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To cite this article: Yuan Hsiao & Scott Radnitz (2021) Allies or Agitators? How Partisan Identity Shapes Public Opinion about Violent or Nonviolent Protests, *Political Communication*, 38:4, 479-497, DOI: [10.1080/10584609.2020.1793848](https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1793848)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1793848>



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Allies or Agitators? How Partisan Identity Shapes Public Opinion about Violent or Nonviolent Protests

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, scholars have argued that protests that employ nonviolent tactics attract greater support and are therefore more likely to succeed than those that use violence. We argue that how protest tactics are perceived is not a purely objective determination, but can be influenced in part by observer characteristics – in particular, by partisan identity. We conducted a survey experiment on two independent samples through the MTurk platform, randomly assigning protester group identity and tactics. Results show that when controlling for assigned tactics, self-identified Republicans but not Democrats perceive higher levels of violence when a disliked group is protesting. The effect is strongest in regard to tactics that are nominally the least disruptive. The findings have implications for theories of nonviolent protest, the legitimacy of repression, and the prospects for marginal groups to influence policy in polarized societies.



KEYWORDS


Protest tactics; partisanship; public opinion; nonviolent strategies; survey experiment

Protest movements have been a major force in American history for bringing about political and social change, and are most effective when they gain popular approval. Not only does public opinion signal to policymakers that they can benefit by embracing a cause (Burstein & Linton, 2002), citizens are also potential supporters who may donate funds, sign a petition, pressure their legislators, or join a protest. Conversely, the public can reject social movement appeals and support efforts to ignore or even suppress mobilization.

One important variable that affects attitudes toward protest is whether participants employ or refrain from using violent tactics. Some scholars argue that nonviolent protests are more likely to succeed due to the perceived legitimacy of nonviolence (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Schock, 2005; Thomas & Louis, 2013), findings undergirded by decades of experience by practitioners of civil resistance, among them Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Despite the emphasis on the value of nonviolent tactics, there are grounds to question whether an assessment of the level of violence used in a protest is independent of people's prior political or ideological views. Preexisting beliefs, including partisan attitudes, shape how facts are interpreted in a wide variety of social and political domains (Green et al., 2002). If judgments about the valence of protest tactics are also a function of existing

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed on the publisher's website at <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1793848>.

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biases, then perceptions of tactics as nonviolent may be an *effect* rather than a *cause* of protest support, and scholars may be overstating the independent contribution of tactical choices to the success of protest movements.

This paper proposes a theory of protest perceptions that incorporates research on social identities and partisanship. We argue that the assimilation of information about a protesting group precedes and shapes assessments of how (non)violent it is, which in turn affects judgments about its merits. In practice, because the many attributes of protests are bundled and information about groups is filtered through media and political narratives, observational studies cannot easily disaggregate the component parts of protest to determine how they contribute to shaping attitudes (Boyle et al., 2012). We therefore use an original fictional vignette within a survey experiment to investigate how tactical choices shape sentiments toward grassroots collective action. Within the vignette – a description of a protest in the guise of a news story – we randomly assign protester identity and tactical choices. The analysis shows that perceptions of tactics are shaped by the alignment between partisan bias and the identity of a protesting group. Furthermore, these perceptions shape assessments of official responses, beliefs about the protest in the abstract, and related policy preferences – findings that have important implications for the role of grassroots protest in democracies.

Protests, Nonviolence, and Democracy

Since the Quit India movement helped achieve Indian independence, the sustained nonviolent protest has been the gold standard for marginalized groups seeking redress. A repertoire of nonviolent tactics was brought to bear in the US Civil Rights movement and codified by, among others, Gene Sharp, who advocated for the strategic withdrawal of consent for illegitimate rule through the use of 198 tactics (Sharp, 1973). The practice of nonviolent resistance, its proponents argued, could exercise power over the authorities through its moral force (Gregg, 1984; Havel, 2009; Singer, 1973).

Other scholars have investigated the strategic use of nonviolent protest for practical rather than moral reasons, argue that the repertoire of tactics used can have a causal impact on movement success *independent of who is wielding them*. (Ackerman & Kruegler, 1994; Gillion, 2013; Schock, 2005). Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) conducted the most comprehensive study along these lines, using a global dataset to show that nonviolent resistance is better than violence at attracting large and diverse crowds, thereby putting pressure on regime officials and increasing the costs of using violence against the protesters. Wasow (2017), analyzing protests from 1954 to 1992, argues that nonviolent black-led protests were more effective in shaping public opinion favorable toward civil rights. Mazumder (2018) shows that in countries where more Civil Rights protests took place, people are more likely to vote Democratic and favor more progressive racial policies today, though others question that finding (Biggs et al., 2020).

Recent studies have shown how nonviolent tactics increase identification with the protesting group (Simpson et al., 2018), provide a sense of legitimacy and efficacy (Thomas & Louis, 2013), increase support for concessions to the group (Huff & Kruszewska, 2016), or shape perceptions of morality (Orazani & Leidner, 2019). Others have observed that how protesters and their actions are perceived is subject to bias based on observer characteristics including race (Wouters, 2019), ideology (Feinberg et al., 2020), and authoritarian disposition (Gutting, 2019).

We contribute to this accumulating scholarship on the subjectivity of responses to protests by focusing on how observers perceive and label protest tactics. We argue that perceptions of the intensity of a given tactic – seemingly an objective determination – are at least partly endogenous to preexisting biases. People’s beliefs about the tactics employed and their (presumably) related expression of support for or rejection of a protest’s goals, rather than a dispassionate assessment, may be a post hoc rationalization of a prior judgment about the identity and claims of the actors. The ambiguity inherent in protest events often makes several interpretations simultaneously available (Kurzman, 2009). How these ambiguities are resolved depends on available information and observer biases.

We argue that partisanship is a critical source of bias that can shape perceptions of protest tactics. We view partisanship as a social identity, in which “people compare their self-image to the types of people and social groups that are associated with a political party and then sort themselves politically on that basis.” (Huddy & Bankert, 2017). As with any deeply held identity, partisans gain satisfaction from stimuli that heightens the status of their group and exaggerate differences from rival groups (Greene, 1999; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). When one’s group status is enhanced, group members feel positive emotions. By the same token, they will feel validation from developments that appear to impede or lower the status of rival groups (Huddy et al., 2015).

Given partisan loyalties, responses to the actions of protesters are likely to be shaped by two processes. First, people are not neutral information processors, but instead tend to engage in motivated reasoning, seeking out and interpreting information in order to bolster their preexisting views (Kunda, 1990; Lodge & Taber, 2013). Strong partisans should be especially motivated to interpret facts in ways that confirm and strengthen their group identities (Green et al., 2002; Nicholson, 2011). Even when people agree on the same realities – never a foregone conclusion – partisanship leads them to attribute blame consistently with their existing beliefs (Bisgaard, 2015)

Second, the threatening nature of protests mobilized by opposing groups should trigger a defensive response among partisan observers. Making claims through protest is inherently conflictual, in that one group’s gain represents another group’s loss. In this sense, protesting is similar to voting (Mason, 2018). However, contentious claims-making raises the stakes and produces a more palpable sense of threat than ordinary political mobilization (Feinberg et al., 2020). Partisans under threat are more likely to engage in outgroup denigration to protect their group’s interest and affirm their group’s identity (Amira et al., 2019). It is well established that views of protest movements, from the Tea Party to Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter, polarize along predictably partisan lines (Horowitz & Livingston, 2016).

We extend this logic and argue that partisan sentiments can also color how observers “code” movement behavior. Once individuals have interpreted cues about the protesting group in ways that trigger partisan associations, they should derive psychic benefit from judging their opponents harshly while giving seemingly allied groups the benefit of the doubt (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Because nonviolence is normatively appropriate whereas the use of violence against authorities is less defensible, the classification of tactical choices is a way to express (dis-)approval of a group’s goals and identity. Ascribing hostile intentions to a disliked group serves to undermine its legitimacy and exaggerate differences from an ingroup. As a result, ostensibly neutral attributions of

tactics as violent or not can be viewed as a proxy for sentiments about a protesting group and an opportunity to reaffirm one’s partisan identity.

If a charged response toward a group’s actions is triggered in a given instance, this effect can have downstream implications for views on the legitimacy of protest more generally. We therefore expect that perceptions of tactics – rather than their “actual” intensity – can trigger the articulation of broader sentiments about the protest that rationalize the initial judgment. In this case, the exposure of Democrats or Republicans to groups that carry positive or negative valence would cause not only a partisan interpretation of the immediate assessment (how violent or nonviolent) but also the consistent expression of views on related matters, such as the abstract value of protest and concrete judgments on public policy (Goren et al., 2009; Nicholson, 2011).

Based on this theory, we propose an effective sequence in which the perceived level of (non)violence is endogenous to the interaction of a) information about a protesting group and b) partisan predispositions, which also shape policy views and abstract opinions about protests. Specifically, through the mediation of perceived violence, the interaction of tactics and partisan sentiments should be associated with c) immediate determinations of how to respond to protesters, d) attitudes on the importance of protest for democracy, and e) support for punitive anti-protest policies in general. Figure 1 diagrams the hypothesized relationships.

From Figure 1, we elaborate our research questions. First, we test the conventional wisdom of nonviolent strategies by asking RQ1: “Given the same tactic, are protest groups more likely to be perceived as violent if they do not align with the observer’s partisan predisposition?” Then, we proceed with RQ2: “Do the effects in RQ1 vary by partisan affiliation or tactics?” Finally, we test RQ3: “Do these effects extend to public opinion and policy outcomes?”

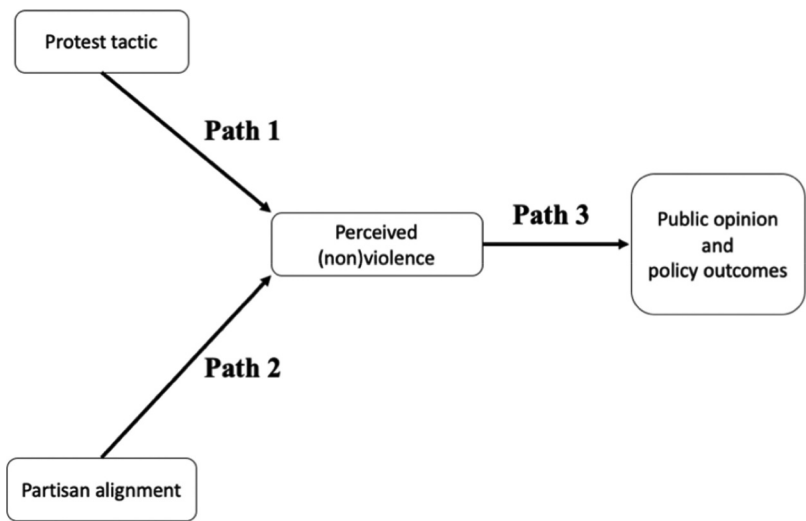


Figure 1. Theoretical model of treatments and outcomes.

Study 1

Data and Methodology

To test the hypotheses, we fielded a survey with an embedded experiment. It was conducted on 950 respondents on the Mechanical Turk platform in August 2018, from which respondents were directed to the survey website.¹ Although the subject pool of Mechanical Turk is slightly more educated and technologically savvy than the general population, it has been used widely for experimental research in the social sciences (Buhrmester et al., 2011).

The vignette describes a fictitious protest and randomly assigns one of the two protesting groups and one of the three tactics, in a 2×3 fully crossed design, as follows:

A crowd of 200 people calling themselves [“Americans Against Racist Policing”/ “Americans Against Illegal Immigration”] gathered at city hall this morning. Larry Carter, 49, was among the participants. “Our political leaders are supposed to protect us, but they don’t. We are angry and feel our voices are not heard!” Carter said. When local officials refused to meet with the organizers, the group [held up placards and shouted slogans, some laced with profanity/blocked a nearby highway, bringing traffic to a standstill/threw rocks and other objects at the building].

All the elements in the vignette were chosen to isolate critical variables and minimize bias. Both “Americans Against Racist Policing” and “Americans Against Illegal Immigration” were devised to refer to salient political issues that have generated real-life social movements. The former is reminiscent of BLM and is associated with Democrats. The latter is associated with Republicans (“Little Partisan Agreement,” 2018). We used fictitious groups in order not to activate conscious associations with existing movements, yet we provided enough information for readers to be able to form an impression and render a judgment.

The tactics in the vignette represent gradations of direct action. We presumed that placards would be perceived as the least violent and rocks the most violent, while blocking a highway is a disruptive but not necessarily violent tactic. However, the surrounding context is ambiguous enough to invite subjective judgments about each of these tactics. Because the vignette does not state what the placards say or what damage, if any, is caused by throwing “rocks and other objects,” respondents must fill in the gaps in the narrative by imagining the contextual details.

The name of the quoted participant includes a common first name and surname, neither of which entails potentially bias-inducing information such as race.² His middle-age status is likewise intended to minimize bias.³

Following the vignette, we pose several questions that correspond to steps in the proposed causal chain. First, we ask how the respondent would describe the intensity of the protest, on a scale from completely nonviolent to completely violent. Second, we ask how much the respondent agrees with the goals of the protest, which acts as a validity check on the correspondence between attitudinal factors and the information in the vignette, providing a measure of approval for the protesters apart from their tactics.⁴ Third, we ask whether it would be appropriate to arrest the protesters, which represents a “law-and-order” response. This measure is related to, but does not automatically follow from, perceptions of violence, as it is possible to disapprove of the tactics used but favor a non-punitive response.

Additional questions gauge how views about protests in general are shaped both by the treatments and three questions more proximate to the vignette. Thus, the fourth post-treatment question asks how much people “agree that protesters provide a useful service to our democracy,” which tests how exposure to a single episode of protest affects ostensibly deep-rooted philosophical beliefs.⁵ Fifth, we ask whether people would support a law punishing certain types of protest actions, the text for which was adapted from a bill proposed by Arizona legislators in early 2017 (Christie, 2019).⁶ Views on this law indicate how perceptions of tactics or other aspects of the immediate episode can have broader public policy implications (Lodge & Taber, 2013).

The main independent variables are the treatments. To test the effect of partisan bias, we interact party affiliation with the protest group treatment. In addition, we include age, education, race, sex, and income. The survey instrument also included two manipulation checks.⁷ The text of all survey items can be found in A3 of the Appendix.

The analytical strategy is as follows. First, we present descriptive statistics and validity checks. Then, since the dependent variables are ordinal Likert scales (e.g., strongly disagree to strongly agree), we first test even whether, controlling for tactics, there is partisan perception bias. We use an ordinal logit model with the following formulations:

$$g(Y) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{Tactics} + \beta_2 X_{Group} + \beta_3 X_{PartyAffiliation} + \beta_4 X_{Group} * X_{PartyAffiliation} + \gamma Z$$

where $g(Y)$ is the ordinal logit transformation of the outcome of perceived violence, β_1 estimates Path 1 on the effect of tactics, β_4 estimates Path 2 on the bias effect of political alignment (i.e., the interaction between protest group and party affiliation), and Z represents controls.

Note that the formulation above does not differentiate whether bias depends on the tactics. If we find that β_4 has an effect, we further estimate the following three-way interaction model, with β_6 as the coefficient of primary concern:

$$g(Y) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{Tactics} + \beta_2 X_{Group} + \beta_3 X_{PartyAffiliation} + \beta_4 X_{Group} * X_{PartyAffiliation} + \beta_5 X_{Tactics} * X_{PartyAffiliation} + \beta_6 X_{Group} * X_{PartyAffiliation} * X_{Tactics} + \gamma Z$$

For the public opinion and policy outcomes (i.e., Path 3 in Figure 1), we add in perceived violence to examine mediation pathways:

$$g(Y) = \beta_0 + \alpha X_{PerceivedViolence} + \beta_1 X_{Tactics} + \beta_1 X_{Tactics} + \beta_2 X_{Group} + \beta_3 X_{PartyAffiliation} + \beta_4 X_{Group} * X_{PartyAffiliation} + \gamma Z$$

Results

Overview and Face Validity Checks

We first check how the demographics of our sample compare the US population. Our sample has slightly more males than females and more whites than other races. The mean level of education is a college degree, and the mean age is 37. Compared to the US Census estimates⁸, our sample is comparable in age and race, but has more males and more respondents with higher education, which is typical of MTurk samples (Ipeirotis, 2010). For full descriptive statistics of the sample, see A1 in the online appendix.

We check whether assignment to treatments is balanced across relevant variables, including gender, race, age, education, income, and party preference (see A3 in online appendix). None of the tests show significant differences between the treatments.

To check the face validity of the treatments, we first expect that the protest group treatment should not be associated with the perceived level of violence, whereas protest tactics should. Specifically, throwing rocks should be perceived as the most violent while holding placards the least violent. Figure 2 shows those who received the “rocks” treatment perceived the protest as being the most violent, but there is no significant difference between the placards and highway-blocking treatments.⁹ The non-significant difference between highway and placards is consistent with our expectation that blocking a highway is disruptive but not necessarily violent.

We also perform a face validity check on the association of party identification with the protesting group. We expect that Republicans should be more inclined to agree with the goals of “Americans Against Illegal Immigration” whereas Democrats should agree with “Americans Against Racist Policing.” These expectations are confirmed, as seen in Figure 3.¹⁰

Explaining Perceptions of (Non)violence – Protest Group, Tactics, and Partisan Alignment

The above analyses provide the two building blocks for the main analyses – protesters who throw rocks are perceived as more violent, and Republicans tend to agree with protesters against illegal immigration while Democrats tend to agree with protesters against racist policing. We next explore how these dynamics affect the perceived level of (non)violence of protesters (i.e., Path 1 and Path 2 in the hypotheses). We describe highlights of the results below, while the full models and tables are available in A4 in the Appendix.

We start with Path 1 (Protest tactic → Perceived level of violence). Consistent with the hypotheses, those who receive the treatment of throwing rocks perceive the protestors as

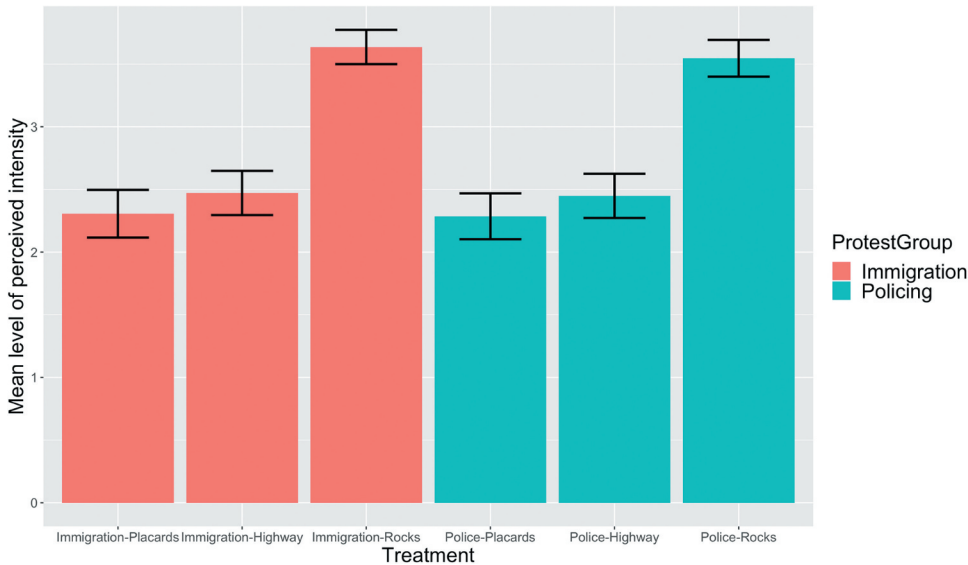


Figure 2. Face validity check on treatments regarding perceived intensity.

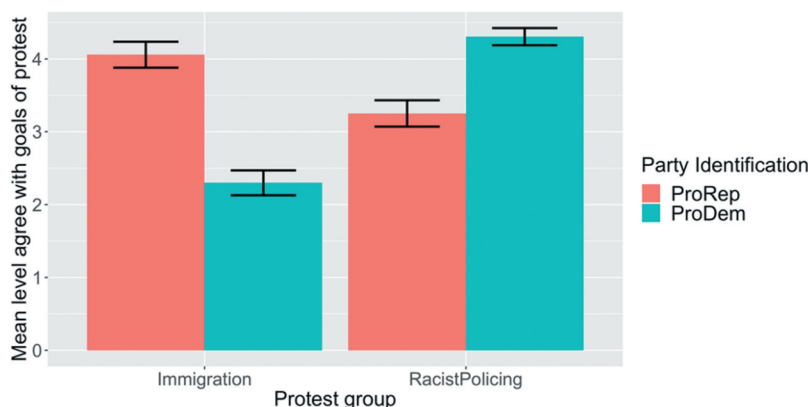


Figure 3. Face validity check on treatments regarding party identification.

more violent, while the effect of blocking a highway disappears after we include control variables. More importantly, our expectation of Path 2 (Partisan alignment → Perceived level of violence) is supported. Although the effect of protest tactics remains significant, we also find an effect of partisan alignment. The negative coefficient of the interaction term (i.e., *Protest group: Immigration * Prefer Republican* in A3) indicates that Republicans are less likely to view protesters against illegal immigration as violent than their Democratic counterparts. Thus, the perceived level of violence does not follow not automatically from what tactics protestors deploy, but is also a function of the partisan bias of the observer.

We further explore Path 2 on whether this “partisan alignment effect” differs depending on protest tactics. As these are three-way interaction coefficients that are difficult to interpret, we test whether *Prefer Republican* has an effect on the perceived level of violence within each treatment. Table 1 shows a summary of the results. However, to better visualize the results, we extract from the ordinal models and plot the predicted probabilities of answering “not violent at all” (i.e., one in the five-point scale), and “violent” (i.e., 4) in Figure 4. The top plot shows results when the protest group is against illegal immigration (Republican issue), while the bottom plot shows when the group is protesting against racist policing (Democratic issue). The red bars indicate Republican affiliation (i.e., +1 SD *Prefer Republican*), while the blue bars indicate Democratic affiliation (−1 SD *Prefer Republican*). Left subplots indicate the predicted probability of answering “not violent at all,” while the right subplots indicate that of answering “violent.”

Table 1. Ordinal models with perceived violence as the outcome and party preference (higher values indicate prefer Republican) as the covariate within each treatment group.

Treatment Group	Estimate	Standard error	95% CI
Police-Placards	0.45	0.08	(0.30, 0.60)
Police-Highway	0.41	0.08	(0.27, 0.55)
Police-Rocks	0.22	0.08	(0.06, 0.37)
Immigration-Placards	−0.01	0.08	(−0.15, 0.15)
Immigration -Highway	0.14	0.07	(−0.00, 0.29)
Immigration -Rocks	0.05	0.08	(−0.10, 0.20)

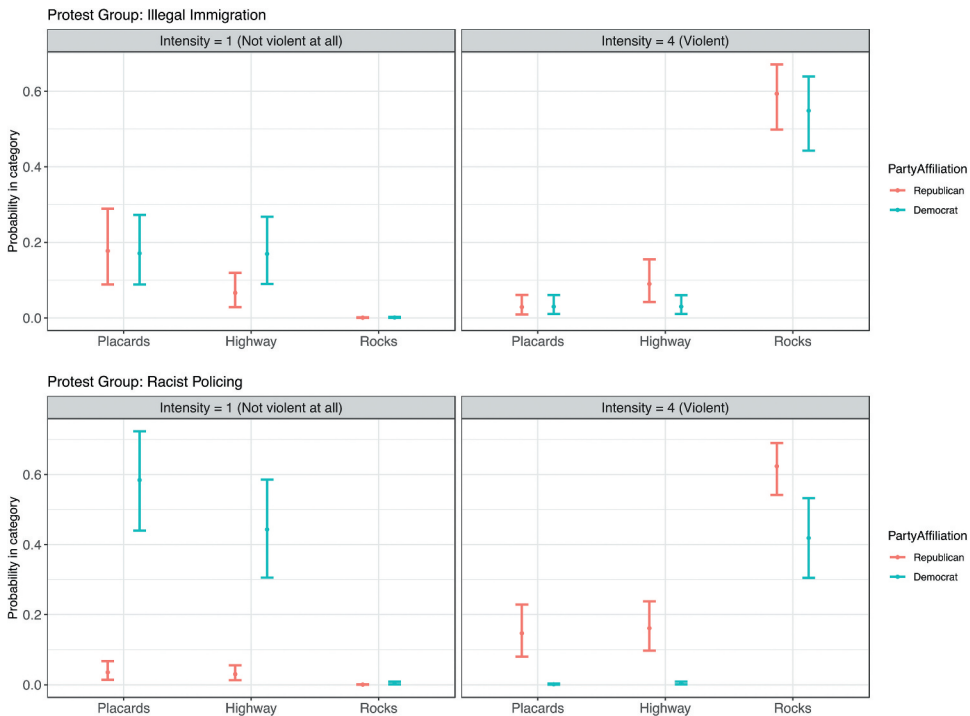


Figure 4. Predicted probability of answer “not violent at all” (category 1) and “violent” (category 4) based on protest group, protest tactic, and party preference.

As seen in the top plot, Democrats do not perceive the protesters against illegal immigration as more violent compared to Republicans, given exposure to the same tactic. This contrasts starkly with the bottom plot for protest is against racist policing, especially regarding the less assertive tactics of holding placards and blocking a highway. As seen in the left subplot, Republicans are very unlikely to perceive protestors holding placards or blocking a highway as not violent at all (4% and 3%, respectively), while Democrats have a much higher probability of answering so (58% and 44%, respectively). In contrast, as shown in the right subplot, Republicans have a much higher probability of seeing protestors holding placards or blocking a highway as violent (15% and 16%), while Democrats absolutely do not perceive protestors using such tactics as violent (0% and 0%).¹¹

In short, we find an *asymmetric* effect as partisan alignment leads to a divergence in perceptions by protesting groups only among Republicans, especially regarding nonviolent tactics. Even nonviolent tactics can be perceived as violent if the group’s goal conflicts with Republican predilections.

Analyses on Policy Outcomes

The previous analyses show that partisan alignment affects the perceived level of violence, but does this effect extend to public opinion and policy outcomes, or Path 3 (Perceived level of violence → Arrest/Democracy/Law)? We again present highlights of the results, while the full Tables are in A5-A7 in the Appendix. It is important to note that Path 3 is based on our theory rather than randomized treatments, which we tested in Path 1 and

Path 2 above. Thus, we can only find support (or not) for our path model, and one should be cautious in making causal interpretations (see Imai et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the analyses are useful to gauge the downstream effects of the treatments.

We start by investigating how appropriate the respondent deems it to arrest the organizers, which we visualize in Figure 5. As the results come from ordinal logit models, we plot the predicted probabilities of answering category 2 (slightly inappropriate; in other words, against arrest) and category 4 (slightly appropriate) as the outcome in the horizontal axis. The vertical axis plots the level of perceived violence. As seen in the left subplot, the probability of answering category 2 (slightly inappropriate) *decreases* with the perceived level of violence, while the probability of answering category 4 (slightly appropriate) *increases* with the perceived level of violence. As expected in Path 3, the higher the perceived level of violence, the more appropriate the perceived appropriateness of arrest.

We proceed to the first downstream effect on public opinion – whether respondents think protesters serve democracy in general. The results are consistent with our hypothesis of Path 2. The effect of protest tactics is not significant when controlling for perceived violence. Instead, as seen in Figure 6, perceived violence has a significant effect on agreeing that protestors serve democracy. Supporting Path 2, protest tactics influence public opinion via perceived violence.

Finally, we present results on supporting a punitive law against certain types of protest as the outcome. As shown in Figure 7, similar to the outcome of arresting organizers, we observe an effect of perceived (non)violence on supporting the punitive law.¹²

Summary of Study 1

We showed in Study 1 that there was a partisan bias in how people perceived the level of violence of protestors. The bias was only for Republicans against the “racist policing”

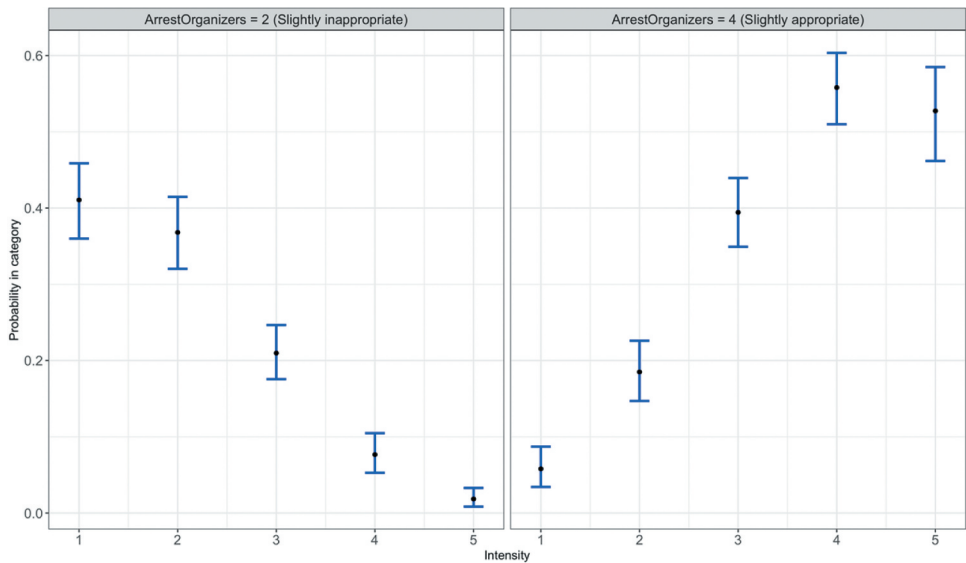


Figure 5. Appropriateness of arresting organizers by the perceived level of intensity.

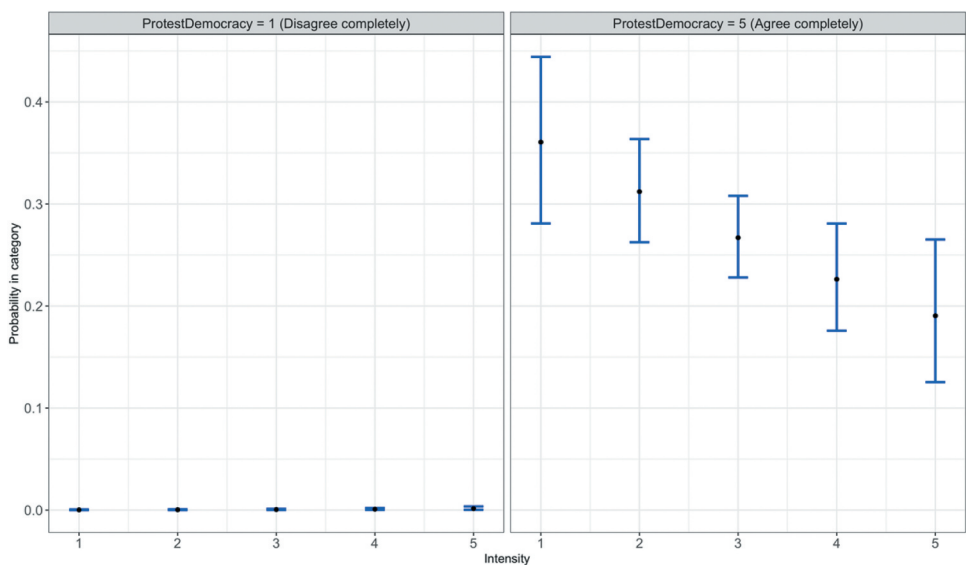


Figure 6. Agree that protestors serve democracy by the perceived level of violence.

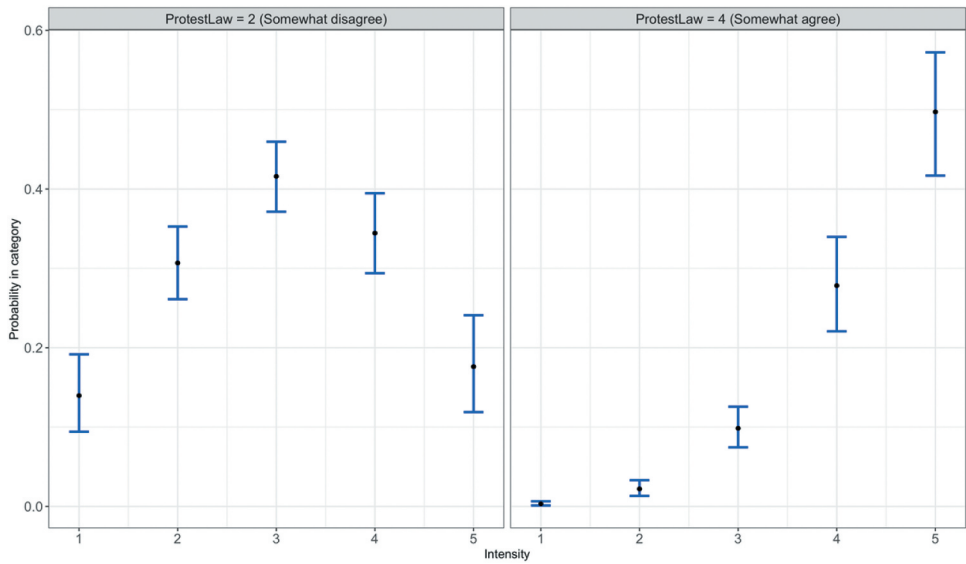


Figure 7. Support of punitive law by the perceived level of violence.

treatment but not for Democrats against the “illegal immigration” treatment. The effect was stronger for less-violent strategies, such as holding placards or blocking a highway, than for more-violent strategies. We further showed that this bias had implications on all policy outcomes.

Study 2

Overview

In order to ascertain the reliability of the findings of Study 1, we pre-registered on EGAP and conducted a second survey experiment on MTurk in August 2019 with 981 respondents.¹³ In light of the partisan asymmetry of our original findings, we sought to test the robustness of the null result among Democrats. Considering the possibility that the priming of “illegal immigration” was insufficiently provocative to Democrats, we replaced that group treatment with “Americans Against All Abortions.” Abortion is a polarizing issue of high emotional salience. According to a recent poll, 76% of Democrats support legalized abortion in most cases, whereas 59% of Republicans oppose abortion in most cases (Hartig, 2018). In addition, the anti-abortion movement is often associated with violence, as activist groups have carried out attacks on clinics and doctors (e.g., Tulbert, 2019). As such, this treatment represents a critical case for Democrats: if they do not perceive that extreme abortion opponents are violent, they are unlikely to do so with other groups. All other aspects were identical to Study 1.

Results

To ensure the validity of our treatments, we again checked whether Republicans agreed more with the goals of “Americans Against All Abortions” and Democrats agreed more with the goals of “Americans Against Racist Policing.” The results confirmed our expectations (not shown but available).

Replicating our analytical strategy in Study 1, we test whether *Prefer Republican* has an effect on the perceived level of violence within each treatment. Table 2 shows a summary of the results.¹⁴ Consistent with Study 1, we do not find large differences between Republicans and Democrats in any of the abortion treatments, indicating that Democrats again do not exhibit bias based on the assigned group. On the other hand, we observe the effects of party preference in the “Police-Placards” and “Police-Highway” treatments; Republicans are more likely to perceive the protestors associated with those treatments as violent than are Democrats. Note that we also observed large differences regarding these two less-violent tactics in Study 1, indicating the consistency of the findings. The only difference between Study 1 and Study 2 was that we observed a small Republican bias for the “Police-Rocks” treatment in Study 1, but do not observe meaningful differences in Study 2. Considering the two studies together, it appears that the Republican bias is strongest when protestors utilize nominally nonviolent strategies.

Table 2. Ordinal logit models with the perceived level of violence as the outcome and party preference as the covariate within each treatment group.

Treatment Group	Estimate	Standard error	95% CI
Police-Placards	0.18	0.07	(0.05, 0.32)
Police-Highway	0.26	0.08	(0.11, 0.42)
Police-Rocks	−0.13	0.08	(−0.29, 0.02)
Abortion-Placards	0.04	0.08	(−0.11, 0.19)
Abortion -Highway	0.13	0.07	(−0.01, 0.26)
Abortion -Rocks	−0.04	0.07	(−0.19, 0.11)

Table 3. Ordinal logit models on the association between the perceived level of violence and policy and public opinion outcomes.

Outcome	Estimate	Standard error	95% CI
Appropriate to arrest organizers	0.66	0.06	(0.56, 0.77)
Agree protestors serve democracy	-0.18	0.05	(-0.28, -0.08)
Agree with punitive law	0.47	0.05	(0.36, 0.57)

We proceed in Table 3 to examine whether the perceived level of violence predicts the policy and public opinion outcomes.¹⁵ The results are consistent with Study 1: Perceived level of violence is associated with all three outcomes.

Summary of Study 2

For the most part, we successfully replicated the results in Study 1. For protest groups that have goals at odds with Republican beliefs, Republicans tend to view protestors as more violent than Democrats do. However, the result was not symmetrical, as Democrats did not perceive objectional groups differently from Republicans. We again found the effects to be strongest when the protestors utilized the relatively nonviolent tactics of holding placards or blocking a highway. In contrast to Study 1, however, we did not find Republican bias when protestors threw rocks. Given that this treatment yielded the smallest effect in Study 1, the result is not surprising.

Discussion

Our analysis suggests that the determination of how violent a protest is is not a fact “out there” in the world. It also depends on who is deploying the tactic and who is making the judgment. In particular, all else equal, partisan bias can yield perceptions that a protest is violent (or not), which in turn affects policy preferences. However, the results are asymmetric: self-identified Republicans, but not Democrats, make distinctions about identical tactics depending on whether they are wielded by a liked or disliked group.

Partisanship and information in the vignette also combine to shape downstream attitudes. When it comes to democratic values, tactical treatments are not significant. Instead, greater perceived violence – a product of protest tactics and partisan alignment – makes a respondent look less favorably on the value of protests to democracy. This is a striking result: reactions to a single episode shape people’s broader views of the value of a Constitutional right. Similarly, when it comes to the controversial law punishing protest, both tactics and perceived levels of violence play a significant role in determining support for the law. A potential weakness of survey experiments is that treatments are momentary and may not lead to long-term changes in general attitudes. It might be the case that social movements, which produce repeated exposure to a protesting group, solidify changes in policy views over time, as if respondents were subjected to the treatments in this study multiple times. Future work might seek to re-interview respondents after a delay or test the effects of repeated exposure.

Our result for asymmetric partisanship is broadly consistent with the accumulating findings on Republican party identity. Republicans are more likely to be intolerant of difference, sensitive to normative threats, and resistant to change (Hetherington &

Weiler, 2009; Jost, 2017; MacWilliams, 2016). But if some pro-Republican respondents exhibited these tendencies, it did not lead to rejection of protests across the board. There were no significant differences in violence perceptions between Republicans and Democrats on immigration or abortion, indicating that the difference involves partisan cues rather than psychological traits alone.¹⁶ More precisely, we believe information about a disliked group interacted with underlying sensitivity to threats to a greater degree among Republicans, thereby triggering a suite of hostile assessments and repressive responses.

While the evidence supports our theory, it is possible that other mechanisms might produce the same observed results.¹⁷ One alternative is that Republicans correctly perceive the violence of the tactics but denounce the protestors to show support for their party (Bullock et al., 2015). While we cannot rule out this explanation, indirect evidence makes it unlikely. First, respondents were shown only one vignette, precluding the comparison of protest groups that would trigger the “cheerleading” mechanism. Besides, we would also expect the effect to occur independent of tactics. However, the bias appears only in the presence of the less disruptive tactics, showing that more ambiguous scenarios trigger the effects.

Another alternative mechanism is that treatments produce confounding effects (Dafoe et al., 2018), particularly if protests “against racist policing” were interpreted by Republicans in primarily racial rather than partisan terms. In Study 2 we included a variable for the perceived race of the protesters and controlled for it, with results remaining similar (see A10 in online appendix).

Finally, as our treatment involves contestation over policy issues, it is possible that reactions are based on policy differences rather than partisan identity (see Bullock, 2011). We cannot exclude this possibility, as ideology and partisanship are highly correlated, especially for the salient issues portrayed in the vignettes. Yet in light of the high level of affective polarization in the U.S. (e.g., Iyengar & Westwood, 2015), in the context of contentious politics, we believe that partisanship is a more compelling mechanism when it comes to explaining motivated biases. But we reiterate that an alternative account might have merit.

The finding that Republican bias did not extend to the ostensibly most violent treatment – throwing rocks – in the policing condition of Study 2 stands out. To make sense of it, we should note that Republican respondents did in fact perceive the tactic as most violent of the three. The difference from the other two tactical treatments is that Democrats also perceived that tactic as more violent. One interpretation of the disparate results is that Republicans *correctly* perceived rock-throwing as more violent than the other tactics, while they *misperceived* as violent what objective observers might conclude are nonviolent tactics. Thus, it may be that bias is mostly manifested not in extreme cases where there may be tangible evidence of physical harm, but in mundane instances in which protesters seek to minimize disruption and even go out of their way to avoid causing damage that could hurt their cause. This double standard has implications for the role of protest in a democracy, a point we address in the conclusion.

Conclusion

Nonviolent resistance has produced globally resonant images, from India to the American South to Communist Eastern Europe, and has been shown to facilitate movement success in several ways, including broadening coalitions, demonstrating moral force, and deterring

regime crackdowns. Yet these mechanisms are unlikely to come into play if observers do not in fact register “nonviolence” as nonviolent. Protesters may be likely to succeed when they reaffirm the values and invite participation among those who already agree with a movement’s goals. However, advocates of civil resistance tactics go further and contend that nonviolence can have desirable effects beyond a movement’s most committed supporters (e.g., Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Schock, 2005). This study has shown that even if a protest tactic is carried out with the intention of demonstrating nonviolence, bias stemming from ideology or partisanship can militate against the expected effects on observers. Furthermore, contrary to the theory, it is the tactics that are less blatantly violent that invite the possibility of bias.

The findings further show that the perceived valence of tactics has downstream effects in the form of preferred policy outcomes. Perceptions of tactics influence whether people view arresting protestors as appropriate, believe protestors serve the cause of democracy, and support punitive laws restricting protests. If partisan bias in fact causes a mismatch between perceived and “actual” violence on a large scale, this can result in support for the repression of unpopular groups with legitimate aims at the pretext of their violating norms of “civility” or, by the same token, downplaying the violence of protestors whose identity is more congenial to the majority, which bodes poorly for the prospects for grassroots-driven change in democracies.

The implications of this finding contribute to our understanding of successful (and even paradigmatic) cases of civil resistance, such as the Civil Rights Movement. The importance of nonviolent resistance in these successes has often been cited, but our results refocus attention on the contextual and historical factors that shape how a movement is perceived more broadly. One implication is that cases may be regarded as (exclusively) nonviolent because the activists are able to secure the ideological approval of certain political or cultural elites. Related, the retrospective coding of successful movements will reflect the societal (or perhaps merely intellectual) consensus of the virtues of nonviolence. Controversial ongoing movements that face ambivalent public perceptions and negative media portrayals, such as Palestinian demonstrations against Israeli occupation, will struggle to earn the certification of nonviolence that more popular movements take for granted (Kouddous, 2018; see also Huff & Kertzer, 2018).

Our theorization of the ramifications of political alignment may be particularly relevant in polarized societies and populist political systems. In an age of distrust of the media and elites’ deliberate distortion of facts for political gain, the gap between actual and perceived measures taken by marginalized groups to improve their status is likely to grow wider. Where the dominant discourse demonizes a minority, activists must work against prejudice and public disapproval (Wodak, 2015). In such cases, even the most benign tactics may be depicted in a sinister light, imposing a major barrier on a marginalized group’s ability to work within the political system. By the same token, harsh measures against disfavored protest groups may enjoy popular support, tactical choices notwithstanding.

Notes

1. To ensure validity of the responses, we restricted eligibility to answer the survey to MTurk workers who lived in the United States and had at least 100 previous approvals and an

approval rate of at least 95%. Each assignment was paid \$1.10. The median survey completion time was 8.5 minutes.

2. According to the 2010 census, Carter was the 49th most common surname in the US, 58% of whose bearers identified as white and 36% as black. See http://howmanyofme.com/search/andhttps://www.census.gov/topics/population/genealogy/data/2010_surnames.html
3. Typically, it is adolescents and younger men who are portrayed in the media as prone to violence (Muschert, 2007).
4. This is intended as a measure of agreement with the protest based solely on the “group” treatment. However, in practice, because it follows the vignette, readers may also take into account information from the tactical treatment. Nevertheless, since the assignment of tactical treatments is random, by averaging across tactical treatments we can approximate a direct measure of how much respondents relate to the group’s goals.
5. This question was used by McLeod and Detenber (1999, p. 12), who did not find a significant effect.
6. The bill did not pass.
7. 23 participants were dropped from the analysis because they failed both checks or completed the survey in under three minutes.
8. See <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045218>
9. In addition to the visualizations, ANOVA tests also yield significant results.
10. For visual purposes, we collapsed the scale of 7 into a binary one – pro-Republican or pro-Democrat. The middle category is omitted in this analysis.
11. Although in the visuals there appears to be some effect on the tactic “rocks” as well, as shown in Table 1 the effect was not statistically significant.
12. The initial positive slope between Intensity 1–3 in category 2 (Somewhat disagree) occurs because respondents are more likely to answer category 1 (Disagree completely).
13. We removed 40 respondents who failed the manipulation checks or if the response time was within 2 minutes (median response time was 3.9 minutes). We also restricted respondents to be those who have not participated in the previous study to produce independent samples. Compared to Study 1, the sample had an almost identical composition in gender, race, age, and education. The sample in Study 2 had a slightly higher level of income (The mean level of income was 2.79 in Study 1, while it was 3.11 in Study 2).
14. Regressions with *Protest group: Abortion * Prefer Republican* as the focal covariate yielded small effect sizes. However, as shown in Table 2 this is due to the asymmetric effect and heterogeneity between violent and nonviolent strategies.
15. The table shows bivariate coefficients. Including all the controls in Study 1 yields almost identical results (see A5-A7 in online appendix).
16. It may also be the case that the effect is produced by Democrats, who respond favorably toward anti-racist policing rhetoric. We thank a reviewer for pointing this out. Further research could test this by including a different “pro-Democratic” group condition.
17. We thank the reviewers for providing this suggestion.

Acknowledgments

We thank Blaine Robbins for comments on the survey design. We also Steven Pfaff, Kerice Doten-Snitker, and the anonymous reviewers for feedback on previous manuscripts. Finally, we thank all the participants in the pretests and the surveys.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Data Availability Statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at <https://doi.org/DOI:10.17605/OSF.IO/TPA6U>.

Open Scholarship



This article has earned the Center for Open Science badge for Preregistered. The materials are openly accessible at <https://doi.org/DOI:10.17605/OSF.IO/TPA6U>.

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