordinates of each protest was linked to county using the GeoLookup API from the US Census Bureau. We then created a cumulative sum of the number of protests that had happened following Floyd’s death in each county each day in the United States. This data was then merged into the Nationscape data using a 1-day lag (for example a respondent who lives in Los Angeles County and took the Nationscape survey on June 5th would be matched with a count of protests that had occurred in that county up to and including June 4th) (mean = 2.6, median=2, range=[0,9])
- **Group Favorability African Americans** “Here are the names of some groups that are in the news from time to time. How favorable is your impression of each group or haven’t you heard enough to say? – Blacks” (4=very favorable; 3=somewhat favorable; 2=somewhat unfavorable; 1=very unfavorable; NA=haven’t heard enough) (mean=3.17, sd=0.85)
- **Group Favorability White Americans** “Here are the names of some groups that are in the news from time to time. How favorable is your impression of each group or haven’t you heard enough to say? – Whites” (4=very favorable; 3=somewhat favorable; 2=somewhat unfavorable; 1=very unfavorable; NA=haven’t heard enough) (mean=3.15, sd=0.86)

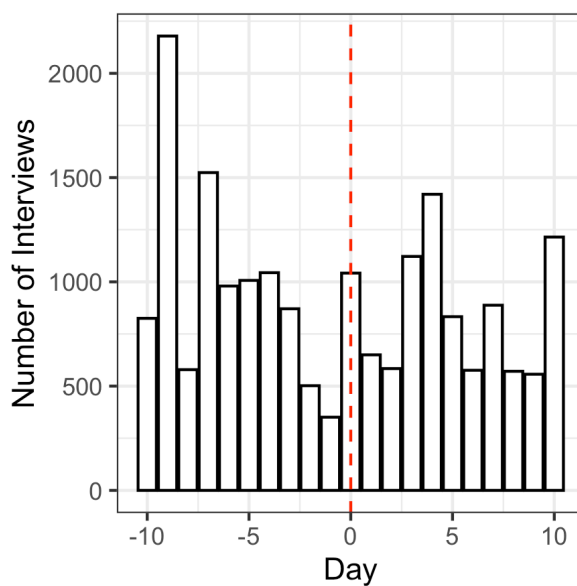
- **Prejudice: Group Favorability Scale White-Black** To create our Black-White favorability difference scale we subtracted Black favorability from White favorability to create a scale ranging from -3 to 3. Those who received a score of -3 felt very favorable toward African Americans and very unfavorable toward White Americans. Those who received a score of 3 felt very favorable toward white Americans and very unfavorable toward Black Americans (mean=-0.02, sd=1.06).
- **Prejudice: Generations** “Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements. - Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class.” (5=strongly disagree; 4=somewhat disagree; 3=neither agree nor disagree; 2=somewhat agree; 1=strongly agree) (mean=2.82, sd=1.40).
- **Follow Politics** “Some people follow what’s going on in government most of the time, whether there’s an election going on or not. Others aren’t that interested. Would you say you follow what’s going on...” (4=hardly at all; 3=only now and then; 2=some of the time; 1=most of the time) (mean=1.87, sd=0.90).
- **Cable TV** “We’re interested in where you might have heard news about politics in the past week. Have you seen or heard news about politics on any of the following outlets in the past week? [CNN or MSNBC or Fox] ” (1=yes, 2=no)
- **Network TV** “We’re interested in where you might have heard news about politics in the past week. Have you seen or heard news about politics on any of the following outlets in the past week? [Network news (ABC, CBS, NBC, or PBS)] ” (1=yes, 2=no)
- **Newspapers** “We’re interested in where you might have heard news about politics in the past week. Have you seen or heard news about politics on any of the following outlets in the past week? [National Newspaper (e.g. New York Times, Wall Street Journal, USA TODAY, Washington Post)] ” (1=yes, 2=no)
- **Radio** “We’re interested in where you might have heard news about politics in the past week. Have you seen or heard news about politics on any of the following outlets in the past week? [NPR or AM Talk Radio] ” (1=yes, 2=no)
- **Social Media** “We’re interested in where you might have heard news about politics in the past week. Have you seen or heard news about politics on any of the following outlets in the past week? [Social Media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter)] ” (1=yes, 2=no)

### A.2.3 Control Variables

	Weighted Mean	Min	Max
Partisanship (7-pt, R)	3.83	1	7
College Education	0.31	0	1
Female	0.52	0	1
Age	47.25	18	99
Race (Non-Hispanic White)	0.64	0	1
Household Income	12.94	1	24
Ideology (conservative)	3.03	1	5

### A.3 RDiT Checks

Figure A.1: Interviews by Day



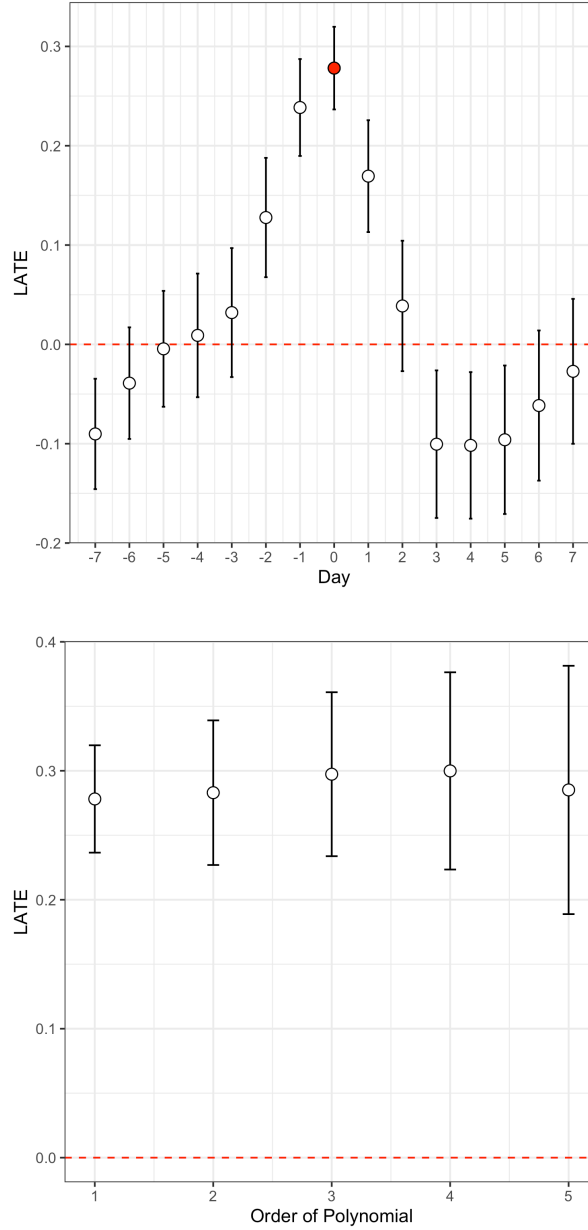
Note: number of interviews completed per day in a 20-day window around cutpoint. We see no spike in survey interest following the killing of George Floyd and the rise of BLM protests.

Table A.1: Balance on Key Covariates Across Cutpoint

	Pre-Treat Mean	Post-Treat Mean	Abs Diff	P-value
Age	47.58	47.44	0.14	0.57
Female	0.51	0.51	0	0.58
White	0.63	0.62	0.01	0.17
Black	0.12	0.12	0	0.89
College	0.30	0.32	0.02	0.03
Household Income	12.92	13.04	0.12	0.27
Partisanship (7-pt)	3.82	3.79	0.03	0.41
Ideology (conservative)	3.02	3.01	0.01	0.38
Vote Clinton 2016	0.34	0.33	0.003	0.68
Daily interviews	986.2	859.8	126.4	0.52

Note: Means, differences, and p-values for key covariates averaged across the 10 days pre-treatment  $[-10,0)$  and post-treatment  $[0,10]$ . Treatment defined as May 28, 2020.

Figure A.2: Favorability Toward Police Using Date Cutpoints Polynomials



Note: Panel A (top) displays policy unfavorability RD estimates varying cutpoints from May 21, 2020 to June 4, 2020 ( $c = -7, \dots, 7$ ). Red point indicates chosen cutpoint at May 28, 2020 (0). Bandwidth chosen to minimize MSE of local polynomial ( $p=1$ ) with triangular kernel. Panel B (bottom) displays RD estimates using varying orders of polynomial ( $p = 1, \dots, 5$ ) to assess robustness, again using triangular kernel and MSE-optimal bandwidth.

# Appendix B

## Results

Table B.1: RD Estimates

Outcome	Sample		RD Estimate	SE	P-Value
Unfavorable Toward Police	Full	Conventional	0.28	0.02	0.00
		Bias-Corrected	0.28	0.02	0.00
		Robust	0.28	0.03	0.00
	White	Conventional	0.28	0.02	0.00
		Bias-Corrected	0.28	0.02	0.00
		Robust	0.28	0.03	0.00
	Black	Conventional	0.20	0.08	0.02
		Bias-Corrected	0.18	0.08	0.03
		Robust	0.18	0.10	0.07
	Latino	Conventional	0.24	0.05	0.00
		Bias-Corrected	0.23	0.05	0.00
		Robust	0.23	0.07	0.00
	Asian	Conventional	0.21	0.10	0.03
		Bias-Corrected	0.18	0.10	0.07
		Robust	0.18	0.12	0.13
Discrimination Against Black People	Full	Conventional	0.19	0.03	0.00
		Bias-Corrected	0.20	0.03	0.00
		Robust	0.20	0.03	0.00
	White	Conventional	0.17	0.03	0.00
		Bias-Corrected	0.17	0.03	0.00
		Robust	0.17	0.04	0.00
	Black	Conventional	0.13	0.08	0.10
		Bias-Corrected	0.11	0.08	0.16
		Robust	0.11	0.10	0.24
	Latino	Conventional	0.22	0.06	0.00
		Bias-Corrected	0.23	0.06	0.00
		Robust	0.23	0.07	0.00
	Asian	Conventional	0.20	0.08	0.01
		Bias-Corrected	0.19	0.08	0.02
		Robust	0.19	0.10	0.05

Note: RD estimates, standard errors, and p-values for unfavorable attitudes toward police and perceptions that Black Americans face discrimination in the United States in Nationscape survey for the full sample, just among non-Hispanic white respondents, just among Black/African American respondents, just among Latino respondents, and just among Asian American respondents. Estimates from `rdrobust()` package with 1st order polynomial, triangular kernel, and MSE-optimal bandwidth.

Table B.2: RD Estimates

Outcome	Sample		RD Estimate	SE	P-Value	Pct of St Dev
Partisanship	Full	Conventional	-0.055	0.04	0.18	2.4%
		Bias-Corrected	-0.071	0.04	0.08	3%
		Robust	-0.071	0.048	0.14	3%
White - Black Group Favorability	Full	Conventional	-0.054	0.023	0.02	5%
		Bias-Corrected	-0.063	0.023	0.01	5.8%
		Robust	-0.063	0.028	0.03	5.8%
Racial Resentment (Generations)	Full	Conventional	-0.164	0.03	0.00	11.7%
		Bias-Corrected	-0.180	0.03	0.00	13%
		Robust	-0.180	0.03	0.00	13%

Note: RD estimates, standard errors clustered by week or day, and p-values for unfavorable attitudes toward police and perceptions that Black Americans face discrimination in the United States in Nationscape survey for the full sample. Estimates from `rdrobust()` package with 1st order polynomial, triangular kernel, and MSE-optimal bandwidth. While several of these estimates are statistically significant, the magnitude of the effect, particularly on our moderators of core interest (White-Black group favorability and partisanship) is negligible at just 5 and 2.4% of a standard deviation respectively.

Table B.3: RD Estimates, Clustered Standard Errors

Outcome	Sample		RD Estimate	SE	P-Value	Clustering
Unfavorable	Full	Conventional	0.28	0.001	0.00	Week
Toward		Bias-Corrected	0.28	0.001	0.00	Week
Police		Robust	0.28	0.002	0.00	Week
Discrimination	Full	Conventional	0.19	0.001	0.00	Week
Against		Bias-Corrected	0.20	0.001	0.00	Week
Black People		Robust	0.20	0.002	0.00	Week
Unfavorable	Full	Conventional	0.28	0.000	0.00	Day
Toward		Bias-Corrected	0.28	0.000	0.00	Day
Police		Robust	0.28	0.000	0.00	Day
Discrimination	Full	Conventional	0.19	0.000	0.00	Day
Against		Bias-Corrected	0.20	0.000	0.00	Day
Black People		Robust	0.20	0.000	0.00	Day

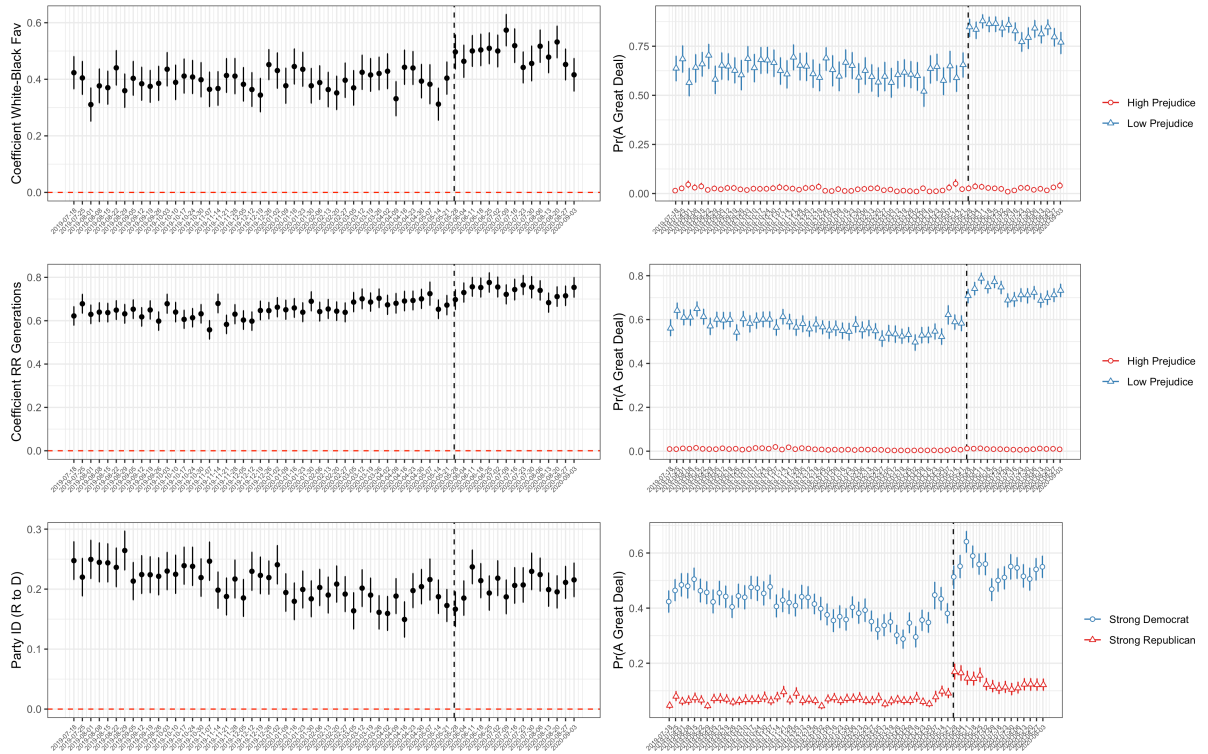
Note: RD estimates, standard errors clustered by week or day, and p-values for unfavorable attitudes toward police and perceptions that Black Americans face discrimination in the United States in Nationscape survey for the full sample. Estimates from `rdrobust()` package with 1st order polynomial, triangular kernel, and MSE-optimal bandwidth.

Table B.4: RD Estimates by Subgroups

Outcome	Sample	RD Estimate	SE	P-Value
Police Unfavorability	Strong Democrat	0.41	0.05	0.00
	Strong Republican	0.17	0.05	0.00
	Strong Black Preference	0.41	0.12	0.01
	Strong White Preference	0.01	0.12	0.96
	Lowest RR	0.39	0.05	0.00
	Highest RR	0.14	0.05	0.00
Black Discrimination	Strong Democrat	0.20	0.05	0.00
	Strong Republican	0.12	0.05	0.01
	Strong Black Preference	0.20	0.10	0.04
	Strong White Preference	-0.11	0.16	0.48
	Lowest RR	0.13	0.03	0.00
	Highest RR	0.03	0.07	0.70

Note: RD estimates, standard errors clustered by week, and p-values for unfavorable attitudes toward police and perceptions that Black Americans face discrimination in the United States in Nationscape survey for the full sample. Estimates from `rdrobust()` package with 1st order polynomial, triangular kernel, and MSE-optimal bandwidth.

Figure B.1: Coefficient and Predicted Value Plots for Prejudice and Partisanship



Note: Ordered probit coefficient and predicted probability of perceiving that African Americans face “a great deal” of discrimination by White-Black favorability ratings, racial resentment (generations item), and partisanship with 95% confidence intervals. Ordered probit models are run on each weekly independent cross-section and control for education, gender, age, race, household income, partisanship, and ideology, which are held at their means in simulations.

# Appendix C

## Additional Robustness Checks

### Placebos

Table C.1: RD Estimates for Irrelevant Outcomes

Outcome		RD Estimate	SE	P-Value	Pct St Dev
Unfavorable	Conventional	-0.05	0.02	0.004	6.1
Toward	Bias-Corrected	-0.06	0.02	0.002	
Jews	Robust	-0.06	0.02	0.011	
Unfavorable	Conventional	0.03	0.03	0.20	2.8
Toward	Bias-Corrected	0.04	0.03	0.09	
Evangelicals	Robust	0.04	0.03	0.15	
Unfavorable	Conventional	0.01	0.02	0.78	1.0
Toward	Bias-Corrected	0.00	0.02	0.95	
Socialists	Robust	0.00	0.02	0.96	
Unfavorable	Conventional	-0.03	0.02	0.10	3.5
Toward	Bias-Corrected	-0.02	0.02	0.14	
Whites	Robust	-0.02	0.02	0.22	
Unfavorable	Conventional	-0.03	0.02	0.24	2.1
Toward	Bias-Corrected	-0.03	0.02	0.16	
Obama	Robust	-0.03	0.03	0.25	

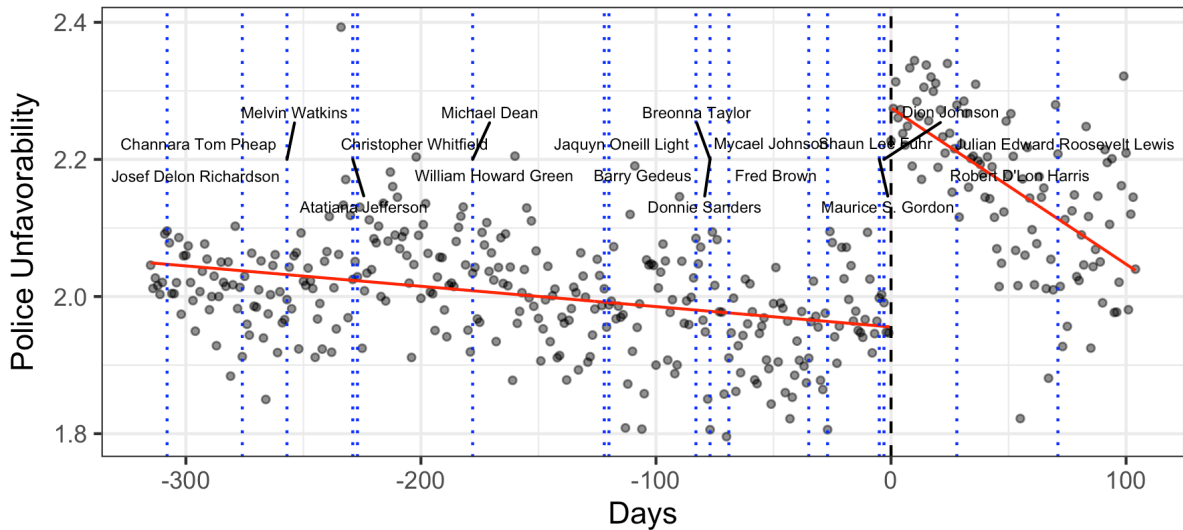
Note: RD estimates, standard errors, and p-values for irrelevant outcomes. Estimated using `rdrobust()` package with 1st order polynomial, triangular kernel, and MSE-optimal bandwidth.

## Media

In Figure 4 Panel A we present RD estimates for each subgroup with 95% CIs estimated using `rdrobust()` package with 1st order polynomial, triangular kernel, and MSE-optimal bandwidth. In Figure 4 Panel B we estimate the probability that respondents who report watching liberal media (*MSNBC*: watch MSNBC but not Fox) or conservative media (*Fox*: watch Fox but not MSNBC) rate the police “very unfavorably” before and after the Floyd protests. Ordered probit models are run on each weekly independent cross-section and control for prejudice, education, gender, age, race, household income, partisanship, and ideology, which are held at their means in simulations. Information on protest measures and question wording in Appendix A.

## Other Police Killings

Figure C.1: Police Killings of Unarmed Black Individuals



Note: Points indicate daily average unfavorable attitudes toward police in Nation-scape survey for the full sample. Best fit lines on either side of the discontinuity estimated using `rdrobust()` package in R with 1st order polynomial, triangular kernel, and MSE-optimal bandwidth. Text and vertical dotted lines indicate other fatal shootings of unarmed Black individuals during the time that the survey was in the field. Data from the Washington Post Police Shootings Database (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>).

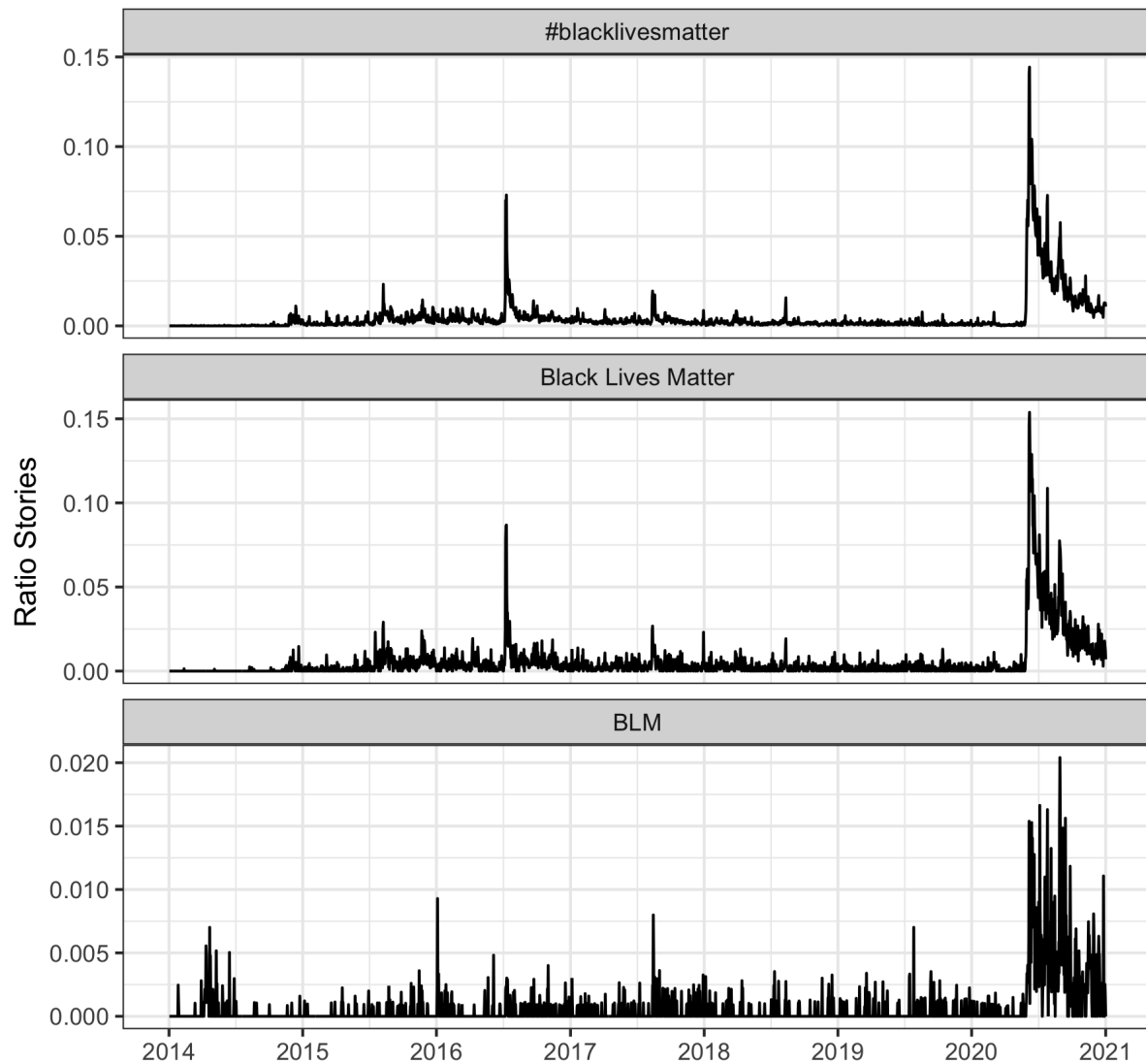
Table C.2: Police Shootings of Unarmed Black Civilians

Name	Date
Josef Delon Richardson	2019-07-25
Channara Tom Pheap	2019-08-26
Melvin Watkins	2019-09-14
Atatiana Jefferson	2019-10-12
Christopher Whitfield	2019-10-14
Michael Dean	2019-12-02
William Howard Green	2020-01-27
Jaquyn Oneill Light	2020-01-29
Barry Gedeus	2020-03-06
Breonna Taylor	2020-03-12
Donnie Sanders	2020-03-12
Mycael Johnson	2020-03-20
Fred Brown	2020-04-23
Shaun Lee Fuhr	2020-05-01
Maurice S. Gordon	2020-05-23

Note: Data from the Washington Post Police Shootings Database (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>).

# Media Coverage of BLM

Figure C.2: Media Coverage of BLM



Ratio of stories mentioning “blacklivesmatter”, “Black Lives Matter”, and “BLM” by major newspapers. Data from Media Cloud transcripts of the 50 newspapers with the largest circulation in the United States in 2018 based on research from the Pew Research Center

# Bibliography

- Coppock, Alexander and Donald P Green (2016). “What Can Be Learned From 500,000 Online Survey Responses About Party Identification ?” In: *American National Election Studies white papers*, pp. 1–5.
- Coppock, Alexander and Oliver A McClellan (2019). “Validating the demographic, political, psychological, and experimental results obtained from a new source of online survey respondents”. In: *Research and Politics*, pp. 1–14.
- Tausanovitch, Chris et al. (2019). *Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape Methodology and Representativeness Assessment*. URL: <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/uploads/reports/Nationscape-Methodology-RepresentativenessAssessment.pdf>.