

Effects of Social Dominance Orientation, Party Identification, and Ideology on White American Attitudes Towards Black Lives Matter and the Police

Introduction

The Black Lives Matter movement and attitudes towards the police drastically shifted after the George Floyd protests reignited racial tensions in America. I build upon existing literature by examining how social dominance orientation, party identification, and ideology impact White attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter movement and the police using survey data collected to measure social dominance and attitudes towards these topics. My findings show that social dominance orientation has a significant effect on White attitudes towards Black Lives Matter even after controlling for party, ideology, and other demographic controls. They also show that while party identification and ideology do not affect White attitudes towards the police, social dominance orientation also does not while controlling for attitudes towards Black Lives Matter. These findings suggest that White attitudes towards these two intertwined topics are not the same and that social dominance orientation may not impact White attitudes in the same way for different topics.

Motivation

The unnecessary use of excessive force by the police, or police brutality, has been one of the most defining social issues in recent American history. And it has continued to gain national attention because of the disproportionate mortality risk from police brutality experienced by Black Americans – 2.5 times higher for Black men and 1.4 times higher for Black women compared to their white counterparts (Edwards, Lee, and Esposito 2019). In 2013, the #BlackLivesMatter movement began on social media following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting of Trayvon Martin. Since then, Black Lives Matter has grown to become a national movement for social justice and police accountability. In 2020, the George Floyd protests revitalized attention towards the Black Lives Matter movement after video footage spread of his murder by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin (Reny and Newman 2021).

Racial attitudes have always been a consistent and powerful influence in American politics (Tesler 2012). Consequently, White Americans and Black Americans hold different opinions on racial topics, such as the Black Lives Matter movement. However, scholars have found that social dominance also has an impact on attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter movement even while controlling for ethnic identity and other demographic variables (Holt 2018; Holt and Sweitzer 2020). Social dominance theory evaluates the effect of attitudes towards group-based social hierarchies, such as an age system, gender system, or any arbitrary-set system (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). Institutions in society can be hierarchy enhancing, supporting the social hierarchies, or hierarchy attenuating, opposing the social hierarchies. The police force is seen as a hierarchy enhancing institution because the police are agents of the state. Since White Americans have more opportunities in American society and tend to hold higher institutional positions, they tend to have higher social dominance orientations than Black Americans.

In response to the killing of NYPD officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu, some Americans began protesting the Black Lives Matter movement by declaring it anti-police and forming the controversial Blue Lives Matter countermovement. Scholars find that two variables, more trust in police and having a more conservative ideology, best influence perceptions that there is a war on the police (Moule 2020). Connecting attitudes towards the police and the Black Lives Matter movement together, scholars find that people with more unfavorable views towards the police tend to be more supportive of the Black Lives Matter movement, while older and more conservative Republicans tend to be less supportive of the Black Lives Matter movement (Updegrave et al. 2020).

Hypotheses

Most of the literature from scholars in this field occurred before the George Floyd protests of 2020. These protests pushed the Black Lives Matter movement to a much larger national stage, and quadrupled its search popularity in America from its previous 2016 peak in popularity according to data from Google Trends (Google 2021). This raised several questions of interest about the movement that I will explore in this paper. The first question focuses on how much social dominance orientation still impacts attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter movement. Psychologists have found, through a twin design, that social dominance orientation

and political attitudes have heritable sub-dimensions and share common genetic influences (Kleppesø et al. 2019). Past scholars have also found evidence that the Black Lives Matter movement has been heavily politicized, with models showing that support for the movement decreased the probability of voting for Trump in 2016, even while controlling for race, ideology, party, and other demographic variables (Drakulich et al. 2020). Taking this into account, I hypothesize that:

H1: Social dominance orientation will not affect attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter movement if controlling for party and ideology along with common demographic variables.

One controversial policy proposal that gained attention during the George Floyd protests is “defund the police” which calls for police budget reductions and re-appropriating funds to other social service organizations. This policy was not widely supported by Americans, nor was it supported by then-Presidential candidate Biden (Bradner, Mucha, and Judd 2020; Peyton, Vaughn, and Huber 2020). This suggests that most Americans generally are supportive of the police and that “defund the police” is not a decisively polarized policy. From this, I hypothesize that:

H2: Party identification and ideology will not affect attitudes towards police favorability.

Data Description and Methods

Participants were recruited through the Harvard Digital Lab for the Social Sciences (DLABSS) and the questionnaire was fielded using Qualtrics during November 12-29, 2021. DLABSS is an online volunteer laboratory that fields questionnaires on social science issues (DLABSS n.d.). Experiments show that results from DLABSS can replicate prior social science findings and produce response quality comparable to paid subjects (Strange et al. 2019). Overall, 409 total responses were collected from people over the age of 18. The final analysis consisted of 334 responses from adults in the United States, 282 of them identifying themselves as White non-Hispanics being the main group of interest in this paper. 65% of the respondents were male ($n = 215$), 31% were female ($n = 102$), and 5% responded with “Other/Prefer not to answer”

about their gender ($n = 15$). The age of participants is calculated from their birth year. 4 respondents (1.2%) were age 18-24, 31 respondents (9.3%) were age 25-34, 45 respondents (13.6%) were age 35-44, 43 respondents (13.0%) were age 45-54, 63 respondents (19.0%) were age 55-64, 141 respondents (42.5%) were age 65+, and 5 respondents (1.5%) did not respond to the question. 320 respondents (96.3%) reported graduating from high school, 224 respondents (67.5%) reported having a Bachelor's degree or higher, and 11 respondents (3.3%) did not answer the question. The proportion of Democrats and Republicans is relatively even, with 115 Democrats (34.6%), 128 Republicans (38.6%), 82 Independents (24.7%), and 7 respondents (2.1%) who did not answer the question. Comparing the demographics of this sample to the most recent U.S. Census statistics of the United States, this sample contains a higher proportion of representation from men, older Americans, and highly educated Americans (U.S. Census Bureau 2020). I will be using these demographic variables and a salary variable as controls in my analysis. So, this skew in sample demographic will be taken into account in the analysis.

To measure social dominance orientation and how the respondents felt about the Black Lives Matter movement and the police, I created a set of questions for each topic and grouped the questions into three matrix tables on Qualtrics. The first set of questions asked respondents to choose how much they favor each of 16 statements used to measure social dominance orientation (Appendix A). 8 of the 16 statements are from the dominance sub-scale and the other 8 statements are from the anti-egalitarianism sub-scale. Responses were collected on a 7-point scale from Strongly oppose to Strongly favor with the middle option being “neutral”. The second set of questions asked respondents to choose how much they favor each of 6 statements used to measure attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter movement (Appendix B). Responses were collected on a 7-point scale from Strongly oppose to Strongly favor with the middle option being “neither favor nor oppose”. This second set of questions was heavily influenced by the questions used in a similar study done comparing attitudes towards Black Lives Matter and social dominance orientation (Holt and Sweitzer 2020). The third set of questions was measured on the same 7-point scale as the second set of questions, but it focused on attitudes towards the police. To account for a wider range of attitudes towards the police, this set included 9 statements (Appendix C). To eliminate any potential question order bias, the second and third sets of questions about Black Lives Matter and the Police were randomly swapped in each questionnaire.

Analysis and Results

Before beginning to test the hypotheses, I conducted a t-test to compare the means of attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter movement and towards police favorability between respondents who answered the questions regarding attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter before they answered the questions regarding police favorability and the respondents who answered the questions the in the opposite order. This addresses potential concerns about question order bias, the potential effect that reading one set of questions before the other will impact how respondents answer each question. For the whole sample, the results failed to reject the null hypothesis that there was a difference between the means of the two groups regarding attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter movement. However, the results did support rejecting the null hypothesis for attitudes towards police favorability for the whole sample. And it also provided evidence to reject the null hypothesis for both attitudes in the sample of White Americans only. This provided me enough evidence to create a logical control variable “BLM Questions First” to try and account for the question order bias in the regression models.

To test whether social dominance orientation affects attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter movement if controlling for party and ideology along with common demographic variables (H1), I start by determining the relationship between the demographics and other control variables to support the Black Lives Matter movement among the whole sample. Then, I added in the party, ideology, and social dominance orientation variables for the whole sample before limiting the sample to just White Americans. I estimate each of these using an OLS regression model with robust standard errors and present the results in Table 1.

Table 1: Regression Models Estimating Attitudes Towards Black Lives Matter

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Demographics/Control	Attitudes towards BLM	
		All	Whites Only
	(1)	(2)	(3)
BLM Questions First	−0.119 (0.202)	−0.268 (0.176)	−0.313 (0.193)
Female	1.170*** (0.231)	0.212 (0.203)	0.165 (0.201)
Age	0.027*** (0.007)	0.012** (0.006)	0.008 (0.006)
Salary	−0.019 (0.024)	−0.018 (0.022)	−0.025 (0.023)
Education	0.227** (0.103)	0.240** (0.096)	0.201* (0.106)
Police Favorability	−1.075*** (0.084)	−0.392*** (0.094)	−0.316*** (0.103)
SDO		−0.436*** (0.099)	−0.349*** (0.109)
Party ID		−0.187 (0.179)	−0.151 (0.197)
Ideology		−0.430*** (0.079)	−0.525*** (0.085)
Constant	6.403*** (0.657)	7.402*** (0.593)	7.653*** (0.676)
Observations	294	219	190
R ²	0.451	0.716	0.730
Adjusted R ²	0.440	0.703	0.717
Residual Std. Error	1.689 (df = 287)	1.200 (df = 209)	1.197 (df = 180)
F Statistic	39.356*** (df = 6; 287)	58.437*** (df = 9; 209)	54.187*** (df = 9; 180)
<i>Note:</i>		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Table 1. OLS regression estimates shown with robust standard errors. Models 1 uses the demographic and control variables to create a baseline model to build off. Models 2 and 3 add in the party, ideology, and social dominance orientation variables for the whole sample and then only White Americans. The results show that, contrary to H1, social dominance orientation does affect attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter movement even while controlling for party, ideology, and other demographic variables.

The increase in R² values, from 0.451 to 0.716 and 0.730, after adding in the party, ideology, and social dominance orientation variables show that some of these variables do a better job than just the baseline demographics and control variables at explaining attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter Movement. However, since most respondents were White, the Whites only model results will be the focus of my analysis. The results show that, contrary to H1, social dominance orientation does affect White attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter movement even while controlling for party, ideology, and other demographic variables. Interestingly, it also shows that

party identification does not play a major role in impacting the attitudes towards Black Lives Matter. This could be explained by similar attitudes being accounted for in ideology. While holding other variables constant, the results show that an increase in social dominance orientation by 1 point on the scale leads to a decrease in favorability of the Black Lives Matter movement by 0.349 points among white Americans on average. While this disproves my original hypothesis, this does show additional evidence supporting the importance of social dominance orientation in the attitudes of White Americans. It also points to evidence that there are still factors in social dominance orientation that ideology does not account for.

Switching to evaluating attitudes towards police favorability and to test H2, whether party identification and ideology affect attitudes towards police favorability, I follow the same procedure that was used to test H1. I present the OLS regression model results with robust standard errors in Table 2.

Table 2: Regression Models Estimating Favorability Towards the Police

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Favorability towards the Police		
	Demographics/Control	All	Whites Only
	(1)	(2)	(3)
BLM Questions First	−0.228** (0.110)	−0.091 (0.142)	−0.094 (0.156)
Female	0.318** (0.125)	0.150 (0.171)	0.169 (0.175)
Age	0.030*** (0.004)	0.032*** (0.004)	0.031*** (0.004)
Salary	0.021 (0.014)	0.018 (0.018)	0.022 (0.019)
Education	−0.055 (0.059)	−0.039 (0.075)	−0.031 (0.084)
BLM Favorability	−0.335*** (0.027)	−0.262*** (0.068)	−0.213*** (0.077)
SDO		−0.039 (0.079)	−0.0005 (0.086)
Party ID		0.248 (0.152)	0.109 (0.170)
Ideology		0.036 (0.065)	0.115 (0.082)
Constant	4.578*** (0.306)	3.526*** (0.644)	3.119*** (0.746)
Observations	294	219	190
R ²	0.495	0.506	0.523
Adjusted R ²	0.484	0.485	0.499
Residual Std. Error	0.943 (df = 287)	0.981 (df = 209)	0.982 (df = 180)
F Statistic	46.888*** (df = 6; 287)	23.813*** (df = 9; 209)	21.907*** (df = 9; 180)
<i>Note:</i>		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Table 2. OLS regression estimates shown with robust standard errors. Models 1 uses the demographic and control variables to create a baseline model to build off. Models 2 and 3 add in the party, ideology, and social dominance orientation variables for the whole sample and then only White Americans. The results show that, supporting H2, party identification and ideology do not affect attitudes towards police favorability while controlling for other demographic variables. Interestingly, social dominance orientation also does not affect attitudes towards police favorability, but age and BLM favorability do.

However, this time the R² values after adding in the party, ideology, and social dominance orientation variables, 0.506 and 0.523, is not that much different than the R² value of the baseline model, 0.495. This shows that, supporting H2, party identification and ideology do not affect White attitudes towards police favorability while controlling for other demographic variables. Interestingly, the results also show that social dominance orientation does not affect White attitudes towards police favorability, but age and BLM favorability do. Although, the statistically significant effect of the age variable should be viewed with caution because the sample

demographic is skewed towards older Americans. These results are interesting because it suggests that White attitudes towards police favorability are not affected by party, ideology, or social dominance orientation while controlling for attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter movement and other demographics. This might show that social dominance orientation and other ideological variables do not impact how White Americans view some subjects, such as the police, as much as it impacts how White Americans view other topics, such as the Black Lives Matter movement.

Conclusion

The Black Lives Matter movement, reignited in popularity after the George Floyd protests, and the lack of support behind some policies that resulted from it, such as “defund the police”, have shown that there is still a lot of nuances to finding a solution for police brutality (Bradner, Mucha, and Judd 2020; Google 2021; Peyton, Vaughn, and Huber 2020). The goal of this paper is to try and understand what factors impact the attitudes of Americans, specifically White Americans, regarding the contemporary social movement of Black Lives Matter and the institution that it is protesting, the police. My findings show that social dominance orientation plays a major role in how White Americans view Black Lives Matter and explains attitudes not accounted for solely in ideology. However, my findings also show that social dominance orientation, alongside ideology and party, also has no impact on White American attitudes towards the police. It also shows that the attitudes behind party identification might be better accounted for in ideology in the topics of Black Lives Matter and the police. This all suggests that while ideology and social dominance can impact whether White Americans support solving police brutality, they have no impact on whether White Americans would be willing to “defund the police”.

These findings build onto existing research in the field extensively and provide one of the first in-depth analyses of attitudes towards Black Lives Matter since the George Floyd Protests. While scholars have found, previously, that social dominance impacts attitudes towards Black Lives Matter while controlling for ethnic identity and other demographic variables (Holt 2018; Holt and Sweitzer 2020), my findings extend the importance of social dominance when evaluating these protests by showing that it is still important even while controlling for ideology

and party identification. Scholars have also found evidence that social dominance orientation and political attitudes have similar genetic influences (Kleppesø et al. 2019), but my findings show that the two may still account for different attitudes. These findings should push scholars to rethink how social dominance impacts attitudes and why it impacts attitudes towards some topics and not others.

While the findings align with past research, this paper is not without its limitations. The biggest limitation is that the demographic makeup of the sample was not representative of Americans or even White Americans. Black Americans were underrepresented, which led to the results being focused exclusively on the attitudes of White Americans. Future studies should try and investigate the impacts of social dominance, ideology, and party on all Americans, not just White Americans. Additionally, the sample underrepresented low-educated Americans. This is a crucial group to have in a research sample, especially after both Presidential elections including Donald Trump stumped pollsters (Walley 2017). The sample also unrepresented women and younger Americans, so overall the first limitation to address would be the poor sample representation. The second limitation is the lack of a good model to evaluate attitudes towards the police. If attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter movement are the only variables that can explain police favorability, then is there even a path available for solving police brutality through police reform or defunding? There will be another George Floyd and there will be more protests until this social issue is addressed. So, there will need to be better psychological research to understand what methods can be used to solve police brutality if that is not through police reform or “defund the police”.

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Appendix A. Social Dominance Orientation Scale Statements

1. Some groups of people must be kept in their place.
2. It's probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom.
3. An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others to be on the bottom.
4. Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups.
5. Groups at the bottom are just as deserving as groups at the top.
6. No one group should dominate in society.
7. Groups at the bottom should not have to stay in their place.
8. Group dominance is a poor principle.
9. We should not push for group equality.
10. We shouldn't try to guarantee that every group has the same quality of life.
11. It is unjust to try to make groups equal.
12. Group equality should not be our primary goal.
13. We should work to give all groups an equal chance to succeed.
14. We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups.
15. No matter how much effort it takes, we ought to strive to ensure that all groups have the same chance in life.
16. Group equality should be our ideal.

Appendix B. Black Lives Matter Scale Statements

1. I like the BLM movement
2. The BLM movement is bad
3. My opinion of the BLM movement is favorable
4. The BLM movement is beneficial
5. The BLM movement is necessary
6. What BLM protestors have done is unwise

Appendix C. Police Favorability Scale Statements

1. I like the police
2. The police are bad
3. My opinion on the police is favorable
4. The police are beneficial
5. The police are necessary
6. I support police reform
7. I support the abolition of police
8. The police are brutal
9. The police are discriminatory

Appendix D. Theoretical models of the relationships between social dominance orientation, party identification, and ideology on attitudes towards Black Lives Matter and the police.

