

The Black Lives Matter protests motivated people to vote in 2016. Will the protests this year do the same?

June 10 2020, by Molly Callahan



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The Black Lives Matter movement and protests of police violence played a major role in the 2016 election, according to new research led

by faculty from Northeastern University, the University of Massachusetts, Northwestern University, and George Mason University.

And, the protests happening [around the world](#) sparked by the [death of George Floyd](#), a Black man in Minnesota who was killed in police custody, may prove to have a similar effect in the 2020 election, says Kevin Drakulich, an associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at Northeastern who helped conduct the research.

The researchers, together with the American National Election Studies—one of the primary organizations that collects [public opinion](#) and political participation data from U.S. voters—surveyed a nationally representative sample of more than 3,600 U.S. citizens ages 18 and older.

They found that [Black Lives Matter](#), a [civil rights movement](#) founded in 2013 to eradicate white supremacy and combat violence against Black people, and its subsequent backlash energized people to vote in 2016 and affected their choice of candidate.

According to the study, people who expressed concern about biased policing and support for the civil rights movement were more likely to vote for Hillary Clinton, the Democratic nominee who positioned herself as [a supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement](#). The study also found that people who expressed [support for police](#) were connected to votes for Donald J. Trump, the Republican nominee who also repeatedly expressed support for police at his [rallies](#) and who accused the Black Lives Matter movement of ["dividing America."](#)

"The effect was substantial on both sides," Drakulich says. "There were a lot of people who were motivated by the BLM movement and the inequalities it raised, and there were a lot of people who were motivated against it."

Critically, the researchers also found that rhetoric related to "supporting police" was often coded language used by "voters concerned about the relative status of Black vs. White Americans," they [wrote](#) in their report.

They found that support for the police, in and of itself, didn't seem to have been an important motivation for voting for Trump. The researchers found that people who said they supported the police also tended to identify themselves as Republican and felt "racial resentment." The researchers define "[racial resentment](#)" as having "views [that] are primarily driven by social concerns about relative racial group positions," and that such resentment is "connected to both explicit and implicit indicators of racial animus."

Thus, the researchers found that "support for police" often served as a proxy for voters [who harbor](#) anti-black feelings and a fondness for the historic racial and class hierarchies in the U.S.

Researchers define this sort of proxy language as a "dog whistle," which they described as "speaking in code to a target audience." Such rhetoric, they wrote, "allows for politicians to speak about taboo subjects while retaining plausible deniability that they violated any social norms."

Drakulich points out that (now President) Trump [tweeted](#) "LAW & ORDER!" during the recent Black Lives Matter protests, but not during [protests in April and May to reopen](#) the U.S. economy. The reopening protests, during which armed civilians shouted anti-government slogans in public spaces, came after public health measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 shut down non-essential businesses.

Drakulich says that the president's timing is an indication that his tweets may serve as dog whistles to voters who oppose the Black Lives Matter movement.

"The context is important," Drakulich says.

In their study of the 2016 election, researchers queried voters about their attitudes toward the Black Lives Matter movement and toward police.

They found that people who felt "warmly" toward the police saw them as unbiased, and those who felt "coldly" toward the Black Lives Matter movement were all "substantially more likely to vote for Trump than people who expressed the opposite feelings."

The differences were particularly stark when the researchers compared people based solely on their feelings toward the movement—those who felt "coldly" toward Black Lives Matter had a 78 percent likelihood of voting for Trump, whereas those who felt "warmly" toward the [movement](#) had only a 12 percent likelihood of voting for him.

The U.S. today is in a remarkably similar situation as in 2016—a [pattern](#) of [extrajudicial](#) killings of [Black people](#) has incited protests of racially biased police violence across the country, while counter-protests in support of [police](#) crop up in their wake.

Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, has positioned himself as [supportive of the civil rights movement](#), while Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee, has considered [using the U.S. military](#) to quell protests.

It's difficult to predict whether these circumstances, coupled with more deeply entrenched political divides and a pandemic that will likely change the way U.S. citizens vote, will result in a similar outcome in November, Drakulich says. But one thing is clear: Civil rights and racial equality are going to be "really important issues again for this election," he says.

"It was a little unclear to me even a few months ago the degree to which these issues would be important factors in this election—as they were in 2016," he says. "But now it is clear that yes, they will be."

More information: Kevin Drakulich et al. Race and policing in the 2016 presidential election: Black lives matter, the police, and dog whistle politics, *Criminology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9125.12239](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12239)

Provided by Northeastern University

Citation: The Black Lives Matter protests motivated people to vote in 2016. Will the protests this year do the same? (2020, June 10) retrieved 21 March 2023 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-06-black-protests-people-vote-year.html>

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