HOW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS INFLUENCE PUBLIC OPINION ON POLITICAL VIOLENCE: ATTITUDE SHIFTS IN THE WAKE OF THE GEORGE FLOYD PROTESTS*

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We examine whether the George Floyd protests influenced public opinion on political violence. Drawing upon the 2016 and 2020 American National Election Studies, we find that most U.S. citizens do not support political violence, and those overall rates remained relatively unchanged. However, we found seismic demographic shifts in attitudes between the two samples. Using logistic regression, we find that strength of support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, liberal ideology, youth, and protest participation were positively correlated with the belief that political violence is justifiable. There was a decrease in support for political violence among older people who oppose the BLM movement, are college educated, ideologically conservative, and trust mainstream news. We argue that cultural views on the acceptability of political violence are pliable, and we offer a theoretical model that explains how salient movement events can shift public attitudes toward controversial protest methods.

Within democracies, nonviolent tactics are strongly preferred by the general public, and most protests are peaceful. Even disruptive tactics, such as sit-ins or general strikes, are typically conducted without violence. Periodically, however, activists resort to property destruction, looting, and street fighting. For example, in 1979, truck drivers staged a peaceful strike to protest rising fuel prices in Levittown, Pennsylvania. When they parked their trucks to block a central intersection, they were joined by local residents, who set fires, destroyed postal delivery trucks, and hurled rocks and bottles at the police (Anderson 2005). Political violence also erupted in the 1999 "Battle of Seattle," where 40,000 people protested globalization at the World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference (Smith 2001). Roughly 200 black bloc anarchists smashed windows of police cars and businesses. Others joined in, throwing debris at security forces. More recently, in 2020, protests erupted in Minneapolis after a police officer killed George Floyd. Protesters set local businesses and a police station on fire, sparking similar episodes in cities throughout the United States. When such events happen, how does this shape citizens' views on politically oriented violence?

In this article, we ask whether social movements shape public opinion regarding the legitimacy of violence in political struggles. We know that movements have influenced cultural attitudes toward gender norms (Banaszak and Ondercin 2016; Costain and Majstorovic 1994; Van Dyke, Soule, and Taylor 2004), the Vietnam War (McAdam and Su 2002), immigration policies (Branton, Martinez-Ebers, Carey Jr., and Matsubayashi 2015), and environmental concerns (Agnone 2007). Most of this work portrays movements as intentionally building public support so that subsequent policy initiatives are successful (Burstein and Linton 2002). However, Banaszak and Ondercin (2016) argue that change in public opinion—as a result of movement activity—is important to explore in itself, not merely as a preliminary step toward legislative victories. We build on their call to study public opinion changes as a social movement impact. However, our focus is on unintentional cultural consequences. When activists

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use violent tactics, they do so to express moral outrage, draw attention to an injustice, or gain concessions from their opponents. Yet the use of political violence could also have inadvertent effects: it might reinforce norms for nonviolence or, if people strongly identify with these movements, the public might perceive violence to be a justifiable means of achieving political goals (Fine 1999).

To explore this, we examine the effects of the 2020 George Floyd protests on public opinion in the United States. While most U.S. citizens do not support political violence, we find a notable opinion shift on this issue among Black Lives Matter movement supporters. We argue that, for highly politicized individuals, views on the legitimacy of political violence have considerable plasticity. People's views can be significantly shaped by recent salient movement events, which can instigate "moral shifting" in attitudes toward violence (Luft 2021).

PUBLIC VIEWS OF NONVIOLENCE AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

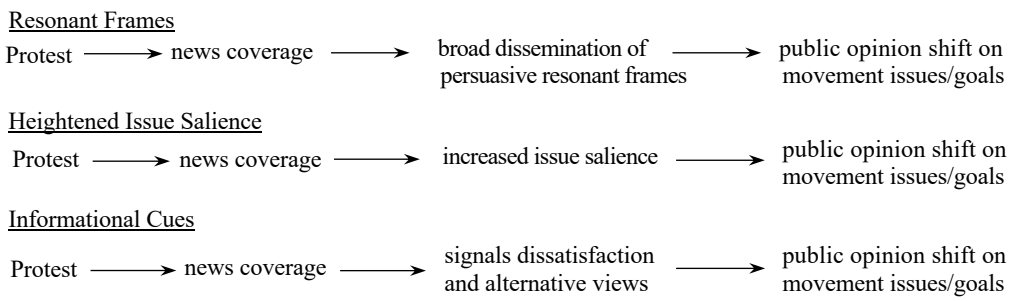
The United States is a "social movement society" where protest has become a conventional part of political life (Meyer and Tarrow 1998). Most U.S. citizens, however, expect protesters to conduct themselves nonviolently. This is due to the belief that nonviolent strategies have greater moral legitimacy (Feinberg, Willer, and Kovacheff 2020; Orazani and Leidner 2019; Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2018; Wang and Piazza 2016) and are more effective at achieving political goals (Chenoweth 2021; Simpson et al. 2018; Thomas and Louis 2014). Thus, public support for a movement increases when it uses nonviolent tactics and decreases when it uses violence (Adelman, Leidner, and Orazani, 2017; Huff and Kruszewska 2016; Muñoz and Anduiza 2019; Selvanathan and Lickel 2019).

Given the strong preference for nonviolence, what could increase support for violent tactics? Research indicates that several factors can shift public opinion on this issue. First, people find violence more acceptable when traditional political methods are incapable of adequately addressing social injustices (Bara 2014; Drystad and Hillesund 2020; Koos 2018; Østby 2013). For example, Santoro and Fitzpatrick (2015) found that those who believed that nonviolent approaches had become ineffective were most likely to condone the 1968 riots as a way to achieve racial equality in the United States. Second, citizens may endorse political violence—such as the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. capitol—if they share strong partisan identities with those using these tactics (Kalmoe and Mason 2022). Third, the public may support a movement's use of violence if it is preceded by significant repression from their opponents (Orazani and Leidner 2019; Zhu, Cheng, Shen, and Walker 2022). For example, when antifascist activists engaged in street fighting against white supremacists during the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, many felt that this was justified because it was done in self-defense. Cornel West expressed such sentiments during an interview: "We would have been crushed like cockroaches were it not for the anarchists and the antifascists . . . [because] you had police holding back and just allowing fellow citizens to go at each other" (quoted in Stockman 2017: A12).

HOW MOVEMENTS SHAPE PUBLIC OPINION

As these studies indicate, people's judgments about political violence often reflect their assessments of specific cases—such as the Black Power movement, the "Stop the Steal" movement, or the Unite the Right rally. We argue that this points toward a new theory of how social movements shape attitudes. Before introducing our theory, we briefly review other explanations of how protests influence public opinion, as depicted in figure 1.

Figure 1. Theories of How Social Movements Influence Public Opinion



Previous scholarship indicates that social movements affect public opinion through several mechanisms (Amenta and Polletta 2019). First, movements can offer resonant frames (disseminated through media coverage) that persuade the broader population to support a cause. For instance, Andrews, Beyerlein, and Farnum (2016) found that Southern whites were more likely to support sit-ins when they were near the campaigns and exposed to civil rights activists' discussions that were framed in terms of religious values, democracy, and fairness. Similarly, Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydstun (2008) found that attitudes toward capital punishment shifted after the dissemination of an "innocence frame," which holds that the criminal justice system is likely to make mistakes and thus, inevitably, some innocent individuals are wrongfully executed. As this innocence frame gained prominence, eclipsing other frames (namely the morality or constitutionality of capital punishment), juries became less willing to impose the death penalty.

A second theory holds that protests garner media coverage, which contributes to opinion shifts by increasing the prominence and importance of the issue for the general public (Burstein 1985). We refer to this as the "heightened issue salience" model. For example, Burstein and Freudenburg (1978) argued that anti-Vietnam War demonstrations drew attention to the problems with the war, including increasing costs and escalating human casualties. This ultimately contributed to a shift in public opinion against the war, which influenced congressional votes. Other studies demonstrate how news coverage of protests has increased public awareness of the debates over immigration (Carey, Branton, and Martinez-Eberz 2014), LGBTQI concerns (Woodly 2015), and economic inequality (Gaby and Caren 2016).

A third theory is that media coverage of social movement activities contributes to public opinion shifts by signaling dissatisfaction with the status quo and providing "informational cues" that reveal dissenting perspectives. For instance, Banaszak and Ondercin (2016) argued that news of women's protests helped shift cultural attitudes—even when the protests were depicted negatively—because it presented alternatives to traditional gender roles. This indicated that gender norms were open to debate and questioning.

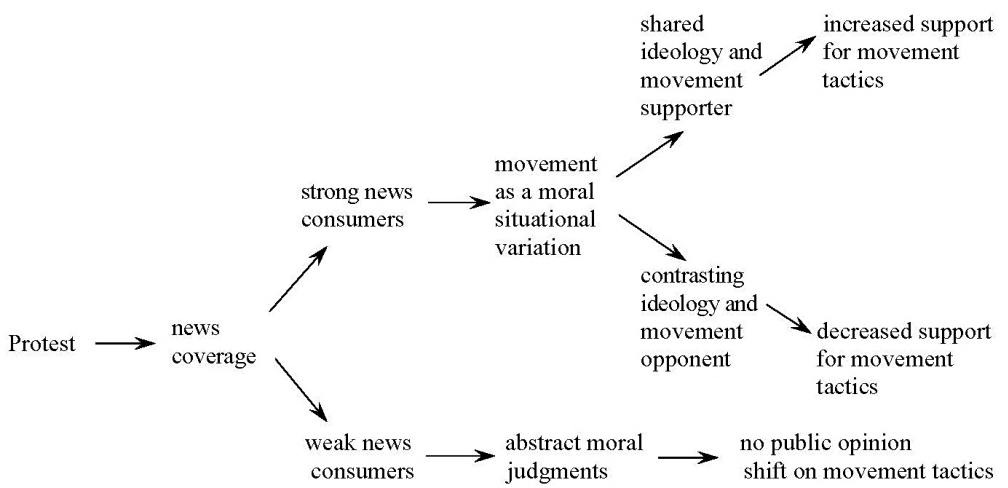
All three theories emphasize the media's role in enabling movements to change public opinion. The George Floyd protests also generated significant media coverage due to the immense number of participants who protested in a wide array of geographic locations (Pressman, Chenoweth, Leung, Perkins, and Ulfelder 2022). Furthermore, there is evidence that this coverage made the U.S. public more aware of police brutality and more supportive of police reform initiatives (Boudreau, MacKenzie, and Simmons 2022; Dunivin, Yan, Ince, and Rojas 2022; Reny and Newman 2021; Shuman, Hasan-Aslih, van Zomeren, and Halperin 2022). Thus, if we were examining how the George Floyd protests influenced public opinion about policing issues, then both the heightened issue salience theory and the informational cues theory would have explanatory power. (The resonant frame theory would be less applicable since the Black Lives Matter movement did not present new frames during the 2020 protests.) Yet our interest is not in the intentional effort to change public opinion on the movement's grievances

and goals. Rather, we are interested in the movement's capacity to unintentionally shift public opinion on methods of protest—in this case, political violence.

To explain how protests can inadvertently shape public opinion on this issue, we draw on moral judgment theory. This theory holds that individuals may agree with a general statement that condemns certain types of political action, such as property destruction or rioting. However, when a particular set of circumstances are introduced, those same individuals might find such action justified. As Kohlberg (1981) argued, placing a moral question within a specific context moves people from making judgments in the abstract (e.g., is it acceptable to steal?) to making a moral judgment in concrete terms (e.g., is it acceptable to steal a life-saving medication that is unaffordable when a loved one will die without it?). Hence, some members of the public might state that political violence is not acceptable in a democracy but then condone the use of arson or street fighting if it is done by a movement that they support. Luft (2021:1) refers to this as the "plasticity of moral judgments" about violence. Luft (2020) and others propose that "situational variations"—changes in the specific circumstances in which the disputed moral action occurs—can cause people to shift their opinions about the legitimacy of political violence and the actors who commit it. She argues that "the same person in the same situation can feel differently about the exact same behavior depending on the subject(s) involved in the interaction" (Luft 2020: 6).

Building on this work, we offer a new theory of how social movements can shift public opinion on controversial protest methods. Our theory, depicted in figure 2, holds that media coverage of a protest that entails political violence will increase the likelihood that the public will have this concrete case in mind when judging the legitimacy of such tactics. However, this is most likely to occur for those who closely follow the news since they are the ones for whom the movement (and its actions) will be highly salient. Minimal news consumers are likely to judge political violence in the abstract. In other words, for strong news consumers, dramatic movement events—such as the George Floyd protests—serve as a tangible situational variation that shifts people from abstract moral judgments (e.g., is it acceptable to use political violence in a democracy?) to judgments that reflect concrete circumstances (e.g., is it acceptable to use political violence to address police brutality, which has led to countless deaths of African Americans?). Their answer to this question will, as Luft argues, be shaped by their opinion of the activists involved and their cause. Therefore, we hypothesize that strong news consumers who support the Black Lives Matter movement are the most likely to condone political violence in the wake of the George Floyd protests, while those who oppose BLM are the most likely to condemn it.

Figure 2. Social Movement Events as Situational Moral Shifters



Beyond news consumerism and support for BLM, we argue that two additional factors will shape views on political violence. The first is the strength of one's political ideology or partisan identity, which researchers have associated with support for political violence when it is committed by members of their own group (Elad-Strenger, Hobfoll, Hall, and Canetti 2021; Kacholia and Neuner 2022; Kalmoe and Mason 2022). Partisan identity can even influence what an individual judges to be violent. Hsaoi and Radnitz (2021) found that Republicans perceived greater levels of violence when they disliked the group that was protesting. Even innocuous tactics, such as holding placards, were deemed violent by some Republicans (but not Democrats) if they opposed the movement's cause. Hsaoi and Radnitz stated, "Because nonviolence is normatively appropriate whereas the use of violence against the state is less defensible, the classification of tactical choices is a way to express (dis)approval of a group's goals and identity" (2021: 481). The second factor we examine is protest participation. Some researchers hold that personal experiences of activism can increase support for political violence (Becker 2021; Decker and Pyrooz 2019; Moskalenko and McCauley 2009) since it deepens ideological socialization and identity. Accordingly, we expect that progressives who have recently participated in protest will be more likely to see political violence as legitimate, while conservative nonprotesters will be less likely to do so following the George Floyd protests.

OTHER INFLUENCES ON ATTITUDES TOWARD POLITICAL VIOLENCE

We recognize that there might be alternative explanations for why some segments of the population have become more accepting of these protest methods, and therefore we include several control variables in our analysis. One control variable is age since it is feasible that a younger cohort is emerging that does not share the existing preference for nonviolent tactics, as some studies suggest (Kalmoe 2014). A second control variable is education, which has been found to decrease support for political violence (Østby, Urdal, and Dupuy 2019). Third, we control for sex/gender. Several studies find that women are less likely to participate in riots (Santoro and Broidy 2014) and are more alienated from movements that use this type of "fringe" violence (Ben Shitrit, Elad-Strenger, and Hirsch-Hoefler 2017; Chenoweth 2021). Others have found that men—particularly those who embrace patriarchal values and misogynistic attitudes—are more likely to participate in political violence and support violent extremism (Bjarnegård, Brounéus, and Melander 2017; Johnston and True 2019).

We additionally control for the effects of religiosity. Some researchers have found that individual religiosity decreases support for political violence (Adamczyk and LaFree 2019). Other researchers have argued that religiosity, particularly of a fundamentalist nature, fuels support for political violence (Hasenclever and Rittenberger 2000; Juergensmeyer 2001; Zaidise, Canetti-Nisim, and Pedazhur 2007). Still, others have found that when grievances are controlled for, religiosity is not correlated with support for political violence (Canetti, Hobfall, Pedazhur, and Zaidise 2010).

Our final control variable is race/ethnicity. We anticipate that whites will be the least likely to express support for political violence in the aftermath of the George Floyd protests. This is because racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. are likely, we believe, to have a lower perception of the political efficacy of institutional and extrainstitutional nonviolent tactics to address police brutality. This is due to the long history of police misconduct in Black, Latinx, and indigenous communities and the lack of progress in addressing this issue through traditional political methods. Moreover, researchers have shown that observers of protest filter their judgments of a movement through their own racial and ethnic identities (Wouters 2019), with whites being more likely to perceive tactics used by racial minority groups as violent (Manekin and Mitts 2022).

With all these factors in mind, we turn to the data to answer two questions. Did the George Floyd protests shift public opinion regarding the acceptability of political violence as a way to address political issues? And, if public opinion shifted, who was most likely to support political violence and who was most likely to oppose it?

DATA AND METHODS

Our data come from the American National Election Study's (ANES) 2016 and 2020 samples. The American National Election Study is a national public opinion survey of adult American likely voters administered by Stanford and the University of Michigan each election year. Our focus lies primarily on the 2020 sample, as it reflects developments in support for political violence in the wake of the George Floyd protests, with the 2016 data serving as a point of comparison. Each survey has its own set of questions based on contemporary events, but many of its measures remain the same from year to year. None of the variables we used in this study were changed between the 2016 and 2020 surveys, allowing us to construct comparable regression analyses between the two samples. Also of note, especially when interpreting ideological results: the 2020 pre-election survey, which included the political violence question, was conducted between August 18 and November 3, 2020. Therefore, it was conducted after the George Floyd protests but before the Capitol Riot in January 2021.

Alongside baseline comparisons of the raw data, we use logistic regression analyses to test our theoretical model. This has required a recode of the independent variable from a five-step Likert scale ranging from no acceptance of violence whatsoever to "a little," "a moderate amount," "a lot," and a "great deal" to a binary measure of whether the respondent supports any degree of violence whatsoever. This serves two purposes. First, it bypasses any potential respondent uncertainty regarding the degree of violence under discussion (e.g., what is the difference between "a lot" of violence and "a great deal" of violence?). Second, it will clarify our results by removing said uncertainty from our regression results. For clarity's sake, the question posed to respondents is worded as follows: "How much do you feel it is justified for people to use violence to pursue their political goals in this country?" We describe the recodes performed on dependent variables in the results section as needed. We also provide complete descriptive tables in our online appendix, including survey question wordings, variable measurements, and a correlation matrix of all variables in the 2020 analysis. The appendix is available at https://osf.io/ewk3m/

RESULTS

Raw Data Comparison of Changes from 2016 to 2020

We begin with a baseline comparison between overall levels of perceived acceptability of political violence in 2016 and 2020. In 2016, 15.28% of the sample believed the use of violence could be justified to achieve political goals. In 2020, that number decreased to 14.34%. While this change may seem small, it masks some significant demographic shifts in attitudes toward political violence between the two samples, some of which are displayed in table 1.

Some seismic shifts are noticeable right off the bat. Between 2016 and 2020, liberals became much more likely to find political violence acceptable not just at the extreme end of the spectrum. In contrast, conservatives became much less likely to find themselves in support of violence despite making up a smaller share of violence supporters in the 2016 sample. Ideological shifts between the 2016 and 2020 elections had an impact across the political spectrum.

Attitudinal shifts occurred among other demographics as well, particularly among various age groups. Younger respondents were more likely to support political violence in 2020 than 2016, while their older counterparts were more opposed than before. One strange outlier is the 2016 survey's proportion of 80+ year-olds who find political violence acceptable. We have checked the coding on this variable multiple times to ensure that there is nothing wrong with it, and it has remained accurate every time. Either the 2016 ANES just happened to capture a particularly rowdy set of senior citizens, or there was some cohort effect among that sample's oldest respondents that was not shared among the 2020 cohort—such as lingering memories of WWII or the 1960s movements. Regardless, the effect between 2016 and 2020 matches the other age cohorts, with a marked decrease in support for political violence among older citizens.

Table 1. Support for Political Violence, Percentages by Demographic Categories

Demographic	*% Who Say Political Violence is Ever Justified (2016)*	*% Who Say Political Violence is Ever Justified (2020)*
Sample Overall	15.28	14.34
Extremely Liberal	14.55	30.79
Liberal	10.02	17.36
Slightly Liberal	16.83	16.23
Moderate	15.93	16.30
Slightly Conservative	14.84	8.59
Conservative	9.24	5.45
Extremely Conservative	12.71	8.22
White	11.79	10.89
Black	24.37	24.41
Men	16.45	14.13
Women	14.17	14.63
Age 18-29	28.40	30.42
Age 30-39	16.42	21.13
Age 40-49	14.54	16.85
Age 50-59	13.12	10.76
Age 60-69	9.86	7.15
Age 70-79	9.35	7.57
Age 80+	15.03	6.02
Attends Church	16.10	12.82
Does Not Attend Church	14.00	15.81

Elsewhere, white respondents became slightly less accepting of political violence, while their black counterparts' attitudes remained nearly unchanged between 2016 and 2020. In both samples, white respondents were less than half as likely to perceive political violence as legitimate, in line with our predictions. Meanwhile, men's support for political violence dropped to 14.13%, just below women's levels of support. Church attendees became significantly less likely to accept political violence, in contrast with nonchurchgoers, who became more likely to accept it than before—inverting their 2016 numbers.

Regression Results

We turn now to our regression results, which are presented in table 2 on the next page. One readily apparent feature is the similarities between the 2016 and 2020 results regarding our control variables: age, gender, race, religiosity, and education. In both surveys, age, college education, and white-ness are negatively correlated with support for political violence, while gender and religiosity are insignificant. While effect sizes differ, education and whiteness are fairly similar from sample to sample, though age grew more significantly negative in 2020 on the whole.

Moving beyond the control variables, we focus on those factors that are part of our theoretical model of social movement events as situational moral shifters. These include news consumption, support for the Black Lives Matter movement, political ideology, and protest participation. The role of news media varies wildly between the two samples. While the degree of a respondent's news consumption is significantly and negatively correlated with support for political violence in

Table 2. Logistic Regression Coefficients and Odds Ratios Predicting Acceptability of Political Violence

	2016 (Controls)	*2016 (Complete)*	*2020 (Controls)*	*2020 (Complete)*
BLM	-	.048 (1.050)*	-	.074 (1.077)***
		.023		*.017*
Liberal	-	-.048 (0.953)	-	.112 (1.119)**
		.047		*.034*
Protest Participation	-	.636 (1.885)*	-	.446 (1.562)***
		.261		*.112*
News Consumption	-	-.191 (.826)*	-	.022 (1.002)
		.058		*.053*
News Trust	-	-	-	.170 (1.186)***
				.041
Age	-.022 (0.977)***	-.017 (0.982)***	-.038 (0.962)***	-.037 (0.962)***
	.003	*.003*	*.002*	*.002*
Female	-.171 (0.842)	-.249 (0.779)*	.112 (1.11)	-.022 (.977)
	.114	*.116*	*.079*	*.082*
College	-.380 (0.683)***	-.329 (0.719)**	-.324 (0.723)***	-.492 (0.610)***
	.114	*.117*	*.080*	*.083*
Church Attendance	.219 (1.244)	.215 (1.240)	-.128 (.878)	.116 (1.124)
	.118	*.124*	*.080*	*.085*
White	-.740 (0.476)***	-.650 (0.521)***	-.696 (0.498)***	-.518 (0.595)***
	.120	*.128*	*.083*	*.086*
Constant	-0.142	-.025	0.694	-0.918
N	2,824	2,824	5,888	5,888

Notes: * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001; Odds-Ratios in Parentheses; Standard Errors in Italics
Source: American National Election Survey (2016, 2020)

2016 (contradicting our theory), it has no correlation in the 2020 sample. In the 2016 survey, those who consumed "a great deal" of news, the highest measure on the ANES's five-point scale, were 8% less likely to support political violence than those who consumed no news at all, making it one of the strongest variables in the 2016 sample by far despite its total absence from the results just four years later. This led us to seek out a different media-related variable to uncover the source of this shift. We included a variable that measures respondents' trust in news coverage (which, unfortunately, only appears in the 2020 survey). While this measure was not quite as powerful as news consumption in 2016, it came close: those with the greatest degree of trust in news media were 7.6% more likely to support political violence than those with the least trust in media. In other words, it appears that at least some of the impact of news consumption on its own has been subsumed by respondent trust in media, creating a schism of public opinion between trusting and distrusting news consumers. Whether this is due to a shift in how respondents relate to news media, a change in how news media covered political violence, or some other factor unique to the 2020 political environment is beyond the scope of this study. We can say for certain that the relationship between media consumption and attitudes toward political violence is in flux.

Corroborating our theoretical model, the regression results show that support for Black Lives Matter is significantly correlated with support for political violence. Moreover, this factor became more relevant in the wake of the 2020 George Floyd protests than in the past. The relationship between BLM support and acceptance of political violence was fairly tenuous in 2016, sitting on the very edge of statistical significance. Before getting into the margins, we should explain how the variable was coded and recoded. The ANES uses an interesting measure of support for political causes such as Black Lives Matter, asking respondents how they would rate the object of analysis on a scale of 0-100. To make the results more legible and to adhere more closely to respondents' answers, which typically placed their opinion on a scale of 10 (i.e., most respondents rate Black Lives Matter at 0, 10, 20, etc. rather than the interim numbers, such as 13 or 27), we have reduced this to a ten-point scale for our analysis. This translates to a

difference of 5% between BLM's strongest supporters and opponents' likelihoods of supporting political violence in 2016, and an 8% total difference in 2020, with each step up the ten-point scale correlating to a .5% and .8% increase in each sample. In other words, not just support but the degree of support for Black Lives Matter is relevant in determining a respondent's probability of supporting political violence.

We also predicted that having a liberal ideology would be positively correlated with support for political violence. The regression results are stark on this matter: liberal ideology went from an insignificant measure in 2016 to a crushingly dominant one in 2020. In the 2016 model, there is effectively no difference between a respondent who identifies as extremely conservative, moderate, or extremely liberal net of other factors. In 2020, each step up on the ANES's seven-step ideology scale is associated with a 1.2% increase in a respondent's likelihood of supporting political violence. While there was zero difference between an extremely liberal and extremely conservative respondent in 2016, in 2020, the very liberal respondent is over 7.2% more likely to support political violence regardless of all intervening factors.

Additionally, protest participation is positively correlated with support for political violence in both samples, in line with our prediction. Unexpectedly, its actual impact decreased in 2020 relative to 2016, from an 8.5% increase in the likelihood of support to a 5.3% increase in likelihood after the 2020 protests. This may be due to an overall increase in protest participation among the 2020 respondents, where 9.16% of the sample had participated in a protest within 12 months of the survey compared to a paltry 3.21% of the 2016 sample. Furthermore, this increase in 2020 is capturing the growing number of people who participated in conservative protests—particularly against COVID stay-at-home and masking policies as well as Blue Lives Matter protests (Pressman et al. 2022); hence those who participated in protests were more ideologically diverse in 2020 than in 2016.

While the full regression analysis supports much of our theoretical model (except for news consumption), it also reveals some interesting trends that emerged between 2016 and 2020 with our control variables. In some cases, the results align with what other scholars have found. Religiosity, for example, is not correlated with support for political violence when we simultaneously control for whiteness. In other cases, we find that the results diverge from prior studies and our own predictions. Take the case of gender in the full regression model. While it was significant in 2016—being female lowered a respondent's overall probability of supporting violence by 3%—in 2020, it has no effect whatsoever, regardless of which variables are included and excluded from the model. The tenuous link between gender and attitudes around political violence in 2016 was eradicated in the wake of the 2020 protest wave.

The impact of age intensified between 2016 and 2020. In the 2016 model, each additional year of age corresponds to a .2% lower likelihood of supporting political violence. In 2020, each additional year corresponds to a decrease of .4%, two times the impact of the previous model. In other words, in 2016, a fifty-year-old respondent would be 6% less likely to support political violence than a twenty-year-old respondent, net of all other factors. In 2020, by contrast, they would be 12% less likely to support political violence, net of all other factors.

There are other results that demand our attention as well. Whiteness remains significant from 2016 to 2020, but its impact on the likelihood of a respondent supporting political violence was dampened slightly. In the 2016 model, whiteness is associated with a 5.7% decrease in one's probability of supporting political violence. In 2020, whiteness only lowered one's likelihood of supporting the movement by 4.7%. This may be a result of the surging relevance of ideology in 2020. If white liberals and white conservatives behave in increasingly disparate ways, race might not have as strong an independent effect as it used to have. Regardless, its impact remains strong in 2020, in line with our predictions. Whether one has a college degree is irrelevant to one's support for political violence in 2016 but is significant in the 2020 model. Specifically, the attainment of a college degree decreases support for political violence by 3.4%. Perhaps the status conferred upon respondents through higher educational achievement shields them from grievances or increases one's familiarity with or access to traditional levers of

political power, increasing the sense of efficacy with institutional tactics and dissatisfaction with outsider tactics, such as political violence.

Based on these regression results, we present some hypothetical scenarios to address how different combinations of traits impact a respondent's likelihood of supporting political violence in 2020. For these hypotheticals, we have created a static set of control variables alongside a shifting set of traits relating to our theoretical variables. The static set of controls seeks to generate a median respondent: A white male, age fifty, who is religious and has a college degree. For reference, a respondent with these traits and average scores in each theoretical variable has a 9.1% predicted likelihood of supporting political violence. Furthermore, we should note here that we are using the far ends of the spectrum when referring to the hypothetical respondent's trust in news and BLM support, i.e., "trusts news" indicates full trust, and "does not trust news" indicates full distrust, and the same goes for BLM support. These results are presented in the table below:

Table 3. Predicted Support of Hypothetical Respondents, 2020 ANES

Trait Combination	*Predicted Likelihood of Support for Political Violence*
BLM Supporter, Extremely Liberal, Trusts News	18.3%
BLM Supporter, Extremely Liberal, Does Not Trust News	10.2%
BLM Opponent, Extremely Liberal, Trusts News	9.6%
BLM Supporter, Moderate, Trusts News	13.8%
BLM Supporter, Moderate, Does Not Trust News	7.5%
BLM Opponent, Moderate, Trusts News	7.0%
BLM Supporter, Extremely Conservative, Trusts News	9.2%
BLM Supporter, Extremely Conservative, Does Not Trust News	4.9%
BLM Opponent, Conservative, Trusts News	4.6%

Source: American National Election Survey (2020)

Finally, as a robustness check, we ran our analyses while including solely those respondents who support political violence "a lot" and a "great deal" rather than "a little." We found some deviations in the results for both 2016 and 2020 when looking at support for the highest levels of political violence, namely that protest participation (2016 and 2020), news consumption (2016), BLM support (2020), and liberal ideology (2020) lost their significance. Those who support a lot of political violence are an ideologically unique subset of the sample and are less likely to be impacted by current events or recent experiences but are still susceptible to the effects of demographic variables such as race and gender. Upon reintroducing those who support "a moderate" amount of political violence to the sample, BLM support and news consumption regained significance in their respective samples, while protest participation (2016 and 2020) and liberal ideology (2020) remained insignificant. Given their disinterest in political violence in 2016, it is not surprising that liberals' support is limited to the lowest level. As for protest participation, it seems likely that most participants would prefer that protests remain largely peaceful. Perhaps a moderate amount or a great deal of violence is simply beyond the scope of their desired forms of protest.

DISCUSSION

These results indicate that, in some segments of society, U.S. public opinion about the legitimacy of political violence has shifted notably in a short period. On the one side, those who are liberal, under forty years of age, who have recently participated in protest, and who strongly

support the Black Lives Matter movement had the biggest increases in supporting political violence. The most notable shift is among the extremely liberal; within this category, the proportion who stated that political violence was acceptable more than doubled from 2016 to 2020. On the other side, those who identify as conservative, are over fifty years old, and have a college degree saw the biggest decreases in support for political violence.

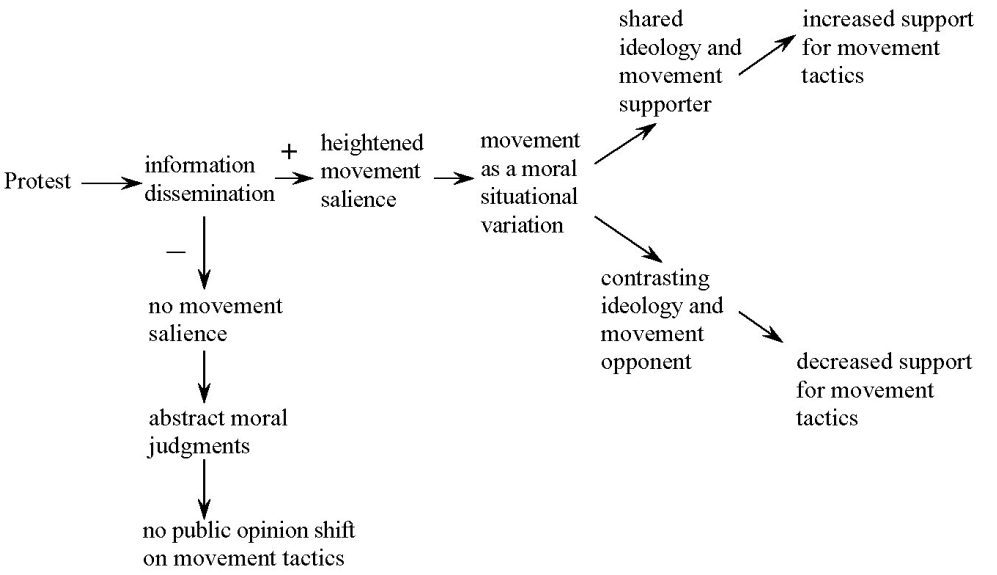
How do we account for such dramatic shifts in public opinion? Consistent with our theory of movements as situational moral shifters, we argue that the political protests that occurred in the summer of 2020, after a Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd, influenced these changes. The protests—which included arson and property destruction—began at the end of May, and the 2020 survey was conducted weeks later, beginning in August. Thus, when the surveys were implemented, the abstract question of whether it is acceptable to use violence to attain political goals was likely contemplated (at least among the most politicized individuals) with this concrete circumstance in mind. In short, the George Floyd riots functioned as a new "situational variation" that shifted people's attitudes, increasing the proportion of liberals and ardent BLM movement supporters who felt that the political violence was justifiable. This parallels what previous researchers have found regarding public support for general ideas versus specific policy initiatives. For instance, while most U.S. citizens support abstract statements regarding racial equity, public support shifts notably for concrete proposals such as affirmative action (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2013).

Yet do the findings about news consumption undermine our theoretical model? While the results do not support our initial model, this does not render our theory completely invalid. Rather, it is likely that news consumption did not matter in 2020 because video footage of George Floyd's death and the ensuing protests was widely disseminated on social media and alternative sources, ensuring that virtually all adult U.S. citizens saw it whether they consumed mainstream news or not. This is particularly likely for youth, who have low rates of traditional news consumerism but are strong users of social media. One study found that in 2016, 97.5% of U.S. youth (between eighteen and twenty-four years old) used social media on a regular basis, and they accessed an average of 7.6 different social media sites (Vallanti, Johnson, Ilakkuvan, Jacobs, Graham, and Roth 2017). This makes it highly likely that they encountered information about the George Floyd protests even if they did not read newspapers or watch televised news. This is what Fletcher and Nielsen (2018) call "incidental exposure" to news—a phenomenon that occurs for all age groups but is particularly strong for youth. Therefore, while news consumerism was not relevant in 2020, what did matter is that the George Floyd protests were widely known in the U.S. at the time of the survey and thus likely on respondents' minds when they were asked about the acceptability of political violence.

Based on these results, we offer a revised model, depicted in figure 3 on the next page. In this amended theoretical model, we remove news coverage and news consumerism and replace those factors with information dissemination, which can occur in various ways, including social media. The critical factor is that this information becomes so widespread that it heightens the movement's salience, increasing the chance that citizens will judge acts of political violence based on this concrete case. Then, their opinion of the movement influences whether they will deem political violence acceptable or unacceptable. We recognize that timing also matters: the more time that passes between the movement event and the survey, the greater the probability that respondents will revert to making judgments about these controversial protest methods on an abstract level. Similarly, if a recent act of political violence does not become salient, abstract moral judgments will be made, and a shift in public opinion is less likely.

How generalizable is our theoretical model beyond the George Floyd protests? As Luft (2020, 2021) has argued, people may shift their attitudes about political violence yet again when a different movement poses a new situational variation. In one instance, people can be supportive of political violence and then, in a different instance, be morally opposed to it. The key factor shaping beliefs in any particular moment is how a person feels about the movement that is using political violence.

Figure 3. Revised Model of Social Movement Events as Situational Moral Shifters



The 2021 Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) survey results provide further evidence that public attitudes toward political violence have substantial plasticity. This survey, conducted after the January 6 Capitol riot, indicates that a right-wing movement can have a similar influence on public opinion regarding political violence. In fact, the PRRI survey results mirror our findings but in reverse. Like the George Floyd protests, footage of the January 6 attack was widely disseminated—both through traditional news sources and social media—thereby shifting people's thinking from the abstract to the concrete. The PRRI survey results indicate that 18% of the overall survey respondents agreed with the statement, "Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots might have to resort to violence in order to save the country." However, among those survey respondents who identified as Republican, 30% agreed with this statement, while only 11% of Democrats did. Among Republicans who trust far-right news sources (an indicator of how strongly their conservative identification is), 39% stated that violence might be necessary (Public Religion Research Institute Report 2022). Granted, the wording of this question is different from the ANES question, and thus they are not directly comparable. Nonetheless, conservatives' support for political violence is low after the George Floyd protests but high after the January 6 Capitol riot. Liberal views are the opposite: a high portion considered political violence acceptable after the George Floyd protests, but this dropped precipitously after the January 6 Capitol attack. This supports our revised theory that salient movement events can serve as the situational variation that instigates moral shifting regarding the legitimacy of political violence.

Are these changes in public opinion long-lasting? Based on these studies, can we conclude that we have entered an era where a sizeable number of U.S. citizens are ready to resort to violence to achieve their political goals? Some researchers argue that attitudes are fixed mainly in youth and subsequently resistant to change; long-lasting attitudinal change, therefore, typically happens slowly through generational replacement (Kiley and Vaisey 2020; Vaisey and Lizardo 2016). From this perspective, the changes in public opinion that we observed may simply be short-term trends or fleeting reactions to these recent movement events (Kiley and Vaisey 2021). However, given that 51.55 percent of eighteen to thirty-nine-year-olds in the 2020 ANES survey expressed some level of support for political violence, there may be generational replacement underway. We also note that some researchers argue that lasting cultural and attitudinal changes sometimes happen quickly and abruptly. When this occurs, it is typically instigated by a moment of social chaos or upheaval, revealing that old attitudes are

no longer relevant or useful, thereby ushering in more durable cultural change (Luft 2020). The George Floyd protests may have induced longer-term attitudinal change on political violence. It is simply too early to tell whether these moral shifts are transitory or enduring.

CONCLUSION

Political violence is quite rare in the United States. However, when it does erupt—typically as riots, property destruction, and street fighting—it can instigate a moral shift in public opinion regarding the acceptability of these methods. We have argued that those who strongly support the movements that use these tactics, and who share an ideological orientation with them, are most likely to shift toward greater acceptance of political violence. Conversely, those who oppose these movements, and hold a contrasting ideology, are likely to shift toward condemnation. Although we only examined evidence of this with the progressive Black Lives Matter movement, we propose that the reverse would occur if a right-wing movement commits political violence. Dramatic movement events—such as the George Floyd protests and the January 6 Capitol Riot—can catalyze shifts in public opinion because, when they are salient in the public's awareness, they function as a situational variation that changes people's judgments from the abstract to the concrete level.

We acknowledge, however, that factors beyond the George Floyd protests may cause these shifting judgments about political violence. For example, consistent with earlier research, the change in public opinion may reflect a diminishing sense of efficacy in traditional political and protest methods; this is something we were unable to measure since it was not asked in the surveys. We also recognize that we have not sufficiently explained some of our findings, such as why gender has lost its statistical significance in 2020, which counters decades of research findings.

Despite these limitations, we believe that these results are important, and we encourage social movement researchers to pay attention to how controversial protest events may influence public opinion on political violence. When movements use political violence, their most ardent supporters become increasingly accepting of these methods. This, in turn, may encourage movements to escalate their violent actions, which can have profound implications for how citizens engage in contentious politics.

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