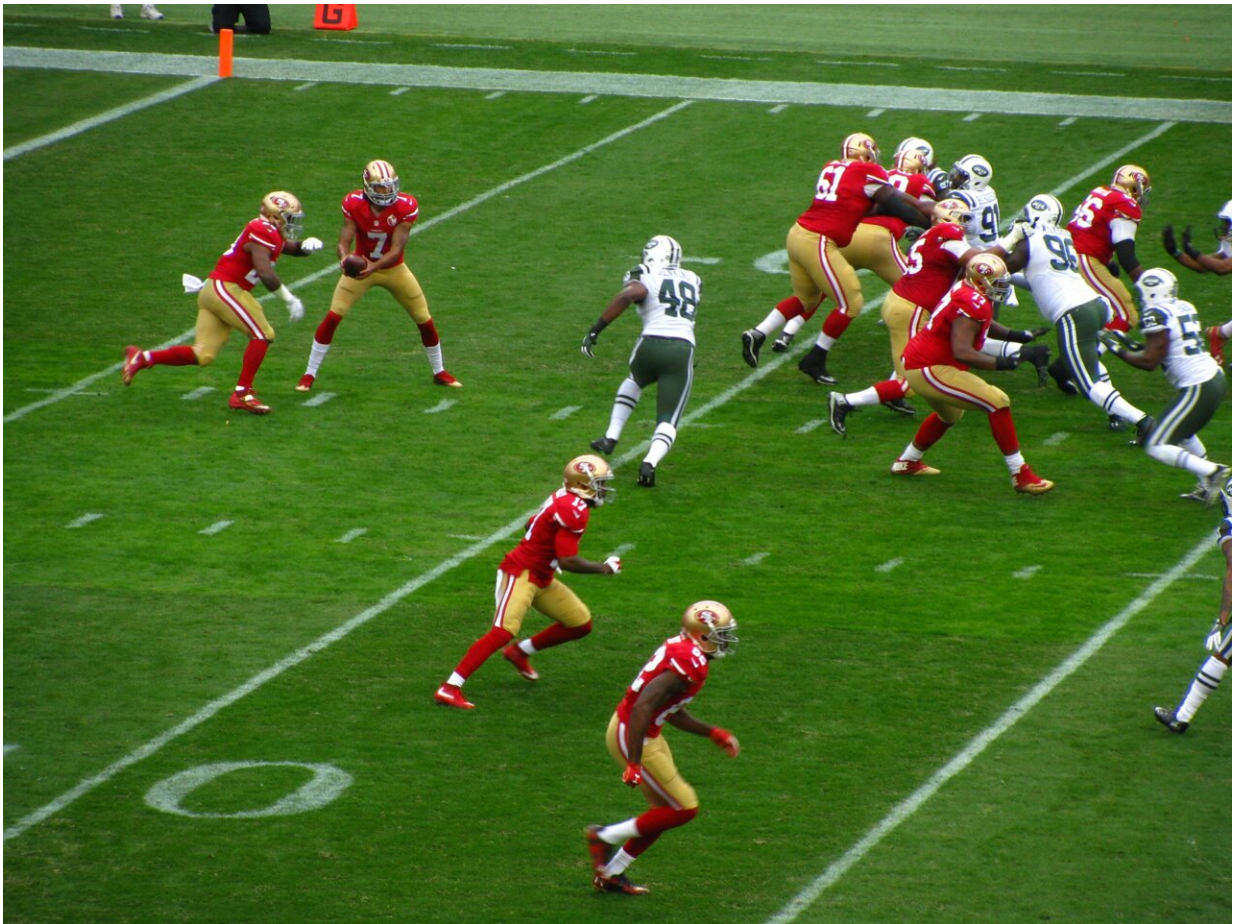


Race, politics divide Americans on sports issues

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Although some people may yearn for sports to be free of political or

racial divisiveness, a new study shows how impossible that dream may be.

Researchers found that Americans' views on two hot-button issues in sports were sharply divided by racial, ethnic and political identities. In addition, their opinions on topics like the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement also were linked to their beliefs about the two sports issues.

The study analyzed opinions on whether [college athletes](#) should be paid and whether it is acceptable for pro athletes to protest racial injustice by not standing during the national anthem.

The gap between Americans on those two topics was sometimes stark—there was an 82-percentage-point difference in whether people supported athletes protesting during the national anthem (a low of 13% to a high of 95%) depending on combinations of race, [political orientation](#), voting intentions and beliefs about issues like BLM.

"Sports are and have increasingly become a central part of the culture wars," said Chris Knoester, co-author of the study and associate professor of sociology at The Ohio State University.

"Sports are not a neutral ground."

The study, published online recently in the journal *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, was co-authored by Rachel Allison, associate professor of sociology at Mississippi State University, and David Ridpath, associate professor of sports administration at Ohio University.

While many people believe the political divide concerning sports found in this study is a modern phenomenon, it really is not, Allison said.

"We like to think that sport is all about fun and entertainment, what we like to do or watch outside of our 'real' lives at work or in our families, and so in a sphere somehow outside of politics," she said.

"But the history of sport shows that it has never been outside of the political. Our study shows that continues to be the case."

Data for the study came from the online Taking America's Pulse 2016 Class Survey, designed and run by researchers at Cornell University and the GfK Group. The survey included 1,461 Americans.

Overall, the study found white adults were particularly likely to be opposed to paying college athletes (69%) and protests during the national anthem (73%). Black adults were especially likely to be supportive, with only 29% and 32%, respectively, opposed to these rights for athletes.

Latino adults and other adults of color were generally more supportive of these rights for athletes than white adults, but not as supportive as Black adults.

"In large part, we think these racial and ethnic differences occur because paying college athletes and allowing protests during the national anthem are frequently seen as antiracist actions particularly supporting Black athletes," Knoester said.

Other results in the study support this, particularly those related to Americans' beliefs about two race-related issues outside of sports.

One issue was racial discrimination in education: Participants were asked whether [white students](#), or Black and Latino students, are advantaged in U.S. educational institutions.

The second issue was BLM. Survey participants were asked whether

BLM advocates for Black lives mattering more than other lives.

Participants' beliefs on these two issues were strongly linked to their views on paying colleges athletes and [athlete](#) protests, the study found. As expected, the impact of these beliefs was compounded by the race and ethnicity of those surveyed.

White adults who were upset about BLM and who believed Black and Latino students were advantaged in education had a 75% predicted probability of being opposed to athletes being paid and an 85% probability of being opposed to athletes protesting.

Meanwhile, Black adults who believed white students were advantaged and who supported BLM had a 28% predicted probability of opposing athlete payments and a 21% probability of opposing athlete protests.

Self-identified conservatism and intentions to vote for Donald Trump for president (the survey was done in the month before the 2016 election) were also strongly linked to opposing pay for college athletes and pro athlete protests. Liberals and those intending to vote for Hillary Clinton were much more supportive of athletes' rights on both issues.

"We found that race, ethnicity and political beliefs all were linked to views about these two sports issues," Ridpath said.

"While political views were important, they did not completely erase the effects of people's race and ethnicity."

For example, it wasn't just conservative white adults who opposed paying college athletes. White adults who identified as middle-of-the-road politically were also generally opposed to paying college athletes (a 66% predicted probability).

Meanwhile, Black adults with moderate political views had only a 35% probability of being opposed. Other people of color with moderate political views were about 50/50 on opposing payment to college athletes.

Combining various identities solidified opposition or support on these two issues, the study found.

For example, a Black adult who was extremely liberal, intended to vote for Clinton, who thought white students were advantaged in education and who didn't think BLM inappropriately valued Black lives had a 13% predicted probability of being opposed to athletes' protests during the national anthem.

Meanwhile, a white adult who was extremely conservative, intended to vote for Trump, thought white students were not advantaged and believed BLM inappropriately valued Black lives had a 95% predicted probability of being opposed to athlete protests.

Since the data in this study was collected, public opinions have appeared to shift somewhat toward the rights of college athletes to get paid and pro athletes to [protest](#), Knoester said. And those shifts have translated into policy changes.

NCAA [college](#) athletes have recently been given [the opportunity to financially benefit](#) from their name, image and likeness.

And the International Olympic Committee [recently gave athletes more scope to protest](#) at the Tokyo games, although significant restrictions remain.

But the controversies are likely to persist, and politics and race will remain a presence in sports, Knoester said.

"Racial and political issues are a part of society, so they will be a part of sports," he said.

More information: Rachel Allison et al, Public opinions about paying college athletes and athletes protesting during the national anthem, *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* (2021). [DOI: 10.1017/S1742058X21000229](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X21000229)

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