

Pre-registration for “Allies and Agitators”

June 2019

In recent years, scholars have argued that nonviolent protests are more likely to succeed than violent ones due to the perceived legitimacy of nonviolence (Thomas and Louis 2013; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Schock 2005). Yet public opinion in the U.S. is best described as conflicted, and several interpretations vie for public dominance. In one framing, civil resistance is a fundamental American virtue and a means for ordinary people to protect their liberties (on the right) or advance social progress (on the left) when institutions or elites fail to act (Thoreau 2014; Kazin 1998). On the other hand, U.S. history has shown a public distrust, verging on hostility, toward grassroots action that imperils stability or threatens the well-being of dominant groups.

Research in cognitive psychology provides grounds to question whether an assessment of the intensity of tactics used in a protest—that is, how (non)violent they are—is independent of people’s prior political or ideological views. Experiments have shown that judgments about observable “facts” cannot be detached from preexisting biases and perceptual processes. People experience reflexive emotional responses to new stimuli based on their moral intuitions, and seek to rationalize them after the fact (Haidt 2001). For example, white police officers are more likely to perceive black children as older and less innocent than white children (Goff et al. 2014). People may even perceive something when there is really nothing to see: Experimentally induced lack of control causes people to perceive illusory patterns amidst random noise (Whitson and Galinsky 2008). These examples, from different substantive areas, illustrate how cognitive distortions can lead to pre-rational judgments and have real-world consequences.

We propose a theory of protest perceptions that incorporates psychological findings on implicit cognitive biases, and argue that the assimilation of information about a protesting group precedes and shapes perceptions of how (non)violent it is, which in turn affects judgments about its merits. People's first exposure to information about a mobilizing group—its demands, actions, and demographic makeup, for example—triggers an affective charge that is experienced as warm or cold feelings toward the group (Lodge and Taber 2005; Morris et al.2003; Redlawsk 2002). If prompted to render a judgment about the group's interaction with the physical world, they will engage in motivated reasoning consistent with their initial charge (Lodge and Taber 2013).

If a positive/negative response is triggered in a given instance, this effect can have implications for views on the legitimacy of protest more generally. We propose a causal chain in which the perceived level of (non)violence is endogenous to the interaction of a) information about a protesting group and b) partisan predispositions, which also shape policy views and abstract opinions about protests. Specifically, through the mediation of perceived violence, the interaction of tactics and partisan sentiments should be associated with c) immediate determinations of how to respond to protesters, d) attitudes on the importance of protest for democracy and e) support for punitive anti-protest policies in general. Figure 1 is a diagram of the hypothesized causal relationships.

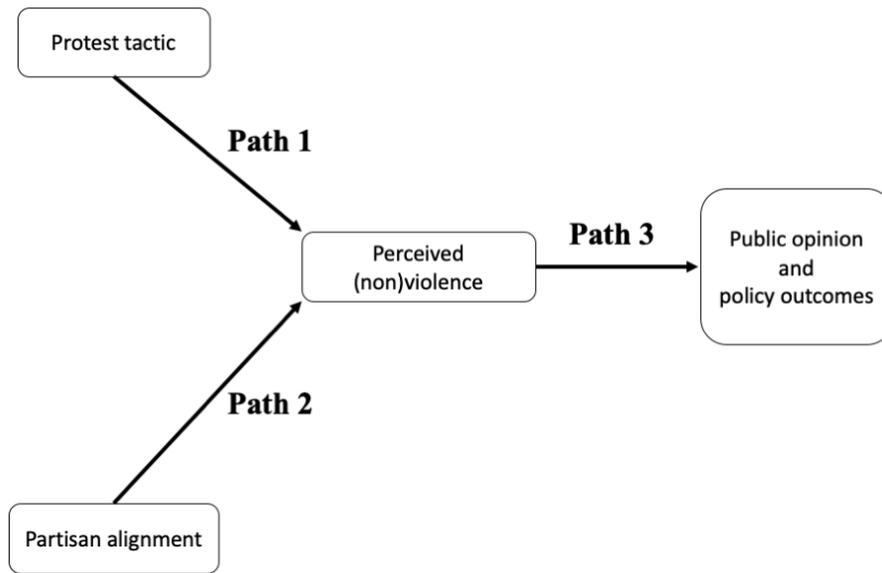


Figure 1. Theoretical path model of treatments and outcomes.

Hypotheses

From Figure 1 above we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Protest tactics should have an effect on the perceived level of violence

H2: Respondents whose partisan preference is aligned with the protest group should perceive the level of violence of the protest as lower

H3: Perceived level of violence should have a positive relationship on whether respondents think it is appropriate to arrest the organizers of the protest

H4: Perceived level of violence should have a negative relationship on whether respondents think protests are important for democracy

H5: Perceived level of violence should have a positive relationship on support for punitive anti-protest policies in general

Methodology

We use an original fictional vignette within a survey experiment to investigate how tactical choices shape sentiments toward grassroots collective action. Within the vignette—a description of a protest in the guise of a news story—we randomly assign varying protester group identity and tactical choices. To test this set of hypotheses, we intend to field a survey with an embedded experiment. It will be conducted on 1100 respondents on the Mechanical Turk platform, from which respondents were directed to the survey website.¹

The vignette describes a fictitious protest and randomly assigns one of two protesting groups and one of three tactics, in a 2x3 fully crossed design. The vignette is as follows:

A crowd of 200 people calling themselves [“Americans Against Racist Policing” / “Americans Against All Abortion”] gathered at city hall this morning. Larry Carter, 49, was among the participants. “Our political leaders are supposed to protect us, but they don’t. We are angry and feel our voices are not heard!” Carter said. When local officials refused to meet with the organizers, the group [held up placards and shouted slogans, some laced with profanity / blocked a nearby highway, bringing traffic to a standstill / threw rocks and other objects at the building].

All the elements in the vignette were chosen to isolate critical variables and minimize bias. Both “Americans Against Racist Policing” and “Americans Against All Abortion” were

¹ To ensure validity of the responses, we restrict eligibility to answer the survey to MTurk workers who lived in the United States and had at least 100 previous approvals and an approval rate of at least 95%. Each assignment was paid \$.35 for what we estimate is a 5-minute task.

devised to refer to salient political issues that have generated real-life social movements. The former is reminiscent of Black Lives Matter and is associated with Democrats. The latter is not represented by a single major movement but is associated with Republicans. We use fictitious groups in order not to activate conscious associations with existing movements, yet we provided enough information for readers to be able to form an impression and render a judgment.

The tactics in the vignette are typical of the repertoire of protests in the U.S. and are not associated with any party or faction. They represent gradations of direct action. Because the vignette does not state what the placards say or what damage, if any, is caused by throwing “rocks and other objects,” respondents must fill in the gaps in the narrative by imagining the contextual details. It is within the realm of possibility that certain kinds of profanity could be perceived as violent, while rocks that cause no injuries could be seen as nonviolent.

There are five dependent variables that correspond to different steps in the theorized causal chain: First, we ask how the respondent would describe the intensity of the protest, on a scale from completely nonviolent to completely violent. Second, we ask how much the respondent agrees with the goals of the protest, which acts as a validity check on the correspondence between attitudinal factors and the information in the vignette, providing a measure of approval for the protesters apart from their tactics. Third, we ask whether it would be appropriate to arrest the protesters, which represents a “law-and-order” response. This measure is related to, but does not automatically follow from, perceptions of violence, as it may be possible to disapprove of the tactics used but favor a non-punitive response.

Additional questions gauge how views about protests in general are shaped both by the treatments and by intervening variables that lie more proximate to the vignette. Thus, the fourth post-treatment question asks how much people “agree that protesters provide a useful service to

our democracy,” which tests the extent to which exposure to a single episode of protest can tap into ostensibly deep-rooted philosophical beliefs. Fifth, we ask whether people would support a law punishing certain types of protest actions, the text for which was adapted from a bill proposed by Arizona legislators in early 2017 (Christie 2017).² Views on this law indicate the extent to which perceptions of tactics or other aspects of the immediate episode can have broader public policy implications (Lodge and Taber 2013).

The main independent variables are the six combinations of treatments. To test the effect of partisan bias, we interact party affiliation with the protest group treatment. In addition, we include psychological and attitudinal variables that may be associated with attitudes toward protest: child-rearing values (Stenner 2005), age, education, race, sex, and income. The survey instrument also includes two manipulation checks.

Our analytical strategy is as follows. First, we present descriptive statistics and face validity checks. Then, since the dependent variables are ordinal Likert scales (e.g. strongly disagree to strongly agree), we test our claims using an ordinal logit model. We use weighted least squares with means and variance adjusted estimation (WLSMV), which performs better for categorical data (Beauducel and Herzberg 2006; Muthén and Asparouhov 2002). Finally, as the outcomes are sequential, we use a structural equation model to test paths of direct and indirect effects. We use the statistical software *R* for the ordinal logit models and *Mplus 8* for the structural equation model.

References

Beauducel, Andre, and Herzberg, Philipp Y. 2006. “On the performance of maximum

² The bill did not pass.

- likelihood versus means and variance adjusted weighted least squares estimation in CFA.” *Structural Equation Modeling* 13(2): 186–203.
- Chenoweth, Erica and Stephan, Maria J. 2001. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. Columbia University Press.
- Christie, Bob, “AZ Senate OKs Racketeering Charges for Riots.” AZCENTRAL., accessed Apr 22, 2019, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/arizona/2017/02/23/arizona-senate-oks-racketeering-charges-riots/98296298/>
- Goff, Phillip Atiba, Christian Jackson, Matthew, Leone, Di, Allison Lewis, Brook, Culotta, Carmen Marie, and Ann DiTomasso, Natalie. 2014. "The essence of innocence: Consequences of dehumanizing Black children." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 106(4): 526.
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2001 "The emotional dog and its rational tail: a social intuitionist approach to moral judgment." *Psychological Review* 108(4): 814.
- Lodge, Milton, and Taber, Charles S. 2005. "The automaticity of affect for political leaders, groups, and issues: An experimental test of the hot cognition hypothesis." *Political Psychology* 26(3): 455-482.
- Lodge, Milton and Taber, Charles S. 2013. *The rationalizing voter*. Cambridge University Press.
- Morris, James P., Squires, Nancy K., Taber, Charles S., and Lodge, Milton. 2003. "Activation of political attitudes: A psychophysiological examination of the hot cognition hypothesis." *Political Psychology* 24(4): 727-745.
- Muthén, Bengt, and Asparouhov, Tihomir. 2002 “Latent variable analysis with

categorical outcomes: Multiple-group and growth modeling in Mplus." *Mplus web notes* 4(5): 1-22.

Redlawsk, David P. 2002. "Hot cognition or cool consideration? Testing the effects of motivated reasoning on political decision making." *The Journal of Politics* 64(4): 1021-1044.

Schock, Kurt. 2005. *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies*. U of Minnesota Press.

Thomas, Emma F., and Louis, Winnifred R.. 2014. "When will collective action be effective? Violent and non-violent protests differentially influence perceptions of legitimacy and efficacy among sympathizers." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40(2): 263-276.