Patriots or Criminals?: An Experiment on How Media Framing Shapes Public Perception of Social Movements

Daniel J. Simmons*

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Abstract

Social movement scholars have assumed riots are distinguished from protests based on the presence of violence in the former. Yet, research has never demonstrated that the public views both events as distinct, nor how much violence is required for a riot. The race of event participants could also play a role, with black social movements viewed as riots and white social movements as protests. Determining the factors that distinguish riots from protests can help explain why one movement is successful in persuading opinion, and clarify why the public views some events as legitimate civic expression and others as hooliganism. I conduct an experiment to determine if an event's violence level and the actors' race, as described by the media, influence perceptions of the event as a riot or protest. I find that as violence increases, respondents are more likely to call the event a riot, yet surprisingly, race has no effect.

Introduction

In late April of 2015, Freddie Gray died after falling into a coma while in police custody. Gray was arrested for allegedly displaying an illegal switchblade after running away from police officers after both parties made eye contact. While being transported to a holding facility in a police van, Gray sustained fatal injuries to his spinal cord. Gray's death came at a time when a series of killings of black men by police officers had received significant national attention.[1] In addition to media coverage of the death of Gray and others, the public's reaction to these events was also heavily covered and scrutinized. The Baltimore public began a series of nightly protests, culminating in a march following Gray's funeral. These protests were largely peaceful, but in some cases resulted in tense and sometimes violent confrontations between protestors and police officers. This escalation in confrontation culminated in wide-spread looting and property damage the afternoon and evening following Gray's funeral. The attendees at the nightly protests were quickly outnumbered by journalists hoping to capture the next outbreak of violence live. While some outlets continued to refer to the nightly activities as protests, others referred to them as riots or as tense situations that could violently erupt.

One of the biggest obstacles proponents of social movements face is how to effectively share their message of social change with the public, persuading the public to support the idea of the social movement (Mattoni and Trerè 2014). Access to sharing that message is often restricted by the media, as the Baltimore protestors learned first-hand. The gate-keeping power of the media can signal to the public the legitimacy and appropriateness of a social movement through the frames of the media's reporting (Druckman 2003). Terms like "protest" or "riot" are used to characterize some of the most common events associated with social movements. Yet, the dividing line between what constitutes a protest and what qualifies as a riot seems fuzzy. The coverage of the situation in Baltimore in April 2015

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[1]These include the shooting of 18-year old Michael Brown by a Ferguson, Missouri police officer in August 2014, the November 2014 shooting death of 12-year old Tamir Rice by police officers in Cleveland, Ohio, and the shooting of 50-year old Walter Scott by a police officer in North Charleston, South Carolina.

is only one such example of the apparent fuzzy and inconsistent application of protest or riot to an event. The dividing line between the terms is similarly fuzzy within academic literature, with riots and protest often used interchangeably within an article to describe the same event. This paper seeks to answer how the characteristics of a social movement event, specifically the level of violence and the race of the actors involved, as described by the media influence citizen perception of the event as being a riot or a protest.

The selection of which term to use in describing an event does not have arbitrary implications. Rioting is a criminal act, whereas protesting is a constitutionally protected form of expression. Thus, it is important to a social movement or other organization promoting social change through events to know where the dividing line is between protesting and rioting; these groups want to be credited with the positive traits of protests and avoid the potential negative consequences of being associated with riots. Identifying the reasons for why an event is labeled a riot vs. a protest is important not just for establishing clarity in discussion about these events, but in determining whether the public sees the events as legitimate acts of alternative political participation or simple hooliganism. Legitimate acts may be likely to lead to further discussion, potentially constructive, that invites the public to take a closer look at the aims of the social movement and its proponents. Alternatively, those found promoting hooliganism may be collectively dismissed by the public as criminals and layabouts. A social movement seeks to change some aspect of society they find objectionable (Mattoni and Trerè 2014). Changing society is hard to do in the best of circumstances. If the movement is labeled and viewed by the public as being an agent of crime rather than an agent of reform, it seems unlikely that the movement will succeed in achieving its aims.

Social movement scholars have suggested that the public views riots as distinct from protests. Specifically, research has assumed that the public identifies riots as more violent than protests (Nam 2006; Piven and Cloward 1992) and will associate violence more often with the actions of black people than with the actions of whites (Dovidio, et al. 1986; Duncan 1976). Surprisingly, however, there have been no empirical tests to confirm that these

assumptions are correct. It seems intuitively likely that the public does view these two terms as distinct events, and that race and violence play a significant role in determining which term the public applies to a given event. Yet, without testing, these assumptions remain unverified speculation rather than empirically-supported conclusions. Using an experiment to test these assumptions presents an opportunity to isolate violence and race as potential causal mechanisms with significant effects on the public's categorization of social movement events. Furthermore, an experiment enables the field of social movement research to begin dealing with and debating empirical findings instead of unproven assumptions.

The next section discusses how scholars have assumed that riots are distinguished from protests based on violence, as well as discussing the potential effects of race and media framing in shaping public views of social movement events. The experimental design used to test how the public distinguishes riots from protests is then described in detail. The experiment employs a subject population of over 500 students in Northern California. The results of the experiment are presented and discussed; specifically, as the violence described at the event became more severe, the likelihood that respondents identified the event as a riot rather than a protest increased significantly. Curiously, the reported race of the participants had no significant effect on event perception. Finally, the implications of the experimental results are discussed and an outline for potential avenues of future research that proceeds from this paper's initial findings is given.

Distinguishing Riots from Protests

There are many definitions of protests and riots given in conjunction with the work of social movement scholars. Some state explicit definitions of protests, but left out any mention of riots (Everett 1992), while others have suggested only implicit definitions of protests (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Many scholars, when they include riots as an explicit part of the discussion of social movements, define riots as distinct from protests due

to the presence of violence (Nam 2006; Piven and Cloward 1992), while others have simply defined riots as a subset of protesting (Jenkins 1995) or as a disorganized form of protesting (Paige 1971). In short, many scholars do see a need to distinguish riots from protests, but that is where the agreement generally ends.

The most common distinction suggested between protests and riots is the presence of violence. Riots are commonly distinguished by the presence of violence, specifically "the use of physical force usually evinced by the destruction of property, the wounding or killing of people, the use of riot control equipment, and by the rioters use of various weapons. If the destruction of property is an essential component of the observed behavior, the event is a riot rather than a protest" (Taylor and Jodice 1983, 29). While the previous definition provides details of what kinds of violence are emblematic of riots, it does little to address questions concerning the scale of the violence. How much property destruction is sufficient to call something a riot rather than a protest; is one broken car window enough? Is a single incident of someone receiving a bruise from a thrown rock sufficient "wounding of people" to constitute a riot? In many protests there are isolated incidents of violence, such as a handful of people tossing water bottles at police officers. Does a single isolated incident change the classification of an event from a protest to a riot? Is the mere presence of riot-gear-clad police officers enough to warrant classifying an event as a riot, absent the other possible indicators?

To some, this attention to definitions may appear to be a trivial quibble over semantics, or a nitpicking of insignificant ambiguities. These definitions are important, however. Many scholars acknowledge that riots and protests are not synonymous terms; rather, they describe distinct types of social movement events. Indeed, scholars are not alone in making this distinction. First Amendment protections are granted to anyone participating in a peaceful assembly, but rioting or unlawful assembly[2] are punishable under state and federal laws. Distinguishing between what is constitutionally protected behavior and what is illegal

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[2]An unlawful assembly is generally defined in state and federal law as a group of three or more persons meet for the purpose of engaging in an illegal activity.

activity is not important only to lawmakers or juries, but to social movement leaders and activists.

Social movements aim to reform aspects of society they disagree with (Dalton 2002). Reform typically implies working within the current social system to effect change, rather than a revolution that seeks to abolish the current social system and replace it with something else. Protesting would tend to fall in the category of reform-focused activity while riots may be the favored tactics of revolutionaries. A social movement that seeks to effect real change will want to know how the public distinguishes between protests and riots, not only to avoid unintended legal consequences, but to elicit a public reaction amenable to considering the grievances presented by the social movement and the suggested reforms.

While violence may be a key distinction between protests and riots, there is reason to believe that not all acts of violence are judged equally. Specifically, the race of those engaged in collective action, violent or peaceful, may play a pivotal role in how social movement events are defined by the general public. Social movement events that are predominantly orchestrated by and attract the support of black people have to navigate stereotypes the public employs about collective action by blacks generally. Prior research by Dovidio, et al. (1986) has found that the public more often associates positive characteristic traits with whites than blacks, and also more often associates negative characteristics with blacks than whites. In short, the public is inclined to believe that black people are predisposed to behaving negatively while white people are seen as being inherently good-natured (McConnell and Leibold 2001; Pearson, Dovidio, and Gaertner 2009).

This implicit stereotyping could affect the way the public interprets social movement events that are dominated by one race or the other. The public may express greater empathy and reserve judgment when evaluating a social movement event that is predominantly attended by whites, while viewing a social movement event predominantly attended by blacks as a threat to public order. Such an interpretation of public attitudes toward social movement events is supported by research that has found self-reported racial attitudes and the

holding of implicit stereotypes predicts bias in behavior towards people of different races, with black people more likely to receive unfavorable judgments than white people (Dovidio, Kawakami, and Gaertner 2002; Amodio and Devine 2006).

Additionally, Duncan (1976) found that white people are generally presumed to be forced into violence as a result of a particular situation, while black people are viewed as inherently prone to commit violent acts. If these stereotypes regarding the predisposition of people of different racial backgrounds to commit violent acts are widespread among the general public, it suggests that the public would be more inclined to believe black people engaging in collective action are rioting while white people engaged in similar activities are protesting. Indeed, Lang and Lang (1968) found that in tense racial situations, even small events will be suppressed by law enforcement officials as if they were riots, regardless of if any violent actions are being carried out by the event participants. If protesting and rioting are distinguished by violence, and blacks and whites are associated as being more and less likely to engage in violence, respectively, then it stands to follow that black people should be more likely to be associated with rioting than white people, and less likely to be associated with protesting than whites.

Violence may be the distinguishing feature between protests and riots, but it is not clear how much violence is required before a protest crosses the line and becomes a riot. Additionally, not all violence may be viewed as equal. The public may have a lower tolerance and, thus, higher expectation of violence stemming from a social movement event carried out by black people, while expressing greater tolerance and lower expectation of violence from social movement events conducted by whites. In order for a social movement event's violence or racial characteristics to effect public opinion, however, the public must first be informed about the event. The media often acts as the primary gate-keeper through which information about social movement events, including the degree to which they are violent and the race of the event's participants, is disseminated to the general public. As such, the media cues the public through the attention given to the social movement event as to whether or not it

is important to have an opinion about the event (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). Consequently, understanding how the media presents information about a social movement is an important piece to understanding the puzzle of distinguishing riots from protests.

Social movements are among the most likely political activities to get media coverage (Burstein 2004). Protests and riots make for good media stories because they are unordinary events. These events typically involve a non-trivial number of people who are participating in generally disruptive activities ranging from congesting streets and sidewalks as they demonstrate, to destroying property and threatening public safety. Such events make for captivating live television and produce eye-catching articles. As a result, the news media can assume that they have an attentive audience when they present coverage on social movement events. Assuming the audience is paying close attention, the media may take advantage of the situation to frame the events in a specific way when presenting them to the audience.[3] The use of specific frames allows the media to more effectively craft the unfolding event as a narrative, which can more easily be understood by the audience (Berinsky and Kinder 2006). Reporters may focus on the apparent two sides of the issue and interview specific individuals on either side, portraying them as representative of the respective views. The framing of social movement events enables the media to carefully manipulate the way in which the issue at the heart of the movement is presented while maintaining the appearance of simply describing the facts (Stone 1989).

The framing done by the media could be an attempt to focus the audience on a particular point of view. The purpose of such framing, rather than being an attempt to convince the audience of a particular point of view, is more likely an effort to confirm the opinions already held by the audience (Jerit and Barabas 2012). This effect has been found to be especially prevalent among partisans, with one seeking out media that produces news that conforms with one's own party identification or ideological viewpoint (Jerit and Barabas 2012; Rahn

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[3]See Druckman 2010 and Kahneman 2011 for comprehensive, yet concise illustrations of what framing is and is not.

1993; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010). With the wide proliferation of media outlets through cable television and the Internet over the last thirty years, the media has an incentive to differentiate themselves from their competitors by ascribing to a particular viewpoint (Garrett 2009; Messing and Westword 2014). That identity attracts an audience that shares the particular viewpoint and is searching for confirmation that their opinions and beliefs are valid (Stroud 2008).

Social movement events are popular political activities that are susceptible to framing by the news media, in part because the audience depends heavily on the media during periods of social change or conflict to determine their beliefs about the ongoing issue (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur 1976). Indeed, one of the classical studies on framing concerns a social movement event. Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997) showed students at The Ohio State University one of two manipulated news stories about a KKK rally on campus. One of the news stories framed the controversy over the rally as a civil liberties issue, arguing that even though some speech may be objectionable, a government school should not have the authority to restrict speech. The other news story framed the rally controversy as a public order issue, arguing that allowing the rally to proceed risked the safety of the general public.

The study found that students exposed to the civil liberties frame were more tolerant of having the KKK rally on campus, while students exposed to the public order frame were less tolerant of the rally (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997). The OSU experiment demonstrates how highlighting certain aspects of a social movement event can potentially alter public views about the event. Both stories contained the same information about the rally; neither story presented any false information about the rally. This point is important, as the news was simply reporting and interpreting the facts of the situation, not altering the facts in order to tell a particular story.[4] Each story, however, emphasized different potential consequences of holding the rally. The same principle could explain how the public classifies

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[4]Gaines, et al. (2007) found that the interpretation of facts, not beliefs, drives opinion formation. In short, individuals do not rely on their beliefs of what happened at an event to derive their opinion of it, but instead rely on the facts and then interpret the facts in a way to justify their preferred opinion.

social movement events, specifically as either protests or riots. The more violence that is highlighted in coverage of the event, the more likely it is that the public becomes concerned with public order and views the event as a dangerous riot instead of a tolerable protest.

Race is another characteristic that the news media highlights when framing stories. Specifically, black people are often framed in a negative way when reported in the news. Past research has focused primarily on crime or welfare policy when looking at the use of racial frames in the news (Mendelberg 2001; Peffley and Hurwitz 2007; Valentino 1999; Virtanen and Huddy 1998). As noted previously, black people are more likely to be viewed as violent than white people in a similar situation (Duncan 1976). When the news media discusses a social movement event, a focus on the race of the event participants may call up racial stereotypes and prejudice the opinion of the audience about the event. As a result, the public should be expected to have a lower tolerance threshold for violence by black social movement participants than white social movement participants because of stereotypes about a predisposition for violence among black people. Two social movement events, differentiated only by the race of the participants in each event, that engage in similar acts of mild to moderate violence[5] should be classified differently by the public according to this theory. An event of white people will be labeled as a protest and an event of black people will be labeled as a riot. The media, thus, can frame an event to tell a specific story simply by focusing on the race of the actors involved. Popular stereotypes will guide the public towards a particular interpretation of the facts based on those prior prejudices.

In summary, the media's framing of violence and race at social movement events is expected to play a significant role in how the public classifies the events, specifically as either protests or riots. This expectation gives rise to three specific hypotheses to be tested through an experiment. First, H_1 : *As an event's level of violence, as depicted by the media, becomes more severe, respondents will increasingly classify the event as a riot as opposed to a protest.* This first hypothesis follows from the social movement literature that riots

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[5]Such as isolated incidents of throwing plastic water bottles at police officers, breaking the windows of an abandoned vehicle, minor fist fights, etc.

are associated with violence. It is expected, in keeping with the literature, that the more violent an event is reported to be, the more likely the public is to classify the event as a riot rather than a protest. This hypothesis is an empirically-testable version of the assumption that many social movement scholars have made when discussing protests and riots. The second hypothesis focuses on the racial characteristic of a social movement event: H_2 : *An event described by the media as being made up of black participants should be more likely to be classified by respondents as a riot as opposed to a protest, relative to the same event described as being made up of white participants.* This hypothesis follows from the discussion on racial stereotypes, namely, that black people will be viewed as more likely to cause violence because they are inherently predisposed to do so. The final hypothesis explains how social movement events are expected to be classified when violence and race are reported together in a news frame: H_3 : *When the descriptions of violence and race are interacted, respondents should be more likely to classify an event of as a riot as opposed to a protest, at a lower level of violence for black participants relative to the same event described as having white participants.* As noted previously, the public's tolerance threshold for violence at a social movement event should be expected to be lower for an event attended primarily by black people than a similar event attended primarily by white people, because of negative racial stereotypes about blacks and violence. Therefore, it will take a lower degree of violence within a black social movement event than a white social movement event for the public to classify the event as a riot than a protest.

Experimental Design

An experiment is used to test the potential effects of media portrayals of event violence and participants' race on whether a social movement event is classified as a protest or a riot. The experimental method is best suited to addressing this question as it allows for the control of the many potential variables that differ from one social movement event to the

next. For example, the topics of some events, such as advocating against funding cuts to K-12 music and arts programs, or events organized to oppose the construction of a Wal-Mart in a small community are simply not likely to be accompanied by violence in part because it does not seem reasonable that participants or those opposing the event's position would express their views through violence on such an issue. Examining the counterfactual of the non-violent event with an identical event that was violent is unlikely to be a possibility by examining real-world data.

Similarly, participants' race is also difficult to examine as a variable through real-world data. A social movement event that occurs in a predominantly black community is simply more likely to attract black participants than white participants. The same principle would hold true for recruiting black participants to an event held in a predominantly white community. Finding a natural variation of the two primary independent variables of interest without using an experiment is simply unlikely to occur without having to juggle an array of potentially significant confounding variables such as the issue being raised, or the location of the event. Using an experimental design allows for the control of the environment in which the social movement event is reported to occur, preventing confounding variables from impacting the analysis.

The experimental treatments are administered through a simulated news vignette. The vignette is designed to be formatted in the way a wire service, such as the AP or Reuters, would deliver a brief alert about a news event. Administering the treatments in this way allows for the appearance of the information as being presented by a news organization without the accompanying confounding variable of bias stemming from the specific source of the news. For example, explicitly including identifying features of AP, Reuters, or any other news organization could bias responses due to personal preferences for or against the source of the news information. While research questions examining the potential effect of source bias or selective exposure may potentially be interesting follow-up experiments,[6]

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[6]Stroud (2010), for example, notes that partisan selective exposure of media and political information leads to increased mass polarization. Selective exposure could result in media framing that seeks to cue partisan

eliminating the possibility that these variables confound the effects of reported violence or event participants' race is necessary for answering the question posed in this paper.

The experiment, outlined in Table 1, is a 3x3 factorial design. There are two treatments, one that manipulates the race of the participants of the event described by the media, and another treatment that manipulates the level of violence described at the event. The race treatment, R_j, varies in three ways: R_0 includes no explicit mention of participants' race in the news vignette, R_1 introduces an explicit mention within the news vignette of the event participants as white, and R_2 introduces an explicit mention within the news vignette of the event participants as black.[7] Additionally, to try to ensure the racial treatment is picked up by the respondent, a second instance of the race treatment uses a stereotyped name, Jake for R_1 and DeShawn for R_2, for a man who gives a quote in the news vignette. The use of stereotyped names, in particular the use of DeShawn and Jake, has been used in previous research that investigated responsiveness of congressional staff to constituent e-mails (Butler and Broockman 2011). These particular names were used because they were previously shown to be among the most racially-segregated names in the U.S. The name DeShawn is almost exclusively applied to African-Americans and the name Jake is almost exclusively applied to whites (Fryer and Levitt 2004).

The violence treatment, V_k, varies with V_0 introducing an explicit mention within the news vignette of no violence occurring at the event, V_1 introducing an explicit mention within the news vignette of minor violence occurring in the form of a few participants throwing water bottles and being subsequently arrested, and V_2 which introduces an explicit mention within the news vignette of severe violence occurring in the form of several participants throwing rocks, vandalizing vehicles, and being subsequently arrested.[8]

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or ideological heuristics in order to persuade the audience to form an opinion about a social movement event that is congruent with their partisan or ideological preferences.

[7]Each version of the race treatment is mutually exclusive of the other versions. For example, if a respondent receives the R_2 treatment, they will read a version of the vignette that only mentions the event participants' race as black.

[8]Each version of the violence treatment is mutually exclusive of the other versions. For example, if a respondent receives the V_2 treatment, they will read a version of the vignette that only mentions the incident of severe violence.

Table 1: Experimental Design to Test Influence of Race and Violence on Event Classification

	No mention of violence (V_0)	Incident of moderate violence (V_1)	Incident of severe violence (V_2)
No race description (R_0)	$V_0 R_0$ (Control)	$V_1 R_0$	$V_2 R_0$
White participants (R_1)	$V_0 R_1$	$V_1 R_1$	$V_2 R_1$
Black participants (R_2)	$V_0 R_2$	$V_1 R_2$	$V_2 R_2$

The control group version of the news vignette, in which neither of the violence or race treatments are introduced, is included for reference below. The bolded sections in the vignette indicate where the treatments would be introduced. Each of the specific treatments that would be inserted in the bolded sections is displayed in Table 4 in Appendix A.

HOUSTON - Members of Houston's growing downtown (R_j **- crowd description**) community took to the streets this weekend to express outrage over the city's handling of a corruption scandal within the city council. Several council members were discovered to have accepted campaign donations from construction companies currently bidding on the rights to construct new apartment complexes. The timing and source of the donations have concerned the community, especially as the construction companies in question do not intend to include affordable units. "The city council promised there would be more affordable housing downtown. Now they are being bribed to break their promises," said a **man (R_j - name)** who joined the crowd outside city hall. Police were monitoring the crowd, **but said there had been no arrests made (V_k)**.

Respondents were first presented with one of the nine versions of the news vignette. After reading the news vignette, respondents were then asked to classify the event as one of four given options: protest, riot, parade, or vigil.[9] Finally, respondents give answers to a series

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[9]Parade and vigil were given as options in order to not force respondents into an either-or decision (e.g. the respondent did not think the event was a protest, so they were left to conclude it must have been a riot since no other option was available) as well as to identify potential respondents who were not closely reading

of questions about the event as well as their personal demographics. The complete survey

instrument is included in Appendix A, including all of the possible answers respondents could

select.[10]

Data and Results

The experiment was conducted over four days during the last week of November 2016 in

the experimental labs maintained by the Department of Political Science at the University

of California, Davis.[11] Respondents were recruited from undergraduate political science

courses and were offered extra credit by their course instructor for their participation. The

respondents signed-in at the lab office by initialing next to their name so extra credit could

be assigned, then taken to the computer lab.[12] Respondents then completed the experiment

anonymously using the Qualtrics survey program. Once the respondents had completed the

survey, they were dismissed and thanked for their participation. The experiment had 502

respondents.[13] A logistical regression model is used to analyze the results as the dependent

variable is binary; respondents either identified the event in the news vignette as a riot,

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the vignette. These two terms were selected because they are also categories of large-group events, but are
not usually forms of collective political action.

[10]The survey first included several questions about California propositions that were on the 2016 ballot
before proceeding to the news vignette. The questions were asked in conjunction with another unrelated
experiment that had no relation to the one discussed in this paper. The propositions had no relation to
social movements, race, violence, or to the situation depicted in the news vignette. The questions asked
about propositions were randomized across the sample that participated in the experiment described in this
paper. As such, there is no concern about possible confounding variables or contamination stemming from
the additional questions at the start of the survey. The questions asked about the propositions are included
in Appendix A.

[11]The labs consist of nine computers in each of two rooms with physical dividers between the computers
ensuring respondents can answer survey questions privately.

[12]Students could receive extra credit in multiple classes, but could only take the survey one time. At no
time was a respondent's name in anyway associated with their survey responses; respondents only initialed
their name on a sign-in sheet located in a separate room from where the survey was administered and was
used solely for the purpose of notifying course instructors which students had participated and, thus, earned
extra credit. Respondents were allowed to withdraw from participating in the experiment at any time and
would not lose their extra credit if they did so.

[13]Appendix B includes several tables of descriptive statistics of the sample, including gender, party ID,
ideology, and race. A total of 513 students participated in the experiment, but eleven students did not
complete the survey in full. As a result, those eleven students are not included in the analysis.

or not a riot.[14] The coefficient values are reported as Model 1 in Table 2, while Figure 1 displays the coefficients graphically. The dependent variable is the word selected to define the event. Primary independent variables of interest are the violence and race treatments. I also include a series of control variables in the model, specifically, respondent's gender, race (coded as either white or non-white), party identification, ideology, and an index variable based on responses to three questions that measured the respondent's racial bias.[15]

Figure 1: Logistic Regression of Event Description on Treatment and Control Variables
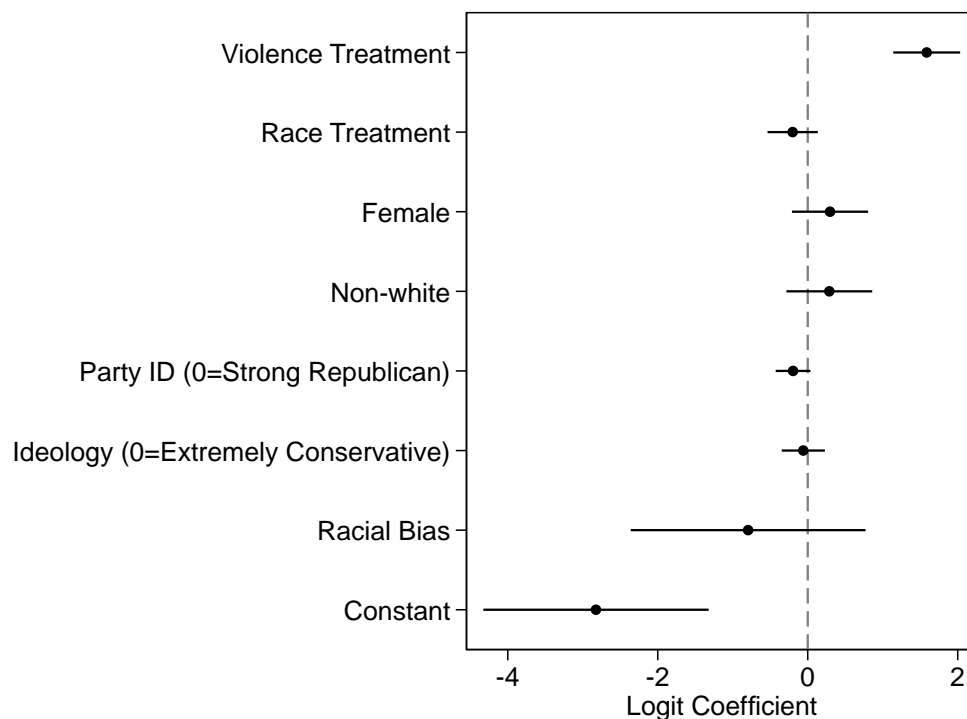
As expected in H_1, the level of violence reported at an event has a strong, positive, and significant effect on whether an individual views the event as a riot or not. The logit coefficient for the violence treatment demonstrates that the more severe violence that is

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[14]In all but fourteen cases, identifying the event as not a riot meant identifying the event as a protest. The fourteen respondents who identified the event as either a parade or a vigil are collapsed together with those who identified the response as a protest in order to analyze the dependent variable as a binary unit. As the primary interest of the study is to identify what will cause a respondent to identify an event as a riot rather than a protest, using a binary measure where respondents choose riot or not riot is a reasonable choice.

[15]The three racial bias questions come directly from the ANES and are included as part of the survey instrument reported in Appendix A.

Table 2: Logistic Regression Results for Perceiving a Riot on Violence Treatment, Race Treatment, and Controls

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coefficient	p-value	Coefficient	p-value
Violence Treatment	1.59	0.00		
	(0.23)			
Race Treatment	-0.20	0.24		
	(0.17)			
Moderate Violence			2.38	0.03
			(1.08)	
Severe Violence			3.40	0.00
			(1.05)	
White Treatment			-0.05	0.97
			(1.43)	
Black Treatment			0.16	0.91
			(1.43)	
Moderate Violence with White			0.75	0.63
			(1.57)	
Moderate Violence with Black			-1.19	0.46
			(1.59)	
Severe Violence with White			0.09	0.95
			(1.48)	
Severe Violence with Black			-0.36	0.81
			(1.50)	
Female	0.30	0.25	0.28	0.28
	(0.26)		(0.26)	
Non-white	0.29	0.32	0.28	0.34
	(0.29)		(0.29)	
Party ID	-0.20	0.10	-0.18	0.12
	(0.12)		(0.12)	
Ideology	-0.06	0.69	-0.08	0.60
	(0.15)		(0.15)	
Racial Bias	-0.79	0.32	-0.80	0.31
	(0.80)		(0.80)	
Constant	-2.82	0.00	-3.17	0.01
	(0.77)		(1.19)	
N	502		502	
Pseudo R^2	0.19		0.19	

Note: Coefficients are log-odds with standard errors in parentheses. Bolded variables are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. Model 1 includes the treatments as independent variables. Model 2 includes interaction effects between the treatments.

reported, the log odds of an individual perceiving the event as a riot increases by 1.59. Surprisingly, however, there is not supportive evidence for the expectation expressed in H_2.[16] There is no significant effect from any of the control variables on whether or not an event is identified as a riot.

I re-run the regression with the violence and race treatments interacted in order to test the conclusions of H_3. The interacted model's coefficient values are reported as Model 2 in Table 2 and displayed graphically in Figure 2. The violence treatment remains positive and significant. The treatment of mild violence is a weaker predictor of perceiving an event as a riot than the treatment of strong violence, confirming the expectations of H_1. Yet, the race treatment remains insignificant with the coefficients close to zero. The interactions are also insignificant, suggesting that there is no support for H_3. Respondents are more likely to perceive the event as a riot as the violence becomes severe regardless of the race treatment.

The predicted probabilities of calling an event a riot are also calculated as both an easier way to interpret the regression results and to further evaluate H_3. The predicted probability of perceiving the event as a riot for each treatment condition is reported in Table 3 and displayed graphically in Figure 3. Each line represents one of the three possible race treatments, while the violence treatments are introduced along the x-axis. Each point represents one of the nine possible experimental conditions to which a respondent could receive. As discussed previously, regardless of the race treatment given, respondents are more likely to identify an event as a riot when violence reported at the event becomes more severe. This effect of the violence treatment is most prevalent when the event participants are described as white, with a slight drop in effect when no racial characteristics of the event participants are reported. When the event participants are described as black, however, respondents are still increasingly likely to identify the event as a riot as violence increases, but do so at a lower rate than when event participants are described as white or racial

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[16]The analysis was also run separately for each racial subset of respondents, white or non-white, to see if the race treatment had weaker or stronger effects for those subsets. The results were still statistically insignificant and negative.

Figure 2: Logistic Regression of Event Description on Interacted Treatments and Control Variables
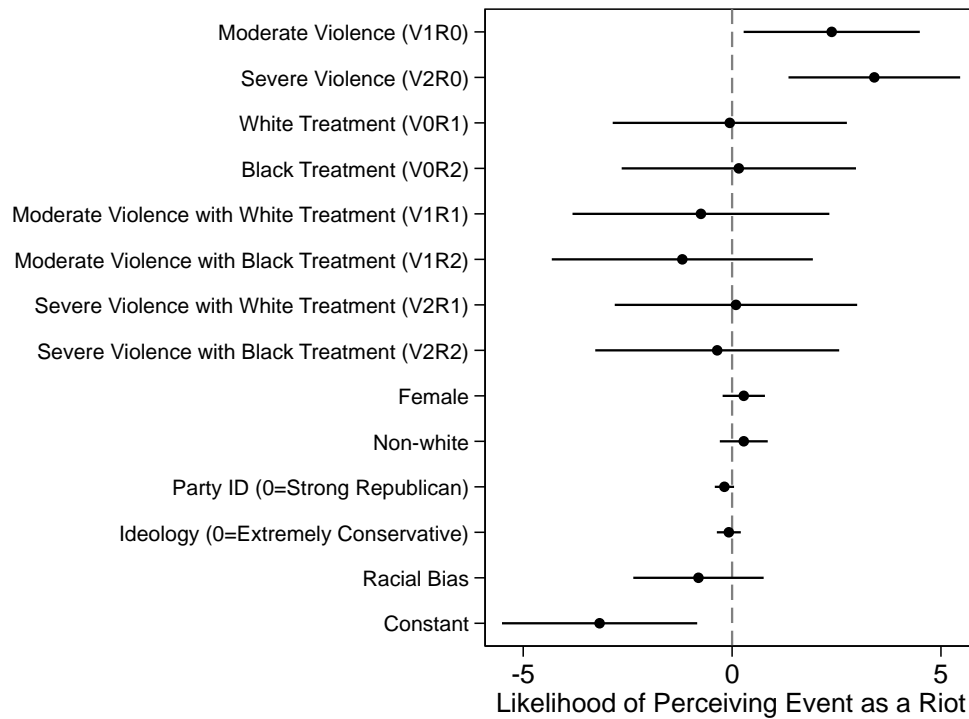
characteristics are not reported. As a result, the expectations from H_3 are not supported. There does not appear to be a lower tolerance for violence for event participants of either race.

In summary, the analysis demonstrates strong support for H_1 as the likelihood of calling an event a riot increases as the level of violence reported at the event becomes more severe. H_2 and H_3 are not supported as the race treatment produces insignificant results and, subsequently, renders the interaction of the violence and race treatments insignificant as well.

Table 3: Predicted Probabilities of Defining an Event as a Riot

	No mention of violence (V_0)	Incident of moderate violence (V_1)	Incident of severe violence (V_2)
No race description (R_0)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
White participants (R_1)	0.15 (0.05)	0.07 (0.04)	0.06 (0.03)
Black participants (R_2)	0.33 (0.06)	0.34 (0.06)	0.29 (0.06)

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.

Figure 3: Predicted Probabilities of Defining an Event as a Riot
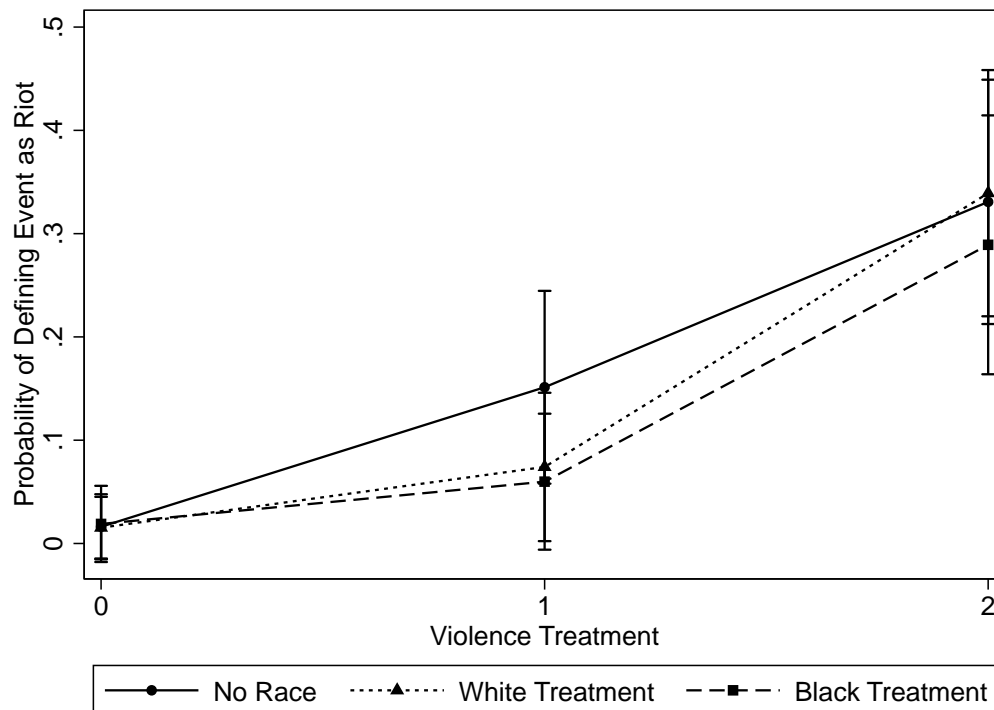
Discussion

As expected, violence is a key distinguishing factor for respondents deciding whether an event is a riot or a protest. As reported violence increases in severity, so too does the likelihood of an event being viewed as a riot. At first glance, this finding may seem quite obvious and uninteresting. The result simply represents an empirically-demonstrated conclusion of a previously held intuition that riots are distinct from protests because of violence. This experiment, however, does more than simply confirm that the public views riots as violent affairs. The experiment also demonstrates that minor skirmishes are unlikely to change an event's categorization in the public's mind. There was little change in predicted probability of identifying an event as a riot when reported violence went from none to a mild incident. Even events that result in severe property damage and threaten bodily harm are still more likely to be classified as a protest than a riot. There is a significant increase in probability of the event being called a riot when severe violence is reported. The majority of respondents, however, were still expected to identify this particular event described in the vignette as a protest, as demonstrated in Figure 3. The mere presence of violence at a social movement event does not automatically change the event from a protest to a riot in the eyes of the public.

This finding could suggest that the public is tolerant of some violence within social movement events and will view those events as legitimate forms of protest, not riotous hooliganism. Such a conclusion would bolster the spirits of social movement event proponents who fret over the possibility of their message being co-opted by small bands of agitators determined to exploit the situation to cause havoc. In the context of this experiment, even severely violent episodes did not persuade the majority of survey respondents to not believe the event was a protest.

One reason for the lack of locating the dividing line between protests and riots with respect to violence is likely due to the nature of the issue described in the vignette. Perceived corruption committed by elected officials is simply not likely to generate a violent public

reaction similar to what was seen in April 2015 in Baltimore. As such, the experiment can only simulate violence up to a point before it becomes unrealistic and unbelievable by the survey respondent. Future work can address this concern by highlighting an issue that could reasonably produce a violent public reaction beyond the limits inherent in the simulated Houston corruption scandal presented in this experiment. Selecting such an issue, however, is not an easy task. Selecting topics such as the excessive use of force by police against black men that provoked the events in Baltimore can lead to confounding bias. The respondents may have preconceived opinions about specific events that will provoke similar reactions when respondents are presented with a similar event. Picking an issue that could reasonably produce a violent reaction from the public but is not easily viewed as another example of a major contemporary issue is not a simple task.

Unexpectedly, race was shown to have no significant effect on event perception. This result is surprising, as it goes against the grain of previous research that has demonstrated a stereotype to view blacks as more violent than whites. The finding could be a result of sample bias, with the younger students in a liberal college town more likely to present a socially desirable answer in purposefully rejecting the stereotype of blacks as violent or more prone to riot activities. Likewise, as liberal college students are the most likely demographic group to engage in protesting, this particular sample may be drawing on personal protest experiences to influence their response (Schussman and Soule 2005). As a result, respondents who may have previously participated in a social movement event that included violence may be reticent to call the event a riot rather than a protest out of a desire to avoid being associated with participating in the latter. In the future, this hypothesis could be tested by asking respondents about their participation in social movement events as part of the demographic section of questions.

There are several avenues for future research to build on these initial results. First, studies can continue to probe for where the line exists, if at all, at which the majority of respondents would call an event a riot rather than a protest. One possibility to consider is a

different introduction of the treatments. This experiment introduced both the violence and race treatments through a news vignette. While effects for the violence treatment were still found through a vignette, the written word is not the most popular news delivery medium as it once was. Instead, presenting the report through a television spot, including pictures and audio, could be a more powerful and realistic method of introducing both treatments. It is possible that it was easier to give the socially desirable answer with respect to race, for example, because words are easier to ignore than pictures. A visual stimulus may strengthen the stereotype and make it more difficult for individuals to overcome. Additionally, using an audio-visual presentation could make violence more distinct and acutely understood, perhaps leading to the more distinct effects initially expected.

Second, the sample of this experiment was notably biased due to the low number of respondents who identified as Republican or conservative. Ideological or partisan influences may play more significant effects on social movement event identification than what was found in this experiment. Specifically, one might expect that conservatives are less tolerant of protesting generally. As a result, they may be more quick to identify something as a riot, even if little violence is reported, than their more liberal neighbors. Additionally, Republicans are increasingly white and more conservative. They may adopt an in-group/out-group mentality and be more sympathetic to racial stereotypes. As such, Republicans may be more likely to identify black social movement event participants with a riot than a protest. Conducting the experiment with a more ideologically diverse sample that includes a similarly diverse sample along party lines would more closely approximate the national population and allow for testing of ideological or party identification effects.

Finally, research that explores how respondents determine whether a violent event is a riot or not could be helpful. Specifically, it may be that the violent acts of event participants are less important to respondents than the reaction by police. Soule and Earl (2005) have found that law enforcement is less likely to attend protests recently than during previous decades of social turmoil, but they are more likely to take action (e.g. arrest participants,

strictly enforce local ordinances, etc.) when they do attend. Perhaps a heavy-handed police response has a greater impact than the actions of event participants in determining whether an event is viewed as a riot or a protest. Varying the police response to the reported violence of participants is one way to test this hypothesis. Police responses could range from not attending, to walking as part of the crowd, to as extreme as donning riot gear and deploying military-style vehicles to control the crowds.

While some of the findings of this study may initially seem intuitive, they only begin to address several questions on public opinion, social movements, and the impact of the media on public attitudes towards social movements. All of these questions are particularly important to address as social movements such as Black Lives Matter, Occupy, and others become more salient and commonplace in U.S. society and political discourse. The addition of new forms of media is also becoming an important tool for social activists in advancing their call for social change. Further research that builds on the initial results outlined by this study can improve understanding of how social change is communicated across communities. Such research could inform how social movements can more effectively accomplish their goal of enabling social change.

Appendix A

Questions concerning California propositions were first presented in conjunction with an unrelated experiment. As detailed in Footnote 10, the questions were randomized across the sample and there is no concern about possible confounding variables contamination stemming from these additional questions. I include these questions at the top of the survey, as they were presented to respondents.

- **Major Provisions of Proposition 16**
  The measure places new voter approval requirements on local governments before they can use public funds - defined broadly in the measure to include tax revenues, various forms of debt, and ratepayer funds - to start up electricity service, expand electricity service into a new territory, or implement a community choice aggregator.

  - First, before an authorized local government entity can start up electricity service, it must receive approval by two-thirds of the voters in the area proposed to be served.
  - Second, before an existing publicly owned utility can expand its electric delivery service into a new territory, it must receive approval by two-thirds of the voters in the area currently served by the utility and two-thirds of the voters in the new area proposed to be served.
  - Third, the measure requires two-thirds voter approval for a local government to implement a community choice aggregator.

- All things considered, do you support or oppose Proposition 16?

  Strongly support, Somewhat support, Somewhat oppose, Strongly oppose,
  Don't know

- If you were to vote today, how would you cast your ballot for Proposition 16?

  Yes, No, Not sure

- How confident are you in your vote decision?

  Not confident, Slightly confident, Quite confident, Very confident

- Where do you think the political parties stand on Proposition 16?

  Asked first for Republicans, then repeated for Democrats:

  Support Prop 16, Neither support or oppose Prop 16, Oppose Prop 16,
  Don't know

- **Major Provisions of Proposition 37**
  This measure makes several changes to state law to explicitly require the regulation of genetically engineered foods.
  Specifically, it:

  - Requires that most genetically engineered foods sold be properly labeled

– Requires Department of Public Health to regulate the labeling of such foods

– Allows individuals to sue food manufacturers who violate the measures labeling provisions.

Retailers (such as grocery stores) would be primarily responsible for complying with the measure by ensuring that their food products are correctly labeled. Products that are labeled as genetically engineered would be in compliance. For each product that is not labeled as genetically engineered, a retailer generally must be able to document why that product is exempt from labeling.

- All things considered, do you support or oppose Proposition 37?

    Strongly support, Somewhat support, Somewhat oppose, Strongly oppose,

    Don't know

- If you were to vote today, how would you cast your ballot for Proposition 37?

    Yes, No, Not sure

- How confident are you in your vote decision?

    Not confident, Slightly confident, Quite confident, Very confident

- Where do you think the political parties stand on Proposition 37?

    Asked first for Republicans, then repeated for Democrats:

    Support Prop 37, Neither support or oppose Prop 37, Oppose Prop 37,

    Don't know

The following survey questions are asked specifically for the experiment described in this paper and were asked following the presentation of the news vignette (possible responses are in italics):

- 1) Which of the following words best describes the event depicted on the previous screen?

    Parade, Protest, Riot, Vigil

- Do you *Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, or Neither Agree nor Disagree* with the following statements? [Word in **bold** is based on the response to question 1] :

    – **Events** in general are violent.

    – **Events** in general are justified.

    – The **event** participants described in the news report were justified in their actions.

    – The police described in the news report were justified in their actions.

    [Note: The following three questions, supplied by the ANES, are intended to measure the respondent's racial bias.]

- – Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.
- – It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.
- – Over the past few years blacks have gotten less than they deserve.

- Which of the following best describes the gender with which you identify?

  Male, Female, Neither

- What of the following best describes your ethnicity?

  White, Black or African-American, American Indian or

  Alaskan Native, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Arab/Middle East/Persian,

  Polynesian/Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian, Other

- Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a *Republican, Democrat, Independent* or something different?

  [If Republican or Democrat] Would you call yourself a

  strong [Republican/Democrat] or a not very strong [Republican/Democrat]?

  [If Independent, Other] Do you think of yourself as closer to the

  Republican Party, Democratic Party, or neither?

- When it comes to politics do you usually think of yourself as *extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate or middle of the road, slightly conservative, extremely conservative*, or have you not thought much about this?

- Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not?

  The President, The Congress, The Supreme Court

- Do you happen to know whose responsibility it is to nominate judges to the federal courts?

  The President, Congress, The Supreme Court

- Do you happen to know which party has the most members in the U.S. House of Representatives?

  Democrats, Republicans

- In general, thinking about the political parties in Washington, would you say that Democrats are more conservative than Republicans, or Republicans are more conservative than Democrats?

  Democrats more conservative, Republicans more conservative

- Who is the Chief Justice on the U.S. Supreme Court?

  Clarence Thomas, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, John Roberts, Anthony Kennedy

- How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House to override a presidential veto?

    one-half plus one vote, three-fifths, two-thirds, three-quarters

- Some people constantly follow what goes on in politics, while others are not interested in it. How often do you follow politics?

    Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Most of the Time, Always

- Have you ever been asked about Prop 16 or Prop 37 in a previous UC Davis Political Science Study?

    Yes, No, Not Sure

- What is your age?

    Respondent entered a response

- What is your current academic year?

    Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Other

Table 4: Experimental Treatments

Treatment Label	Wording of Treatment
No race description (R_0)	Crowd description left blank; "man" (no name)
White participants (R_1)	"downtown White community"; "said Jake"
Black participants (R_2)	"downtown African-American community"; "said DeShawn"
No violence (V_0)	"but said there had been no arrests made"
Moderate violence (V_1)	"and arrested a few participants who threw water bottles at the officers"
Severe violence (V_2)	"and arrested several participants when they vandalized police vehicles and threw rocks and other objects at the officers"

Appendix B

The following tables include descriptive statistics for the experimental respondents.

Table 5: Frequency of Event Description

Event Description	Frequency	Percentage
Protest	420	81.9%
Riot	79	15.4%
Parade or Vigil	14	2.7%

Table 6: Frequency of Event Description and Treatment

Treatment	Protest	Riot	Parade or Vigil
V0R0	58 (96.7%)	1 (1.7%)	1 (1.7%)
V0White	60 (96.8%)	1 (1.6%)	1 (1.6%)
V0Black	46 (92%)	1 (2%)	3 (6%)
V1R0	46 (82.1%)	9 (16%)	1 (1.8%)
V1White	42 (87.5%)	4 (8.3%)	2 (4.2%)
V1Black	50 (92.6%)	3 (5.6%)	1 (1.8%)
V2R0	39 (61.0%)	21 (33.3%)	3 (4.8%)
V2White	39 (60%)	24 (36.9%)	2 (3.1%)
V2Black	40 (72.7%)	15 (27.3%)	0 (0%)

Table 7: Frequency of Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	192	37.4%
Female	316	61.5%
Other	6	1.2%

Table 8: Frequency of Race (all categories)

Race	Frequency	Percentage
White	181	35.2%
Black	15	2.9%
Asian	117	22.8%
Polynesian	8	1.6%
Other	26	5.1%
Middle East	38	7.4%
Hispanic	129	25.1%

Table 9: Frequency of Race (white-nonwhite)

Race	Frequency	Percentage
White	181	35.2%
Non-white	333	64.8%

Table 10: Frequency of Party ID

Party ID	Frequency	Percentage
Strong Republican	18	3.5%
Weak Republican	31	6%
Independent Republican	26	5.1%
Independent	52	10.1%
Independent Democrat	85	16.5%
Weak Democrat	138	26.8%
Strong Democrat	165	32%

Table 11: Frequency of Ideology

Party ID	Frequency	Percentage
Extremely Conservative	6	1.2%
Conservative	22	4.3%
Somewhat Conservative	47	9.3%
Moderate	87	17.1%
Somewhat Liberal	111	21.9%
Liberal	184	36.2%
Extremely Liberal	51	10%

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