

# Whose lives mattered? How White and Black Americans felt about Black Lives Matter in 2016

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## Abstract

White Americans, on average, do not support Black Lives Matter, while Black Americans generally express strong support. The lack of support among white Americans is striking, and we argue that it matters why this racial gap exists. Using a nationally representative survey collected during the crest of the first wave of widespread attention to the movement, we explore four potential explanations for interracial differences in feelings toward Black Lives Matter. These explanations reflect competing claims made by advocates and opponents of the movement and have distinct implications for understanding the meaning of these racial differences. Two explanations focus on attitudes toward the police, and two focus on racial prejudice. The results suggest that interracial differences in contact with the police mattered to views of the movement, though in opposite ways for white and Black Americans. Support for the movement among Black Americans was not motivated by an animosity toward the police. Ultimately, the lack of white support for Black Lives Matter was best explained by anti-Black animus and racial resentment, reflecting a concern about the threat this contemporary civil rights movement presents to the racial status quo.

## INTRODUCTION

### Black Lives Matter

This declaration, originally conceived in 2013 after George Zimmerman's acquittal for the death of Trayvon Martin and used as a rallying cry after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, has come to represent a larger social movement reflected both in mass protests over a series of deaths of Black citizens at the hands of police and in the work of activists and organizers across the

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United States (e.g., Lowery, 2016).<sup>1</sup> The declaration signifies the root concern of the movement: the devaluation of Black lives evidenced in broad racial inequalities and injustices and highlighted specifically in the disproportionate experience of hostile or fatal interactions between police and Black civilians.<sup>2</sup>

Research suggests the movement's grievances are well-founded. Broadly, Black Americans experience persistent and striking socioeconomic inequalities and disparate exposure to the criminal justice system (e.g., Peterson & Krivo, 2010). More specifically, the police do, on average, treat Black citizens differently (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2018; Crutchfield et al., 2012; Gelman et al., 2007; US DOJ Report, 2013; Voigt et al., 2017), including shooting and killing unarmed Black people more frequently than unarmed white people (e.g., Correll et al., 2007; Nix et al., 2017; Ross, 2015).

Despite this, most white Americans do not express support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. In 2016, only 40% of white Americans expressed any kind of support for BLM and only 14% expressed *strong* support (Pew Research Center, 2016).<sup>3</sup> Only 28% of white Americans thought that Trayvon Martin's death raised important issues about race, and only 37% felt the same about Michael Brown's shooting (Pew Research Center, 2014). This is in stark contrast to Black Americans, who largely thought both cases raised important questions about race (around 80% for each) and 65% of whom supported BLM, with 41% strongly supportive (Pew Research Center, 2014, 2016).<sup>4</sup> Even among police officers, Black officers are substantially more likely than white officers to believe that the deaths of Black citizens at the hands of the police are signs of a broader problem (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Why is it that white Americans hold substantially less favorable views of the movement than Black Americans? To answer this question, we focus on a particular moment in time: the crest of the first wave of widespread attention to the movement in 2016, when protests were widespread across the country and the movement became a significant issue in the presidential election. Based on the specific and general concerns of the movement—police killings of Black Americans as a window into broader racial inequalities— and drawing on theory and past research, we develop and test four potential explanations for the divergence in perspectives. Two are at least superficially nonracial: that differences in support for the movement might be explained by racial disparities in experiences with the police or more generally in differences in affinity for the police. The other two propose a role for racism in explaining views of this racial civil rights movement, investigating basic racial affinity as well as a more modern form of racism that implicates the movement's broader concern: the relative positions of Black and white people in America's racial hierarchy, and the threat to the current racial order posed by the movement.

It matters that so few white Americans feel positively toward BLM. More than 150 years after the end of chattel slavery and more than 50 years after a racial civil rights movement challenged legal segregation and discrimination, the United States remains deeply divided about the persistence of racial inequality and injustice. Public opinion about the central concerns of the movement had political relevance in the 2016 election (e.g. Drakulich et al., 2017, 2020), and of course has broader consequences for the future of the country's racial divide.

<sup>1</sup>Although coined by and intended as the name of an organization founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi (Garza, 2016; King, 2015), "Black Lives Matter" became journalistic shorthand for both smaller organic protest activities and the work of a large number of unrelated existing community organizers and groups—including those who organized and participated in the pivotal Ferguson protests (e.g., Lowery, 2016). Given our focus on popular understandings, we use this shorthand as a reference point for how people felt toward the movement more broadly, even though we recognize that the work was not accomplished by a single organization nor exclusively by those affiliated with the Black Lives Matter organization.

<sup>2</sup>Black Lives Matter began as an effort to call attention to "state-sanctioned violence"—including police violence but also anti-Black violence by citizens as in the case of Trayvon Martin's death—as well as "anti-Black racism" more broadly (Black Lives Matter, n.d.).

<sup>3</sup>A daily tracking poll suggests that net opposition to the movement persists among White Americans in the years following this initial moment of widespread attention to the movement outside of a brief window in the late spring of 2020: [https://civiqs.com/results/black\\_lives\\_matter](https://civiqs.com/results/black_lives_matter).

<sup>4</sup>Importantly, these numbers also suggest that support for and opposition to the movement is far from a monolithic view among either Black or White Americans.

For these same reasons, it also matters *why* white Americans are less supportive of the movement. Scholarly work generally frames opposition to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s as a function of racism (e.g., Beckett & Sasson, 2004; Sears & Kinder, 1971; Sears & McConahay, 1973; Tonry, 2011), suggesting opposition to the BLM movement may be similarly explained. However, there are two related reasons to consider alternative explanations. First, competing public narratives about the motivations behind support or opposition to BLM compel a systematic evaluation. Specifically, counter-protestors and social media critics argued that their opposition was rooted in their support for the police, and explicitly denied racism as a motivation.<sup>5</sup> Second, real differences exist between the 1960s and 2010s, including a striking decline in overt expressions of racism (Krysan & Moberg, 2016; Schuman et al., 1997). As a result, it is important to carefully examine the nature and sources of attitudes toward BLM.

The explanations we consider each imply different causal mechanisms. A difference in experiences with the police highlights a white ignorance of the experiences of Black Americans, perhaps protected by persistent segregation. Affinity toward the police speaks to competing claims—that feelings about BLM are not fundamentally about race, but about support for the symbolic guardians of the moral order, or, on the other side, about a hatred of those same guardians and the order they represent (an accusation made by the Blue Lives Matter counter-movement). The explanation rooted in an affinity for Black people reflects the problem of affective ties too rarely reaching across racial lines. Or opposition to the movement might be better explained by a more modern racism—a perspective that anticipates claims of superficially nonracial motivations. This implies something much more problematic: that white opposition to the movement reflects a more fundamental opposition to efforts to upset the racial status quo.

We conclude by situating our findings about views of BLM in historical context, drawing both parallels and distinctions between the Civil Rights Era and the modern one. In the end, racial and racist progress appears to run in parallel and interactive rather than pendular and divergent paths (e.g., Kendi, 2016). We also consider the implications of our findings for understanding attitudes toward the movement beyond 2016.

## FOUR EXPLANATIONS FOR RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN VIEWS OF BLM

We begin by developing four theoretical explanations for why white Americans, on average, feel substantially less favorably toward BLM than Black Americans.<sup>6</sup> While the four explanations are not necessarily competing—each could explain some of the white-Black difference—we do not present them as equally likely, noting in particular serious questions about the first three that may be resolved by the fourth. The first two explanations are ostensibly race-neutral and focus on experiences with and feelings toward the police. The latter two focus on the role of racism, distinguishing more overt expressions of racial animus from more strategic concerns about group position (e.g., Blumer, 1958).

### The police

The first possible explanation is that divergent views of a movement concerned with police misconduct are a consequence of race differences in police contact (Braga et al., 2019). People of color—and people in communities of color—experience a greater quantity of police contact, including stops and

<sup>5</sup>Captured in the “Blue Lives Matter” (Solomon & Martin, 2019) and “All Lives Matter” (Gallagher et al., 2018) counter-frames, respectively.

<sup>6</sup>We focus on White and Black Americans because Black inequalities are the focus of the movement and White Americans benefit most from the current racial order. The views of other racial/ethnic groups are beyond the scope of the current paper, though we strongly recommend further research on that topic (e.g., Merseth, 2018).

frisks, searches, citations, and arrests (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2018; Crutchfield et al., 2012; Fagan & Davies, 2000; Gelman et al., 2007; Ingram, 2007; Kochel et al., 2011; Lytle, 2014; Petrocelli et al., 2003; Rojek et al., 2012). While white Americans are more likely to initiate contact with the police or have contact with officers offering help, Black Americans are more likely to be stopped while driving and much more likely to be stopped and questioned on the street (e.g., Davis & Whyde, 2018). Within this contact, people of color—and people in communities of color—are also more likely to experience police disrespect and misconduct (e.g., Epp et al., 2014; Kane, 2002; US DOJ, 2013; Voigt et al., 2017), the use of coercive force (e.g. Smith, 1986; Terrill & Reisig, 2003), and be injured, shot, or killed (Correll et al., 2007; Nix et al., 2017; Ross, 2015; Ross et al., 2018).

In judging the likelihood of a phenomenon, people tend to privilege their personal experiences (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Persistently high levels of racial segregation in the residential, professional, and social lives of Americans (Massey & Denton, 1993; Peterson & Krivo, 2010) insulate many white Americans from the treatment many Black Americans receive at the hands of the police. Consequently, views of the police appear to be stratified not just by the race of individuals but also by the racial composition of the neighborhoods in which Americans reside (e.g., Drakulich, 2013; Drakulich & Crutchfield, 2013). And although raising awareness about these kinds of experiences was an explicit goal of the BLM movement, people's selection into media outlets—themselves relatively segregated—likely prevented many Americans from learning about these experiences in a manner that does not simply reinforce pre-existing beliefs. In short, white Americans may not support BLM both because of their own lack of experience with aggressive police stops as well as their social distance from those who have experienced frequent police stops.

One important problem clouds this explanation. Although people may privilege their own experiences in the absence of direct knowledge of the experience of Black Americans, they also bear some responsibility for this lack of knowledge given the choices they made that resulted in a lack of direct contact with Black Americans or in the media outlets they seek out. Even when people do encounter stories of the problematic treatment of Black Americans by police, they may choose not to believe them or interpret them as exceptional rather than systematic.<sup>7</sup> In this light, an explanation resting on benign ignorance seems insufficient. Charles Mills (1997, 2007) describes a white ignorance—protected by an “epistemology of ignorance”—that acts to intentionally insulate white Americans from the realities of race. This willful ignorance of inequalities is a core component of theories of modern racism, including *laissez-faire* (e.g., Bobo & Kluegel, 1997; Bobo & Smith, 1998) and color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2017), as we discuss below. In the context of understanding disparities in the criminal justice system, Drakulich and Rodriguez-Whitney (2018: 23) describe this as a failure “to critically investigate the inconvenient truths of racial privilege.”

The second possible explanation for Black-white differences in views of the movement is that opposition to the movement is driven not just by experiences with the police but more broadly by *feelings toward* the police. The police act as representatives of the legal authority and are publicly tasked with protecting citizens from criminal harm and providing order. Psychologists identify “respect for authority” as one of the core moral foundations: nearly everyone has some level of respect for authority although people differ in how important this moral foundation is relative to others like fairness or caring (Graham et al., 2012; Haidt & Joseph, 2004). Thus, many people may have an affinity for the police, especially when they see them as providing important social goods like security and order. This may be especially true amidst broader concerns about social changes in which people may “look to the police to defend a sense of order” (Jackson & Bradford, 2009, p. 499; see also Jackson & Sunshine, 2007; Wozniak, 2016). If there are racial differences in support or affinity for the police, they may explain differences in views of BLM. In fact, BLM protestors and

<sup>7</sup>Additionally, it is possible that repeated viewings of videos of police violence against Black Americans may be desensitizing for some viewers, and traumatic for others—particularly for Black Americans (Williams & Clarke, 2019). It is also possible that repeated exposure reinforces stereotypes that Black people are violent and dangerous.

politicians who supported them were accused of lacking the proper respect for the police, and even of being motivated by a dislike or hatred of the police (e.g., Alcindor, 2016; Holley, 2016; Vitale, 2016).

To the extent that there are racial differences in support for the police, it is also important to consider *why* they exist, as this may complicate this potential explanation. Work on moral foundations often specifies that this respect is for a *legitimate* authority (e.g. Graham et al., 2009). The relationship between legitimacy and respect for authority may be tautological: legitimacy is predicated on the existence of respect for authority and this respect only makes sense when the authority is viewed as legitimate. In this sense, it matters that many Americans, particularly people of color, have sincere questions about the legitimacy of the police (e.g., Peffley & Hurwitz, 2010). Several theories take different approaches to this phenomena, describing the concerns as rooted in procedurally unjust experiences with the police (e.g., Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Waslak, 2004), as a legal cynicism in which the “the police and courts are viewed as illegitimate, unresponsive, and ill equipped to ensure public safety” (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011, p. 1191), or as a legal estrangement in which many in poor communities of color correctly recognize the law as operating to exclude them from society (Bell, 2017). If the police frequently act in racially biased ways, this not only recasts lower levels of support among Black Americans as justified, it also raises troubling questions about the meaning of white support. In short, what does it mean to support the police when the police are publicly accused of racial bias?

## Racism

The third possible explanation for interracial differences in attitudes toward BLM is that feelings about the movement are rooted in feelings about Black people. This is among the simplest explanations and reflects the logic of the name of the movement, implying that Black lives are not valued equally by all Americans. Research on the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) suggests positive intergroup feelings emerge from positive contact between members of different groups (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Unfortunately, high levels of segregation, especially in residential communities (e.g. Peterson & Krivo, 2010), mean that affective ties often fail to stretch across racial lines. In this simple sense, then, a greater affinity *for* Black people *among* Black people may help explain their greater affinity for BLM.

There is a long history of anti-Black animus among white Americans, one that justified slavery (e.g., Kendi, 2016), the post-Civil War Black Codes (e.g. Blackmon, 2008), the Jim Crow System (e.g. Alexander, 2010), and even biased policies in northern cities during the Progressive Era (Muhammad, 2019). Thus, antipathy toward BLM may simply be a function of antipathy toward Black people. However, this explanation faces two related potential problems. First, relatively explicit expressions of racial animus—like a lack of warm feelings toward Black people as a group—have declined substantially (Krysan & Moberg, 2016; Schuman et al., 1997). Second, many theories of racism focus on group interest rather than simple affection (e.g. Blumer, 1958; Bonilla-Silva, 2017)—something that was true even when overt expressions of racism were more common (e.g., Kendi, 2016). Further, despite the seeming decline in overt expressions of racial animus, support for policies that disproportionately harm Black Americans and opposition to policies designed to ameliorate racial inequalities suggest a more modern form of racism not reflected in simple measures of racial animus (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Drakulich, 2015a, 2015b). Thus, a simple indicator of racial feelings may miss a more complicated racial logic that better explains opposition to BLM.

The civil rights movement and subsequent decline in overt racism motivate the fourth and final possible explanation, which focuses not on a simple view of racial affect but on perceptions of racial group interest. A civil rights movement, by definition, presents a threat to the status quo racial hierarchy. Any perceived threats to the existing racial order and existing distribution of privileges and resources will engender racial prejudice as a protective mechanism (e.g. Blumer, 1958). This can be

seen most dramatically in the rise of racist collective action—including by the Ku Klux Klan (see Cunningham, 2013; McVeigh, 2009)—to preserve racial privileges thought to be threatened, but may also be reflected more broadly in public opinion among white Americans. Similar to the lack of support for the BLM movement, a majority of Americans—and white Americans in particular—opposed the protests of the 1960s civil rights movement (Legum, 2017).

In fact, “modern” theories of racism emerged out of attempts to understand the evolving views of race relations among white Americans both during the Civil Rights Era and in the decades following. Using a survey of Los Angeles residents collected in the months following the Watts Rebellion in 1965, *symbolic racism* was developed to help understand an emerging phenomenon in which some white Americans expressed support for racial equality in principle but simultaneously opposed policies attempting to ameliorate this inequality (Kinder & Sears, 1981; Sears & Kinder, 1971; Sears & McConahay, 1973). During the Jim Crow Era, some white Americans used openly racist ideologies to justify their dominant position in the racial hierarchy, arguing that Black Americans were fundamentally inferior and thus undeserving of the same legal status as white Americans (e.g., Kendi, 2016). However, when legal discrimination and racial inequalities were challenged—as they were by the civil rights movement—those in power began to shift away from openly racial ideologies and toward those emphasizing individualism while simultaneously minimizing or denying the role of historical or contemporary racism as barriers faced by Black Americans (Jackman & Muha, 1984; Krysan, 2000; Mendelberg, 2001). This new form of racism, more covert but still effective at maintaining racial inequalities, has also been described as *laissez-faire racism* (Bobo et al., 1997; Bobo & Smith, 1998) or *color-blind racism* (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). A substantial body of prior research has connected these kinds of ideologies to opposition to economic policies intended to address racial inequalities (see Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Krysan, 2000; Tuch & Hughes, 2011), while a smaller number of studies have connected them to support for criminal justice policies and practices that disproportionately harm Black Americans (e.g., Carter & Corra, 2016; Johnson, 2008). Thus, while some of the opposition to a racial civil rights movement like BLM may be expressed in openly racial and racialized terms, some may be expressed in color-blind or *laissez-faire* terms: emphasizing that existing inequalities are the product of individual successes and failures while intentionally ignoring the very different circumstances faced by members of different racial groups.

This fourth potential explanation addresses some of the limitations of the three preceding explanations. First, we suggested that white ignorance about the experience of Black Americans with the police was an unsatisfying explanation when that ignorance is willful and instrumental as color-blind and *laissez-faire* theories of modern racism suggest (Bobo & Kluegel, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2017). Second, we asked what support for the police meant in the context of accusations of racial bias against the police. Theories of modern racism suggest people may mask racist motivations—whether possessed explicitly or implicitly (Drakulich, 2015a, 2015b)—in superficially nonracial positions (Bobo et al., 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2017). In other words, some white people may justify their opposition to BLM on the grounds of support for the police when their opposition is really rooted in indifference toward Black lives and an opposition to calls for racial justice. Finally, the fourth explanation also accounts for the changing nature of racial prejudice from more overt anti-Black bigotry to more covert and implicit modern expressions of racism.

## THE PRESENT STUDY

As a relatively new social movement—though one built on prior racial social justice movements (e.g., Lebron, 2017; Lowery, 2016)—few studies have measured public opinion about BLM. One study examined the correlates of views of BLM and found that opposition was highest among older, conservative, and Republican men, as well as those who live in more Republican states (Updegrave et al., 2018).

Despite the paucity of direct work on broad *public opinion* about BLM, research on the movement itself suggests processes consistent with our theoretical emphasis on group position.

Boyles (2019) describes a “post-Ferguson backlash against black action” (p. 29) that dismisses civil rights protest as disobedient and disorderly. Cobbina (2019) situates the movement in the history of differential policing by race, linking these disparities to historical and contemporary processes of oppression. Notably, both of these scholars point to important variation in views of the movement among Black Americans.

The four explanations we explore are not necessarily conflicting or mutually exclusive, though we are interested in the relative magnitude of their effects. Based on the discussion above, we are particularly interested in the effects of the other explanations once we control for racial resentment, the measure capturing our fourth explanation.

Both major party presidential candidates in the 2016 election took stances on BLM. Hillary Clinton, the Democratic candidate, more closely aligned herself with the movement, calling for criminal justice reforms while also praising the police generally (Blake, 2016; Bouie, 2015; Glanton, 2016; Grawert, 2016). Donald Trump, the Republican candidate, explicitly criticized the movement, describing it as “trouble” (Campbell 2015) and suggested a protestor allegedly assaulted at one of his rallies “maybe ... should have been roughed up” (Johnson & Jordan, 2015). For this reason, it is important to control for the role of political identification.

However, the role of politics is complicated. Political identification is likely endogenous to racial resentment and racial animus (e.g., Drakulich, 2015a; Matsueda et al., 2011). Indeed, an explicit component of the Republican “southern strategy” was the recruitment of voters who were uncomfortable with the threats to the racial status quo posed by the Civil Rights Movement (e.g., Beckett & Sasson, 2004; Tonry, 2011). In the modern context, the nomination of a Black presidential candidate in 2008 appeared to push white voters with racial animus and resentments away from the Democrats (e.g., Krupnikov & Piston, 2015). Support for the Tea Party Movement that arose shortly after this election was driven directly by racial resentment (e.g., Hochschild, 2016; Tope et al., 2015). In 2016, Donald Trump appeared to make direct appeals to these voters who felt left behind by structural economic changes and believed that racial minorities were “cutting the line” with the assistance of the federal government to gain the benefits of the American Dream (e.g., Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019; Drakulich et al., 2017; Hochschild, 2016; Sides et al., 2018). In fact, expressions of support for the police appeared to function as a racist dog whistle, predicting support for Donald Trump only among those high in racial resentment (Drakulich et al., 2020). In short, political frames of the movement may have shaped public opinion both along party lines and in ways that resonated with those who have concerns about the relative status of Black and white Americans. This suggests that controlling for people’s politics will allow us to examine the role of racism or views of the police independent of these political attitudes, but also has implications for how to interpret the meaning of the role of politics relative to our other explanations.

## DATA, MEASURES, AND METHODS

We use data from the 2016 American National Election Studies Time Series Survey to explore racial differences in feelings toward the BLM movement. The survey was conducted in two modes: face-to-face interviews as well as questionnaires administered online (DeBell et al., 2018).<sup>8</sup> The survey was conducted in two waves in late 2016—the first in the 2 months prior to the election and the second in the 2 months after the election. This timing works well to capture feelings about BLM at the crest of the first peak in widespread attention to the movement. Although the deaths of Black Americans provoked substantial and sustained protests in 2014 and 2015—particularly in Ferguson and Baltimore—the summer of 2016 saw these protests expand broadly in cities across the country (Lee et al., 2016). Discussions of the movement by the major party candidates in the 2016 presidential election brought even more attention. Online searches suggest a first major peak of attention to the

<sup>8</sup>A control for the version of the survey was added to all analyses.

**TABLE 1** Descriptive statistics

	Mean	SD
Warmth toward BLM	49.73	32.49
Stopped by police	0.24	0.43
Ever arrested	0.21	0.41
Warmth toward police	74.48	23.60
Warmth toward “Blacks”	67.99	22.65
Racial resentment	3.17	1.13
Female	0.51	0.50
Age	46.77	17.60
Education	13.99	2.61
Income	75.73	64.40
Unemployed	0.06	0.24
Black	0.11	0.31
Asian	0.03	0.16
Other race	0.05	0.21
Hispanic	0.12	0.32
Foreign born	0.08	0.27
Conservative	4.14	1.46
Republican	3.80	2.15
Face to face	0.25	0.44

Note: N = 3252.

Abbreviations: BLM, Black Lives Matter; SD, standard deviation.

movement in the summer of 2016.<sup>9</sup> Our study captures the moment just after this first peak in news coverage and public interest in the movement. The post-election interview included 1059 face-to-face interviews and 2590 online interviews. The study is designed to be nationally representative of adult U.S. citizens.

## Measures

Our core interest is in people’s feelings toward BLM, which we measure with a “feeling thermometer scale,” a common format in political science research to gauge affective support for individuals, groups, or issues (Nelson, 2008). Respondents were asked to rate their feelings toward a list of individual persons and groups on a scale ranging from 0 to 100, with 0 representing very cold and unfavorable feelings and 100 representing very warm or favorable feelings. For this measure of *warmth toward BLM*, respondents were asked specifically how warmly or coldly they felt toward BLM. Overall, the average respondent was mixed in their feelings, rating the movement about a 50 on the scale from 0 to 100 (Table 1).<sup>10</sup>

Two questions capture experiences with the police. The first asks whether the respondent or any of their family members were *stopped* or questioned by a police officer in the last 12 months. Roughly a quarter of respondents said yes. The second question asks whether the respondent has ever been *arrested*. Roughly a fifth of respondents reported they had.

<sup>9</sup>Data Source: Google Trends for “Black Lives Matter” (<https://www.google.com/trends>).

<sup>10</sup>Only 22 respondents indicated they did not recognize who Black Lives Matter was. Nine respondents indicated they did not know how to rate them. Twenty-eight refused to answer the question. All were treated as missing data.



In addition to experiences with the police, respondents were asked for their feelings about the police (*warmth toward police*) also using a thermometer scale. The average respondent felt relatively warmly toward the police, ranking them a 75 out of 100.

Similarly, respondents were asked about their *warmth or coldness toward “Blacks”* on a 100-point scale—representing explicit and affective views toward “Blacks” as a group. The average respondent felt somewhat warmly toward “Blacks”: a 68 out of 100.

Finally, concerns about the racial order were captured with a measure of *racial resentment*, a dimension of “symbolic racism” widely used in prior work (Henry & Sears, 2002; Kinder & Sears, 1981). These views are primarily driven by social concerns about relative racial group positions rather than by nonracial ideological views (Simmons & Bobo, 2019). The measure is captured as the average of nonmissing responses to four questions (on five-point agreement scales): whether “Blacks” should overcome prejudice and work their way up without “special favors,” whether slavery and discrimination created conditions that remain significant barriers for lower-class “Blacks” (reverse-coded), whether “Blacks” had gotten less than they deserved (reverse-coded), and whether inequalities would be solved if “Blacks” tried harder.

We include two measures of political beliefs: identification as more liberal or conservative and as more Democrat or Republican, each on seven-point scales.

We control for a variety of sociodemographic characteristics that may be associated with views of this social movement: gender, age, education, income, employment status, race-ethnicity, and foreign-born. For race-ethnicity, we focus on the differences between non-Hispanic white and Black respondents, though also control for those identifying as Hispanic/Latino, Asian, or something else (including Native American and two or more races).<sup>11</sup>

## Methods

The study employs a stratified, clustered address-based sampling design for the face-to-face surveys and a somewhat simpler address-based sampling design for the online survey. The survey also includes weights to adjust for the sample design and attrition. To properly account for the survey weights within the stratified, clustered sampling scheme, the reported effects are estimated with survey-weighted generalized linear models using the “survey” package in R (Lumley, 2014; R Core Team, 2016). We test for mediation via a structural equation model using the “lavaan” and “lavaan.survey” packages (Oberski, 2014; Rosseel, 2012).

Relatively little data are missing within the survey—the only measures missing more than 2% of cases were income (4.2%) and age (2.6%). Recognizing that there is no perfect solution to missing data, we conducted all of the analyses twice, using different methods with different sets of assumptions. First and most simply, we drop the relatively small number of cases with missing data. Second, we employ a multiple imputation strategy (e.g., Allison, 2002) using the “mice” package (van Buuren & Groothuis-Oudshoorn, 2011), imputing 20 data sets in a process that used all the variables from the analyses as well as several auxiliary variables to add information and increase efficiency. The auxiliary variables included information on marital status, children, home ownership, stock market investment, and length of time in the neighborhood. Reassuringly, the two approaches produced substantively identical results: no differences in statistical significance and similar magnitudes for the estimated effects. Given this, we report the simpler complete models.

Although the study is conducted in two waves, many of the key questions including feelings toward BLM and the police were asked only in the second wave, making the analyses effectively

<sup>11</sup>We include all respondents in the analyses to preserve the nationally representative design of the survey. We include “other race” in the models to make non-Hispanic White respondents the reference group, but given the heterogeneity of this grouping we do not attempt to substantively interpret its effect.

cross-sectional. Given the recent emergence of BLM, it seems likely that views of the police and race were established earlier, though we are unable to definitively establish the causal order.

## RESULTS

### Racial differences in experiences and views

Table 2 presents basic racial differences in support for BLM as well as for each of the potential explanations for this support. As expected, there are large racial differences in ratings of BLM. The average white respondent felt coldly toward the movement, rating it a 43 on a scale of 0–100.<sup>12</sup> The average Black respondent, by contrast, felt very warmly, rating it an 82, nearly 40 points higher than the average for white respondents.

Consistent with prior work on police stops, sizeable interracial differences existed in reports that the respondent or a family member had been stopped or questioned by the police in the prior year. More than a one-third of Black respondents reported that they or a family member had been recently stopped or questioned by the police, as compared to less than a quarter of white respondents. Despite the large difference in *recent* stops, the proportions of Black and white respondents who had *ever* been arrested were roughly equal.

Feelings toward the police also differed greatly between Black and white respondents. White respondents rated police highly, an average of nearly 80 out of 100. Black respondents were much more mixed, rating the police on average as a 55 on the 0 to 100 scale. Importantly, while support for BLM was relatively consistently high among Black respondents—half of Black respondents rated the movement above 85 on the 100-point scale—there was substantial variation in feelings toward the police among Black respondents. Slightly more than half the sample felt positively toward the police, ranking them a 51 or higher with 30% ranking them 70 or above and 15% ranking them 85 or above. Seven percent ranked the police a perfect 100 while 5% ranked them 0.

Not surprisingly, there were also substantial differences in racial attitudes and views. On average, white respondents reported feeling only lukewarm toward “Blacks”: 67 out of 100. Black respondents, by contrast, felt very warmly toward other “Blacks”: an average of 82 out of 100. Most white

**TABLE 2** Racial differences in experiences and perceptions

	White	Black
Warmth toward BLM	43	82***
Experiences with the police		
Percent stopped recently	23	34***
Percent arrested ever	20	20
Warmth toward the police	79	55***
Warmth toward “Blacks”	67	82***
Percent racially resentful	57	16***
Percent very racially resentful	27	3***
N	2390	306

Note: For tests of significance of difference from whites: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ .  
Abbreviation: BLM, Black Lives Matter.

<sup>12</sup>In presenting the results we use “White” and “Black” as shorthand for those identifying as non-Hispanic White and non-Hispanic Black, respectively.

respondents—57%—were at least a little racially resentful of Black Americans, and 27% were very racially resentful.<sup>13</sup> Levels of racial resentment were much lower for Black respondents.

## Explaining differences in feelings toward BLM

Table 3 presents four basic models to explore people's feelings about BLM. The first includes basic controls. The second explores the two explanations related to the police: experiences and affinity. The third explores the role of racial feelings and views: an affinity or animus toward Black people and racial resentment. The final includes controls for political identification.<sup>14</sup> We pause in discussing the second and fourth models to consider potential moderating effects for key variables. We then conclude with a more formal test of whether any of our explanations mediate the racial differences in views between Black and white Americans.

Model 1 includes basic controls for demographic and biographical characteristics. On average, female respondents rated BLM about nine points more warmly than male respondents. Those currently or formerly married rated BLM less warmly than single respondents, while those with more years of education rated the movement more favorably. Even after accounting for differences in these basic characteristics, Black and white respondents were still 38 points apart in their average ratings of the movement (the coefficient for Black represents the average difference in ratings between Black and white respondents). Asian respondents were not significantly different from whites in their assessment of BLM, while those identifying themselves as Hispanic or Latino were significantly more supportive of BLM than white respondents.

## Role of experiences with and feelings toward the police

Model 2 adds measures to explore two of the potential explanations for the racial gap in support for BLM: experiences with and feelings toward the police. The experience of being stopped by the police in the last year—whether personally or vicariously through a family member—is associated with *less* support for BLM, a surprising finding we explore below. The experience of ever having been arrested, by contrast, is not associated with feelings about BLM.<sup>15</sup> Positive feelings toward the police are significantly and negatively associated with support for BLM. This effect is relatively sizeable: for every standard deviation (SD) increase in support for the police (rating the police about 24 points higher on the 100-point scale), respondents rated the movement about six points less favorably. Collectively, however, these factors only explain a small portion of the gap between white and Black respondents, who remained more than 33 points apart in their ratings even after controlling for experiences with and support for the police.

The finding that personal or vicarious stops by the police were associated with *less* support for BLM is surprising and deserves more consideration. We know that the quality of experiences with the police is highly dependent on race: Black Americans are significantly more likely to experience mistreatment during stops than are whites (e.g., Epp et al., 2014). Thus, the effect of being stopped may depend on race. Model 1 of Table 4 suggests this is indeed the case, revealing a significant

<sup>13</sup>On the scale of 1–5, a 3 indicates that the respondent neither agrees nor disagrees with the four statements indicating racial resentment. For Table 2, racially resentful is measured as those with an average score greater than three, and *very* racially resentful is captured as an average score greater than four.

<sup>14</sup>As described above, controlling for political identification likely captures some of the effect of racial animus and resentment—for this reason we begin by exploring the direct role of racial animus and resentment on support for Black Lives Matter. However, given the differing views on the movement expressed by the Democratic and Republican presidential nominees in 2016, we explore in the final model whether racial animus and resentment are related to views of Black Lives Matter even after politics are controlled for—given the likely endogeneity to racial animus and resentment, we see this as a conservative estimate of the total effect of the racial feelings and views.

<sup>15</sup>It is possible that more recent arrests may have a larger effect on views of the movement, though only a small number of a nationally representative sample would have experienced an arrest in the last year.

**TABLE 3** Coefficients from regression of support for Black Lives Matter

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	$\beta$	SE	Z $\beta$	$\beta$	SE	Z $\beta$	$\beta$	SE	Z $\beta$	$\beta$	SE	Z $\beta$
Intercept	34.13***	4.62		53.47***	5.39		111.91***	4.30		116.89***	4.17	
Female	8.55***	1.21	0.13	8.60***	1.23	0.13	6.46***	0.95	0.10	5.16***	0.89	0.08
Age	-0.14**	0.04	-0.08	-0.10*	0.04	-0.05	-0.02	0.03	-0.01	-0.01	0.03	-0.01
Years of education	0.68*	0.27	0.05	0.60*	0.27	0.05	-0.88***	0.22	-0.07	-0.85***	0.22	-0.07
Income	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	-0.01	0.01	-0.03	-0.01	0.01	-0.01
Unemployed	2.57	2.94	0.02	0.99	2.91	0.01	1.80	2.11	0.01	1.26	2.19	0.01
Black	38.10***	1.94	0.37	33.42***	2.14	0.32	18.37***	1.97	0.18	16.14***	1.97	0.16
Asian	5.60	3.68	0.03	3.42	3.65	0.02	5.34	3.02	0.03	5.45	2.90	0.03
Other race	13.85***	3.41	0.09	13.29***	3.60	0.09	9.30***	2.66	0.06	8.67***	2.40	0.06
Hispanic	15.92***	2.12	0.16	14.04***	2.12	0.14	10.65***	1.94	0.10	8.41***	1.97	0.08
Foreign born	4.83	2.73	0.04	5.12	2.79	0.04	6.32**	2.40	0.05	4.54	2.30	0.04
Stopped				-6.23***	1.52	-0.08	-3.44**	1.25	-0.05	-2.79*	1.16	-0.04
Arrested				-0.83	1.49	-0.01	2.58	1.31	0.03	1.60	1.29	0.02
Warmth toward police				-0.24***	0.03	-0.18	-0.06*	0.03	-0.05	-0.03	0.03	-0.02
Cold toward "Blacks"							-0.26***	0.03	-0.17	-0.25***	0.03	-0.17
Racial resentment							-13.70***	0.55	-0.48	-10.00***	0.61	-0.35
Conservative										-1.84***	0.45	-0.08
Republican										-3.14***	0.35	-0.21
R <sup>2</sup>	0.18			0.21			0.46			0.51		
AIC	31,821			31,711			30,485			30,189		

Note: N = 3252.

 Abbreviations:  $\beta$ , unstandardized coefficient; AIC, Akaike information criterion; SE, standard error; Z $\beta$ , standardized coefficient.

 \*\*\*,  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ .

**TABLE 4** Coefficients from interactions predicting support for Black Lives Matter

	Model 1		Model 2	
	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE
Intercept	58.83***	5.53	119.23***	4.31
Female	8.71***	1.23	5.27***	0.89
Age	-0.09*	0.04	0.00	0.03
Years of education	0.55*	0.27	-0.87***	0.21
Income	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Unemployed	0.90	2.90	1.50	2.09
Black	8.61	5.85	-10.03	5.55
Asian	2.93	3.61	5.11	2.89
Other race	13.31***	3.64	8.70***	2.41
Hispanic	13.68***	2.12	8.43***	1.96
Foreign born	4.81	2.79	4.47	2.26
Stopped	-8.01***	1.61	-3.69**	1.21
Arrested	-1.83	1.56	1.71	1.29
Warmth toward police	-0.30***	0.03	-0.04	0.03
Cold toward "Blacks"			-0.24***	0.03
Racial resentment			-10.81***	0.63
Conservative			-1.81***	0.46
Republican			-3.00***	0.35
Black*stopped	14.27***	3.48	9.02**	2.96
Black*arrested	7.06	4.28	1.94	3.39
Black*sup. police	0.32***	0.07	0.05	0.07
Black*cold toward Blacks			-0.10	0.11
Black*resentment			9.24***	1.80
R <sup>2</sup>	0.22		0.52	
AIC	31,677		30,150	

Note: N = 3252.

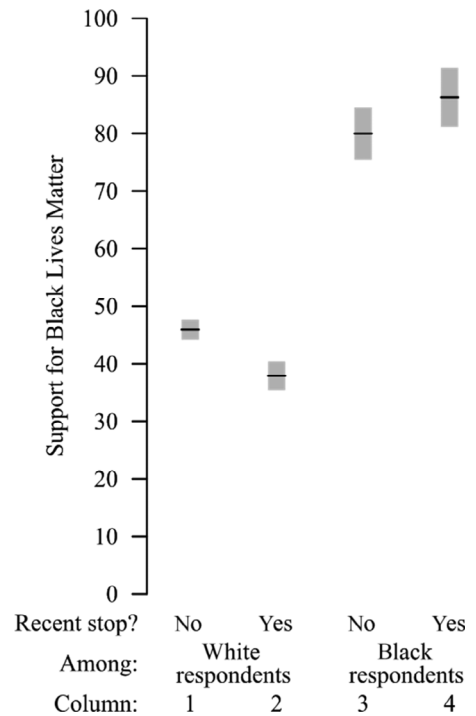
\*\*\*p < 0.001, \*\*p < 0.01, \*p < 0.05.

interaction between race and police stops. As illustrated in Figure 1, among Black respondents, the personal or vicarious experience of a police stop was associated with a small increase in support for BLM. For white respondents, by contrast, a similar experience was associated with less support—specifically ranking the movement about eight points more coldly. The most basic issue raised by BLM involves racial bias in police misbehavior. Given that white citizens experience less mistreatment at the hands of the police, it may be that the experience of a more respectful police stop leads white Americans to question the claim of *police misbehavior*.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, even among those white respondents who did feel mistreated in a police stop, that experience may lead them to question the claim of *racial bias*.

We also consider whether the effect of feelings toward the police depended on race. Model 1 of Table 5 does reveal a significant interaction between race and views of the police. As Figure 2

<sup>16</sup>Consistent with this narrative, results from an exploratory analysis suggested that while the experience of recently being stopped by the police makes most people feel less warmly toward the police, this effect is significantly more pronounced among Black respondents and more muted among White respondents.

**FIGURE 1** Predicted warmth toward Black Lives Matter from interaction of race with police stops



**TABLE 5** Indirect effects from structural equation model

	Est.	BCI	Contrast
Indirect effect of race through:			
a. Stopped recently	-0.31	(-0.61, 0.00)	
b. Cold toward “Blacks”	4.07	(2.79, 5.34)	a,d
c. Racial resentment	9.67	(7.85, 11.49)	a,b,d,e
d. Conservative	0.78	(0.28, 1.29)	a
e. Republican	6.41	(4.59, 8.22)	a,d
Black	16.14	(12.15, 20.13)	
Total effect	39.23	(34.74, 43.72)	

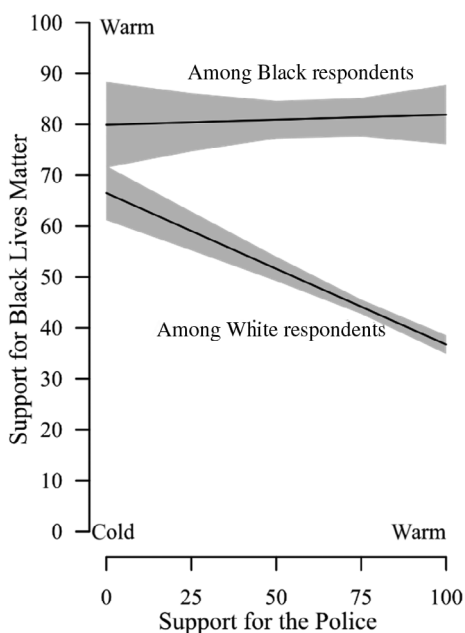
Note: RMSEA: 0.08; SRMR = 0.05;  $\chi^2 = 1045$ ,  $df = 45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Note all mediators standardized.

Abbreviations: BCI: bootstrapped confidence interval; Contrast: indirect effect is significantly larger than other indirect effects; Est.: estimate of indirect effect (Black \* mediator).

illustrates, support for the police was only associated with a decrease in warmth toward BLM among white respondents. Despite a wide diversity of feelings about the police, support for BLM remained consistently high among Black respondents. This challenges a popular narrative that support for BLM among Black Americans is primarily motivated by anti-police sentiment. Rather, it suggests that feelings about the police matter—at least superficially—among white respondents.

## Role of racial animus and resentment

Returning to Table 3, Model 3 adds the other possible explanations: that feelings about BLM may be a product of feelings about Black people or concerns about the relative status of white and Black



**FIGURE 2** Predicted warmth toward Black Lives Matter from interaction of race with support for the police

Americans. Feelings about Black people do appear related to support for BLM: the colder a respondent felt toward “Blacks,” the lower they rated the movement.<sup>17</sup> This effect is sizeable, translating to about a six-point decrease in support for every one SD increase in coldness toward “Blacks” (rating them roughly 23 points more coldly). Racial resentment was very strongly and negatively associated with favorable views of BLM—the standardized coefficient of  $-0.48$  is easily the largest in the model. A one SD increase in racial resentment was associated with a roughly 16-point decrease in support for the movement. At the extremes, the least resentful were predicted to rate BLM as a 79 while the most resentful were predicted to rate the movement a 23 of 100. Adding these racial feelings and views explains a sizeable portion of the racial gap: after controlling for feelings toward “Blacks” and racial resentment, Black and white respondents were roughly 18 points apart. Put simply, white racism toward Black Americans is an important part of the explanation for why white Americans dislike the BLM movement.

Notably, accounting for racial animus and racial resentment also appears to explain much of the effect of feelings about the police, which correlations reveal is more likely among those high in racial animus and resentment. In other words, “support for the police” appears to be acting in part as a proxy for racial resentment and animus toward Black Americans.<sup>18</sup>

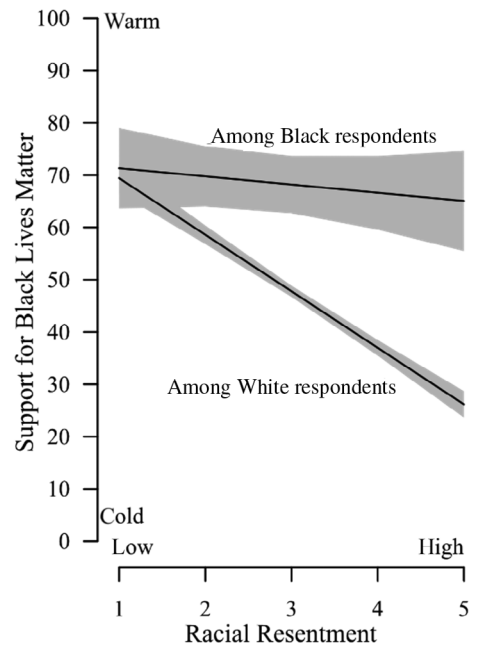
### Role of politics

Finally, Model 4 of Table 3 adds measures of political ideology and partisanship, both to explore the role of partisan identification in views of BLM and to see if our proposed explanations—involving

<sup>17</sup>For ease of interpretation and consistency with the substantive interpretation of racial resentment, warmth toward blacks is recoded as *coldness* toward blacks by reversing the 100-point scale. Notably, the effect of coldness toward blacks is much larger when racial resentment is not included in the model. It appears, then, that some of the direct effect of negative feelings toward blacks people is captured by the broader measure of racial resentment (itself a product of a racial animus, e.g. Drakulich, 2015a), though it is notable that these feelings also remain directly and significant associated with feelings toward Black Lives Matter.

<sup>18</sup>Including racism also has an effect on a number of other covariates, including evidence of a suppression effect. Once anti-Black racism is accounted for, being foreign-born is associated with significantly more support for Black Lives Matter. Education, which is generally associated with lower levels of racism (Bobo & Kluegel, 1997; Jackman & Muha, 1984; Schuman et al., 1997), is positively associated with support for Black Lives Matter until racism is accounted for, at which point it is significantly negatively associated with support for Black Lives Matter.

**FIGURE 3** Predicted warmth toward Black Lives Matter from interaction of race with racial resentment



the police and race—remain predictive even when politics are included. Those identifying as politically conservative and as a Republican were less likely to feel warmly toward BLM—not surprising given the racialized and partisan use of BLM as an issue in the 2016 election (e.g., Drakulich et al., 2017, 2020; Updegrove et al., 2018). In particular, identification as Republican was strongly associated with reduced affection for BLM. The inclusion of political identification reduced the racial gap in feelings toward BLM to about 16 points. The difference, however, remained significant, suggesting the model explains some but not all of why white respondents had less affection for BLM than did Black respondents. Controlling for partisanship also reduced the small remaining effect of support for the police to a role statistically indistinguishable from zero. Notably, racial animus and racial resentment remain strongly predictive of opposition to BLM, with racial resentment retaining by far the strongest standardized coefficient in the model.

Just as we considered race differences in the effects of experiences with and affinity toward the police, we also consider race differences in the effects of feelings and views of race (Model 2 of Table 4).<sup>19</sup> Although the effect of feelings toward “Blacks” did not appear to differ by race, there was a large significant interaction between race and racial resentment. As Figure 3 illustrates, the large negative association between racial resentment and support for BLM existed largely among white respondents. At low levels of racial resentment, white and Black respondents were similarly supportive of BLM, but support dropped precipitously among white respondents as racial resentment increased. This may not be surprising—especially given the sizeable interracial differences in racial resentment indicated in Table 2—but it does illustrate the powerful relationship between racial resentment and views of Black Lives Matter among white Americans.

Thus, among the four potential explanations for the racial gap in feelings toward BLM, a lack of warmth toward and in particular a resentment of Black Americans among white Americans

<sup>19</sup>In this last model, both the direct effect and the interaction for warmth toward the police disappear—the consequence, again, of “support for the police” acting as a proxy for racism among White voters. The effect of being stopped remains, although the differences are more muted once racism is accounted for. Our central interest is in differences in the effects of these explanations between White and Black respondents. For the sake of completeness, we did also explore interactions for each of the other race-ethnic categories and found no significant interactions. In other words, the effect of experiences with the police, views of the police, and racism does not differ between non-Hispanic White respondents and either Asian, Hispanic, or other respondents.



appeared the most important. The experience of a police stop unexpectedly appeared to decrease support for the movement—though only among white rather than Black respondents—while proclaiming support for the police appeared to largely be a proxy for racial animosity toward Black Americans.

## Exploring mediation through indirect effects

The sizeable drop in the coefficient for Black respondents across the models in Table 3 suggests a mediating role for some of our proposed explanations, especially racial feelings and resentments. We explore this mediation more directly through a structural equation model. Table 5 presents just the indirect effects from this model, as well as bootstrapped confidence intervals for these estimates.<sup>20</sup> We also estimated the contrasts (differences) between these indirect effects. The total effect confirms the racial difference reported above: Black respondents felt roughly 39° more warmly toward BLM. Of the mediators, racial resentment had the largest role, explaining about 10 points of this difference.<sup>21</sup> Feeling coldly toward Black Americans and identification as a Republican also had sizeable roles mediating the effect of race. Identification as politically conservative had a small but significant role. The indirect effect of race through the experience of a police stop is not significant. As Table 3 revealed, Black and white respondents remain about 16 points apart even after all the mediators are included. In sum, these results confirm the mediation suggested by a comparison of models in Table 3. Specifically, differences between Black and white respondents in their politics, in their animus toward Black Americans, and in their resentment of Black Americans explained a substantial portion—though not all—of the interracial differences in views of BLM. Of these factors, racial resentment played a significantly larger role than the other factors.

## DISCUSSION

Substantial racial differences exist in feelings toward the racial civil rights movement BLM. By our estimate from the fall of 2016, white Americans rated the movement about 40 points lower than Black Americans on a 100-point scale. Specifically, the average white respondent only rated the movement a 43 out of 100, meaning they felt coldly toward the movement.

Our central question was why white Americans expressed so much less support than Black Americans. We explored four possible explanations and draw several conclusions. First, experiences with the police mattered, in particular whether the police have recently stopped and questioned you or a family member. However, the effect of these stops depended on race. Among Black respondents, affective support for BLM was slightly higher among those who had recent personal or vicarious experiences with the police but remained relatively high among those who had not. Interestingly, among white respondents, police stops had the opposite effect: they were associated with less support for BLM. In this case, white respondents may have given their personal experiences more weight than descriptions of police behavior seen on the news or social media—those who had relatively positive experiences with the stops may dismiss complaints of police *misbehavior*, while those with negative experiences may dismiss complaints of police *bias*.

<sup>20</sup>Results from the full model are omitted for the sake of space. The model predicting Black Lives Matter is identical to the results presented in Model 4 of Table 3, and race is significantly associated with each of the mediators. Only potential mediators significantly associated with feelings toward Black Lives Matter in the final model were considered. For ease of comparison, each of the mediators was standardized, such that the indirect effects reflect a one-standard deviation increase in the mediator.

<sup>21</sup>We examined bootstrapped confidence intervals of the differences between the indirect effects to determine differences that were significantly larger than zero. The third column of Table 5 reports for each indirect effect the other indirect effects that are significantly smaller. Notably, racial resentment is significantly larger than all four other indirect effects.

Affective support for the police *appeared* to matter more than experiences with the police. However, contrary to the narrative that Black support for BLM is motivated by a dislike of the police, support for the social movement was strong even among the substantial number of Black respondents who felt positively toward the police. Instead, support for the police was primarily associated with less support for BLM among white respondents. Further, the explanation for this race-specific effect appeared to be that “support for the police” was just a proxy for anti-Black sentiment—the association shrank substantially after controlling for racial attitudes.

Of the factors that we considered, the most important explanations for feelings about BLM were racial animus toward and resentment of Black Americans. Racial resentment, in particular, had a very large and negative association with affective support for BLM—specifically among white respondents—and helped explain a sizable portion of the differences in views between white and Black Americans. This association makes sense: racial resentment captures a dismissal of the legitimacy of Black grievances—those rooted in a history of racial exploitation as well as continued discrimination—and instead focuses on Black failings as the root causes of inequalities. Thus, *the primary motivation for white opposition to BLM was not support for the police but was instead an animus toward Black Americans and commitment to a racial logic that justifies white privilege.*

## Views of BLM in historical context

Throughout the long history of the subjugation and exploitation of Black Americans, movements advocating for greater racial equality or justice have been viewed unfavorably by many white Americans, particularly those who were concerned about the relative status of racial groups. This was true for the slavery abolition movement, for the civil rights policies of the Reconstruction Era, and for proposed reforms benefiting Black communities during the Progressive Era (Kendi, 2016; Muhammad, 2019). Similarly, surveys show low levels of support for the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s among white Americans (Legum, 2017; Sears & Kinder, 1971; Sears & McConahay, 1973).

The parallels between the Civil Rights and BLM eras are particularly striking and draw attention to some of the forces that may explain similar responses by some white Americans to the civil rights movements in each of the two eras. First, each era was witness to important successes for Black Americans. The 1960s saw the passage of three federal civil rights acts, while the 2008 election of Barack Obama broke a symbolically important racial barrier and served as part of the inspiration for the changes advocated by BLM (Taylor, 2016). Second, both eras saw dozens of mass protests in predominantly Black urban spaces in cities across the country fueled by broader concerns about racial inequalities and injustices and frequently sparked by specific incidents in which police officers were seen as mistreating or killing Black Americans—including Marquette Frye in Watts in 1965 and Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014 (Gately & Stolberg, 2015; National Advisory Commission, 1968; Thorsen & Giegerich, 2014). Finally, in both eras some politicians explicitly criticized the protesters as disorderly and dangerous, looking to galvanize support among those white Americans concerned about the changes to the racial status quo posed by the movements (Beckett & Sasson, 2004; Drakulich et al., 2020; Drakulich & Kirk, 2016; Hochschild, 2016; Tonry, 2011).

There are also important differences between the two eras—BLM emerged amidst a historical backdrop of apparent contradictions on racial progress. On the one hand, real successes in the 1960s ended legal segregation and discrimination and began a long decline in the public’s embrace of overt racism as well as a striking increase in agreement on the *principle* of racial equality (e.g., Krysan & Moberg, 2016; Schuman et al., 1997). Obama’s election, the dominance of hip hop in the music industry and in popular culture (Chang, 2005), as well as the symbolic successes of numerous high-profile Black Americans, gave rise to talk of a possible post-racial era. More recently, a growing number of white Americans appear to support some criminal justice reforms (e.g., Drakulich & Kirk, 2016; Thielo et al., 2016; Wozniak, 2020), and formerly radical ideas for achieving racial change

appear somewhat closer to mainstream progressive positions—for example, a substantial majority of Democratic candidates for president in 2020 supported at least studying reparations for slavery (King, 2019). On the other hand, actual racial inequalities have remained stubbornly large during this same time, creating a phenomenon Taylor (2016) describes as “two black societies, separate and unequal” (p. 6). New ostensibly race-neutral policies and practices created since legal segregation and discrimination ended in the 1960s achieve similar ends (e.g., Rothstein, 2017), and the massive expansion of the criminal justice system preserved racial separation and control (Alexander, 2010; Tonry, 2011; Wacquant, 2003). Further, recent increases in hate crimes (e.g., United States Department of Justice, 2019) and the increased visibility of an overtly racist alt-right movement seem to suggest the resurgence of older expressions of racism (Heim, 2017).

These differences between the earlier and modern eras suggest two distinct stories. First, there have been real successes and there are real opportunities for more progress toward racial equality and justice. Despite visible signs of overt racism, white Americans appear less implicitly or explicitly pro-white since the advent of the BLM movement (Sawyer & Gampa, 2018) and may be more open to additional reforms. Our finding of general support for BLM among those white Americans who were low in racial resentment is a reflection of this potential opportunity. However, there are also new barriers facing movements seeking racial equality or justice. The historical transition from more overt to more hidden forms of racist expressions and policies may ironically make them harder to address (e.g., Drakulich, 2015a, 2015b), especially as growing numbers of white Americans now believe that they face more contemporary discrimination than Black Americans (Hochschild 2016; Norton & Sommers, 2011). Finally, surges in hate crimes and overt racism continue to pose direct threats to Black lives. These changes are only superficially contradictory. As Kendi (2016) notes, “racist progress has consistently followed racial progress” (p. xi), and throughout our history surges in antiracism, assimilationist racism, and segregationist racism generally overlap rather than oscillate clearly from one to another. These differences in—and different sources of—support or opposition to the movement reflect these overlapping forces.

Both of these stories are reflected in events in 2020. In the spring, the murder of Breonna Taylor, the release of video from the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, the release of a report showing substantially higher COVID-19 death rates for Black Americans, and the murder of George Floyd all combined to increase support for BLM among white Americans, though a Civiqs daily tracking poll suggests this was short-lived. As the protests and clashes with the police grew in size, scope, and intensity, opposition to BLM shot up among white Americans, leaving only a short period from the middle of May through the end of June when more white Americans expressed support rather than opposition to the movement.<sup>22</sup> The key finding of this paper—that opposition to the movement among white Americans appears driven by concerns about threats to the racial order—may help explain these patterns as the national story moved from expressions of outrage and sympathy over specific incidents to more explicit calls for real change in broad policies and practices.

## CONCLUSION

Our findings have a variety of important implications. The broadest is a reminder to be wary of false narratives masking true motivations, especially for public issues with racial dimensions. The paradox of modern race relations—the persistence of racial inequalities despite improved explicit racial attitudes—can be explained in part by a new racial logic promoting color-blind narratives. Prior work, for instance, has suggested that a focus on individualism to explain opposition to welfare policies or support for punitive policies that disproportionately harm people of color is in fact a cover for explicit and implicit racial animus (e.g., Drakulich, 2015a, 2015b). Similarly, in the present work, we find that declarations of support for the police as a reason to oppose BLM appeared to be a mask

<sup>22</sup>Source: [https://civiqs.com/results/black\\_lives\\_matter](https://civiqs.com/results/black_lives_matter)

for racial animus and resentment. This suggests that statements like “Blue Lives Matter” may be motivated more by an animus toward Black lives than a concern about police lives.

These findings also have more specific implications for several fields of research. Research on perceptions of the police, for instance, often starts from the assumption that such perceptions are primarily about the police—that differences in perceptions must be a product of differences in experiences and interactions with law enforcement. Our results, however, revealed a more modest role for experiences with the police—at least in terms of the overall likelihood of contact—and found that views of a social movement concerned with the police were primarily shaped by views of race. For research on social movements, these findings help confirm the connection between BLM and earlier civil rights movements (e.g., Taylor, 2016) and shed new light on the ways that opposition to such movements is falsely framed in nonracial terms. They also suggest, as discussed above, that we should continue to expect opposition from white Americans at moments when the possibility of real change to the racial order appears most likely. Research on racism often focuses on views of racial *economic* inequalities. The present findings—in particular the very strong association between racial resentment and opposition to BLM—reinforce the need for scholars to further explore other dimensions of racial inequality, including inequalities in experiences with the police and the criminal justice system.

Finally, it is important to remember the deeply troubling accusations at the core of the BLM movement: that the very institution and individuals publicly tasked with protecting civilians from harm are in fact causing harm to members of marginalized groups. In a democratic society that values freedom and equality—one which emphasizes basic rights to due process and equal protection—these accusations must be taken seriously as posing a fundamental threat to that democracy. In this light, it is striking that most members of the dominant racial group feel negatively toward a social movement raising these issues. How should we understand this indifference or hostility? Our results suggest it is not *primarily* out of a lack of experience, nor is motivated by support for the police. Instead, it is a dislike of Black Americans, and a resentment of the very acts of pointing out injustice and asking for equal treatment.

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