

University of Texas at Dallas

**Disparity in Social Media Coverage of Black Lives Matter**

**An Analysis of Twitter Data and Metadata**

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## Background

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement started with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of Trayvon Martin.<sup>1</sup> The movement garnered national attention in 2014 following the deaths of (and the ensuing protests against the deaths of) Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice.<sup>2</sup> While the BLM movement is most visible in its actions against police brutality, the BLM movement also seeks to eradicate white supremacy and systemic racism in all aspects of American society and uplift the Black community.<sup>3</sup> The BLM movement established itself as an international movement following the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, sparking protests in all 50 states and in various countries.<sup>4, 5</sup> Such attention was reflected in social media activity: The use of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was used approximately 47.8 million times on Twitter from May 26 to June 7, with the daily use of the hashtag soaring from 218,000 tweets on May 26, when the video of George Floyd's death was first posted online, to 8.8 million tweets on May 28.<sup>6</sup> Due to the heightened racial tension following protests and riots, police brutality during such demonstrations, media attention towards other unjust deaths or injuries (e.g. Breonna Taylor, Jacob Blake, and Elijah McClain), and the popularization of the All Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter movement, Americans were increasingly polarized on the issue of racial issues and justice

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<sup>1</sup> Day, E. (2015, July 19). #BlackLivesMatter: the birth of a new civil rights movement. Retrieved November 30, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/3o7SIPJ>.

<sup>2</sup> Black Lives Matter Movement. Retrieved November 30, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/3ml6zfz>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Burch, A., Cai, W., Gianordoli, G., McCarthy, M., & Patel, J. (2020, June 13). How Black Lives Matter Reached Every Corner of America. Retrieved November 30, 2020 from <https://nyti.ms/3lrYzYV>.

<sup>5</sup> Kirby, J. (2020, June 12). "Black Lives Matter" has become a global rallying cry against racism and police brutality. Retrieved November 30, 2020 from <https://bit.ly/36mNQL6>.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson, M., Barthel, M., Perrin, A., & Vogels, E. (2020, June 10). #BlackLivesMatter surges on Twitter after George Floyd's death. Retrieved November 30, 2020 from <https://pewrsr.ch/3lym0Qx>.

in the United States along party lines. The growing polarization is evident: In June, Ipsos found that 84 percent of those who identify with the Democratic Party and 44 percent of individuals whose beliefs align with the Republican Party showed support for BLM demonstrations, while 50 percent of those who identify as Republicans opposed BLM protests, whereas in September, Ipsos found that 75 percent of individuals who identify as Democrats have shown to support BLM demonstrations and only 7 percent of those identify as Republicans have shown to support BLM demonstrations, with 77 percent of Republicans opposing BLM demonstrations.<sup>7, 8</sup>

## **Purpose**

This study seeks to observe the differences in the discourse of BLM, police brutality, and systemic racism on Twitter among individuals of various political beliefs across the spectrum. The sample consists of tweets produced by Twitter users of sociopolitical influence in their respective political sect. Twitter accounts of traditional news media (e.g. CNN, FOX, New York Times) were excluded from the sample as to represent the views of individuals, rather than of media entities. This study uses Twitter time-series metadata to compare significant dates in the Twitter coverage of racial issues in the United States and Twitter data to draw distinction in the mannerisms that racial issues are discussed on Twitter by individuals of various political beliefs. Political beliefs were bisected into the left and the right, and further divided along the spectrum.

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<sup>7</sup> Americans split on the right to protest versus law and order. Retrieved on November 30, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/3oeFE5s>.

<sup>8</sup> Rose, R. (2020, September 3). Americans Increasingly Polarized When It Comes to Racial Justice Protests, Poll Finds. Retrieved on November 30, 2020, from <https://n.pr/39v67b1>.

## Data Collection

The sample consists of 64,119 tweets that discuss BLM, police brutality, and racial issues in the United States produced by 312 Twitter users of sociopolitical influence. Sociopolitical belief and influence of each Twitter account was determined using personal experience and knowledge and the list provided by an article by the journalist Nathan Allebach.<sup>9</sup> Most Twitter accounts in the sample was verified by individual searches to have discussed BLM or racial issues in the United States at least once since May 25, 2020 until November 24, 2020, when the data was collected. The few exceptions to the individual verification only occurred for accounts that are shadow-banned on Twitter, by which tweets by the user are not discoverable through the search function, but are highly influential in their given political sect (e.g. Charlie Kirk, a general conservative) or part of a small sample (e.g. Ian Miles Cheong, a member of the alt-right). The sample data, as provided by Twitter API, only includes tweets produced on or after May 25, 2020—the date of George Floyd’s death—as the date marked a watershed in the BLM movement: when the sociopolitical movement became an international phenomenon. Tweets by each individual were filtered using words relevant to BLM, police brutality, and racial issues.

## Findings

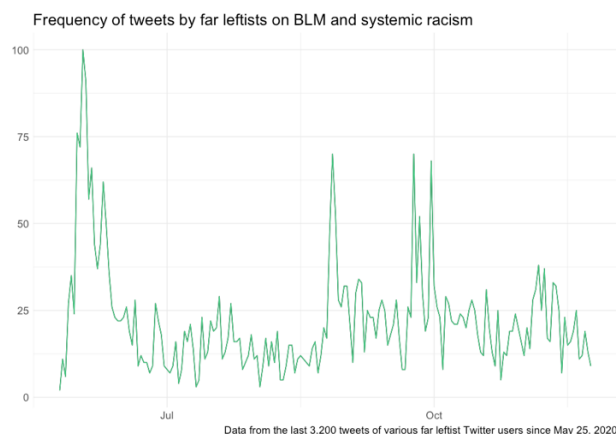
The general classification of left/left-leaning or liberal political beliefs, as outlined by Nathan Allebach, consist of anarchist, far leftist, moderate leftist, left-leaning progressive, social media progressive, establishment Democrat, general liberal, and centrist liberal beliefs, and the classification of right/right-leaning and conservative political beliefs include centrist

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<sup>9</sup> Allebach, N. (2019, April 15). The Most Influential Political Identities from Left to Right. Retrieved on November 30, 2020, from <https://medium.com/discourse/the-most-influential-political-identities-from-left-to-right-a488bb6a4f19>.



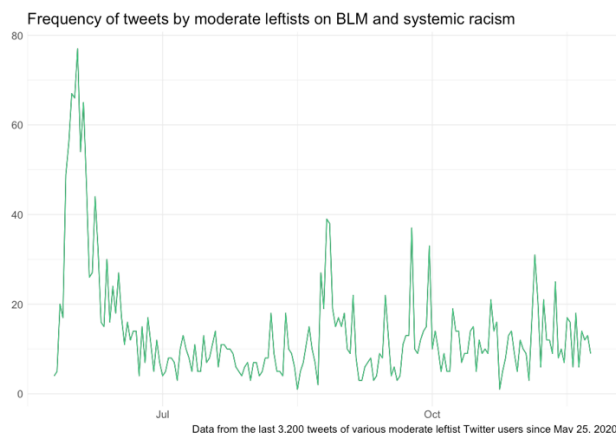
Taylor, respectively.<sup>10, 11</sup> The graphic on the right, a word cloud of the most frequently used words in the sample by anarchist Twitter users, shows that the discourse on BLM, police brutality, and racial issues revolved around the police, the government, protests, and racism, with notable words including “police,” “people,” “violence,” “state,” “white,” “cops,” “protest,” “racist,” “protests,” “protesters,” “black,” “racism,” and “Antifa.” Accelerated Mobile Pages, or “AMP,” as shown in the word cloud, refer to tweets embedded with web pages—while AMPs are likely to be news articles in the context high-profile sociopolitical discourse on Twitter, the usage of “AMP” will be disregarded in the further analysis of social media activity around BLM, police brutality, and racial issues as the attachment of a web page is irrelevant to the analysis.



Data on far-left Twitter users consist of 2,064 tweets from 27 Twitter accounts, with an average of 150.52 tweets per account. The graphic on the left shows that tweets were made most frequently by far-leftist Twitter users in the immediate days following the death of George Floyd, with the highest peak on June 2, 2020, in the midst of BLM protests, when President

<sup>11</sup> Headlines: September 24, 2020. Retrieved on November 30, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/3qgMHu7>.

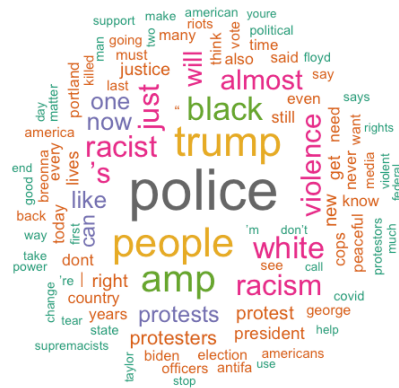
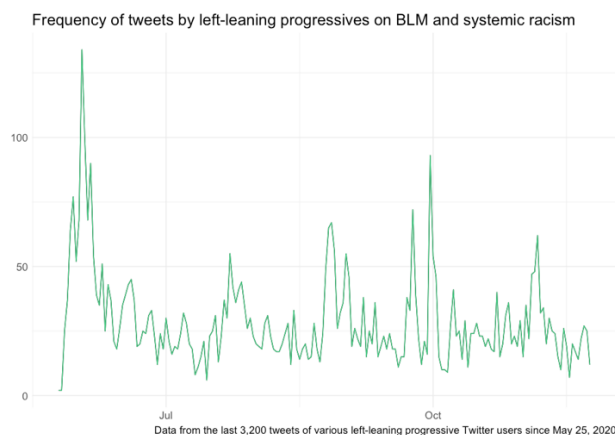
Trump threatened to deploy the U.S. military to localities due to protesters and Jake Gardner, a bar owner who shot James Scurlock in a protest in Omaha, dodged charges.<sup>12</sup> Peaks in frequency of Tweets in later months occur on August 27, 2020, the day Rusten Sheskey was identified as the police officer who shot Jacob Blake and the day after the arrest of Kyle Rittenhouse; September 24, 2020, the day Brett Hankison was charged with wanton endangerment; and September 30, 2020, the day President Trump refused to condemn white supremacists and right-wing militia during the presidential debate.<sup>13, 14, 15</sup> The word cloud of the words most frequently used by far-leftist Twitter users show that the discourse on BLM, police brutality, and racial issues primarily revolve around the police, protests, and racism, as notable words include “police,” “people,” “black,” “white,” “racist,” “violence,” “cops,” “racism,” “racist,” “protesters,” “supremacist,” “Trump,” “protest,” “Antifa,” “protests,” and “BLM.”



<sup>12</sup> Headlines: June 02, 2020. Retrieved on November 30, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/3qfCU9Y>.

Data on moderate-leftist Twitter users include 2,548 tweets from 14 Twitter users, with an average of 182.63 tweets per user. The frequency plot of tweets produced by moderate-leftist Twitter accounts shows that tweets by moderate leftists were largely made in the immediate days following George Floyd's death, with small peaks distributed along the rest of the plot. Similarly to that of far leftist Twitter users, the highest peak in the frequency of tweets relating to BLM, police brutality, and racial issues by moderate leftist Twitter accounts was on June 2, 2020, when President Trump threatened military presence against protesters during nationwide BLM protests. Trends in word usage was similar to that of anarchists and far leftists, where the most frequently used words include "police," "violence," "racism," "black," "Trump," "people," "white," "racist," "protests," "justice," and "protesters," but more prominently displayed words aligned closer with that of far-leftist Twitter accounts than that of anarchist Twitter accounts.

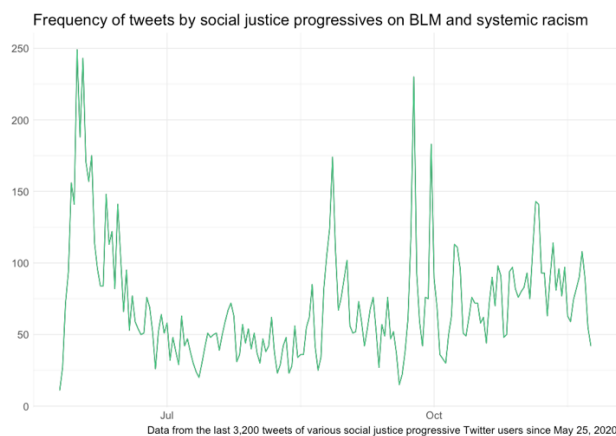
### *Left-Leaning Progressives.*



Data on left-leaning progressive Twitter accounts include 5,313 tweets and 31 Twitter accounts, with an average of 171.39 tweets per account. While the highest peak occurs on June 2, 2020, similarly to that of far and moderate leftist accounts, smaller peaks occur on the exact



same dates as that of far-leftist Twitter users: August 27, 2020, the day the police officer who shot Jacob Blake was identified and the day after the arrest of Kyle Rittenhouse; September 24, 2020, the day Brett Hankison was charged with wanton endangerment; and September 30, 2020, the day President Trump refused to condemn white supremacists and right-wing militia during the presidential debate.<sup>16, 17, 18</sup> Left-leaning progressives word usage reflects similarly to that of moderate and far leftists and anarchists, with words such as “police,” “people,” “black,” “racist,” “white,” “racism,” and “violence,” but “Trump” is used more frequently than the other political factions, implying heavier political commentary on the Trump administration by left-leaning progressives.



Data on social justice progressive Twitter accounts consist of 13,187 tweets from 52 Twitter accounts, with an average of 253.60 tweets per account. The graphic on the left, the frequency plot of tweets related to BLM, police brutality, and racial issues produced by social justice progressive Twitter users, depicts similar patterns as far and moderate leftist and left-

leaning progressive accounts, where the highest peak occurs in the immediate days following the death of George Floyd, and other peaks are distributed in the later months. However, tweets made by social justice progressives uniquely have two high peaks in May 31, 2020, in the height of BLM protests, and June 2, 2020, a peak found in tweets by far and moderate leftists and left-leaning progressives, and another peak comparable to the two peaks on September 24, 2020, the day Brett Hankison was charged with wanton endangerment in his involvement in the death of Breonna Taylor—this date, while significant to other political factions on the left, garnered a relatively higher level of attention among social justice progressives than other leftist or progressive political sects, as compared to other dates, with the exception of anarchists.<sup>19</sup> Other significant dates include August 27, 2020, the day Rusten Sheskey was identified as the police officer who shot Jacob Blake and the day after the arrest of Kyle Rittenhouse, and September 30, 2020, the day President Trump refused to condemn white supremacists and right-wing militia.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Patterns similar to other leftist and progressive factions show in the word cloud as well, with heavy word usages in the words “police,” “black,” “people,” “racism,” “violence,” “white,” “Breonna,” “protests,” “Trump,” “protesters,” “justice,” “racist,” “officers,” and “protest.” The peak on September 24, 2020 is represented in the heavy usage of “Breonna.”

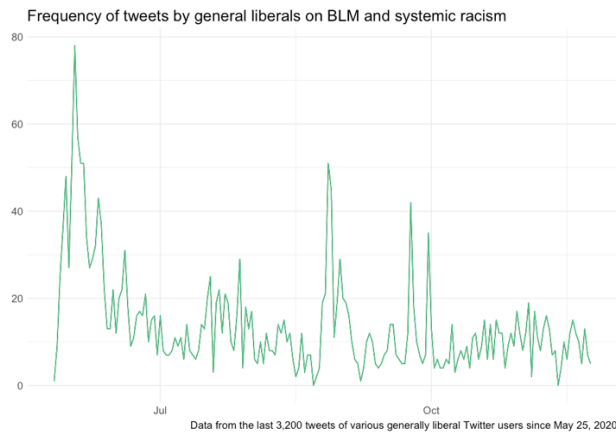
*General Liberals.*

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<sup>19</sup> Headlines: September 24, 2020. Retrieved on November 30, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/3qgMHu7>.

<sup>20</sup> Headlines: August 27, 2020. Retrieved on November 30, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/33yl8nn>.

<sup>21</sup> Headlines: September 30, 2020. Retrieved on November 30, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/3mslowQ>.



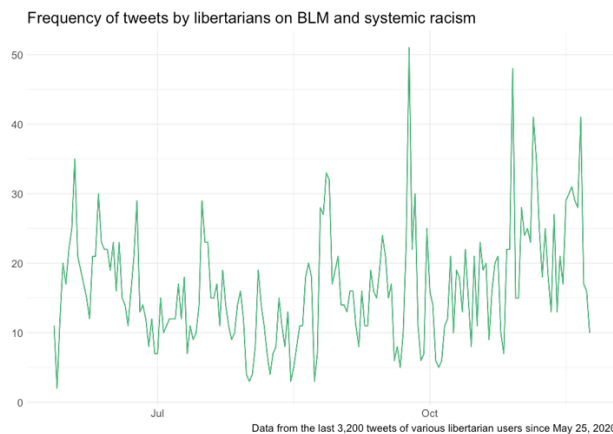
Data on general liberal Twitter users consisted of 2,557 tweets from 19 Twitter accounts, with an average of 134,58 tweets per account. The pattern in the frequency plot of general liberal tweets about BLM, police brutality, and racial issues is similar to that of leftists and progressives, with a major peak in the days immediately following the death of George Floyd with other peaks distributed across various months after the death. As established among far and moderate leftists and left-leaning and social justice progressives, the most notable peak occurs on June 2, 2020, at the height of BLM demonstrations. Other peaks across the data occur on August 27, 2020, the day the police officer who shot Jacob Blake was identified and the day after Kyle Rittenhouse was arrested; September 24, 2020, the day Brett Hankison was charged with wanton endangerment; and September 30, 2020, the day President Trump refused to condemn white supremacists and right-wing militia during the presidential debate.<sup>22, 23, 24</sup> While the most frequently used words largely share similarities with patterns previously established among leftists and progressives, with the use of words such as “police,” “black,” “violence,” “white,” “protesters,” “racist,” “protests,” “racism,” “lives,” “matter,” “justice,” “support,”

<sup>22</sup> Headlines: August 27, 2020. Retrieved on November 30, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/33yI8nn>.

<sup>23</sup> Headlines: September 24, 2020. Retrieved on November 30, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/3qgMHu7>.

<sup>24</sup> Headlines: September 30, 2020. Retrieved on November 30, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/3mslowQ>.

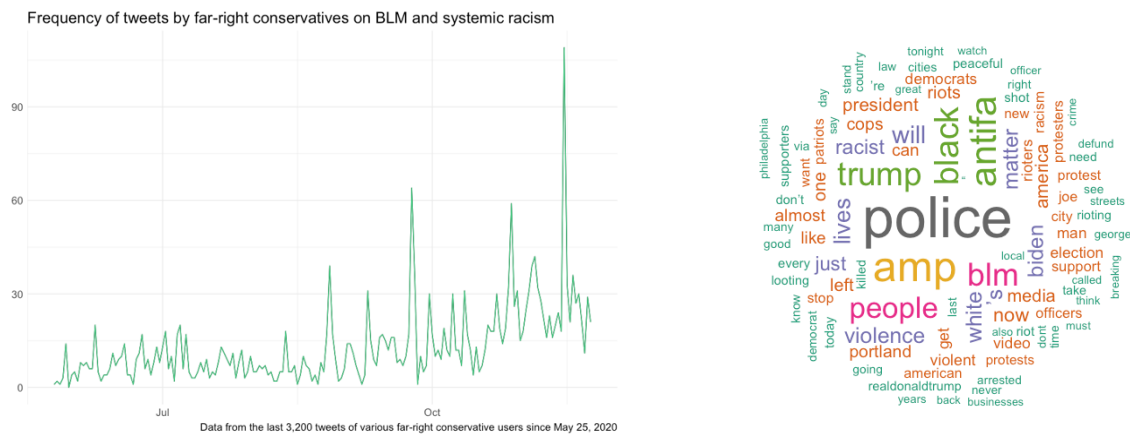
“officers,” and “Floyd,” the use of words such as “Biden,” “president,” and “campaign” suggest a more political context to tweets produced by general liberal Twitter users.



Data on libertarian Twitter accounts include 3011 tweets from 14 accounts, with an average of 215.07 tweets per account. The frequency plot shows constant and frequent peaks throughout the months following the death of George Floyd, with the four most prominent dates being September 24, 2020, the day Brett Hankison was charged for wanton endangerment; October 29, 2020, a day leading up to the election and two days after Trump supporters were stranded in freezing weather after a rally in Omaha; November 5, 2020, two days following the presidential election; and November 21, 2020, the day president-elect Joe Biden was certified as the winner in Georgia.<sup>25, 26, 27</sup> As such, much of the discourse on race among libertarian Twitter users appears to revolve less around the death of George Floyd compared to leftist, left-leaning, or liberal Twitter users. The most frequently used words among libertarian Twitter users include

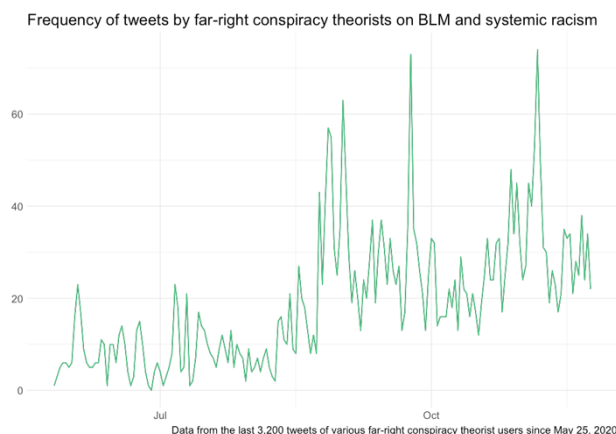
most likely referring to Larry Sharp, the vice-presidential candidate for the Libertarian Party.

fatal shot in the head; and August 26, 2020, the day Kyle Rittenhouse was arrested.<sup>29, 30, 31</sup> The pattern established in the word cloud among general conservatives shows a clear negative emphasis on violence during protests and riots, with an emphasis on words such as “Antifa,” “violence,” “riots,” “violent,” “rioters,” and “Portland,” where the police declared a riot 30 times since May 29, 2020.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the frequent usage of “Trump,” “Biden,” “Democrats,” and “president” imply the significance of the presidential election in the discourse on racial issues in the United States among general conservatives.



<sup>29</sup> Headlines: October 28, 2020. Retrieved on December 1, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/36y8oAk>.

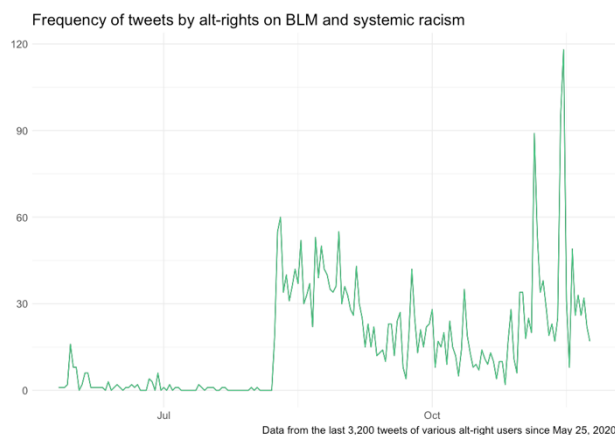
conservative Twitter users occurred on November 15, 2020, the day of the Million Maga March, similarly to general conservative Twitter accounts.<sup>33</sup> Two other dates of significance include September 24, 2020, the day Brett Hankison was charged for wanton endangerment, and October 28, 2020, the day a grand juror involved in the case against Brett Hankison described the actions of the officers who killed Breonna Taylor as criminal.<sup>34, 35</sup> Notable words include “police,” “Trump,” “black,” “Antifa,” “people,” “BLM,” “violence,” “white,” “Biden,” “lives,” “matter,” “racist,” “Portland,” “America,” “media,” “president,” “riots,” “cops,” and “Democrats.” Negative connotations continue with the use of “Antifa,” “Portland,” and “riots,” and emphasis on electoral politics is evident through the use of “Trump,” “Biden,” “president,” and “Democrats.”



Data on far-right conspiracy theorist accounts consist of 3,491 tweets from 15 Twitter accounts, with an average of 232.73 tweets per account. While far-right conspiracy theorists do not have a significant frequency of tweets in the immediate days and weeks following the death

of George Floyd, extreme peaks begin to show starting in August, with the highest peaks occurring on September 24, 2020, the day Brett Hankison is charged for wanton endangerment, and November 6, 2020, in the midst of heightened tension due to the election.<sup>36</sup> Two other significant dates are August 27, 2020, the day Rusten Sheskey was identified as the police officer who shot Jacob Blake and the day after the arrest of Kyle Rittenhouse, and September 1, 2020, when President Trump left for Kenosha, WI and President-Elect Biden blamed protest violence on President Trump.<sup>37, 38</sup> The most frequently used words include “police,” “patriots,” “black,” “people,” “BLM,” “Trump,” “Antifa,” “matter,” “white,” “Biden,” “violence,” and “riots.” There is a conveyance of negative attitudes towards protests show with the combination in the use of “BLM,” “Antifa,” “violence,” and “riots,” with political undertones with the use of “Trump” and “Biden.” The use of “patriot” is extremely prominent, implying that their sociopolitical views are grounded in their nationalist sentiments.

#### *Alt-Right Twitter Users.*



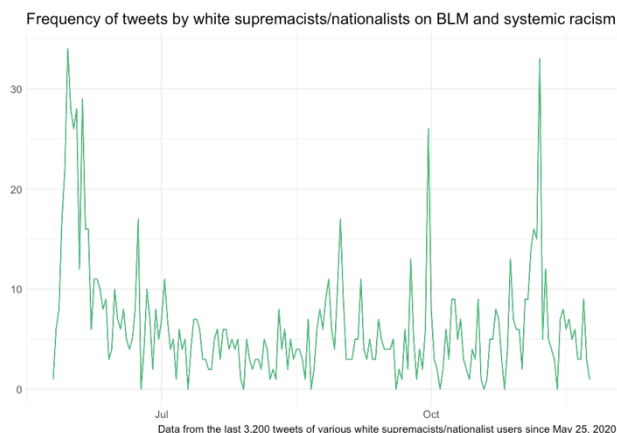
<sup>36</sup> Headlines: September 24, 2020. Retrieved on November 30, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/3qgMHu7>.

<sup>37</sup> Headlines: August 27, 2020. Retrieved on November 30, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/33yl8nn>.

<sup>38</sup> Headlines: September 1, 2020. Retrieved on December 1, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/3mzt6FB>.



Data on alt-right Twitter users consist of 3,005 tweets from 5 Twitter users, with a low average of 601 tweets per user. Discourse on BLM, police brutality, and racial relations are minimal until August 9, 2020, the day after conservative media reported on Hunter Biden's alleged tax lien.<sup>39</sup> The most significant amount of tweets in a single day from alt-right Twitter accounts occur on three dates: November 5, November 14, and November 15, 2020, days within close proximity to the election. A significant deviation from previous trends is found in the word cloud, with the discourse on BLM, police brutality, and racial issues in the United States most often including the word "Antifa," with "police" of less prominence in word usage. Other frequently used words include "Portland," "Portlandriots," "Arrested," "riot," "violent," "protesters," "BLMAntifa," "charged," and "released." A extremely negative context regarding BLM, Antifa, and protests or riots is evident among the alt-right.



Data on white supremacist and nationalist Twitter accounts include 1,178 tweets from 6 Twitter users, with an average of 196.33 tweets per user. The frequency plot shows randomly

distributed high peaks, with the most notable peaks occurring in the days immediately after the death of George Floyd. The day with the greatest number of tweets is May 30, 2020, the day Derek Chauvin is charged, and President Trump defends his tweet that states, “When the looting starts, the shooting starts.”<sup>40</sup> Two other notable peaks occur on September 30, 2020, the day President Trump refused to condemn white supremacists and right-wing militia during the presidential debate, and November 7, 2020, the day President-Elect Biden won the presidential election.<sup>41, 42</sup> The word cloud shows that “police,” “white,” “people,” “racism,” “racist,” “Trump,” “riots,” “Antifa,” “black,” “America,” “violence,” “rioters,” and “almightygenie,” a right-wing Twitter account. Negative connotations around BLM is evidently prevalent with the use of “riots,” “Antifa,” “violence,” and “rioters.”

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<sup>40</sup> Headlines from The New York Times for Saturday, May 30, 2020. Retrieved on December 1, 2020, from <https://nyti.ms/3lyDiwN>.

<sup>41</sup> Headlines: September 30, 2020. Retrieved on November 30, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/3mslowQ>.

<sup>42</sup> Lemire, J., Miller, Z., Weissert, W. (2020, November 7). Biden defeats Trump for White House, says ‘time to heal’. Retrieved on December 1, 2020, from