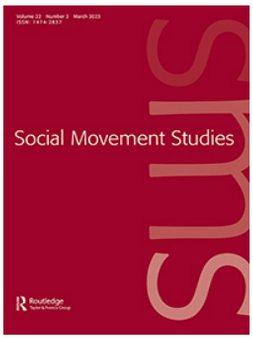

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Black lives matter protests and the 2020 Presidential election

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ABSTRACT

Can protest influence elections? We examine whether Black Lives Matters (BLM) protest during the summer of 2020 shaped the November presidential election. We hypothesize that BLM demonstrations are associated with increased voting for the Democratic candidate. We examine a secondary hypothesis that more contentious events (with arrests, injury, or violence) are likely to produce a negative impact. We use data collected from news media, official election returns, and survey data combined with demographic and political control measures to test our hypotheses. We find strong evidence that BLM protests were associated an increased likelihood of voting for the Democratic candidate, with this effect concentrated among the less contentious protest events. Our findings bolster and extend the emerging theoretical claims and evidence that protest plays a substantial role in shaping electoral behavior.

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Elections; black lives matter; protest; 2020 US election; movement consequences

Can social movements and protests shape elections? The conventional wisdom based on existing research on electoral behavior would suggest not; partisan identities and behavior tend to be highly stable. At the individual level, scholars have focused on durable characteristics like education, race, age, income, and gender as characteristics that shape electoral behavior. At the aggregate level, voting patterns are linked to many of these demographic characteristics and institutional factors such as electoral systems, partisan alignments, and macro-economic conditions. To the extent that scholars focus on the relationship between protest and elections, they have considered how elections may influence protest and movements, more often than the reverse. For example, supporters of losing candidates or parties may take to the streets to express discontent about the election and keep attention focused on their demands.

More recently, however, scholars have begun investigating the potential influence of protest on elections. This article examines the most direct effects of protest on voting for candidates aligned with a movement's agenda. Specifically, we ask whether protests in a community during the George Floyd protest wave increased support for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, the Democratic candidates for president and vice-president. We conduct analyses for two outcomes: county-level change in Democratic presidential voting and individual voting for Biden and Harris. Through these analyses, we contribute to an important and growing body of scholarship on a timely case.

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We hypothesize that local protests are associated with shifts in support favoring the Democratic candidates. We further differentiate protest in terms of its contentiousness, testing the hypothesis that more contentious protests (events with arrests, injuries, or violence) have a negative relationship to Democratic electoral gains in a county and individual voting for Democrats. In contrast, we hypothesize that less confrontational events will have a positive relationship. We use data collected from media accounts of protests, official election returns, combined with demographic and political control measures to test these hypotheses. Our analyses provide strong evidence that the George Floyd protest wave increased the positive shift for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. We identify possible mechanisms through which proximity to protest may influence electoral behavior, including elevating the salience of racial justice and spurring informal and formal mobilization.

George Floyd protests, black lives matter, and the 2020 election

The protest wave following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police was one of the largest in U.S. history. Beginning with a protest in Minneapolis on May 26, more than 7,500 demonstrations were held by the end of June in more than 2,500 cities.[1] This wave of protest included millions of participants, possibly the largest wave of protest in U.S. history. The protest wave's origins, diffusion, and escalation will be a major focus of research and debate for many years.

Protest organizers used the dominant tactical forms of contemporary movements such as marches, rallies, and speeches. Not surprisingly, these protest events were overwhelmingly peaceful and nonviolent (Chenoweth et al., 2021). Kirshi et al. (2021) estimate that only 6% of pro-BLM events in 2020 included 'reports of violence, clashes with police, vandalism, looting, or other destructive activity.'

Like other large protest waves, the George Floyd protests built on various strands of activism, especially concerning policing and systemic racism that had elevated these issues to among the most visible and salient. In 2020, activists built upon the networks, organizations, and broader support cultivated by the Black Lives Matter movement that had grown since 2013 (Ransby 2018; Taylor 2016; Woodly 2021). While this prior activism was critical, the 2020 protest wave far exceeded the earlier BLM protest in size and geographic scope, with ten times as many events and participants as the August 2014 and August 2015 wave documented by Williamson et al. (2018, p. 401), a period that included demonstrations in response to the deaths of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, among many others.

In addition, the Floyd protest wave built on the massive protests and sustained organizing in the aftermath of Trump's election in 2016. The 2017 Women's March included hundreds of demonstrations with millions of participants as one of the largest days of coordinated demonstrations in U.S. history. Subsequent waves of protest have focused on immigration, racial justice, the environment, healthcare, and many other issues (Andrews et al., 2018; Corrigall-Brown, 2021; Fisher, 2019). While many of these events concerned topics other than race or policing, protest participants have consistently reported that race and racial justice were core priorities and motivations for their activism (Fisher, 2019). As early as 2017, activists approached special elections in Virginia and elsewhere as opportunities to win back political power.

This strategic effort to link protest, organizing, and activism with electoral politics was carried forward by various organizations. For example, new groups like Indivisible sought to coordinate and support organizing, and many groups worked independently, building on longstanding civic and community networks (Corrigall-Brown, 2021; Fisher, 2019; Putnam and Skocpol 2018). Tea party activism under the Obama administration and the resistance movement during Trump's term fit a longstanding pattern of partisans mobilizing in the streets when their preferred party is out of office (Heaney & Rojas, 2015). Significantly, the Floyd protest wave far outpaced what had been a period of massive and diverse protest activity in the years preceding it.

Though the 2020 presidential campaign featured a wide range of policy issues, the protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd were a focal point that amplified issues surrounding race and racism in America, albeit in different ways across the polarized political environment.[2] In their initial responses, both Biden and Trump called for justice, but their rhetoric diverged as Trump focused on what he called 'thugs' and 'looters' when talking about the protests (Astor, 2020; Cathey & Keneally, 2020). On the right, President Trump characterized the protests as a sign of the collapse of urban America, calling for more aggressive policing in the interest of securing 'law and order' (Plott 2021). In contrast, Biden spoke of 'systemic racism' and criticized Trump's rhetoric as an effort to create 'division' (Detrow & Sprunt, 2020). Among Democratic voters, the protests elicited greater interest in racial justice and police reform, namely in addressing racial inequalities in the criminal legal system. Given these high-profile issues and the mobilizing effect of Trump to supporters and opponents, turnout was historically high. 66.8% of eligible voters cast ballots, a roughly seven-point increase in participation over the 2016 election (Clement & Santamariña, 2021). Despite receiving 7,000,000 more votes nationwide, Biden carried the four closest and decisive states in the electoral college – Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, and Wisconsin – by fewer than 85,000 votes combined (Fowers et al., 2020). In this context, local protest on a massive scale may have played a critical role in shaping electoral patterns.

Do Movements matter for electoral politics? Theoretical debates and expectations

Dominant theories and empirical traditions in political science and sociology cast doubt on the electoral influence of movements. Political scientists have for many decades pointed to the stability of partisan identities and political behavior. At the macro-level, the structure of political institutions and macro-economic factors are fundamental determinants of elections and partisanship (Blais, 2006). Protest and movements are also largely absent from the broader scholarship on the individual-level determinants of voting and vote choice where scholars tend to focus on stable social and demographic characteristics (Verba et al., 1995).

Movement scholars, for their part, have tended to view elections as a potential driver of movements but have been less likely to consider the reverse. For example, Piven and Cloward's (1977) influential argument sees periods of mass electoral realignment generating political uncertainty that opens up new opportunities for insurgents. Similarly, scholars in the political process and contentious politics tradition have tended to view elections as part of a political opportunity structure (Meyer, 2004). Elections may become

focal points of protest or define issues around which activists mobilize. Thus, protest is often considered a consequence of electoral politics rather than a factor shaping the outcome of elections. When movement scholars have considered the impact of movements on politics, they have primarily examined policy consequences (Amenta et al., 2010, 2019).

In recent years, movement scholars have begun to take the relationship between movements and electoral politics more seriously, including questions about the influence of protest on elections (Drakulich & Denver, 2022; Heaney & Rojas, 2015; Tarrow 2021). Importantly, elections could be a more substantial and far-reaching pathway of political influence than their direct influence on policy adoption. To the extent that movements alter the outcomes of elections, their agendas could have a much more sweeping (if indirect) impact across multiple policy domains, and activists or their allies could come to hold significant political power in the state. McAdam and Tarrow (2010) propose several possible pathways through which movements could influence elections (and the reverse). First, movement groups may innovate new strategies and tactics that political parties adopt and that allow campaigns to mobilize new constituencies (McKenna & Han, 2014). In addition, movements may have various impacts on political attitudes, such as increasing issue salience or polarization (Barrie, 2020; Reny and Newman 2021; Schram and Fording 2021). Last and most fundamentally, movements may come to compromise new voting blocs that anchor and thereby shift a party's leadership (Andrews, 1997; Madestam et al., 2013) and policy agendas (Schlozman 2015).

Here, we focus on the more immediate and direct impact of protest on electoral participation and the partisan composition of the electorate. Recent work on this question helps focus our core theoretical and empirical expectations. Importantly, this research has examined the impact of local protest on electoral behavior. Although protest could matter in other ways – e.g., through the national media coverage – our study builds on work assessing how proximity to protest matters. For example, Wasow (2020), examining Black-led protests between 1960 and 1972, finds that proximity to nonviolent protest was associated with significant gains in Democratic voting in subsequent presidential elections. Importantly, Wasow examines whether proximity to violent tactics has a backlash effect by mobilizing voters to support candidates who oppose the movement's agenda. He tests several possible mechanisms for protest's positive and negative impact, including media coverage and framing, congressional speeches, and public opinion on civil rights. Gillion and Soule (2018) expand this focus by considering a broader range of protests and a longer time frame. They argue that protest may inspire and motivate electoral activity by building enthusiasm, efficacy, and salience of politics that reaches beyond core activists. Based on U.S. Congressional elections from 1960 to 1990, their core findings indicate that left protests increased Democratic vote share while right-wing protests increased Republican vote share. However, they note that protests may have countervailing pressure by mobilizing voters who oppose a movement's goals.

Scholars have focused as well on more recent movements, including the Tea Party, in reshaping the Republican Party and the potential impact of resistance to the Trump presidency (Andrews et al., 2018; Fisher, 2019; Gose & Skocpol, 2019; Madestam et al., 2013; McKane & McCammon, 2018; Skocpol and Williamson 2016; Vann, 2018). The 2009 Tea Party protests helped push the Republican Party rightward through local organizing. Madestam et al. (2013) gauge the impact of the Tea Party's Tax Day rallies

and find that attendance yielded substantial turnout gains for Republicans in 2010. Overall, protests played a critical role in building local organizations, supporting a new generation of party leaders, increasing turnout among more conservative voters, and winning elections (Madestam et al., 2013). Gillion (2020) reports that areas with BLM protests prior to the 2016 election saw increased Black voter turnout, while preliminary analyses and case studies suggest a similar relationship with anti-Trump protest encouraging turnout that favored Democratic candidates (Frank, 2020; Larreboure & González, 2020; Pinckney, 2019). Outside the US, there is also some evidence that anti-government protests, especially large marches, are correlated with voting behavior (Lee, 2021).

We contribute to this ongoing literature by assessing the electoral consequences of the protests following the murder of George Floyd. This protest wave offers a valuable analytical entry point into testing whether local protests shape voting behavior for several reasons. First, the wide diffusion of protests around the country resulted in considerable geographic variation in the size and number of protest events, which can be leveraged to assess how local protest events shaped electoral choices. Furthermore, given the overall stability of voting patterns in the United States, the massive scale of the protests – and their occurrence during election season – render them an important case for testing the claims about the impact of protest on vote choice. In other words, if protests can affect electoral outcomes, the George Floyd protests offer a likely case.

Multiple potential mechanisms may underlie a positive relationship between local protest and increased support for Democratic candidates. At the individual level, voters may directly participate in or observe protest, with a personal spillover into electoral action. However, the broader effects of protest are more likely indirect and could be mediated through local news coverage, social media, or face-to-face networks. While media consumption has become increasingly national (Hopkins, 2018), local media remains an important source of information about local events, issues, and organizations (Andrews & Caren, 2010). Local media – especially local TV news – remains a dominant news source for many individuals (Pew Research Center 2021). Unfortunately, we lack systematic data on local TV news coverage of protest, but local Floyd protests were likely covered because these events would have appealed to journalistic norms. Stories that highlight local angles on national or international issues are valued as highly newsworthy, as are events with the potential for conflict (McCarthy et al., 1996).

Local protest may have also encouraged support for the Democratic candidate by increasing the salience of racial justice issues. This could have helped bolster support for Biden and Harris or undercut support for Trump and Pence, given the divergent campaign rhetoric. Some studies have used panel designs to identify significant changes in attitudes spurred by protests (Collingwood et al., 2018; Mutz, 2022; Reny and Newman 2021), especially among non-partisans (Drakulich & Denver, 2022). Other recent studies suggest that proximity to protest may be particularly impactful. For example, this dynamic was important for the 2006 immigration protest wave (Wallace et al. 2014). Individuals may be more sympathetic to protest that occurs in their community or nearby because they have additional context and information (Andrews et al., 2016, see also Baggetta & Myers, 2021). While national protest coverage tends to overrepresent violence or militant action incidents, very few protest events have these characteristics. Voters in communities with greater protest activity may have been less susceptible to negative framing in the national media.

In addition, proximity to protest may influence electoral behavior through increased mobilization. This could occur if protest is linked to get-out-the-vote activities, other local organizing, or personal networks. As described above, the Madestam et al. (2013) study documents intervening dynamics such as the formation of local organizations or the emergence of new leaders. Other recent studies point to plausible mechanisms by which local protest, even violent, leads to increased mobilization. Enos et al. (2019) study of the impact of the Rodney King riots found proximity to the riots increased support for local spending on education and attribute this to the mobilizing effect of the event. Ayoub et al. (2021) found that local Pride parades in Bosnia and Herzegovina increased support and future mobilization potential locally but not through a broader, national diffusion. Protests may elevate the salience of racial justice issues and encourage subsequent formal and informal mobilization processes as have been documented in other protest waves.

Our core hypothesis is that protest increases electoral support for candidates most aligned with a movement's agenda. In this case, BLM protests should increase support for Biden and Harris relative to prior Democratic presidential candidates. We also test hypotheses regarding how different types of protest events are related to electoral support. We expect that events with more contentious elements such as arrests, injury, and violence will reduce support for Biden and Harris. Although almost all events entailed the same basic tactics of marches and rallies, a small subset included one or more contentious elements. Violence and looting, for example, emerged under various conditions, including the initiative of demonstrators and 'aggressive government action, intervention from right-wing groups or individual assailants, and car-ramming attacks' (Kirshi et al., 2021, p. 2). Scholarship on this recent wave and protest policing more broadly shows that black-led movements face more severe policing (Davenport et al., 2011), as does protest targeting police or police practices (Reynolds-Stenson 2018).

It is challenging to draw strong inferences about the strategic or tactical approaches underlying events that are 'nonviolent' or 'violent,' as interactions during a protest may lead to unplanned confrontations (Nassauer, 2019). However, regardless of the factors that generate more antagonistic events, we expect events with contentious characteristics to have different consequences because contentious and conventional protest events are interpreted in different ways in the media, by political elites, and among the broader public (Wasow 2020). In addition, recent experimental work indicates that more extreme protest action reduces social identification with activists (Feinberg et al., 2020), and violent protest reduces the perceived reasonableness of activists (Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2018), although repression perceived as undeserved might electorally backfire on the party in power (Chau & Wan, 2022). We expect there to be negative effects of arrests, violence, or injury regardless of whether activists plan or initiate more militant forms of action.

Motivated by this scholarship and observations surrounding protests and recent U.S. elections, we test three main hypotheses:

H1: Localities with high levels of progressive protest should experience greater gains in support for Democratic candidates.

H2: Localities with high levels of progressive protest with arrests, violence, or injury should experience greater losses in support for Democratic candidates.

H3: Localities with high levels of progressive protest without arrests, violence, or injury should experience greater gains in support for Democratic candidates.

Research design and data

Prior research on the impact of protest on voting has focused on the electoral impact at the county (Madestam et al., 2013; Wasow 2020) or congressional district level (Gillion & Soule, 2018.) We expand on this by testing our hypotheses using data at the county and individual levels. The county analysis outcome is based on the official electoral results reported by the *New York Times*.[3] The individual-level analysis uses the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) nationally representative sample surveyed before and after the 2020 presidential election.

Protest measure: Our primary explanatory measure is the intensity of Black Lives Matter protests in a county between May 26 and 26 June 2020 from the day after George Floyd was killed until the wave had subsided one month later. This month-long wave of protest included an unpreceded volume of events and participants.[4] Protest event date, location, and size are aggregated from two datasets, Count Love (https://countlove.org/) and Crowd Counting Consortium (https://sites.google.com/view/crowdcountingconsortium). Both datasets primarily rely on public media accounts, and they are produced by research assistants (CCC) or semi-automated procedures (Count Love). Both draw on thousands of print newspapers, online newspapers, television and radio websites, and wire reports, in contrast to early research on protest events, such as the Dynamics of Collective Action (McAdam et al., 2018) which relied on a single source, often the *New York Times*, (see Fisher et al., 2019 for a detailed discussion of both datasets). The CCC and CL data has been used in multiple media (*e.g*, Buchanan et al., 2020; Chenoweth et al., 2021) and academic studies (*e.g.*, Pressman and Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2021; Pressman et al. 2022) of protest patterns.

As our focus is on the impact of the prominent protest wave following the murder of George Floyd, we include events occurring between May 26 and 26 June 2020 which were categorized as related to Black Lives Matter. During this period, activists also called attention to many other killings, including nationally prominent and recent cases like Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, as well as lesser-known cases. This period contains 7,591 events in the CCC dataset and 5,097 events in the CL dataset. To aggregate the two datasets, we merged them at the city-day level. This process yielded 7,920 unique events, including 4,629 from only one source. We additionally aggregated all events in the same county. In total, we found evidence of at least one BLM protest in 1,433 U.S. counties.

Protest intensity is measured as the cumulative size of all protest events in a county divided by the county's population. Protest event size allows us to distinguish between small and large events while adjusting for county population size enables us to distinguish between 3,000 people protesting in Orange County, NC (population 148,000), where it would be 2% of the population, and 3,000 people protesting in Orange County, CA (population 3,176,000) where it would be .06% of the population. As the intensity

measure is skewed, we employ an inverse hyperbolic sine transformation before including it as a predictor. Effect sizes can be interpreted identical to log transformation, and the inverse hyperbolic sine has the advantage of being defined at zero.

To test our hypothesis related to the impact of contentious (H2) and conventional (H3) events, we distinguish between events where there were reports of arrests, violence, or injuries and those without accounts of these kinds of contention. This information was only collected in the CCC data, so our analysis of these measures excludes events of any type only reported in CL. We find that 222 counties experience contentious events.

In our county-level analysis, the outcome measure is the percentage of votes cast for the Democratic presidential candidate, Joe Biden, in 2020. Positive values are associated with increased Biden vote share. These are based on official election results reported by the *New York Times*. We downloaded the votes cast for each candidate in the 2016[5] and 2020[6] Presidential elections for each county. Our county models also include political measures, including the proportion voting for the Democratic political candidate in 2016 and the intensity of left protest between 2017 and the BLM summer protests. This measure of prior protest was constructed identically to the BLM protest intensity measure, including all protests against President Trump, in favor of liberal policies or opposition to conservative policies in the CCC and CL datasets. We also include conventional social and demographic control variables measured at the county level. These include measures of the local racial composition, median household income, educational attainment, higher education enrollment, and the unemployment rate.[7] In addition, we include a measure for the COVID death rate to reflect the deaths that had occurred in each county by election day.[8] We estimate our regression models employing state fixed-effects and standard errors that account for within-state residual correlations.

Our individual-level analysis uses the 2020 CCES Common Content Dataset, a nationally representative sample of eligible voters conducted over the Internet by YouGov (Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Luks 2021). The full survey was asked of 61,000 adults in September and October 2020 for pre-election data and in November and December 2020 for post-election data. We limit our analysis to validated registered voters who responded to both survey waves. Of those 37,152, we exclude 264 additional respondents with missing data on presidential vote choice or who we cannot geographically link to protest events for a final sample size of 36,888. While the CCES did not ask respondents if they had participated in a BLM protest, it did question them about whether or not they had participated in any protest event over the last twelve months. While this is an imperfect measure given its lack of specificity, the vast majority of protesters in 2021 participated in BLM marches (Pressman et al 2022). In an attempt to test whether the impact of protest on voting is restricted to just those who protested, we include protest participation based on this variable in some of our models. We employ the provided *vvweight_post* survey weights for our subsample in our regression analysis.

Our outcome measure is whether the respondent reports voting for the Democratic presidential candidate in the 2020 election. We code all other non-missing responses as a zero. We include 2016 presidential vote as an individual-level political control, with indicators for voting for Clinton, a third party-candidate, and not-participating, with voting for Trump as the left-out category. As with the county models, we include control variables that may be related to Democratic voting including race and ethnicity, age (four categories), educational attainment (four categories), presence of a child in the house,

and family income, along with measures of religious salience and whether or not the respondent identifies as born again. We also include county-level controls of the political environment, including the percentage voting for Clinton in 2016 and the intensity of progressive or 'Resistant' protest before the George Floyd wave. We estimate our logistic regression models using standard errors that account for potential within-county residual correlations.

Estimating the impact of protest on the 2020 election

Table 1 looks at the impact of the intensity of BLM protesters on the Democratic vote in the 2020 Presidential election at the county level. Model 1 reports the baseline model without any protest measures. Consistent with conventional wisdom about the election, Biden's vote share is positively correlated with Clinton 2016 voting, proportion college educated, and population size, while proportion Asian American and Latinx are negatively associated with Biden voting. Model 2 adds the measure of BLM protest intensity, which is statistically significant ($p < .05$) and positively associated with Biden voting at

Table 1. Regression models of proportion voting for the 2020 democratic presidential at the county level.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Baseline	All events	Type
BLM Protests			
All Events		0.0103*	
		(2.48)	
Contentious Events			−0.00619***
			(−4.32)
Non-contentious Events			0.0111**
			(2.75)
County Context			
% African American	0.0297	0.0304	0.0312
	(1.44)	(1.48)	(1.52)
% Asian American	−0.0258**	−0.0258**	−0.0236*
	(−2.78)	(−2.78)	(−2.62)
% Latinx	−0.0493**	−0.0489**	−0.0489**
	(−3.27)	(−3.25)	(−3.28)
% College graduate	0.0820***	0.0797***	0.0795***
	(11.12)	(11.02)	(10.91)
Median income (ln)	0.0110*	0.0119**	0.0114**
	(2.59)	(2.78)	(2.69)
Population size (ln)	0.0516***	0.0511***	0.0520***
	(5.56)	(5.51)	(5.68)
% College students	−0.00874	−0.00942	−0.0103
	(−1.59)	(−1.68)	(−1.81)
% Clinton '16	0.913***	0.912***	0.911***
	(41.36)	(41.40)	(41.37)
Resistance protests	0.00725	0.00363	0.00598
	(1.49)	(0.92)	(1.45)
Covid death rate	−0.00942	−0.00934	−0.00930
	(−1.76)	(−1.74)	(−1.73)
Unemployment rate	0.00294	0.00285	0.00266
	(0.34)	(0.33)	(0.31)
Constant	−0.000430	−0.000316	−0.000275
	(−1.74)	(−1.17)	(−1.04)
N	3111	3111	3111

t statistics in parentheses *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

the county level. Model 3 disaggregates these protests and shows that while non-contentious events were positively associated with Biden voting ($p < .01$), contentious events were negatively associated with Biden voting ($p < .001$).

The results from our county analysis are supportive of all three hypotheses. Overall, a higher level of BLM protest led to more support for the Democratic candidate. Still, the direction of the effect is moderated by the presence of contentious elements, with contentious events decreasing Democratic support and conventional protest events increasing it.

Table 2 reports the results of our logistic regression models of 2020 Presidential voter choice. Model 1 presents the baseline model, without any protest measures. Identifying as African American, Latinx, college educated, and non-Trump 2016 voting are each positively associated with voting for Biden, while being 30–64, not reporting an income, being Born Again and religious are negatively associated. Net of these individual effects, county percentage voting Clinton in 2016 is also associated with voting Biden. Model 2 adds the measure of BLM protest intensity, which is statistically significant ($p < .05$) and positively associated with Biden voting at the individual-level. Model 3 disaggregates these protests and shows that while non-contentious events were positively associated with Biden voting ($p < .01$), contentious events were negatively associated with Biden voting but not significant.

Models 4 and 5 replicate Models 2 and 3 but add a measure of individual protest participation over the prior 12 months. This individual level measure is significant ($p < .001$), and the county-level protest measures also remain significant.

Like our county results, the findings from our survey-analysis are supportive of all three hypotheses. Overall, a higher level of BLM protest led to more support for the Democratic candidate. Disaggregated by type, while the non-contentious protests had a positive effect, the impact of the contentious events was not statistically significant. The addition of the individual protest measure did not substantially change these effects.

Robustness of findings

Unobserved political beliefs or local cultures of progressive activism may influence both the intensity of protests and voting behavior, which presents a problem with directly estimating the impact of protest intensity on voting behavior. Following Madestam et al. (2013), we also employ an instrumental variable approach that leverages the fact that people are likelier to attend a political protest when the weather is good and the built environment favors local gatherings. Importantly, these environmental factors are likely to impact variation in the protest intensity but not Democratic voting. We employ an instrumental variable modeling strategy, which includes the count of the number of days during the protest wave with the weather in a county that was either hot (above 90°F), rainy (more than .1" of precipitation), or windy (average wind speed greater than 10 mph).[9] In addition, we measure the built environments favorable to protests by including a Census-derived measure of the median commute time, as we anticipate that areas on the outskirts of metropolitan areas are less likely to have locations that are culturally available for public street events. For example, among politically competitive counties, those where the 2016 Presidential vote was within five points, the fifty counties with the longest commute times experience protests with 56% less intensity than those with

Table 2. Logistic regression models of voting for the 2020 democratic presidential candidate at the individual level.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
BLM Protests:					
All Events		0.0939*		0.0836*	
		(2.42)		(2.15)	
Contentious Events			−0.0373		−0.0405
			(−1.18)		(−1.23)
Non-contentious Events			0.117***		0.109**
			(3.32)		(3.09)
Protested in last year				0.602***	0.601***
				(6.52)	(6.56)
Race (white omitted):					
African American	1.613***	1.623***	1.625***	1.636***	1.637***
	(9.33)	(9.41)	(9.40)	(9.56)	(9.55)
Latinx	0.303*	0.328*	0.332*	0.334*	0.338*
	(2.27)	(2.47)	(2.50)	(2.54)	(2.57)
Asian American	0.208	0.206	0.204	0.234	0.233
	(1.31)	(1.30)	(1.29)	(1.47)	(1.46)
Other racial	−0.172	−0.159	−0.162	−0.183	−0.186
	(−1.29)	(−1.19)	(−1.22)	(−1.37)	(−1.40)
Age (under 30 omitted):					
Age 30–44	−0.339***	−0.341***	−0.338***	−0.297**	−0.295**
	(−3.34)	(−3.36)	(−3.33)	(−2.93)	(−2.90)
Age 45–64	−0.394***	−0.397***	−0.396***	−0.347***	−0.346***
	(−4.17)	(−4.21)	(−4.20)	(−3.65)	(−3.64)
Age >65	−0.139	−0.142	−0.142	−0.0741	−0.0749
	(−1.32)	(−1.35)	(−1.35)	(−0.70)	(−0.71)
Some College	0.288***	0.288***	0.288***	0.261**	0.261**
	(3.57)	(3.57)	(3.56)	(3.29)	(3.28)
College degree	0.534***	0.537***	0.539***	0.516***	0.518***
	(6.55)	(6.55)	(6.59)	(6.34)	(6.38)
Post-grad	0.597***	0.598***	0.601***	0.562***	0.566***
	(5.12)	(5.13)	(5.15)	(4.83)	(4.85)
Family Income (< $30K omitted):					
$30–$60K	−0.0171	−0.0182	−0.0187	−0.0238	−0.0242
	(−0.19)	(−0.21)	(−0.21)	(−0.27)	(−0.28)
$60–$100K	−0.165	−0.166	−0.167	−0.170	−0.170
	(−1.72)	(−1.74)	(−1.75)	(−1.78)	(−1.79)
>$100K	−0.161	−0.166	−0.168	−0.182	−0.184
	(−1.62)	(−1.67)	(−1.68)	(−1.80)	(−1.82)
Missing	−0.381**	−0.380**	−0.384**	−0.381**	−0.384**
	(−2.83)	(−2.82)	(−2.83)	(−2.82)	(−2.84)
2016 Vote: (Trump omitted)					
Voted Clinton	5.674***	5.673***	5.679***	5.662***	5.667***
	(61.20)	(61.37)	(61.12)	(61.22)	(60.99)
Vote other	2.728***	2.725***	2.729***	2.707***	2.711***
	(30.79)	(30.68)	(30.99)	(30.04)	(30.34)
Did not vote	2.991***	2.989***	2.992***	3.000***	3.003***
	(34.40)	(34.40)	(34.52)	(34.83)	(34.94)
Had children in house	−0.112	−0.112	−0.111	−0.103	−0.102
	(−1.34)	(−1.34)	(−1.34)	(−1.25)	(−1.24)
Religious importance	−0.356***	−0.355***	−0.356***	−0.350***	−0.350***
	(−13.11)	(−13.13)	(−13.12)	(−12.94)	(−12.94)
Born Again	−0.557***	−0.556***	−0.552***	−0.550***	−0.546***
	(−7.66)	(−7.64)	(−7.59)	(−7.57)	(−7.52)
County Political Context:					
County % Clinton '16	0.202***	0.181***	0.184***	0.177***	0.180***
	(5.04)	(4.35)	(4.43)	(4.22)	(4.29)
County Resistance protests	0.00370	−0.0450	−0.0294	−0.0456	−0.0307
	(0.11)	(−1.12)	(−0.72)	(−1.13)	(−0.75)
Covid death rate	0.00236	0.000727	0.00279	0.000723	0.00284
	(0.06)	(0.02)	(0.08)	(0.02)	(0.08)

(*Continued*)

Table 2. (Continued).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Unemployment rate	−0.0780	−0.0734	−0.0729	−0.0718	−0.0713
	(−1.78)	(−1.68)	(−1.65)	(−1.66)	(−1.63)
Constant	−3.547***	−3.547***	−3.555***	−3.609***	−3.617***
	(−22.25)	(−22.29)	(−22.24)	(−22.67)	(−22.63)
N	36884	36884	36884	36884	36884

Note: t statistics in parentheses.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

shortest commute times. As discussed below, two measures are significant correlates of protest intensity net of our other political and demographic measures and are valid instruments in all but two models based on the Hansen overidentification test. Additionally, the county-level model includes state-fixed effects with robust standard errors, while the individual-level models include standard errors robust to county-level clustering.

Table 3 , Model 1 reports the results of the first stage estimates of the instrumental variable regression model. Of our proposed instruments, both the number of days with rain and commute time are negatively associated with BLM protest intensity, net of other variables. Model 2 examines the impact of BLM protest intensity on the swing toward the Democratic presidential candidate. The instrumental variables from the first stage (Model 1) are valid, as the non-significant Hansen J statistic can be interpreted to mean that weather and infrastructure measures are jointly uncorrelated with the error term from our vote change. Consistent with our first modeling strategy, the effect of BLM protest is statistically significant ($p < .001$) and positively associated with Democratic presidential voting, as shown in Model 2.

Table 3. Instrumental variable regression models of proportion voting for the 2020 democratic presidential at the county level.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	First Stage	All events	Contentious	Tame
BLM				
All Events		0.189***		
Contentious Events			−0.136**	
			(−2.79)	
Non-contentious Events				0.158***
				(4.00)
Days above 80°	0.00948			
	(0.19)			
Days with rain	−0.0702**			
	(−3.07)			
Days with wind	−0.0319			
	(−1.73)			
Mean commute time	−0.0714***			
County Context	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	3108	3108	3108	3108
Hansen J		0.304	0.0416	0.266

Note: t statistics in parentheses.
County context control variables include all measures included in Table 1.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Table 4. Instrumental variable regression models of voting for the 202 democratic presidential candidate at the individual level.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	All events	Contentious	Tame	Protest
BLM Protests:				
All Events	0.0531*			
	(2.28)			
Contentious Events		−0.0175		
		(−0.68)		
Non-contentious Events			0.0333**	
			(2.85)	
Protested in last year	0.0485***	0.0548***	0.0505***	0.295
	(5.55)	(6.49)	(5.91)	(1.54)
Individual controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
County Context	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	36888	36888	36888	36888
Hansen J	0.941	0.0248	0.917	0.0566

Note: t statistics in parentheses.
County context and individual control variables include all measures included in Table 2.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Models 3 and 4 examine the separate impact of contentious and conventional protests. As shown in Model 3, the impact of contentious protests, events where there were reports of arrests, injuries, or violence, is negative and statistically significant ($p < .01$). In contrast, protests that are conventional have a positive effect ($p < .001$). However, the findings for Model 3 should be interpreted with caution as the significant ($p < .05$) Hansen test suggests the model may be over-identified. These findings are consistent with our original-county level regression models and supportive of the idea that the relationship is not the result of some unobserved factor associated with both county-level protest and voting behaviors.

We also test the robustness of individual vote choice using the same instrumental variable approach, as shown in Table 4. Model 1 estimates the effect of total protest intensity. Net of controls, including vote choice in the 2016 presidential election, the impact of protest intensity is positive and statistically significant. As shown in Model 2, the effect of contentious protests is non-significant, and, in this case, we can reject the hypothesis that our instrument is valid ($p < .05$). Model 3 is consistent with the county-level results, as the intensity of conventional protests positively impacts the likelihood of voting for the Democratic Presidential campaign. The effect size is significant ($p < .05$), and the instruments are valid ($p > .05$). As with the county results, these findings are consistent with our logistic regression models and supportive of the idea that the relationship is not the result of some unobserved factor associated with both county-level protest and voting behaviors.

In sum, we find strong support for the hypothesis that conventional BLM protest intensity was associated with greater support for Biden and Harris. This relationship was significant in both the county and survey analysis. Evidence supporting a negative impact of contentious protest is mixed, with a significant negative effect in the county analysis but no relationship in the survey analysis.

Conclusions

Building on recent scholarship on protest and elections, we hypothesized that the George Floyd protest wave increased support for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. We further differentiated protest based on whether events included arrests, injury, or property damage. We expected that events including these elements would negatively affect the Democratic vote share. To test these hypotheses, we use data collected from media accounts of protests, official election returns, combined with demographic and political control measures. We conducted analyses at the county and individual levels, which largely confirmed our hypotheses.

Our analyses account for the most important theoretical and empirical factors associated with county-level voting patterns. In addition, we include county characteristics specific to COVID and its likely economic consequences since these factors may influence movement activity and electoral participation during this period.

As with other research on the political consequences of social movements, we rely on observational data that limits our ability to draw strong causal inferences. Despite these limitations, these results provide important insights into the potential impact of protest on elections. The story of the George Floyd protests and support for Biden suggests that movement efforts were consequential in propelling shifts away from Trump and to Biden. Protest may have helped build or bolster local movement organizations, networks, and coalitions and encouraged party officials to engage in additional voter mobilization to channel opposition. In addition, protests may have spurred greater awareness of movement demands and commitment to pursuing movement goals (Corrigall-Brown, 2021; Frank, 2020; Putnam 2020; Schram and Fording 2021).

These findings align with recent work by other sociologists and political scientists on the relationship between protest and elections. For example, Fisher's (2019) surveys of participants at anti-Trump protests show that activists were highly engaged in various forms of electoral mobilization. Schram and Fording (2021) show that 'racial liberals' who sat out the 2016 election were more likely to be mobilized and vote following Trump's election than racial conservatives. Fieldwork by Putnam and Perez-Putnam (2019) show that organizing was heavily concentrated in congressional districts that were highly competitive during the 2016 election. Thus, we suspect that this organizing was synergistic with protest in building support for Biden in those places where it would matter most. Our findings also raise important questions about the potential linkages between organizing that went into demonstrations, electoral politics, and the durability of the political engagement that emerged from the Black Lives Matter protests.

Notes

1. Estimate based on the authors' analysis of aggregated media accounts. Method described below.
2. In addition to the George Floyd protests, Covid-19, and the federal government's response to it, was another defining issue for the campaigns and the electorate. With hundreds of thousands of lives lost to the pandemic by election day, much of the discourse surrounding the campaign focused on the Trump administration's public health policy decisions and then-candidate Biden's alternative proposals to curb the spread of the virus.
3. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-president.html.

4. While protests certainly did not disappear in the subsequent 30 days, the intensity declined dramatically, with 95% fewer protesters according to CCC and Count Love data. Additionally, less than one percent of counties reported their first post-Floyd BLM protest in the second thirty-day period.
5. https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2016/results/president.
6. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-president.html.
7. Data for all variables are from the American Community Survey 2014–2018 5-year estimates except for unemployment rate, which is from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Local Area Unemployment Statistics.
8. https://usafacts.org/visualizations/coronavirus-covid-19-spread-map/.
9. Weather data was collected from the Weather Source OnPoint API (https://developer.weathersource.com/).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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