

An American Paradox: Progress or Regress? BLM, Race, and Black Politics

Christopher Sebastian Parker

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was founded in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012, and the acquittal of his vigilante assailant the following year. The movement achieved dizzying heights in the aftermath of the murder of another Black male, this time under the guise of authority of the Minneapolis Police Department. George Floyd's lynching unleashed a mass(ive) protest movement during the summer of 2020, the scope of which had never been seen in the United States.¹ What's more, these protests resonated internationally.² They were also the most racially diverse protests to date, with 54% of the insurgents identifying as white.³ Most protests burn out in short order; not these. Spanning several weeks and thousands of cities, the temporal and spatial scope of the 2020 BLM protests pushed eminent social movement scholar Doug McAdam to declare that this insurgency was "different."⁴ To elaborate, at the height of the movement during the summer of 2020, only 28% of the American public opposed the movement.⁵ (Contrast this with the findings of a Gallup poll in 1963 in which 60% of the American public opposed the civil rights movement.)⁶ And yet, recent trends in public opinion indicate *increasing* opposition to BLM, clocking in at 43%, an increase of 56% relative to 2020.

What happened? To fully appreciate the unrealized potential for racial progress that might have resulted from the BLM protests (Dunivin, Yan, and Rojas 2022), one must first appreciate BLM in the context of the larger freedom struggle (Lebron 2017). In this way, a retreat from racial progress is nothing new; it's the norm. It's a cyclical process in which racial progress is *always* followed by racial retrenchment, a pattern elucidated by Klinkner and Smith (1999). Yes, as a result of the 2020 protests, some reforms were instituted: many municipalities redirected resources from law enforcement to aggrieved communities, and roughly twenty states adjusted or clarified use-of-force policies.⁷ Further, Juneteenth was made a federal holiday. This is all to the good. And yet, ten Black people were murdered in a supermarket in Buffalo, NY,

earlier this year by an avowed white supremacist; the Republican party opposes teaching kids any part of American history that dares make plain the fact that many whites participated willingly in a system of structural oppression, and those that didn't participate in oppression, nonetheless benefitted from white supremacy. If that's not enough, as of February 2022, 53% of whites approved of the recently disgraced former president, the same "man" who imposed a ban on Muslim immigrants, who granted the same moral standing to white supremacists as those who opposed them in Charlottesville, and whose supporters paraded around the Capitol with a confederate flag, wearing anti-Semitic tee shirts, seeking to find and hang the vice president. Trump, as the recent congressional hearings make plain, fomented a coup as a means to cling to power.

The attempt to overturn a presidential election by a (largely) white mob was novel. Still, the stench of racism was not a one-off. Consider the following: The Civil War, and the establishment of formal equality in an amended Constitution was accompanied by the formation of the first iteration of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), followed by codification of Jim Crow that further institutionalized white supremacy. The return of the "New Negro" in the aftermath of the "Great War," where many were exposed to the humanity of some Europeans, instilled in them a new confidence, and sense of possibilities. On their return, these soldiers in the great fight for democracy were met by the second edition of the KKK, only this version was national in scope. In the 1950s, the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* sparked "massive resistance" in the South. Often overlooked is the fact that the Court's order to implement desegregation with all *deliberate* (versus all *due*) speed permitted white supremacists the luxury of time to develop a strategy to derail progress. The success of the civil rights movement, partnering with LBJ's Democratic Party, drove white southerners from the party, causing a seismic realignment, one that resulted in the present polarized state of American politics. As it turns out, race is the most important factor

on which affective polarization rests, beating out both class and religion (Zhirkov and Valentino 2022). This led to another recent episode of racial progress and racial regress: the election of Barack Obama. In a nutshell, Obama's election represented racial progress, something by which the emerging Tea Party couldn't abide (Parker and Barreto 2014). In turn, the Tea Party paved the way for Trump (Gervais and Morris 2018).

This brings us to the present, where the revanchist-in-chief is poised for another run for the White House. Mind you, this is after he botched the response to a global pandemic, presided over a cratering economy, and after he was impeached—twice, among other things. This is in addition to his blatant disregard for Black people, clearly evident in his intemperate disdain for the BLM movement.⁸ To illustrate, according to his former Defense Secretary, Mark Esper, Trump wondered why BLM protesters couldn't simply be shot, perhaps in their legs, to dissuade them from exercising their First Amendment rights.⁹ Not surprisingly, race-based hate crimes spiked on his watch (Edwards and Rushin 2019). This was bound to happen given that Trump's racist rhetoric encouraged those already predisposed to racism to act on it (Newman et al. 2021). The question then becomes: why does Trump remain so popular among so many Republicans? It's a fact that 50% of Republicans don't want him to run for president again,¹⁰ but this still means that half of the Republican party wants him to have another go at it. To put it bluntly, these people stick with Trump because they feel as though he runs interference between them, as "real Americans," and everyone else. What I call status threat serves as the fascia connecting the Ku Klux Klan, the John Birch Society, the Tea Party, and now the MAGA movement (Parker 2021). With their way of life under threat, Trump's supporters refuse to abide any challenges to the cultural status quo, even if it's in keeping with the American creed.

This a problem. To understand why, consider the following. In a recent study I conducted with colleagues, we asked a number of questions related to the core issue of the BLM movement: the preservation of Black lives. We also asked a few questions about who was to blame for the violence that took place during the protests in the summer of 2020. In the first pair of questions, we asked subjects to comment on whether or not Black people dying at the hands of police or civilians (e.g., Dylann Roof) were "isolated incidents" or part of a "broader" issue of systemic racism. Those identifying as Republicans would make Trump proud with their answers. Indeed, when the police are the aggressors, 76% of GOP identifiers say blue on Black murders are basically one-off events. For civilians, the number declines to 72% of GOP identifiers who think such encounters are isolated incidents. When we asked folks about assigning responsibility for the violence associated with the BLM protests, 90% of Republicans placed

the blame on the protestors. As we can see, even if only half of Republicans desire Trump to pursue another stint in the Oval Office, his views have infected most of the party.

Given the degree to which Republicans, 81% of whom are white,¹¹ refuse to believe that murdering Black people by either cops or civilians is a *racial* problem, what are Black people supposed to do? If we agree that the ultimate end of the freedom struggle is for Blacks to live on terms equal to those of whites, and history suggests as much, the issue, roughly speaking, boils down to the means of achieving this long-overdue end. As such, history tells us that the Black community typically considered accommodation or confrontation (as the means). In this regard, the work of political theorist Juliet Hooker seems tailored to address these issues in the context of BLM and Black politics writ large. She suggests that the accommodation model, what she terms "democratic sacrifice," something that includes a romanticized version of the civil rights movement, is no longer appropriate, and for good reason. Among other things, the model assumes that non-violent insurgency in the face of white hostility would generate a sense of moral solidarity with sympathetic whites; this would pave the way for anti-racist reforms (Hooker 2016). However, given the white-hot anti-Black racism characteristic of today's political climate, Hooker doesn't think accommodation is the wisest course. If living on equal terms with whites is the strategic objective of the freedom struggle, she suggests adopting a model that doesn't depend on the placation of whites: racial justice.

Racial justice, she argues, doesn't *require* the Black community to always bear the responsibility of sustaining American democracy, of dealing with "democratic loss," and serving as exemplary citizens. (Sometimes sacrifice produces the desired outcome. As Parker [2009] shows, during wartime, this may ultimately result in racial progress.) This reminds us of Michael Hanchard's work on democracy, in which he makes plain the hypocrisy of democracy in that it (democracy) tends to thrive at the expense of the Other (Hanchard 2018). In the American case, of course, this is typically the Black community. Freed from the need to accommodate whites, racial justice permits the Black community to pursue political, social, and economic equality by any means necessary (in Malcolm X's famous formulation), including protests that some have called "rioting." For instance, in the 1960s, many in the Black community thought that retaliatory violence used to meet violent white aggression was a legitimate response to the indifference of white-dominated institutions. In other words, the "riots" were a self-defensive response to violence that had a political purpose (Sears and McConahay 1973), a sentiment shared by most participants as well as many bystanders.

As we approach the 2024 election cycle, it's clear that the Republican party will continue to pose an existential threat to American democracy (e.g., Levitsky and Ziblatt

2018), perhaps—although it remains a longshot—even by way of civil war (Walter 2022). It's hard to imagine how these outcomes might promote achieving the purpose of the freedom struggle: equality. Even so, we can't let Democrats off the hook. Yes, the Build Back Better bill championed by President Biden is a boon to communities of color,¹² but Democrats still have work to do. For instance, Democrats can't even agree to carve out an exception to the filibuster for voting rights, especially the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act (2021), a bill designed to undercut discrimination on the basis of race.¹³ Senators Manchin (D-WV) and Sinema (D-AZ) refuse to play ball, as well as President Biden. The president's reluctance is particularly galling given his acknowledgement that the Black vote was essential to his victory both in the Democratic primaries and the general election, adding, in return, he'd "have their [the Black community's] back."¹⁴ This begs the question: When will Biden make good on this promise, and do something for Black people?

Fortunately, Black people can draw on electoral politics in *addition* to protest politics. For, it seems, two components of the contemporary political scene, Trump and racism—paradoxically—encourage Black turnout. In results from a recent study (2020) which are not yet published, preliminary evidence suggests that both garden-variety racism and negative affect toward Trump predicted political engagement within the Black community. This includes presidential political choice (Biden), congressional political choice (Democrats), and writing a letter to one's senator. In other words, race-based threats radiating from the White House *and* society pushed the Black community to close ranks, and to resist the implementation of another American authoritarian regime (the first was the Jim Crow South). Black politics, in other words, is alive and well, via insurgency and conventional politics, thanks to "real Americans" and the threat they pose to Black people: a real American paradox.

Before summarizing the articles in this issue, I'd like to add a personal note of gratitude to the editors of *Perspectives on Politics*: Michael Bernhard and Dan O'Neill. When I approached them about guest-editing this issue more than two years ago, they warned me about the workload, but I'm hardheaded. They freely availed themselves to my many SOS calls, often with good cheer and indefatigable patience.

The Articles

Now that I've had my say, it's time to furnish the readers with an overview of the articles in this special issue of *Perspectives on Politics*. It's been two years since the journal issued the call for a BLM issue. I'm happy to say that the scholarly community, near and far, rose to the challenge in that the papers explore BLM in several ways. Broadly, the articles included in this issue explore Black Lives Matter from police/community perspectives, the role of activists,

and meditations on the meaning of the movement. They do so from normative (theory), comparative, and American perspectives. Further, a range of methods are employed, including qualitative, quantitative, and interpretive approaches. The pieces included represent a collective attempt to make plain the extent to which race (and racism) are, at once, a threat to American democracy and a necessary condition for American democracy to "work." At the same time, from a narrower perspective, the papers highlight the ways in which groups and institutions approach divisive issues in contemporary American society.

Traci Burch's contribution directly addresses the issue that the movement most forcefully confronts: *blue on Black murder*. In "Not All Black Lives Matter: Officer-Involved Deaths and the Role of Victim Characteristics in Shaping Political Interest and Voter Turnout," she explores the nuances of Black community reactions to blue on Black violence, and how it encourages political engagement. Experimentally manipulating race, visibility, and perceived threat, she shows that victim race (Black), visibility (high), and perceived threat (low) results in increased likelihood of political engagement of the Black community. Ultimately, this paper suggests that the media, BLM activists, and watchdog groups all have a role in the ways in which the Black community perceives and reacts to blue on Black violence. The research also indicates that the reactions to such encounters need not be confined to "riots."

In "'They Say We're Violent': The Multidimensionality of Race in Perceptions of Police Brutality and BLM," Nicole Yadon, has a slightly different take on this issue. Applying her approach to race, one emphasizing the import of skin color, to blue on Black encounters, she examines whether differences exist in the ways in which dark-skinned and lighter-skinned Black folks perceive police encounters. Deploying a mixed-methods approach, she finds that most Black people acknowledge that darker-skinned Black people are more likely to be mistreated at the hands of police than others in the community. Interestingly, such consensus fails to materialize around the relationship between movement messaging and sub-group differences around skin color. She finds that the Black community tends to eschew emphasizing color-based differences in policing in movement messaging out of concern that it will detract from the larger message of racial justice.

The final piece on this subject in this issue is "Representation and Aggression in Digital Racial Conflict: Analyzing Public Comments during Live-streamed News of Racial Justice Protests." Authored by Nathan Kalmoe, P. Brooks Fuller, Martina Santia, and Paromita Saha, it assesses discourse in the public sphere when blue on Black violence leads to protest. In an effort to understand how the public reacts to BLM protests in real time, the authors

draw on a representative sample of comments generated by Facebook Live (FBL). Among other things, the comments reflect the demography and political attitudes of the community. Further, when it comes to racial disparities, comments authored by Black folks that were derogatory were met with hostility, but similar comments on the part of whites went unpunished. In the end, this contribution illustrates how race and racism plays out in the public sphere where, as always, the promise of multiracial democracy is consistently undermined by the practice of *American* democracy.

Another set of papers centers on *BLM activists*. These, however, not only discuss the movement in America, but France and Nigeria, as well. It's no secret that France has a long history of racism and it is not surprising that it has a BLM movement of its own. This is explored in depth by Jean Beaman and Jennifer Fredette in "The US/France Contrast Frame and Black Lives Matter in France." Discussions of race or racism in France face the problem that the centrality of egalitarianism as a theoretical concept in French identity denies the reality of racism. The political authorities, fearful of American-style confrontational approaches to racism by their own anti-racist activists, attempt to undermine claims by the activists. They do so by claiming the American model doesn't fit the French case because of the absence of the significance of race, given the French ethos of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. In investigating the discourse of the French BLM movement, and drawing on ethnographies and media analyses, Beaman and Fredette find that activists tend to draw on existing global anti-racist frames, not only those confined to the American case. In the end, the authors demonstrate that the strategic (mis)use of the American frame on the part of French elites is designed to erase race and racism in France.

Adaugo Pamela Nwakanma's contribution, "From Black Lives Matter to EndSARS: Women's Socio-political Power and the Transnational Movement for Black Lives," compares BLM to the EndSARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad) movement in Nigeria in order to capture the transnational significance of the BLM movement. Beyond the common origins that instantiated both movements—police brutality—she notes several similarities between them, the most important of which is that both are grounded in feminist theories of justice. A close reading of the literature on the activists of both movements highlights the intersectional strategies employed by both as a means of generating and sustaining mobilization. There are, however, important points of departure between the movements, including prescriptions aimed at funding law enforcement. EndSARS supports *increased* funding as a means of combatting corruption, whereas BLM is all about *decreasing* funding, and rerouting the savings into community-based resources, e.g., mental health, housing.

The focus shifts back to activists in the United States in Julien Talpin and Clément Petitjean's "Tweets and Door-knocks. Differentiation and Cooperation between Black Lives Matter and Community Organizing." They examine the relationship between movements and community-based organizations. It's often taken for granted that synergies exist, but the authors wish to test this assumption, something they accomplish by comparing these dynamics in Los Angeles and Chicago. Ultimately, they find that any potential for cooperation is often riven by distrust and competition. Based on the ethnography on which they draw, they argue that such disconnections are driven by styles, action repertoires, and organizational forms. All is not lost, however. As the authors go on to make plain, cooperation between movements and community-based organizations may yet materialize if younger activists are permitted to weigh in. They are more likely to cultivate connections between the national-level movements, in this case BLM, and local organizational concerns.

Michael Heaney's offering on movement niches in the American case rounds out our discussion on activists. In "Who Are Black Lives Matter Activists? Niche Realization in a Multimovement Environment," Heaney points out that movements must often compete for space on the public agenda with other movements. Ideological overlap is common, but movement goals tend to remain distinct, and so it is with their respective activists. Tapping data collected during protests prior to the BLM marches of 2020, Heaney sets out to test this proposition. His findings reveal that, relative to other movement activists in the progressive space, BLM activists tend to be more inclined toward intersectional activism, to use social media, to be less satisfied with American democracy, are more willing to countenance violence, and are angrier about the state of American politics.

Several of our contributors focus their research on trying to make sense of the movement, and to understand what it means for our political future. In "From 'Freedom Now!' to 'Black Lives Matter': Retrieving King and Randolph to Theorize Contemporary White Antiracism," Jared Clemons tries to understand the decline of white enthusiasm for the movement I noted in my earlier remarks. Using the works of A. Philip Randolph and Martin Luther King, Jr. to guide his analysis, Clemons interrogates the likelihood of achieving racial justice. He concludes that the preconditions outlined by these thinkers are not achievable in the current neoliberal political economy, one that privatizes the costs of racial justice, making individual whites pay the price for racial reform versus the state and society in the earlier, more liberal New Deal order. In our current neoliberal order, whites must be willing to sacrifice material advantage if racial justice is to ever be achieved. However, as Clemons argues, this is apparently simply too much to ask. For this reason, when it comes to anything

beyond empty symbolic gestures, racial reform remains a work very much in progress. This, he argues, is why the prospects for any enduring change associated with BLM is unlikely.

Kevin Drakulich and Megan Denver use a set of more positivist tools to interrogate the meaning of BLM in “The Partisans and The Persuadables: Public Views of Black Lives Matter and the 2020 Protests.” Their study uses a field experiment embedded in a national survey to explore support for BLM and support for the protests in 2020 through the prism of partisanship. For anyone who’s paid any attention to politics at all over the last fifteen years, the results will not surprise. When it comes to the protests, for instance, Democrats believe they are motivated by the continued mistreatment of the Black community. Republicans contend that the protests were simply a cover for criminal behavior. Even when partisans were induced experimentally to change their respective positions, they held fast. The picture for independent voters is quite different. First, their initial positions on the support for BLM and the protests were mixed. Further, their initial positions were malleable, subject to persuasion. Ultimately, they conclude that the effect of partisanship on BLM is consequential, albeit complicated.

In “Black Lives, White Kids: White Parenting Practices Following Black-Led Protests,” Allison P. Anoll, Andrew Engelhardt, and Mackenzie Israel-Trummel confront the ways in which the 2020 protests served as a teaching moment for white parents and their children. Employing a national survey, and using a battery of thoughtful indicators of attitudes and behaviors consistent with anti-racism, they find that political predispositions tended to structure how people approached racial justice in the aftermath of the protests. Among other things, parents on the right, relative to those on the left, are less likely to discuss white privilege, the persistence of discrimination, historical figures who aren’t white, or attend a BLM protest with their children. Yet even among those on the left, as the costs associated with educating their children on racism increased, the less likely they were to bring their social practices into alignment with their beliefs.

Flavio Azevedo, Tamara Marques, and Leticia Micheli also try to make sense of BLM by conducting a meta-analysis of extant research in “In Pursuit of Racial Equality: Identifying the Determinants of Support for the Black Lives Matter Movement with a Systematic Review and Multiple Meta-Analyses.” To accomplish this, they first turn to an exhaustive literature review, one entailing almost 1600 “records.” The review suggested a number of factors that are believed to predict support for BLM, including partisanship, race, discrimination, psychological factors, ideology, prejudice, and demography. To examine this, they lean on meta-analyses in which they analyzed no fewer than thirteen nationally representative surveys that include approximately 32,000 subjects. They find that

institutions, groups, and ideologies that are predisposed to racism reject BLM.

Related Content

This special issue also includes outstanding content that, while not directly on the topic of Black Lives Matter, nevertheless concerns the overarching context in which those protests occurred. These pieces focus on the role of religion in American life and the influential concept of “linked fate,” respectively.

Churches are renowned as incubators of civic activism. They are often places in which civic skills are first acquired and developed. In this sense, the Evangelical church is an ideal case study of the role of religion with respect to the issue of race, given its mobilization in the late 1970s in assisting Ronald Reagan’s successful bid for the White House. In “Igniting Change: An Evangelical Mega-church’s Racial Justice Program,” Hahrie Han and Maneeh Arora wonder about the possibility that this energy and activism is available for more progressive ends like racial justice. For anyone at all familiar with recent history, and the link between evangelicalism and Christian nationalism, this seems a difficult task. The latter is well known for its racial intolerance. Drawing on a multi-method approach, Han and Arora interrogate a Mega-Church’s attempt to foster interracial comity by way of a six-week racial justice program. In the end, they find that program participants emerged with attitudes and behaviors more conducive to the pursuit of racial democracy.

Beginning with the publication of Michael Dawson’s classic, *Behind the Mule*, the concept of linked fate is something scholars of race and politics, who take a behavioral approach, cannot ignore. Written, at least in part, as a rebuttal to sociologist William Julius Wilson’s *The Declining Significance of Race*, Dawson outlines a mechanism, anchored in a history of social and economic deprivation, through which Black people must make political choices against a backdrop cluttered by a bewildering array of information. In “Rewiring Linked Fate: Bringing Back History, Agency, and Power,” Reuel R. Rogers and Jae Yeon Kim acknowledge the theoretical import of linked fate, but that doesn’t stop them from engaging in constructive criticism of the concept. In a nutshell, they argue that Dawson and others emphasize the micro-level, social psychological component of the theory to the detriment of the macro- and meso-levels of analysis: history and roles played by elites, respectively. The willy-nilly extension of linked fate to other racial groups beyond the Black community produces results that are, at best, uneven. This, they suggest, is because researchers who study these other communities fail to pay much attention to the macro- and meso-levels when applying linked-fate to non-Black populations. Ultimately, they argue that a more thoughtful approach to the wider application of linked fate will continue the revolution begun by Dawson in 1994.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>.
- 2 <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/12/21285244/black-lives-matter-global-protests-george-floyd-uk-belgium>.
- 3 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2020/07/08/the-diversity-of-the-recent-black-lives-matter-protests-is-a-good-sign-for-racial-equity/>.
- 4 <https://jacobin.com/2020/06/george-floyd-protests-black-lives-matter-riots-demonstrations>.
- 5 https://civiqs.com/results/black_lives_matter?annotations=true&uncertainty=true&zoomIn=true.
- 6 https://www.crmvet.org/docs/60s_crm_public-opinion.pdf.
- 7 <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/state-policing-reforms-george-floyds-murder>.
- 8 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/09/01/over-over-trump-has-focused-black-lives-matter-target-derision-or-violence/>.
- 9 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/05/02/donald-trumps-dangerous-view-state-violence/>.
- 10 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/12/us/politics/trump-approval-polling-2024.html>.
- 11 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/26/what-the-2020-election-looks-like-by-party-race-and-ethnicity-age-education-and-religion/>.
- 12 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2021/11/05/what-does-the-build-back-better-framework-mean-for-bipoc-communities/>.
- 13 <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/john-lewis-voting-rights-advancement-act>.
- 14 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/11/us/joe-biden-black-voters.html>.

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