Police Violence and Public Opinion After George Floyd: How the Black Lives Matter Movement and Endorsements Affect Support for Reforms

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Abstract

What factors shape public opinion about government solutions to address police violence? We address this question by conducting a survey in which respondents express their opinions about actual proposals to reform police practices. Within the survey, we randomly assign respondents to receive the positions of traditional advocates (Black lawmakers) and/or opponents (law enforcement) of police reform efforts. Our results reveal broad bipartisan support for the proposals, but that information about groups that support or oppose these proposals polarizes partisans' opinions. However, Democrats and even Republicans who support Black Lives Matter (BLM) express high levels of support for the proposals regardless of the information they receive. These results suggest that partisanship in the mass public is not necessarily a barrier to police reform efforts. A bipartisan majority of the public supports meaningful reforms, and any polarizing effects of elite signals are muted by Democrats' and Republicans' support for BLM.

Keywords

police violence, Black Lives Matter, endorsements, public opinion, partisanship, polarization

In recent years, episodes of police violence involving unarmed Black men—Michael Brown's death during an altercation with a white police officer in Ferguson (2014), Freddie Gray's death while in the custody of the Baltimore Police Department (2015), the fatal shooting of Stephon Clark in his grandmother's backyard in Sacramento (2018)—have captured the attention of public officials and ordinary citizens alike. Each of these episodes followed a disturbingly familiar timeline: immediate condemnation followed by widespread protests bordering on unrest, internal investigations resulting in none of the police officers involved being charged and convicted, and diminished hopes for meaningful changes to police personnel and practices as opponents of reform dug in and public attention turned elsewhere. In late May 2020, as video of the killing of George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin while three seemingly indifferent colleagues looked on went viral, scholars and practitioners were already asking whether this episode would be different.

Just over one year later, some things look different. What began as local protests near the scene of Floyd's death mushroomed into a mass movement with tens of millions of Americans taking to the streets in thousands of cities and towns during a pandemic. Led by the Black Lives Matter movement, these marches for justice attracted unusual allies, including Republican senator and 2012 presidential nominee Mitt Romney, and police chiefs and uniformed officers in Flint, Camden, Sacramento, and many other places. Chauvin and the other three officers were fired by the Minneapolis Police Department. All four were arrested, and Chauvin was convicted of murdering Floyd and sentenced to 22.5 years in prison. The other three officers currently await trial. In Minneapolis and other cities, local officials are

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reevaluating long-accepted police practices. In state legislatures, dozens of police reform bills are being considered. In March 2021, the U.S. House passed the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act to ban chokeholds, no-knock warrants, and reform qualified immunity for police officers.

Nevertheless, as of this writing, it is fair to say that the millions who marched and the communities of color suffering from unequal police treatment are still waiting for tangible solutions from their government. In Minneapolis, for example, a proposal to disband the police department was shelved in August 2020; a special session of the Minnesota state legislature called in June 2020 ended with no agreement on a police reform package. The George Floyd Justice in Policing Act faces an uncertain path in the U.S. Senate. Despite the efforts of activists and the political momentum created by the George Floyd protests, the window for reforming police practices and strengthening accountability might not be fully open.

It is likely that the frustrating aftermath of high-profile episodes of police violence, where protests galvanize reform efforts only to end in political stalemate, stem from enduring elements of the politics of policing that can impede change (National Research Council 2004). They include the decentralized nature of policing, with thousands of police departments operating outside national and state supervision. There is also the well-documented culture of policing characterized by excessive militarism and resistance to change (Mummolo 2018). Supporting this resistance are politically omnipresent police employee unions wielding significant resources in local, state, and even federal elections. In recent years, the lack of federal leadership has forced advocates of reform to look outside Washington for solutions (Robinson 2020).

Less appreciated is the role of public opinion, which can provide a reservoir of support for police officers and departments, even those involved in episodes of police violence (Boudreau, MacKenzie, and Simmons 2019). To overcome the many barriers to reforming police practices, proponents of reform must translate the public's concern about the issue of police brutality, and its support for the Black Lives Matter movement and George Floyd protests, into favorable appraisals of concrete police reform proposals. Survey evidence about proposals to "defund the police" suggests that this can be difficult (Peyton, Vaughn, and Huber 2020). Moreover, favorable public opinion must be sustained as legislatures deliberate specific reform proposals and traditional supporters and opponents weigh in. Recent research indicates that public opinion about policy proposals can polarize as citizens receive cues from political parties, interest groups, and others (Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014, 2021), or learn about the strategic context inside legislatures (Hill and Huber 2019).

What factors shape public opinion about government solutions to address police violence? We address this question by studying citizens' support for a package of police reform proposals introduced by the California Legislative Black Caucus (CLBC) in response to the George Floyd killing. Using an original survey, we first examine how Californians' partisanship, support for Black Lives Matter, and race/ethnicity affect their support for four bills considered by the California state legislature in advance of the 2020 general election. Within the survey, we embed an experiment that randomly assigns respondents to receive either the CLBC's positions in support of the bills, the official positions of the California Police Chiefs Association (which opposed three of the bills), or the positions of both groups. We also include a control group in which no additional information is provided. We examine the effects that information about these groups' positions, separately and together, has on Democratic and Republican respondents' opinions. We also assess whether citizens' views about the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement affect their response to endorsements from traditional advocates and opponents of efforts to reform police practices.

By randomly assigning respondents to receive authentic endorsement information from advocates (e.g., Black lawmakers) and opponents (e.g., police officer associations) of actual legislative proposals addressing police violence, we overcome several limitations of previous research. First, while much attention is paid to the outsized clout of groups representing police personnel, few studies examine whether police endorsements influence citizens' opinions about policies affecting the police. Second, existing research has yet to establish whether citizens' symbolic support for Black Lives Matter extends to their opinions about the specific policies tied to the movement's policing reform objective. Third, no experimental study directly tests whether and how the policy opinions of different types of citizens (i.e., Democrats and Republicans, BLM supporters and opponents) change when exposed to the contested information environments that characterize legislative deliberations of policing reforms.

We find that citizens' symbolic support for Black Lives Matter (75% of Democrats and 42% of Republicans) readily translates into favorable appraisals of four bills addressing the movement's objective to reform police practices and policies. Further, Democrats and even Republicans who oppose Black Lives Matter exhibit more support for than opposition to the proposals. In California and perhaps elsewhere, there is a bipartisan, multi-racial majority coalition ready to support concrete policing reform proposals. Our experimental results indicate that endorsement information from advocates and opponents of reform increases the partisan gap in support for the

legislative proposals. This polarizing effect is modest, however, and occurs exclusively among Democrats and Republicans who oppose the Black Lives Matter movement. For the 61% of respondents who say they support BLM, we find consistently high levels of support whether the endorsement information is provided or not. Together, these results suggest that partisanship in the mass public is not necessarily a barrier to police reform. Like the issues of gun control and COVID-19 relief, a bipartisan majority of the public supports meaningful reforms to police practices even as elites are mired in partisan gridlock. Our results also indicate that any polarizing effects of signals from elites are muted by Democrats' and Republicans' support for BLM.

Partisanship, Endorsements, and Public Opinion About Police Reform

Decades of research on policing and the link between public opinion and policy change offer reason to believe that the path from high-profile episodes of police violence and misconduct to the implementation of reforms by government will seldom be straightforward (Robinson 2020). From the protests against police brutality in the 1960s and 70s to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in recent years, there is a long history of police-inspired political mobilization (Laniyonu 2019; Bonilla and Tillery 2020). The Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Stephon Clark, and many other recent cases suggest that the intensity of such mobilization is increasing. As Zimring (2020) reports and the massive unrest after George Floyd's murder affirms, the death of unarmed civilians at the hands of the police is a significant governance problem.

In response, public officials at all levels of government have engaged in efforts to address police violence. Following the Ferguson protests in 2014, for example, a White House task force was created to study policing and issue recommendations for changing existing practices (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015). A report by the National Council of State Legislatures (NCSL) found that 16 states passed laws addressing use of force by the police between 2014 and 2017 (see Robinson 2020). At the local level, law enforcement agencies, acting independently and in concert, are reevaluating use of force policies and confronting their past negative interactions with minority communities. Police departments across the country are also experimenting with the use of body-worn cameras, de-escalation and implicit bias training, and civilian oversight (Engel, McManus, and Isaza 2020).

The success of government efforts to address police violence depends in part upon public support for policies designed to reform police practices. Decades of political

science research indicate that partisanship is likely to dictate citizens' views about police reform. Whether due to citizens gravitating toward parties that take positions they agree with (Downs 1957; Key 1966) or citizens bringing their positions into alignment with parties they belong to for other reasons (Campbell et al. 1960; Layman and Carsey 2002), partisanship is widely viewed as the most important predictor of citizens' policy opinions. Indeed, determining the direction of the relationship between partisanship and issue positions has become more difficult as ideological sorting has increased (Levendusky 2009; Barber and Pope 2019). That is, now more than ever, Democrats hold liberal policy views while Republicans take conservative positions, resulting in polarized policy opinions.

The polarization of citizens' policy opinions is often exacerbated by signals from elites who seek to shift public opinion toward their preferred policy outcomes. These signals frequently come in the form of endorsements from political parties, interest groups, labor unions, and racial/ethnic organizations. A large body of research in political science demonstrates the power of political party endorsements (i.e., party cues) to shift citizens' policy opinions in the direction of their own party's positions (Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). Endorsements from non-party actors, including interest groups with distinct ideological reputations, can similarly polarize citizens' policy opinions (Rapoport, Stone, and Abramowitz 1991; McDermott 2006; Arceneaux and Kolodny 2009; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2021). For example, McDermott (2006) shows that an endorsement from the AFL-CIO (a labor union with a reputation for supporting liberal candidates and policies) induces liberal respondents to support a Democratic candidate that the union endorsed and conservative respondents to oppose that same candidate. In a similar manner, endorsements from organizations representing racial/ethnic communities can signal to their members and others how they should feel about particular candidates and polices (Benjamin 2017; Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2019).

Despite the key role that partisanship and elite signals play in shaping public opinion, there has been little examination of how these factors affect citizens' support for policies designed to reform police practices. Rather, a large body of observational research tends to focus on citizens' general views toward the police and criminal justice system (Tyler and Fagan 2008; Lerman and Weaver 2014), and how those views are shaped by respondents' race/ethnicity, age, neighborhood context, and contact with the police (Baumgartner, Epp, and Shoub 2018; Wu, Sun, and Triplett 2009). Other research examines how exposure to episodes of police violence affects citizens' use of government services like calling 911

([Cohen et al. 2019](#)) and their willingness to participate in local elections ([Laniyonu 2019](#)).

Beyond these observational analyses, a handful of experimental studies examine how information about episodes of police violence can affect citizens' perceptions of the police. These studies, however, do not assess citizens' support for specific police reform policies (for an exception, see [Mullinix, Bolsen, and Norris 2020](#)), nor how partisanship or signals from elites might affect such support. Rather, they seek to manipulate information about episodes of police violence, showing its effects on citizens' beliefs about the appropriateness of the officers' conduct and what punishment, if any, is warranted. [Peffley and Hurwitz (2010)](#), for example, manipulate the race of the victims and officers involved in episodes of police violence; [Boudreau, MacKenzie, and Simmons (2019)](#) assess how citizens' attributions of blame are affected by information about previous episodes of police violence and, separately, police-initiated reforms.

The mixture of observational and experimental studies of public opinion about the police and episodes of police violence leave several unanswered questions. First, while the evidence suggests that exposure to police violence and/or information about specific episodes can affect citizens' behavior, their impact on citizens' views about actual policies affecting the police is unclear. This makes it difficult to predict how citizens' reactions to police violence will register in public debates over policing reforms. Second, while much of the debate about police reforms cites the political influence of law enforcement organizations as a key factor, there has been little effort to link this influence to citizens' views about the police. Third, while experimental studies demonstrate that information about episodes of police violence can shape citizens' views about them, few studies examine other types of information that are relevant in debates over policing reforms, such as endorsements from traditional advocates and opponents of reform.

Our study contributes to research on the relationship between partisanship, endorsements, and public opinion about police reform in several ways. First, we explore the relationship between citizens' symbolic support for protests against police violence, as captured by their views of the Black Lives Matter movement, and their opinions about specific proposals to change police practices and strengthen accountability. Second, we extend experimental research on police violence by manipulating information about the positions of traditional advocates (e.g., Black lawmakers) and opponents (e.g., police officer associations) of policing reforms on actual proposals to address police violence after George Floyd's murder. Third, we assess the stability of citizens' support for police reforms by examining whether endorsement information

polarizes the opinions of Democrats and Republicans. Fourth, we determine what effects, if any, citizens' symbolic support for Black Lives Matter has in conditioning any polarizing effects of the information.

Theory and Hypotheses

Given the aforementioned differences in partisans' policy opinions, it is reasonable to expect that Democrats and Republicans will respond differently to high-profile episodes of police violence like George Floyd's murder. While the video footage of Derek Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds sparked outrage across the globe and more than eight in ten Americans believed the officers deserved to be fired, there was partisan disagreement about whether race was a major factor and whether the protesters desired reform or property destruction ([Skelley 2020](#)). Elite responses to the George Floyd killing and ensuing protests have been, with few exceptions, more partisan. Democratic elected officials at all levels voiced support for the protesters and called for reforms. For example, congressional Democrats proposed a bill to ban police chokeholds, create a federal database for keeping track of police officers with records of misconduct, and eliminate "qualified immunity," which shields police officers from liability for certain acts performed on the job. Meanwhile, many Republican politicians framed the protests as a "law and order" issue and responded with proposals to impose tougher penalties on protesters. President Trump explicitly urged governors to use force to end the protests and even threatened to use the U.S. military to end the unrest in cities. These distinct elite responses to George Floyd's death, together with the well-documented ideological differences between Democrats and Republicans, provide the basis for our first prediction:

> **Hypothesis 1**: Support for proposals to reform police practices after George Floyd's death among Democrats will be greater than support among Republicans.

We expect that any gap in partisans' opinions about proposals to reform police practices will grow as traditional advocates and opponents begin to weigh in. As the examples of the polling on the culpability of the officers and the role of race make clear, citizens can agree about how they feel about an episode of police violence even as they disagree about its causes. Citizens who disapprove of George Floyd's killing might also disagree about what government solutions, if any, are appropriate. Additionally, the confidence citizens have in their views about both causes and solutions is likely to be weaker than their views about the event itself. Information about the positions of groups supporting or opposing reform can reduce the uncertainty that citizens might have about the efficacy or

desirability of proposed solutions. As federal and state legislators considered policing reforms in the aftermath of Floyd's death, many such groups were clamoring to be heard. For example, the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act received the endorsement of the Congressional Black Caucus, the NAACP, and Amnesty International. Leading the opposition were law enforcement organizations like the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association. Similar divides between law enforcement organizations and traditional advocates of reform played out in statehouses across the country. In California, for example, a reform package sponsored by the California Legislative Black Caucus generated staunch opposition from police unions in the state.

Whether signals from politically active groups such as these will influence partisans' opinions is likely to depend on two conditions. First, a group must be knowledgeable about the policy at issue, for example, its likely consequences, and citizens must perceive it as such. Second, citizens must be able to identify the group's interests and assess whether these interests are aligned with their own (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Both conditions plausibly hold in the context of policing reform. With respect to the first condition, groups that sponsor legislation aimed at reforming police practices (like the California Legislative Black Caucus) are perceived as knowledgeable about the topic, as are the law enforcement organizations that are directly affected by such legislation. On the second condition, research indicates that citizens are often capable of perceiving the interests of groups with established reputations for supporting particular policies (Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2021). Groups of Black lawmakers and organizations representing police personnel have well-known ideological reputations and are typically affiliated with one of the political parties (e.g., nearly all members of the Congressional Black Caucus and California Legislative Black Caucus are Democrats, while police officer associations tend to align themselves with the Republican Party). If citizens can identify these groups' interests, then information about their positions on police reform proposals may help them to determine where their own interests lie.[1] These considerations lead to our second prediction:

> **Hypothesis 2**: Citizens exposed to information about the positions of advocates and opponents of policing reforms will be more likely to support proposals that groups affiliated with their own party support and oppose proposals that groups affiliated with their party oppose than citizens who do not receive such information. Such endorsement information will increase the gap between partisans' support for proposals to reform police practices, relative to the control group.

In predicting that reactions to information about the positions of advocates (e.g., Black lawmakers) and opponents (e.g., police officer associations) of policing reforms will mostly break along partisan lines, we are implicitly asserting that such endorsements function similarly to political party endorsements. A key difference is that citizens are unlikely to identify with particular groups supporting or opposing reforms to police practices as strongly as they identify with political parties. They are also unlikely to have the same level of aversion to groups not usually affiliated with their own party as they do to the opposite party. Indeed, we expect that some groups affiliated with the Democratic Party will be viewed favorably by some Republicans, and groups traditionally affiliated with the Republican Party to be popular with many Democrats. For example, Democrats who view the police favorably might reduce their support for a proposal to reform police practices upon learning that a prominent law enforcement group opposes it.

In the aftermath of the George Floyd killing, the Black Lives Matter movement is an example of a group that inspired such bipartisan appeal. Public opinion polls show that support for BLM soared following Floyd's death. The symbolic appeal of a movement that served as a focal point and mobilizer of Americans' outrage was manifested in the Black Lives Matter signs posted in windows and scrawled on sidewalks and buildings across the country (Bonilla and Tillery 2020). Whether such symbolic support translates into support for specific policies tied to the movement's police reform objective is an empirical question we investigate. In general, we expect Democrats and Republicans who support BLM to exhibit greater support for specific proposals to reform police practices than Democrats and Republicans who do not support BLM.

We also theorize that heterogeneity in support for Black Lives Matter will moderate partisans' reactions to information about the positions of advocates and opponents of policing reforms. Specifically, Democrats and Republicans who support BLM are more likely to see themselves as having common interests on law enforcement issues with groups that support the movement and its policy objectives; they are less likely to see themselves as having common interests on law enforcement issues with police officer associations who typically oppose proposals to reform police practices.[2] For Republicans, this entails trusting and following the recommendations of groups that are not usually affiliated with their own party or its causes. Our third prediction captures our expectations about the similar reactions of Democratic and Republican BLM supporters to endorsement information:

> **Hypothesis 3**: Democratic and Republican BLM supporters exposed to information about the

positions of advocates and opponents of policing reforms will be more likely to side with advocates and against opponents than Democratic and Republican BLM supporters who do not receive such information. Such endorsement information will reduce the gap between these partisans' support for proposals to reform police practices.

In contrast, we expect that Democrats and Republicans who do not support BLM will exhibit mostly partisan reactions to the positions of advocates and opponents of policing reforms. They are not likely to see themselves as having common interests on law enforcement issues with groups that support the movement and its police reform objective in the same way that BLM supporters are. Lacking a strong connection to the Black Lives Matter movement, these partisans are likely to view their interests as best served by groups affiliated with their own party and its causes. This yields a final prediction:

> **Hypothesis 4**: Democratic and Republican BLM opponents exposed to information about the positions of advocates and opponents of policing reforms will be more likely to support proposals that groups affiliated with their own party support and oppose proposals that groups affiliated with their party oppose than Democratic and Republican BLM opponents who do not receive such information. Such endorsement information will increase the gap between these partisans' support for proposals to reform police practices.

Examining Police Reform and Public Opinion: California After George Floyd

We examine the politics of police reform by conducting original survey experiments in California after George Floyd's murder, but before the November 2020 general election. We selected this setting for several reasons. First, with the largest, most diverse population in the United States and a history of serving as a bellwether for the nation, California's and Californians' reaction to the George Floyd killing is important in itself. The reaction was unprecedented as millions joined protests across the state, from downtown Los Angeles, where the National Guard was called in for the first time since the Rodney King riots in 1992, to California's most rural enclaves. As in the rest of the country, most of the protests were peaceful, albeit punctuated by significant looting and vandalism, frequent and violent clashes with law enforcement, thousands of arrests, and curfews enforced by the National Guard, California Highway Patrol, and local police officers in large cities for multiple weeks. Public officials across the state attempted to balance efforts to preserve order and public safety during a pandemic with expressions of solidarity, calls for action, and occasional active participation in the marches for justice.

Second, California has been ground zero for efforts to address police violence. For many years, the state was a staunch supporter of broad police powers; it remains one of a handful of states to deny public access to records of police misconduct. Law enforcement groups, like the California Coalition of Law Enforcement Associations and Peace Officers Research Association, are a powerful force in state elections and in Sacramento whenever legislation affecting the police is discussed. The emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, nonetheless, has pushed police reform efforts to the forefront. The shooting of Stephon Clark in Sacramento and the protests it inspired statewide in 2018 led to a flurry of actions by state and local officials. In August 2019, after a year of negotiations between advocates of police reform in the state legislature and law enforcement groups, California passed the country's first significant law affecting guidelines on police use of force (AB 392) since 1989.[3] It changes the standard for use of deadly force from when it is deemed "reasonable" to when "necessary" to defend against imminent threat of death or bodily harm.

Further, the practice of direct democracy in California makes public opinion about the police especially relevant. Indeed, law enforcement issues have frequently been the subject of initiative campaigns in the state. Most famously, California voters passed a "Three Strikes" initiative in 1994 (Proposition 184), possibly the toughest criminal sentencing law in the state's history. Subsequent initiatives have attempted to relax Prop. 184's provisions and address overcrowding in state prisons. For example, in the November 2020 election, voters considered a referendum to replace cash bail with a system for pre-trial release based on public safety.

Finally, the coordinated response of the California Legislative Black Caucus (CLBC)—a group of state lawmakers representing the concerns of the African American community—to George Floyd's murder constitutes a real-world effort to convert political momentum from protest activity into policy achievements. Prior to George Floyd's death, the CLBC's legislative agenda included items such as reinstating affirmative action, a commission to study reparations, and eliminating court fees. On Juneteenth of 2020, the CLBC added a package of six bills designed to reform police practices to its agenda. In a statement, the group tied its action to the George Floyd killing and announced that it would be a conduit for social justice groups like Black Lives Matter (California Legislative Black Caucus 2020). Indeed, one of the bills was a BLM-sponsored effort to decertify officers guilty of misconduct.

The CLBC's legislative package crafted in the wake of George Floyd's death offers a unique real-world context

for studying public opinion about episodes of police violence and possibilities for meaningful reform. Instead of designing survey questions around broad issues or reform ideas not actively under consideration, our survey examines public opinion about live legislative proposals with real stakes for advocates and opponents of reform, California public officials, and ordinary citizens. Every seat in California's 80-member Assembly and half the seats in its 40-member Senate were up for election in November 2020. Incumbents, candidates, law enforcement groups, and others had to decide whether to support or oppose the CLBC-sponsored bills as voters galvanized by a summer of protests looked on. Ultimately, law enforcement groups decided to support one of the bills and oppose the others. The positions of law enforcement groups, including those of the California Police Chiefs Association, which represents municipal police chiefs and their agencies, supply an important element of the contested information environment we examine in our study.[4]

Study Design

In our survey experiments, all respondents read brief descriptions of four bills in the California Legislative Black Caucus's (CLBC) legislative package. The four bills include proposals to: (1) Set up a statewide process to revoke the certification of police officers who are found guilty of serious crimes or misconduct, (2) Prohibit the use of chokeholds by the police, (3) Create a division within California's Department of Justice to investigate incidents of a police shooting or use of deadly force against a suspect, and (4) Require police officers to physically stop and report another officer who is using excessive force and punish police officers if they do not report such behavior. After reading each proposal, respondents express whether they strongly support it, somewhat support it, somewhat oppose it, strongly oppose it, or they can respond "don't know."

In the control group, respondents receive only the brief description of each policy proposal before expressing their opinion (see the Online Appendix for the full text of these questions). In the treatment groups, respondents also receive information about the actual positions that politically active group(s) took in support of or opposition to these policies. As discussed previously, the sponsor and staunch advocate of these policies was the CLBC. One prominent opponent of the CLBC's efforts was the California Police Chiefs Association (CPCA).

To test our hypotheses about how these groups' positions affect support for the legislative proposals, we include three treatment groups. In the "Black Caucus" treatment group, respondents are told, "The California Legislative Black Caucus (a group of elected officials in the state legislature representing the concerns of the African American community) supports this proposal" after reading the description of each policy. In the "Police Association" treatment group, respondents are told, "The California Police Chiefs Association (an association representing municipal police chiefs and their agencies) opposes it." The lone exception to this pattern is the proposal to create a division to investigate incidents where the police used deadly force. For this policy, respondents are truthfully told that the CPCA supports it. In the "Black Caucus + Police Association" treatment group, respondents receive both groups' positions on these issues. Thus, they receive competing signals from these groups on three proposals and consistent signals of support on a fourth.

To test our hypotheses about the differences between Democrats and Republicans, and between supporters and opponents of Black Lives Matter, in their opinions about proposals to reform police practices, we also included items that measure partisanship and BLM support on our survey. We measured partisanship using the standard seven-point party identification question. We used a five-point Likert scale (with options ranging from strongly support to strongly oppose) question to assess support for the Black Lives Matter movement. By examining whether these factors moderate respondents' opinions and responses to the treatments, we are able to shed light on the conditions under which public support for police reform strengthens or erodes.

Methods

Our analyses use a sample of 1633 Californians from the Lucid panel. Lucid is a survey research firm that recruits samples of adults via the Internet. We administered our survey experiment online using Qualtrics software from October 2 to October 22, 2020, approximately 2 to 3 weeks before Election Day (November 3, 2020). We used quotas to select a sample that resembles California's population with respect to gender, age, education, and race/ethnicity.[5] Table A6 in the Online Appendix compares the characteristics of our respondents and those of California's population. A randomization check confirmed that none of these characteristics is associated with assignment to our control and three treatment groups (see Online Appendix Table A7).

To test our hypotheses, we first conduct a series of difference-of-means tests using respondents assigned to the control group. We calculate the average level of support for each of the four legislative proposals (with 95% confidence intervals), where support ranges from 0 "least supportive" to 1 "most supportive." We then pool the four proposals and calculate the average level of support across the proposals. We compare levels of support among groups of partisans (Democrats, Independents and Republicans) and for different racial/ethnic

groups (whites, Blacks, Latinos, and Asian/Pacific Islanders). We also examine differences between supporters and opponents of the Black Lives Matter movement.

To test our hypotheses about the effects of endorsement information, we estimate ordinary least squares models that pool the four legislative proposals. Our dependent variable is the respondent's level of support for a particular proposal (from 0 "least supportive" to 1 "most supportive"). We use clustered standard errors because we expect the errors to be independent across respondents, but not necessarily within respondents across the four proposals. Proposal fixed effects are included to account for variation in the level of support across the policies. Because we expect the effects of our treatments to be different for Democrats and Republicans, we run a separate model for each group of partisans.[6]

To examine how information about the positions of the California Legislative Black Caucus and California Police Chiefs Association affects support for the legislative proposals, we create independent variables that reflect the nature of the signal that Democratic and Republican respondents receive on each proposal in each group. Because the California Legislative Black Caucus is affiliated with the Democratic Party and its causes, the variable *Black Caucus* takes the value 1 for Democratic respondents in the "Black Caucus" treatment group and −1 for Republican respondents. Because the California Police Chiefs Association typically supports the Republican Party and its causes, the variable *Police Association* takes the value 1 for Democratic respondents in the "Police Association" treatment group on proposals opposed by the CPCA and −1 on proposals supported by the CPCA. That is, we expect the CPCA's opposition to (support for) a proposal to increase (decrease) support among Democrats. We expect the opposite effect among Republicans, so *Police Association* takes the value −1 for Republicans on proposals opposed by the CPCA and 1 on proposals supported by the CPCA. In all but one case, the coding of the *Black Caucus* and *Police Association* variables is identical.[7] The variable *Caucus + Police* is coded like the variable *Black Caucus* for Democrats and *Police Association* for Republicans assigned to the "Black Caucus + Police Association" treatment group.

To test our predictions about the effects of CLBC and CPCA endorsement information on supporters and opponents of the Black Lives Matter movement, we estimate additional models for Democrats and Republicans belonging to these subgroups. Respondents who say they support ("strongly" or "somewhat") the Black Lives Matter movement are classified as supporters, while respondents who say they oppose ("strongly" or "somewhat") or "neither support nor oppose" BLM are classified as opponents (i.e., non-supporters). We convert the coefficients in our models to expected values (with 90%

critical intervals) and compare the effects of receiving the CLBC's positions, the CPCA's positions, and the positions of both groups on partisan BLM supporters and opponents.

Results

Our results show that a bipartisan majority of Californians supports adopting meaningful reforms to reduce police violence and strengthen accountability. Among control group respondents, support for or opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement is the single most important predictor of opinion about the four legislative proposals. Our experimental analyses indicate that providing the positions of key advocates (California Legislative Black Caucus) and opponents (California Police Chiefs Association) polarizes opinion, with partisans expressing opinions more in line with the group traditionally affiliated with their own party and its causes. Nonetheless, while these endorsements (separately or together) influence Democratic and Republican respondents' opinions, the degree of polarization is modest. Further, the endorsements have little effect on Democrats and Republicans who support BLM, whose support for the proposals is consistently high.

Support for Police Reforms after George Floyd

Given the potent symbolism of the Black Lives Matter movement and its lead role in opposing an event—the killing of George Floyd—that most Americans disapprove of, it would not be surprising to observe strong support for BLM but significant disagreement about specific policies tied to the movement's police reform objective. Instead, we find that support for BLM readily translates into favorable appraisals of legislative proposals designed to reform policing practices and policies. The leftmost symbol in Figure 1 plots the average level of support for the four proposals. Overall, support for the proposals measures 0.75 on a 0-1 scale. We also find consistently high levels of support across the four proposals, with the proposal to create a division to investigate shootings and the use of deadly force by the police registering the highest approval (0.78) and the proposal to prohibit the use of chokeholds registering the lowest (0.66).

Support for meaningful reforms appears to be both bipartisan and multi-racial. As Figure 1 indicates, Democrats (consistent with Hypothesis 1) have significantly higher levels of support for the four proposals than do either Independents or Republicans. But even among Republicans, we observe more support than opposition to the reforms (0.73 on a 0-1 scale). We find few differences among California's major ethnic groups in their support
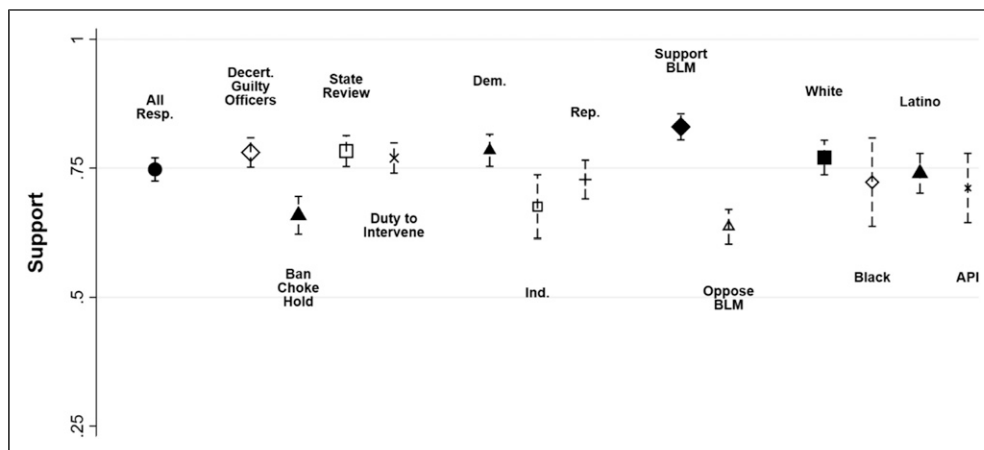
Figure 1. Variation in Support for Four 2020 California Police Reform Proposals. Symbols indicate support [with 95% confidence intervals] for four police reform proposals considered in California (All Resp.), including: (1) de-certifying police officers found guilty of misconduct, (2) banning the use of chokeholds, (3) setting up a state review process for episodes of police violence, and (4) requiring officers to intervene when witnessing excessive force by a colleague. Levels of support plotted for all respondents, Democrats, Independents, and Republicans, respondents who support the Black Lives Matter movement and do not support BLM, and white, Black, Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander respondents. Support is scaled from 0 (least supportive) to 1 (most supportive).

for the proposals, with the caveat that support among Blacks and Asian/Pacific Islander groups is imprecisely measured due to the relatively small number of members of those racial/ethnic groups in our control group.

The single most important predictor of opinion about the four legislative proposals is respondents' views of the Black Lives Matter movement. Overall, 59.06% of our California respondents say they support BLM, including 74.73% of Democrats and 41.58% of Republicans. As Figure 1 demonstrates, there is a large gap in the level of support between those who say they support BLM and those who say they do not. Support among BLM supporters is 0.83, which is significantly greater than the level of support among BLM opponents (0.64). The strong association between opinions about BLM and support for the proposals indicates that supporting BLM extends beyond citizens placing symbolic signs in their windows. Those who say they support the movement overwhelmingly support substantive policies tied to its police reform objective.

The Effects of Endorsement Information on Opinions about Reform

Consistent with our second hypothesis, partisans are more supportive of legislative proposals that the group affiliated with their own party supports, and less supportive of proposals that the group affiliated with their party opposes. Figure 2(a) displays expected levels of support among Democrats for proposals that the California Legislative Black Caucus supports and the California Police Chiefs Association opposes. These expected values

are generated from an OLS model that pools the four proposals (see Table A2 in the Online Appendix). In the control group, support among Democrats is 0.72. In the "Black Caucus" and "Police Association" treatment groups, the levels of support are higher (0.75 and 0.73), but not significantly different. Support is significantly higher for Democratic respondents in the "Black Caucus + Police Association" treatment group who were given both the CLBC's and CPCA's positions (0.75).

Information about the groups' positions also affects Republicans. As predicted, support decreases when Republicans learn that a group affiliated with their own party opposes the proposals (or when a group affiliated with the other party supports them). As Figure 2(b) shows, support for the proposals is 0.66 in the control group. The level of support in the "Black Caucus" treatment group is 0.62, a substantively meaningful decrease (albeit not statistically significant). We observe a similar, albeit smaller decrease in support when Republicans learn about the CPCA's opposition to the proposals in the "Police Association" treatment group. The level of support in the "Black Caucus + Police Association" treatment group, 0.62, is significantly lower than in the control group.

These effects of endorsement information, whether from a group affiliated with a respondent's own party, the other party, or both simultaneously, testify to its role in coordinating partisan supporters and opponents. Nonetheless, among Democrats and Republicans, we observe stronger reactions to the endorsements of Black lawmakers, whether presented by themselves or alongside recommendations from police chiefs in California. What accounts for this discrepancy? One of the crucial conditions of our
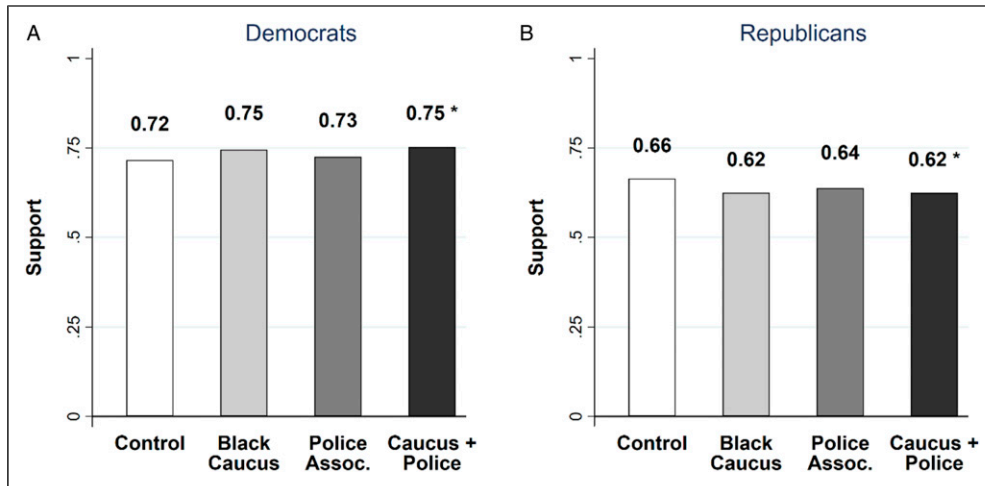
Figure 2. The Effect of Information on Support for Police Reform Proposals. Bars indicate estimated level of support for four police reform proposals, generated from the models in Table A2 in the Online Appendix. * denotes difference with control is significant (*p* < .05, one-tailed).
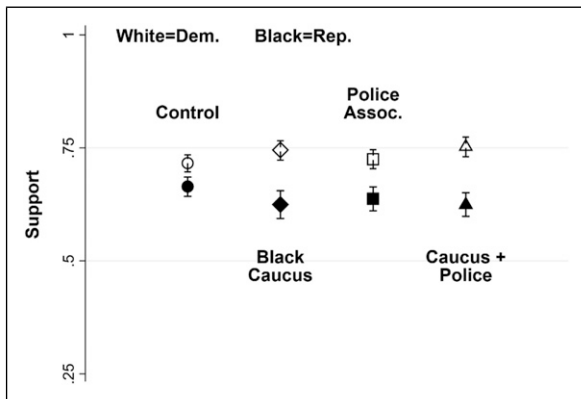

Figure 3. The Polarizing Effects of Endorsement Information. Symbols indicate levels of support [with 90% critical intervals] for police reform proposals supported by the California Legislative Black Caucus and opposed by the California Police Chiefs Association. Levels of support plotted for Democrats and Republicans in the *Control* group (circles), and *Black Caucus* (diamonds), *Police Association* (squares) and *Black Caucus + Police Association* (triangles) treatment groups. Support is scaled from 0 (least supportive) to 1 (most supportive).

theory is that citizens can accurately perceive the ideological reputations of traditional advocates and opponents of reform. In Figure A1 of the Online Appendix, we offer evidence that the ideological signal respondents receive from the CLBC is stronger than the signal they receive from the CPCA. That is, while respondents rate the group of Black lawmakers as significantly more liberal than the organization representing police chiefs overall, their ratings of the former are less variable. Greater certainty about the CLBC's ideological reputation makes its endorsements more useful for both Democrats and Republicans.

The result of the effects of endorsement information on Democrats and Republicans is polarization of respondents' opinions about policing reforms. Figure 3 plots Democrats' and Republicans' levels of support for proposals supported by the CLBC and opposed by the CPCA. In the control group, support among Democrats is substantively similar and statistically indistinguishable from the level of support among Republicans. We observe statistically significant differences in support between Democrats and Republicans in our three treatment groups. While such polarization suggests that citizens' opinions about reform might change when exposed to the contested information environments that characterize legislative deliberations, we would point out that the movement is modest. In the "Black Caucus + Police Association" treatment group, which exhibits the largest gap between Democrats and Republicans, the difference (0.13) is still just over 10% of the scale of our dependent variable.

How BLM Support Conditions the Effects of Endorsement Information

Our analyses of partisans who support versus oppose Black Lives Matter reveal differences in these respondents' reactions to information about the positions of traditional advocates and opponents of policing reforms. Figure 4 displays expected values from the OLS models that pool the four legislative proposals (see Table A3 in the Online Appendix). As with Figure 2, we generated these expected values for proposals that the California Legislative Black Caucus supports and the California Police Chiefs Association opposes. As Figure 4(a) indicates, information about the positions of these groups,
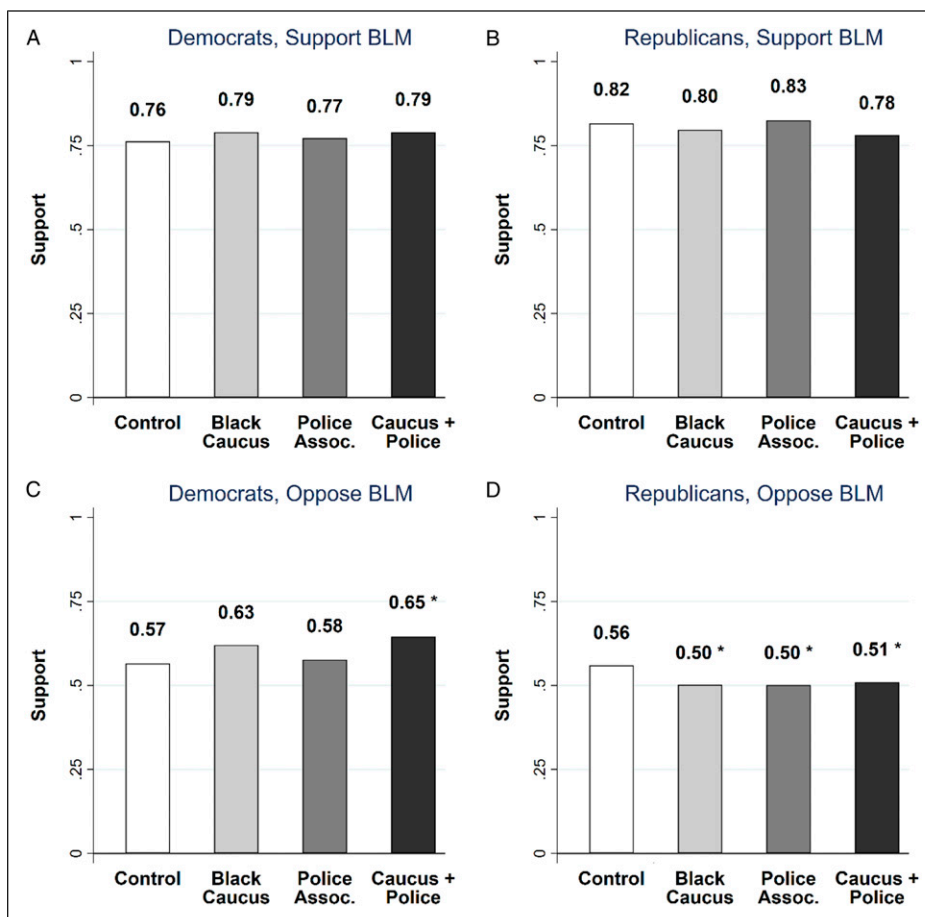
Figure 4. The Effect of Information on Support for Police Reform Proposals, by Views Toward Black Lives Matter. Bars indicate estimated level of support for four police reform proposals, generated from the models in Table A3 in the Online Appendix. * denotes difference with control is significant ($p < .05$, one-tailed).

whether presented separately or together, has no effect on Democratic respondents who support BLM. These respondents have a high level of support in the control group (0.76), and it remains consistently high in each treatment group.

In contrast, we observe larger effects of the endorsement information on Democratic respondents who do not support BLM. As Figure 4(c) shows, these respondents have a lower level of support for the proposals in the control group (0.57) than Democrats who support BLM. Information about the CLBC's positions, presented separately and combined with the CPCA's positions, increases support for the legislative proposals. While the effect of the CLBC's positions by itself is marginally significant, we observe a significant increase in support among respondents in the "Black Caucus + Police Association" treatment group. What explains this counterintuitive finding, where respondents who would seem least inclined to support the CLBC nonetheless exhibit the strongest responses to its endorsements?[8] Part of the

answer lies in the already high levels of support among BLM supporters. Even before receiving the endorsements, BLM supporters' opinions about the proposals are aligned with the CLBC's positions. For those who do not support BLM, the endorsement of a group affiliated with respondents' own party and its causes sends a signal about the positions that Democrats should have on the proposals.

We observe a similar pattern among Republican respondents who do and do not support BLM. Figure 4(b) displays the levels of support among Republicans who support BLM in our control group and three treatment groups. As with Democrats, Republican BLM supporters express high levels of support for the legislative proposals (0.82) in the control group. Information about the positions of the CLBC and CPCA also has no effect on these respondents, whose support remains consistently high in each treatment group. In contrast, Figure 4(d) shows that support for the four proposals is lower among Republicans who oppose the Black Lives Matter movement in the
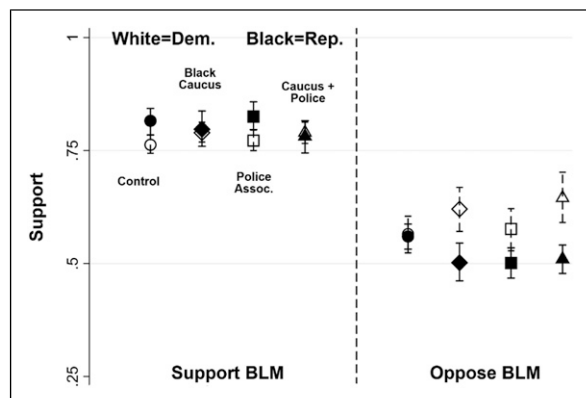
Figure 5. The Polarizing Effects of Endorsement Information, by Views Toward Black Lives Matter. Symbols indicate levels of support [with 90% critical intervals] for police reform proposals supported by the California Legislative Black Caucus and opposed by the California Police Chiefs Association. Levels of support plotted for Democrats and Republicans in the *Control* group (circles), and *Black Caucus* (diamonds), *Police Association* (squares) and *Black Caucus + Police Association* (triangles) treatment groups. Support is scaled from 0 (least supportive) to 1 (most supportive).

control group, though even this subgroup exhibits more support for than opposition to the proposals (0.56). That support significantly decreases in response to information. That Republicans who oppose BLM would follow CPCA positions and react against CLBC positions is not surprising. More impressive is Republican BLM supporters' consistently high levels of support, even when presented with the opposite recommendation from a group affiliated with their party and its causes.

The null effects of information on BLM supporters and strong effects on BLM opponents shed light on how public opinion about policing reforms might polarize in a contested information environment. Figure 5 compares Democratic and Republican BLM supporters' and opponents' levels of support for proposals supported by the CLBC and opposed by the CPCA. As the left-hand panel of Figure 5 shows, there is no polarizing effect of endorsement information among BLM supporters. Democratic and Republican respondents have positions that are indistinguishable in both our control group and three treatment groups. As the right-hand panel of Figure 5 indicates, the polarization we observed in Figure 3 occurs exclusively among BLM opponents. In the control group, support among Democrats and Republicans is indistinguishable. In each treatment group, we observe statistically significant differences in support between Democrats and Republicans who oppose BLM. The stability of BLM supporters' opinions about the four proposals underscores the fact that, for these respondents, identification with the movement extends

beyond symbolism to a strong commitment to specific proposals to reform policing practices and policies.

Conclusion

Recent years are filled with examples of excessive police violence that focus the public's attention, but fail to create conditions for meaningful reforms to succeed. Given this pattern, it is worth asking whether the mass movement following George Floyd's murder will be different in its effects or just unprecedented in its size. On one hand, public opinion has clearly moved since George Floyd's death. In 2016, 43% of Americans (64% of Democrats, 20% of Republicans) supported the Black Lives Matter movement. In June 2020, support had grown to 67% of Americans (92% of Democrats, 37% of Republicans; Thomas and Horowitz 2020). Still, support for Black Lives Matter need not translate into favorable opinions about policies tied to the movement's police reform objective. Studies of public opinion demonstrate that there is a difference between symbolic and operational ideology (Ellis and Stimson 2012), and the example of "defunding the police" (which most Americans oppose; Peyton, Vaughn, and Huber 2020) offers reason for caution.

Our results offer evidence that a bipartisan, multi-racial majority of Californians supports not only the Black Lives Matter movement, but several concrete proposals designed to implement its reform objective. This support is not for "ideas" in the abstract (such as defunding the police), but for actual legislative proposals to reform certain police practices considered by state legislators in a contested information environment with the November 2020 election looming. Our experimental analyses indicate that support for these policies is durable, even as respondents learn more about the positions of traditional advocates and opponents of policing reform. We do observe some initial partisan gaps in support, which grow as Democrats and Republicans move toward the positions of groups affiliated with their party and its causes. But these gaps are modest and the polarizing effects of information are confined to those who do not support Black Lives Matter. For the majority of respondents who support BLM, support for the legislative proposals remains strong, whether the endorsement information is provided or not.

Our study has several implications for scholars and practitioners interested in public opinion, the role of information, and the politics of policing. On the topic of public opinion, some scholars have suggested that large movements toward the positions of partisan elites in response to party cues should lead us to view citizens' expressed policy positions with suspicion (Hill and Huber 2019). If opinions are so easily moved, they argue, then citizens' positions mostly consist of "non-attitudes" (Converse 1964). The stability we observe

in our experimental analyses should reduce concerns that citizens' opinions about policies addressing the problem of police violence are ephemeral. This could reflect the fact that many of our respondents are confident in their ability to judge policy in this area, which Huber and Hill (2019) find is associated with smaller effects of information. Alternatively, it might be due to differences in the importance BLM supporters and opponents place on policies affecting the police. Whatever the reason, the stability of opinion among BLM supporters (a statewide majority) in California and partisan movements among BLM opponents (with remaining Democrats becoming more supportive) can only help the cause of reform.

With respect to the politics of policing, our results highlight the disconnect between elite and public opinion about how to address the problem of police violence. While we observe strong bipartisan support for specific policies tied to the Black Lives Matter movement's policing reform objective, elite opinion is extremely polarized. In March 2021, when the U.S. House passed the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act a second time, 219 of 221 Democrats voted for the bill while only 1 of 211 Republicans did so. In the California legislature, divisions are less lopsided, but severe nonetheless. In September 2020, the California Assembly passed a revised version of the proposal to limit police use of chokeholds. Democrats voted 57–0 in support (with three others not voting) while Republicans voted 12–4 against (with four others not voting). Like the issues of gun control and COVID-19 relief, bipartisan majorities of the public support meaningful reforms to police practices even as legislators are mired in partisan gridlock.

Scholars will continue to study the origins of such disconnects, including the influence of politically active groups like police officer associations. Our study suggests that elected officials might have less to fear electorally from law enforcement organizations than they did in the past. Plenty of research testifies to the substantial impact of public opinion, especially on salient issues. Increasing the salience of police brutality and unequal treatment by law enforcement undoubtedly will be an enduring legacy of the Justice for George marches. In the meantime, the window appears to be wide open in California and may soon be elsewhere. Two years ago, Assembly member Kevin McCarty, author of the proposal to create a division in the California Department of Justice to investigate police shootings, could not convince fellow Democrats Kamala Harris and Xavier Becerra to support his bill. As legislators debated the bill again at the height of the justice marches, the head of the powerful Peace Officers Research Association of California quietly announced that, as long as funding was available, he "doesn't see why we wouldn't support it" (Wiley 2020). Not an earthquake, but the ground is shifting.

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Notes

1. In the Online Appendix (pp. 19–21), we show that citizens give similar liberal ideological ratings to the California Democratic Party and the California Legislative Black Caucus, an indication that they see these organizations as having common interests. Citizens give conservative ideological ratings to the Republican Party and a group representing police chiefs in the state. In Table A4 of the Online Appendix, we show that Democrats rate a group of Black lawmakers as significantly closer to themselves ideologically than the group representing police chiefs. Republicans rate the group representing police personnel as significantly closer to themselves than the group of Black lawmakers. These findings suggest that citizens both accurately perceive the ideological reputations of traditional supporters and opponents of policing reforms, and understand how these groups' reputations relate to their own policy and partisan interests.

2. In Table A5 of the Online Appendix, we show that Democrats and Republicans who support the Black Lives Matter movement rate a group of Black lawmakers as significantly closer to themselves ideologically than a group representing police personnel. Democrats and Republicans who do not support BLM rate the group representing police personnel as significantly closer than the group of Black lawmakers.

3. Black Lives Matter was an early sponsor of the proposal to change California's standard for use of deadly force, but withdrew its support after the proposal was amended.

4. Ultimately, the CLBC passed four of the six proposals, including two we examine below. These two proposals sought to: (1) create a division within California's Department of

Justice to investigate incidents of a police shooting or use of deadly force against a suspect, and (2) end the use of chokeholds by the police.

5. We also included attention checks to verify that our respondents were answering questions diligently. See the Online Appendix, pp. 30–35 for a discussion.

6. We code respondents who identify as "strong," "not very strong," or "lean" Democrat or Republican as Democrats and Republicans. We omit true Independents from these analyses.

7. The exception is the proposal to create a new agency inside the California Department of Justice to investigate shootings and use of deadly force incidents involving the police. Both the CLBC and the CPCA supported this proposal. *Black Caucus* and *Caucus + Police* take the value 1 for Democrats, while *Police Association* and *Caucus + Police* take the value 1 for Republicans on this proposal.

8. In the Online Appendix (pp. 22–29), we show that differences in BLM supporters' and opponents' strength of partisanship cannot explain their different reactions to the endorsements.

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