Black Lives Matter Protests and Voter Turnout*

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Abstract

In the summer of 2020, Americans took to the streets in larger numbers than ever before. Following the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, an enormous multiracial coalition voiced their dissatisfaction with the state of policing in the United States. These mass protests took place shortly before a presidential election, and the incumbent loudly voiced his disdain for protesters and their political message. This paper explores one aspect of the impact of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Using a national voter file and data on protest location, we aim to estimate the causal impact of physical proximity to a BLM protest on voter turnout. Our pilot studies using Georgia, North Carolina, and Ohio point to a complicated relationship that demands further investigation.

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Black Americans are subject to disproportionate interactions with the police, the carceral state, and the criminal justice system, more broadly. Against this backdrop, Black Lives Matter began as a twitter hashtag following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin (Rickford 2016). Since then, BLM has evolved into a protest movement against racial disparities in economic, social and political outcomes.

Protests & Turnout/Election Outcomes

Lohmann (1994) suggests that protest demonstrations reveal privately held information about dissatisfaction to the general public. Specifically, they raise awareness of social issues that result from prior policies with the aim of influencing voting decisions, as protest often signals intent to vote for or support a particular candidate or party. Moreover, informal communication within social networks influences electoral behavior, as social pressure from within an individual's network works as an inducement to political participation (Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008). Some researchers recognize the social environment as a mechanism to increase turnout by establishing norms of participation and providing networks to mobilize potential voters (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). In fact, simply being informed of another's actions in one's community – or network – can increase an individual's likelihood of voting (Großer and Schram 2006).

The 2020 BLM protests demonstrate how protest movements can raise awareness of social discontent and increase its salience in the mind of the public. Informational and network effects were amplified with the advent of social media, and by facilitating information exchange, sites like Twitter and Facebook make it easier for large groups of people to organize collective demonstrations. However, unique to the modern era is how these demonstrations are portrayed. Wasow (2020) offers the concept of agenda seeding to describe protestors drive media coverage and framing, congressional speech, and public opinion on civil rights, finding that nonviolent protests led to sympathy, especially when met with repression, and

destructive protests led to themes centered on "law and order." In the current political environment, portrayals of the protests differed along ideological lines, and so reinforced already existing political beliefs (see, for instance, AI 2020).

As such, we should expect that proximity to a local BLM protest had little to no effect on voter turnout for either Democrat or Republican voters. Given the polarization and prominence of national coverage, we suspect that individuals interpreted local protests through national media frames, and so were mobilized to vote for BLM and against Trump, or against "rioting" and for Trump. Whether the presence of social media and its heightening of network and informational effects motivated people to vote for or against Trump largely depends upon a person's preexisting political beliefs, and thus their preferred media. Put more simply, people motivated to vote by the BLM Movement voted in reaction to the national protest movement, not its local iterations.

Nonetheless, other scholars analyze the reciprocal relationship between social movements and elections, more broadly. Political parties have attempted to capitalize on discontent by claiming issue ownership on social issues and including activists' perspectives in their party platforms (Fetner 2008). Grievance is harnessed by political parties to mobilize groups of voters(Leege et al. 2002), and when social movements organized around a particular grievance challenge the status quo, mobilization efforts from the associated political party intensifies, in hopes of increasing voter turnout (Winders 1999). As a result, protests that express liberal issues lead to a greater percentage of the two-party vote share for Democratic candidates, while protests that espouse conservative issues offer Republican candidates a greater share of the two-party vote (Gillion and Soule 2018).

This appears to have held true in 2020 – BLM protests espousing liberal issues led to Democrats receiving a larger percentage of the vote share. Indeed, illustrating the reciprocal relationship between movements and elections, "Vote and Organize" became the motto for the BLM movement as election day grew nearer, the movements "get out the vote" ef-

fort reaching over 60 million households, according to one prominent national BLM activist (Cullors 2020). At the same time, the Democratic Party continues to promote the BLM Movement and its issues.[1] As such, while proximity to BLM protests likely did not affect voter turnout, the existence of the national BLM movement did.

Protest & Political beliefs

There is no consensus on whether protest movements help or hurt in advancing their purported goals – affecting public opinion to change public policy. However, foundational research on political socialization indicates that that initial frame alignment between an individual and a social movement organization is a precondition for participation (Snow et al. 1986). That frame alignment is a continuous process that occurs between individuals and social movements, transforming and reinforcing the individual's ideological orientations. By their very nature, protest movements offer the opportunity for a frame realignment.

Research on how participation in (or exposure to) protest movements change individual political beliefs has largely focused on the Civil Rights movement, a movement with which Black Lives Matter shares several similarities. One study found that participating in the Freedom Summer project "radicalized" volunteers, who were then significantly more likely to participate in social movements in subsequent years (McAdam 1989). Similarly, researchers conclude that involvement with social movements through the 1960s and 1970s caused a liberal shift in political orientation, as evidenced by subsequent political engagement such as voting for Jimmy Carter and participating in subsequent demonstrations (Sherkat and Blocker 1997). - individual, police v trusted

At a more macro level, Soumyajit Mazumder (2018) finds that whites from counties that experienced civil rights protest are more liberal today, as measured by shifts in levels of racial resentment against African Americans, support for affirmative action, and identification with

[1] See https://democrats.org/black-lives-matter-organizing-resources/

the Democratic Party. Moreover, this enduring attitudinal change is largely attributed to Civil Rights activists priming identities other than race (such as the American identity) and emphasizing ways in which whites and blacks were similar, causing whites to feel more sympathetic to black issues. On the contrary, Black Lives Matter activists invoke gender and LGBTQ+ frames in addition to race (Tillery 2019), which has been shown to reduce support for the movement, though not necessarily the movement's goals (Bonilla and Tillery 2020).

Finally, Madestam et al. (2013) show that Tea Party Movement rallies caused individual participants to become more politically conservative in their political views, increased public support for Tea Party positions, and led to more Republican votes in the 2010 midterm elections. Specifically, they find that the interactions produced at rallies and protests caused genuine shifts in political views, which sustained the momentum for a rightwards shift in fiscal policy going forward. We anticipate that the local Black Lives Matter protests had a similar effect among Democratic-leaning voters.

This is in line with the "social logic of politics," which centers social learning through interaction with others in development of political beliefs. Focusing events," unexpected and visible events that harm a specific sub-population, such as the cellphone video of George Floyd's killing, push issues related to said event to the top of public consciousness (Birkland 1998). And theories of activated opinion suggest that minority-led protest often serve as "bottom-up" factor that powers liberal shifts in public opinion (Lee 2002). Thus, we anticipate that BLM protests caused those already sympathetic to BLM issues – Black voters and Democrats – to view the police in a less positive light.

the police are a well-known and widely trusted institution, especially for white Americans (Pew)

H: It is likely that the BLM protests caused white voters, in aggregate, to view police slightly less positively. However, the protests caused Republican-leaning votes to have more positive

views of police.

Data and Design

We use a variety of data sources and empirical approaches to understand the electoral consequences of the 2020 protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. We are interested ultimately in the *causal* effect of protest exposure on these beliefs and behaviors, complicating our empirical approach. It seems highly probable that factors associated with protest formation are also associated with other political behaviors. Put differently, demonstrating a correlation between protest exposure and voting behavior might simply point to a third factor influencing them both. An example might be helpful: it seems possible that areas with large Black populations were politicized by the Trump Administration's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately impacted Black communities. This politicization—which may have occurred prior to the murder of George Floyd—could have increased an area's propensity to protest *and* increased their likelihood of voting in November. Thus, any correlation between protest and turnout would be due not to the protests themselves, but the underlying politicization.

To estimate the causal effect of protests on voter turnout, we leverage the known fact that protests are less likely to develop in inclement weather [CITE]. We use an instrumental variables (IV) approach that allows us to leverage random fluctuations in rainfall, the resulting protest formation, and eventual turnout and political behavior. IV setups are a common way for identifying causal relationships in the social sciences [CITE; CITE; CITE].

IV models do, however, have one very strict assumption: namely, the *exclusion restriction.* In other words, we must assume that our exogenous variable (here, rainfall) is unrelated to our dependent variable in any way other than through our endogenous variable (here, protest formation). If there is reason to believe that rainfall influenced turnout in November or political beliefs, our estimates cannot determine the causal relationship. There is reason to

be particularly concerned with a violation of this assumption when using rainfall: as Mellon (2021) shows, nearly 200 journal articles have used rainfall as an instrument in recent years. It is incumbent upon us, then, to demonstrate that the use of rainfall does not violate the exclusion restriction.

To improve the validity of our approach, we do not use *overall* rainfall, but rather relative rainfall during the period in which the protests occurred. George Floyd was murdered on May 25, and protests began in the days that followed, and peaked the weekend of June 6 (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020). As such, our instrumental variable is the amount of rainfall that fell between May 26 and June 7, 2020, *relative* to the amount of rainfall that fell in that period between 2000 and 2019. This avoids a rainfall measure that simply captures generally rainier parts of the country, whose political orientation may be different. It is still possible, however, that relative rainfall in late May and early June could influence our dependent variables through other avenues. This seems especially likely if places with high relative rainfall in May and June *also* had high rainfall in late October—such high rainfall could then reduce turnout [CITE]. However, as we demonstrate in the Supplemental Information, this is not the case. Relative rainfall in our period is only weakly associated with relative rainfall in late October ($r = 0.07$). We thus conclude that our approach satisfies the exclusion restriction.

Data

Our data come from a variety of sources. To estimate relative rainfall, we turn to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which collects detailed weather data from around the country. NOAA records the estimated daily rainfall at some 13,000 locations around the country. We use the `rnoaa` (Chamberlain 2021) package to download and process this data. The weather sites include each site's latitude and longitude.

Our data on protest formation comes from the U.S. Crisis Monitor, a project of the Armed

Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and the Bridging Divides Initiative (BDI) at Princeton University.[2] The U.S. Crisis compiled geocoded data on Black Lives Matter protests from around the United States throughout 2020. Using this data, we identify over 3,800 Black Lives Matter protests occurring between May 26 and June 7. These protests occurred in all 50 states and Washington, DC.

Voter File Data

To explore the relationship between protest exposure and individual-level turnout, we leverage the national registered voter file provided by data vendor L2. L2 collects the registered voter file from each state in the country and includes a host of self-reported and modelled information such as age, partisan affiliation, gender, and race / ethnicity. Importantly, they also indicate whether each voter participated in the 2020 general election, as well as past contests. These records are geocoded, and are mapped to home Census block groups. Taken as a whole, we have the individual-level voter records for the more than 180 million registered voters in the United States. We calculate each voter's exposure to relative rainfall by assigning them the relative rainfall of the nearest weather station. Their exposure to protest is calculated as the distance between their home address and the nearest Black Lives Matter protest. In addition to testing the relationship between distance to the closest protest (instrumented by rainfall), we control for individual- and neighborhood-level characteristics.

The individual-level registered voter file data allow us to test our first hypothesis:

H1: Exposure to protest [increased / decreased] turnout. This was [especially / less] true for Black voters.

There are some limitations to using the registered voter file to test for turnout effects. Most importantly, by looking at participation among registered voters, we may be "selecting" on the dependent variable (See Nyhan, Skovron, and Titiunik 2017). In other words, registration

[2]See https://acleddata.com/special-projects/us-crisis-monitor/.

itself is a form of political participation. If protest organizers registered many new voters at the protests—an approach that did apparently occur [CITE]—but only a relatively small share of these new registrants actually voted, the net result may have been *lower* turnout among registered voters but *higher* turnout among eligible citizens.

To sidestep this potential problem, we also aggregate the number of ballots cast up from the individual-level registered voter file to the Census [block group? tract?] level (Morris 2021, 2020). The Census Bureau makes estimates of the citizen voting-age population available at this level. This provides a denominator for turnout that is unbiased by differential registered voters. By testing whether the distance between the center of a [tract / block group] to a protest (again instrumented by the relative rainfall at the weather station closest to the [tract / bg]) is related to that neighborhood's turnout, we estimate the causal effect of protest exposure on turnout among eligible citizens—and not just registered voters.

DEALING WITH SPATIAL DEPENDENCIES TKTKTKTKTK [KASEY]

Survey Data

While the administrative data gives us exceptional coverage of the relationships between protest and turnout across the country, turnout is a relatively blunt measure of political participation. Moreover, it seems possible that the BLM protests could have shifted voters' *beliefs* about topics such as the police without bringing new participants into the voting booth.

To understand the effect of protest exposure on political beliefs we turn to national survey data. We use two national surveys: the American National Election Study 2020 Time Series data (ANES) and the Cooperative Election Study (CES). Both are widely used among sociologists and political scientists to understand the political orientation of the American electorate. In addition to a rich set of data about individuals' political beliefs, these surveys also collect information about respondents' age, race, family income, and other character-

istics. Each record includes the respondent's home ZIP code. ADD A LITTLE MORE ABOUT SURVEYS / SAMPLE SIZE / ETC

Once again, our empirical strategy relies on using rainfall as an instrument for protest exposure. In the case of the national survey data, however, there are not respondents from all ZIP codes in the country. As such, we run our IV models in two steps. We begin by predicting the distance from the center of each ZIP code in the country to the closest protest as a function of rainfall. To do so, each ZIP code is assigned the relative rainfall of the closest weather station (or the mean relative rainfall of all weather stations in the ZIP code). We then measure the distance from the center of the ZIP code to the closest BLM protest (this is coded as 0 miles if a protest occurred anywhere inside the ZIP code). The predicted distance for each ZIP code is then merged with the national survey data.

Constructing Political Attitudes in the ANES

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Constructing Political Attitudes in the CES

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