When do peaceful protesters support political violence in the United States?

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Abstract: Political violence has become an increasingly salient element surrounding peaceful protests in the United States in recent years. This study examines the attitudes of peaceful protesters towards various conceptions of political violence. Drawing on surveys of participants at major protest events in Washington, DC in 2017 and 2018, it shows that protesters are more inclined to endorse the use of violence for political purposes when they are less satisfied with the way that democracy works in the United States. They are also more likely to support violence when they are identified with the left side the ideological spectrum than when they are identified with the right side of the spectrum. These views are reversed when protesters themselves are the target of violence. In this instance, the interaction of democratic satisfaction and ideology helps to explain attitudinal variations.

Keywords: Political violence, protest, social movements, satisfaction with democracy, ideology, United States

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Introduction

The past several years has witnessed a spate of politically motivated violent acts at, or related to, otherwise peaceful protests in the United States. For example, 32-year-old activist Heather Heyer was murdered in 2017 when she was deliberately hit by a car while participating in an anti-racist counterprotest to the Unite the Right gathering in Charlottesville, Virginia (Signer 2020). In 2016, Micah Xavier Johnson shot and killed five police officers during a Black Lives Matter demonstration in Dallas, Texas (Achenbach, Wan, Berman, and Balingit 2016). Numerous other incidents have led to serious injuries or death on the part of supporters, opponents, and neutral parties to protests.

The political violence of recent years is exceptional in the sense that it has taken forms that are distinctive to technologies and political rituals that are present in today's society. However, when situated in the broader swath of American history, contemporary events are in keeping with a long tradition of turning to violence for political purposes. Slavery, the War of Independence, the Whiskey Rebellion, the Civil War, the Haymarket Riot, urban unrest, the Oklahoma City bombing, attacks on abortion clinics and doctors, ecoterrorism, and continued lynching of Black Americans are some of the most prominent examples of domestic political violence, though they are hardly the only cases. In light of this unabated stream of violence, it is incumbent upon scholars to expose these events not only as the acts of individuals, but also as the products of structural political conditions.

Activism is a critical locus for the study of political violence. Not only is violence deployed by, against, or around activists, but activists inhabit a liminal space between routine institutional politics and violence. Protesters, in particular, have chosen to demonstrate their numerical strength in the streets, finding it insufficient to convey their opinions only through the ballot box or other less contentious forms. Prior research establishes that political violence often percolates within peaceful social movements and protests as sustained repression and situational tensions make nonviolent postures increasingly untenable (Nassauer 2016; White 1989). Studies reveal that attitudes toward the

utility and ethics of violence develop in conjunction with emerging activist identities (Becker 2020; Decker and Pyrooz 2019; Moskalenko and McCauley 2009). This work points to attitudinal and situational origins of activists' perspectives toward political violence.

The current study adds to the extant literature on political violence by connecting it to broader political currents (for an exception, see Littler 2017). Specifically, I argue that support by peaceful protesters for various conceptions of political violence is associated with levels of satisfaction with the way that democracy does nor does not work in the United States, as violence may appear to be more justified and necessary when political institutions malfunction. These viewpoints are not uniform across the political spectrum, as left-leaning activists are generally more inclined to endorse violent means to reach political goals, while right-leaning activists are more resistant to this position.

The research is based on surveys of participants at conservative and liberal protests held in Washington, DC during 2017 and 2018. Respondents were asked for their views on the justification and efficacy of political violence. The results show that protesters are more favorable toward political violence when they are less satisfied with how democracy works in the United States and as they are rooted more firmly on the ideological left side the political spectrum. These views are reversed, however, when the question of violence toward protesters themselves is considered. In this instance, satisfaction with democracy and ideology interact, dampening the effects of ideology when satisfaction is high and amplifying ideological proclivities when satisfaction is low. This analysis is relevant to predicting, explaining, and remedying the persistence of political violence in the United States.

Democratic Satisfaction, Ideology, and Political Violence

The study of comparative politics embraces a long tradition of examining the satisfaction or dissatisfaction that citizens have with the way that democracy works (or not) in the countries where they live (Easton 1975; Linde and Erman 2003). This concept has been applied more sparingly in

research on American politics and on questions related to support for political violence. Scholars have found that satisfaction with democracy is responsive to citizens' perceptions of parties selection of candidates, the closeness of elections, evidence of corruption, government performance, and other features of institutional responsiveness (Cameron 2020; Howell and Justwan 2013; Pellegata and Memoli 2018; Shomer, Put, and Lavy 2016). The way that citizens view these conditions, and the potential appropriateness of violence as a response, depends partly on their ideological positions and whether they count themselves among the winners or losers of the current political alignment (Ferland 2017; Rich and Treece 2018).

In consideration of this prior scholarship, I consider the following hypothesis about the attitudes of peaceful protesters toward political violence:

Hypothesis 1. Higher satisfaction with democracy corresponds with lower support for political violence, other things equal.

Hypothesis 2. Left-leaning ideology corresponds with greater support for political violence, while right-leaning ideology corresponds with lesser support for violence, other things equal.

Hypothesis 3. Satisfaction with democracy and ideology interact such that being satisfied with democracy dampens the effects of ideology, while being unsatisfied with democracy amplifies the effects of ideology.

Research Design

The goal of the research design was to conduct surveys of participants at all, or almost all, of the major protests held in the Washington, DC metropolitan area in 2017 and 2018. "Major" was determined based on advertising by leading activist organizations, media coverage, scheduling on a weekend day (Friday, Saturday, or Sunday), at least one week advance planning by the organizers (i.e., no spontaneous protests), making reservations for large spaces (such as the Washington Mall), and

intelligence gained from the author's networking with activists. Surveys were conducted at 24 protests, with 10 events held in 2017 and 14 events held in 2018. The majority of these events (17) were liberal / progressive in orientation (such as the Women's March and the March for Our Lives), with 7 events being conservative / right-leaning in nature (such as the March for Life and Unite the Right). The ideological balance of these events was determined by the mobilization of activists, not by design. An equal effort was made to include both liberal and conservative events in the study.

While it is impossible to claim that "all" major protests have been included in the research, I am unaware of any significant event that has been excluded. A list of the events is provided in Table 1. These events addressed a wide range of issues, such as women's rights (Women's March), the right to life (March for Life), health care (Keep Your Promises – Tea Party), immigration (Families Belong Together), funding for science (March for Science), gun control (March for Our Lives), the environment (People's Climate March; March for the Ocean; Youth Climate March), taxes (Tax March), LGBTQ+ rights (Equality March for Unity and Pride), and peace (Women's March on the Pentagon). There were events that were pro-racism (Unite the Right) and anti-racism (March for Racial Justice; Still Here, Still Strong; Rise Up, Fight Back). Some events were targeted at politicians, rather than any particular issue. On the liberal / progressive side, these included Counter-Inaugural Protests and the Impeachment March. On the conservative / right-leaning side, these included the Mother of All Rallies and the March for Trump.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Surveys were conducted at peaceful, organized events that did not involve violence or property damage. Almost all events (23 of 24) are unambiguously consistent with this claim. The one event that requires some discussion is the Counter-Inaugural Protests, which were held on January 20, 2017. These protests were a series of loosely coordinated events in downtown Washington, DC around the Presidential Inauguration. Surveys were only conducted at publicly advertised events on the Inaugural Parade route and in McPherson Square. These events were peaceful and did not include either property

damage or violence. However, some participants in these events joined events elsewhere in the city that day which *did* involve property damage and violence, leading to over 230 arrests (Day 2018).

At each event, surveyors began by surrounding the perimeter of the crowd. They were instructed to look into the crowd, select an anchor for the purpose of counting, and then contact the fifth person to the right of the anchor. Inviting every fifth person continued until three surveys were accepted, after which a new anchor was selected and the counting process repeated. This approach is discussed in some depth by Fisher et al. (2019). Prior research has shown that these field approximations of random samples can produce reliable estimates of protest crowds by enforcing the sampling of random participants and not only "approachable peers" (Walgrave and Verhulst 2011; Walgrave, Wouters, and Ketelaars 2016). Respondents were asked to self-administer the anonymous, six-page paper survey using a pen and clipboard. Surveyors occasionally administered surveys verbally for respondents with visual impairments.

Attitudes toward political violence were measured with three questions. The first question, drawn from the American National Election Study (ANES 2016), asked respondents their view on the extent to which political violence could be justified in general.

- *Political violence is justified*: "How much do you feel it is justified for people to use violence to pursue their political goals in this country?" Options: Not at all [Value = 1]; A little [Value = 2]; A moderate amount [Value = 3]; A lot [Value = 4]; A great deal [Value = 5].

The second question, written specifically for this study, asked whether violence was necessary to achieve political influence.

- *Violence is influential*: "Property damage and/or violence are sometimes necessary in order for protest to influence the actions of policy makers." Options: Agree Strongly [Value = 5]; Agree Somewhat [Value = 4]; Neither Agree nor Disagree [Value = 3]; Disagree Somewhat [Value = 2]; Disagree Strongly [Value = 1].

The third question, drawn from the ANES (2016), asked about the legitimacy violence against protesters.

- *Violence against protesters is justified*: "When protesters get 'roughed up' for disrupting political events, how much do they generally deserve what happens to them?" Options: Not at all [Value = 1]; A little [Value = 2]; A moderate amount [Value = 3]; A lot [Value = 4]; A great deal [Value =5].

Note that none of these questions asked respondents whether they had previously, planned to, or would engage in violence. They only tap views about the potential justifications and/or effectiveness of violence.

The two focal independent variables are *Satisfaction with democracy* and *Ideology*. The wording for democratic satisfaction was drawn from the ANES (2016):

- *Satisfaction with democracy*: "On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way that democracy works in the United States?" Options: Very satisfied [Value = 4]; Fairly satisfied [Value = 3]; Not very satisfied [Value = 2]; Not satisfied at all [Value = 1].

The ideology question was written specifically for this study in order to allow for a wider range of ideological viewpoints than is permitted by the ANES (2016), since activists are more likely than the general public to think of themselves as occupying the political extremes.

- *Ideology*: "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as . . ." Options: To the "left" of strong Liberal [Value = 9]; A strong Liberal [Value = 8]; A Not very strong Liberal [Value = 7]; A Moderate who leans Liberal [Value =6]; A Moderate [Value = 5]; A Moderate who leans Conservative [Value = 4]; A Not very strong Conservative [Value = 3]; A Strong Conservative [Value = 2]; To the "right" of strong Conservative [Value = 1]; Other (please specify) [Value = Missing].

In addition to these focus variables, control variables are inserted into each statistical model. The wording of all questions used to construct control variables is contained in Appendix A. The

variables and their rationale for inclusion are discussed here in the order in which they are entered into statistical models.

Partisan identity folded is intended to capture the effect of loyalty to party that is distinct from *Ideology*. The variable is "folded" so that it is measured with high values when a respondent is strongly identified with either the Democratic or Republican Party and low values when a respondent identifies close to the independent side of the spectrum. Partisan identity is expected to be positively associated with support for political violence (Kalmore 2020).

Organizational membership alters an individual's connection to a movement by bridging people across localities and through the internet (Fisher et al. 2005). Hence, it is important to control for the possibility that protesters in organizations have different attitudes than protesters that are not organizationally affiliated.

Activist identity is included in recognition of prior studies indicating that self-identified activists are more supportive of political violence than individuals with weaker activist identities (Becker 2020; Moskalenko, Sophia, and Clark McCauley 2009).

Activist networks have been connected to participation in high-risk activism by prior research (McAdam 1986), thus suggesting that they may be relevant to support for political violence.

Sex / gender is female is expected to be negatively related to support for political violence because of the long tradition of women in organizing against violence (Goss and Heaney 2010).

Race / ethnicity is nonwhite may seed support for political violence because violence can help racial and ethnic minorities to overcome asymmetries they suffer at the hands of the majority (Wasow 2020).

Age in years accounts for the empirical regularity that youth have an above average propensity to support and engage in political violence (Kustra 2019; Weber 2019).

Level of education has been found to have mixed effects on support for and participation in political violence (Østby, Urdal, and Dupuy 2019). In general, increasing levels of education correspond with lower support for political violence, though terrorists (i.e., perpetrators of political violence) are often highly educated (Holloway 2018).

Income in thousands of dollars is in the models to consider the possibility that socio-economic differences affect the ways that individuals participate in activism (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012).

Attendance at religious services permits the models to recognize the effects of religiosity on support or opposition to violence. Prior research shows that the direction of the effect may be either positive or negative (Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman 2010).

Log of distance traveled reflects the possibility that people who travel greater distances to an event may tend to have above average commitment to activist causes and, therefore, endorse violence to achieve those goals. The log form is based on the expectation that the effects of increasing distance traveled are felt most acutely for short distances, with the effect increasing less and less as distances become greater.

Months since January 2017 should detect linear time trends that may be present in the data.

Results

A total of 3,860 surveys were conducted over the two-year period from 2017 to 2018 with a response rate of 74 percent. These surveys are representative of people participating in major demonstrations in Washington, DC, but not representative of the general population in the United States. To see how these respondents compared to the average American, descriptive statistics are presented for three questions where the wording was identical between the protest survey and the 2016 ANES. The results reported in Figure 1 compare the views of respondents to the 2016 ANES, a representative sample of eligible voters in the United States, to the respondents to the protest survey.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Figure 1A shows that both protesters and eligible voters overwhelmingly say that political violence is not at all justified in the United States. However, about 9 percent more eligible voters hold this position than do protesters, who are more likely to say that political violence is at least a little justified. This difference is statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$). Figure 1B demonstrates that protesters are much more likely (36 percent more) to believe that it is not at all justified to "rough up" protesters than is the case for eligible voters, also a statistically significant difference ($p \leq 0.05$). Finally, Figure 1C indicates that protesters are about twice as likely as eligible voters to say that they are "not at all satisfied" with the way democracy works in the United States, which is statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$). In summary, protesters in Washington, DC are somewhat more prone to justify the use of violence (but reject it being directed at themselves) and less satisfied with American democracy than are typical Americans.

Having discerned how Washington, DC protesters differ from other Americans on relevant issues, we now consider explanations for their varied attitudes toward political violence. Three models are estimated, one for each of the three violence variables, defined above: (1) *Political violence is justified;* (2) *Violence is influential;* and (3) *Violence against protesters is justified.* Each equation contains both focal independent variables described above, *Satisfaction with democracy* and *Ideology*, as well as the series of control variables enumerated above.

Ordered Probit models are estimated for each equation because the dependent variables are increasing in discrete categories from 1 to 5. Survey weights are applied to adjust for nonresponse differences corresponding with events, estimated gender, and estimated race / ethnicity. The data are stratified by event and categorical variables are included for k-1 events. These procedures necessitate that the coefficients on the substantive independent variables be interpreted as differences between a respondents *and other respondents at the same event*. That is, the analysis does not compare a

Women's March participant to a Unite the Right participant. Instead, it compares a Women's March respondent to other Women's March respondents and, accordingly, a Unite the Right respondent to other Unite the Right respondents. Missing values were imputed using complete-case imputation, which is an appropriate method when there is a relatively low incidence of missing data, as was the case in this study (King et al. 2001; Little 1988; Wood et al. 2004). Results from estimating these models are reported in Table 2. Descriptive statistics and information on missing data are contained in Appendix B.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The estimates reported in Table 2 support Hypothesis 1 in Models 1 and 2 but not in Model 3. In Model 1, there is a significant, *negative* association between satisfaction with democracy and willingness to justify political violence. In Model 2, there is similarly a significant, *negative* association between satisfaction with democracy and the belief that violence is sometimes necessary to achieve influence over the policymaking process. In Model 3, however, there is a significant, *positive* association between satisfaction with democracy and the position that protesters get what they deserve if they get "roughed up" when disrupting political events. In short, protesters are less willing to advocate political violence as a general proposition the more that democracy works the way that they want it to. At the same time, they become more supportive of efforts to stop protests – even if that requires some violence – as they are happier with the functioning of democracy.

The relationship between support for violence and satisfaction with democracy is not only significant, it is substantial. These magnitudes are evident in the marginal-effects graphs plotted in Figure 2. As revealed in Figure 2A, the chance that respondents say that political violence is "not at all" justified increases from about 0.65 when they are not at all satisfied with democracy to 0.85 when they are very satisfied with it. Concomitantly, the chances that respondents say that political violence is "a little" justified falls from about 0.20 to about 0.10 when satisfaction with democracy rises from "not satisfied at all" to "very satisfied".

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The findings for whether violence is necessary for influence, reported in Figure 2B, are similar to the findings for whether violence is justified, though the probability levels are different. The chances that a respondent disagrees strongly that violence is sometimes necessary for influence rises from roughly 0.45 to 0.65 as satisfaction with democracy goes from low to high. Concomitantly, the chances that respondents only disagree somewhat that violence is sometimes necessary for influence falls from roughly 0.20 to 0.16 as satisfaction with democracy goes from low to high.

The findings for how much protesters get what they deserve when they get roughed up are the reverse of the earlier two questions. Respondents are less likely to completely eschew roughing up protesters (falling from 0.75 to 0.65) as their satisfaction with democracy moves from low to high. Consistent with this finding, their tolerance of roughing up rises modestly over the same interval.

The pattern of support for Hypothesis 2 is parallel to the pattern for Hypothesis 1. That is, the hypothesis is supported in Models 1 and 2 but not in Model 3. Significant, *negative* coefficients on ideology in Models 1 and 2 reflects the inclination of more left-leaning respondents to see violence as tool of political influence, with right-leaning respondents being more skeptical of this expectation. In contrast, more right-leaning respondents are prepared to excuse violence against protesters, while left-leaning respondents are loath to do so.

As was the case with respect to democratic satisfaction, movement along the ideological continuum correlates with substantial variation in the positions that respondents take on political violence. As is clear from Figure 3, switching from the ideological far right to the far left corresponds with a 0.15 drop in the probability that a respondent said that political violence was “not at all” justified (Figure 3A), a 0.30 decline in the probability that a respondent strongly disagreed that violence could generate political influence (Figure 3B), and a 0.30 jump in their acceptance of any roughing up of protesters (Figure 3C).

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

Unlike Hypotheses 1 and 2, conclusions about Hypothesis 3 cannot be drawn directly from the parameter estimates in Table 2. The reason for this limitation is that interaction effects may vary nonlinearly throughout the sample space (Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu 2019). Hence, the appropriate technique is to examine marginal effects over the entire space to assess the significance interaction effects. This analysis is presented in Figure 4. The results demonstrate that there is no support for Hypothesis 3 in either Model 1 or Model 2 (see Figures 4a and 4b). Thus, there is no evidence indicating that satisfaction with democracy and ideology interact in affecting support for political violence generally or belief in its efficacy. However, the results do provide support for Hypothesis 3 in Model 3 (see Figure 4c). The interactive effect is evident from the significant decline of the "not at all" curve across the ideological scale from conservative to liberal. This trend establishes that right-leaning respondents give less support to roughing up protesters when they are more satisfied with democracy but more support when they are less satisfied with democracy. On the other hand, left-leaning respondents give more support to roughing up protesters when they are more satisfied with democracy but less support when they are less satisfied.

INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

Beyond the specific hypotheses that are the focus of this article, Table 2 contains results regarding the control variables that may be of interest to scholars of political violence. First, the folded partisanship measure is not significant in any model. This result should *not* be interpreted as implying that partisanship does not matter in motivating political violence. Rather, it makes clear that there is not a separate effect of partisanship based on attachment to parties as institutions that is distinguishable from their ideological relevance. For Washington, DC protesters, the effect of partisanship appears to be manifest through ideology.

Activist variables displayed mixed relevance. Organizational membership is associated with justifications of political violence but not with whether it is effective or should be applied to protesters. A strong activist identity corresponds both with the justification of political violence and with belief in its efficacy but not with its use on protesters. Strength of activist networks was not significant in any model. People who made long trips to attend protests were less likely think that it is a good idea to rough up protesters than were people who were closer to home, though distance traveled did not matter in the other violence equations.

Demographic variables were consequential in the models. Women were more likely than non-women to recoil from justifying violence or recognizing its efficacy but were no different from non-women in endorsing the roughing up of protesters. Nonwhite and younger respondents similarly favored justifying and recognizing violence's potential usefulness more than White and older respondents, though they were not different than Whites and older respondents in how they viewed roughing up protesters. Respondents with higher levels of education were more likely to oppose roughing up protesters than were respondents with lower levels of education, but education made no difference in attitudes toward violence's justification or effectiveness. Lower income people were more likely to embrace the influence potential of violence but were not different from other classes with respect to justifying violence or using it against protesters. Religious attendance aligned with accepting violence against protesters but was not associated with views on justifying violence or seeing its influence.

There is no significant, linear time trend in any of the models. That is, violence grew neither more nor less appealing over the two-year period of the study.

Categorical variables representing events were included in the estimation but are not reported in Table 2. This information is contained in Supplement A.

Robustness Analysis

The purpose of robustness analysis is to consider whether the conclusions of the statistical analysis would be different if other, reasonable assumptions had been made. To this end, I consider several plausible alterative specifications of the models. Model estimates made based on these specifications are deposited in Supplement B.

First, some readers may be concerned that the Counter-Inaugural Protests differed qualitatively from the other events because of the occurrence of violence elsewhere in Washington, DC. Hence, alternative models were estimated in which the Counter-Inaugural Protests were excluded from the data. The results of this analysis, reported in Supplement B1, did not yield different conclusions about the main hypotheses from those contained in Table 2.

Second, readers may worry that the presence of event categorical variables alters the conclusions of the analysis. Thus, the models were re-estimated without these variables and are reported in Supplement B2. The study's conclusions were not altered by this exercise.

A third issue is that since the three questions about violence all appeared on the same survey, the errors among the equations may be correlated. For example, if a respondent answered that protests could influence policymakers, they may feel pressured to give a consistent answer to a later question in stating that political violence is justified. A Seemingly Unrelated Regression (SUR) estimator is appropriate to address this issue (Zellner 1963). To accommodate this concern, a SUR for Ordered Probits was estimated using Roodman's (2011) mixed-process aproach and is reported in Supplement B3. The results show that there are indeed significant correlations between the errors of the equations, especially Models 1 and 2. Nevertheless, incorporating this information into the estimation does not modify the conclusions drawn from the analysis.

Discussion

Although this study is focused on understanding support for violence, it is critical to recognize that the results clearly demonstrate a strong aversion to violence both among the overwhelming majority of protesters and the public more broadly. Still, there is some willingness to justify political violence on the part of public, and a marginally greater propensity to do so among Washington, DC protesters.

The substantive relevance of the minority opinion justifying violence can be appreciated by considering the large numbers of people involved. For example, according to the Crowd Counting Consortium (2017), the first Women's March on Washington in 2017 was attended by about 725,000 people. My survey at this event estimated at 23 percent of those present believed that political violence was at least "a little" justified in the United States. That amounts to more than 150,000 people at the event that were open to the idea of political violence, all of whom were packed into a relatively small space of a few square miles. Of these, I estimate that more than 10,000 people (based on answers of 1.43 percent of survey respondents) believed that political violence is justified "a great deal." While the 2017 Women's March was purely peaceful, it is valuable to acknowledge the potential of such a gathering. It is not inconceivable that considerable force could be marshalled in such a setting by political entrepreneurs who identified and articulated a case for violent collective action. My point is not to argue that this would ever actually happen, but to direct attention to the fact that the evidence presented indicates that the phenomenon in question is of potentially great consequence.

Shifting the discussion to the regression analysis, there is a strong similarity between the estimated results of Model 1 and Model 2. This finding suggests a highly salient connection between the justification for political violence (an ethical position) and beliefs about whether it is sometimes needed to exert political influence (an empirical position). However, there is no necessary logical equivalence between the two positions. It is possible to believe, for example, that using violence is highly justifiable

but is unlikely to be effective. Conversely, it is possible to believe that violence could be deployed to great effect even though it is morally reprehensible to do so. The findings of this research demonstrate that there is a correlation between these views in practice. Activists who see violence as effective tend to be keen to justify it. Those who see violence as ineffective tend to condemn it.

While there is striking similarity between the results of Model 1 and Model 2, there is dissonance with the results of Model 3. Indeed, the conclusions of all three hypothesis tests are different in this model. Different control variables weigh in as significant in this model, as this is the only model with significant effects attributed to education, attendance at religious services, and distance traveled. The key departure is in the wording of the question about violence. While the dependent variables for Models 1 and 2 were extracted from questions on political violence in general, Model 3 relied on a question about violence toward a specific population: protesters who disrupt political events. Based on this choice, right-leaning respondents could believe this group to be their opponents, making them willing to excuse violence against them. Likewise, left-leaning respondents would tend to count this group as their allies, thus making them prone to mount a defense on their behalf. Similarly, people who are more satisfied with democracy, may be inclined to believe that group to be tearing down a system that they like to think is working well. Some roughing up might be warranted under these conditions. But for people less satisfied with democracy, they might be more inclined to prefer a little more disruption in the mix, even if it means looking the other way on violent action.

However understandable the contrast of Model 3 with Models 1 and 2 may be, the disparity in these results is informative about the way that activists think about violence. Many people who take a principled stand on political violence seem to be willing to adjust their views depending on who the target of that violence may be. Rather than approaching violence as strictly taboo, many activists have a more flexible perspective. Violence is in their toolbox and they are willing to at least consider its application.

Despite these caveats, it must be emphasized that the statistical analysis yields robust conclusions under a variety of reasonable specifications. The more that activists are satisfied with the way that democracy works in the United States, the more that they want to avoid violence – unless it is directed at people who themselves seem to be interfering with the operation of democracy. In general, liberals are much more permissive of violence than are conservatives, unless we are talking about violence toward protester themselves. Satisfaction with democracy and ideology usually do not interact with one another, but this interaction does help to account for the deviant case when protesters themselves are the target of violence. These findings deepen what is known about how activists think about the ways that violence fits into the American political system as it is currently constituted.

Conclusion

The key contribution of this study is to demonstrate how satisfaction with democracy and ideology are relevant to the ways that activists think about the uses of political violence in the United States. This knowledge is especially relevant during a time of peak activist mobilizations, expanding concerns about the functioning of democratic institutions, and deepening ideological polarization. This analysis provides a framework that could be applied to help predict, explain, and (potentially) avoid violent political action. To these ends, concerted efforts are needed to repair the functioning of American democracy. Such efforts might aim to create more accurately proportional representation from elections, restore consensual norms in policymaking, foster an environment of greater accuracy and balance in mass media, reduce the role of corporate money in elections, and other reforms.

The analysis presented in this article is based on thousands of surveys of peaceful protesters in Washington, DC, including people attending both liberal and conservative events. A notable limitation of the study, however, is that it was conducted only during a period of unified Republican control over the federal government. It is conceivable that the rise of a Democratic majority in the US House of

Representatives after the 2018 congressional midterm elections could have modified the relationships documented herein. These relationships could potentially be modified further should the Democrats gain greater control over national political institutions. Further research is needed to explore these possibilities.

Similarly, the fact that the study only incorporates input from people engaged in peaceful political action is a limitation. These people have demonstrated that they embrace nonviolent action as a worthy endeavor. Thus, the research design involves some degree of selection on the dependent variable (King, Keohane, and Verba 1995). The result is likely understatement of the willingness of activists to engage in violence. Still, this critique should be mindful of the limits of social science. It is hard to imagine, for example, conducting surveys of Unite the Right protesters as they carried torches to defend Confederate statues in Charlottesville, Virginia (Signer 2020). Methods of studying violent activists do exist, though they are far afield from the approach taken here (Below 2018; Blee 2003; McVeigh and Estep 2019).

Some readers may be especially interested in how racial politics factor into support for political violence, which has only been discussed in a limited way in this article. Indeed, the historically unprecedented protests – some of which involved violence – following the murder of George Floyd and other African Americans (Putnam, Chenoweth, and Pressman 2020) – suggest undeniable links among violence, race, and activism in contemporary America. These issues are more complex and extensive than can be satisfactorily covered here. Nevertheless, this study does offer insights on this issue. The increasingly apparent disregard for Black life has likely prompted decreases in satisfaction with democracy among broad swaths of the public, leading to a rise in political violence. Divisions between left-leaning and right-leaning activists are playing a role as well, with left-leaning activists targeting violence at the police, state institutions, and businesses. Right-leaning activists have directed their animosity at protesters themselves (Shepherd and Bailey 2020). While this narrative seems to be

broadly consistent with the findings of this study, it would also be a mistake to reach firm conclusions without more research. Thus, next steps in this agenda ought to pay close attention to the Black Lives Matter movement, related activism, and countermovement mobilization to better appreciate the place of political violence in the United States today.

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Table 1: Events included in the study.

Event	Date	Ideological orientation
Counter-Inaugural Protests	January 20, 2017	Liberal / progressive
Women's March	January 21, 2017	Liberal / progressive
March for Life	January 27, 2017	Conservative / right-leaning
Tax March	April 15, 2017	Liberal / progressive
March for Science	April 22, 2017	Liberal / progressive
People's Climate March	April 29, 2017	Liberal / progressive
Equality March for Unity and Pride	June 10, 2017	Liberal / progressive
Mother of All Rallies	September 16, 2017	Conservative / right-leaning
Keep Your Promises Rally (Tea Party)	September 23, 2017	Conservative / right-leaning
March for Racial Justice	September 30, 2017	Liberal / progressive
March for Life	January 19, 2018	Conservative / right-leaning
Women's March	January 20, 2018	Liberal / progressive
Impeachment March	January 27, 2018	Liberal / progressive
March for Trump	March 4, 2018	Conservative / right-leaning
March for Our Lives	March 24, 2018	Liberal / progressive
March for Science	April 14, 2018	Liberal / progressive
March for the Ocean	June 9, 2018	Liberal / progressive
Families Belong Together	June 30, 2018	Liberal / progressive
Youth Climate March	July 21, 2018	Liberal / progressive
Unite the Right	August 12, 2018	Conservative / right-leaning
Still Here, Still Strong (Counterprotest)	August 12, 2018	Liberal / progressive
Rise Up, Fight Back (Counterprotest)	August 12, 2018	Liberal / progressive
Mother of All Rallies	September 8, 2018	Conservative / right-leaning
Women's March on the Pentagon	October 21, 2018	Liberal / progressive

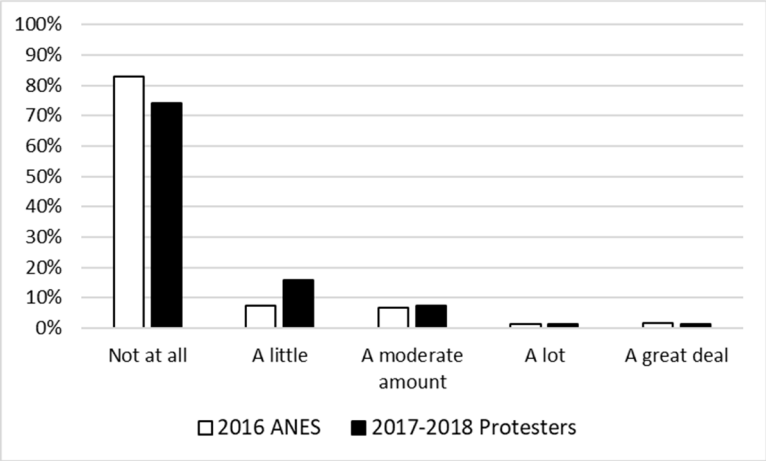
Table 2: Determinants of support for political violence.

Independent variable	**Model 1** *Political violence is justified*	**Model 2** *Violence is influential*	**Model 3** *Violence against protesters is justified*
		Coefficient (Standard Error)	
Satisfaction with democracy	--0.233 *	--0.210 *	0.134 *
	(0.035)	(0.030)	(0.033)
Ideology	0.063 *	0.116 *	--0.114 *
	(0.019)	(0.018)	(0.016)
Partisan ideology folded	0.010	0.026	--0.007
	(0.025)	(0.021)	(0.025)
Organizational membership	0.171 *	0.044	--0.084
	(0.053)	(0.045)	(0.054)
Activist identity	0.132 *	0.079 *	--0.162
	(0.029)	(0.026)	(0.028)
Activist networks	0.024	0.048	0.023
	(0.035)	(0.031)	(0.035)
Sex / gender is female	--0.294 *	--0.260 *	0.005
	(0.053)	(0.046)	(0.052)
Race / ethnicity is nonwhite	0.236 *	0.259 *	0.030
	(0.070)	(0.065)	(0.073)
Age in years	--0.013 *	--0.013 *	0.003
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Level of education	--0.001	0.002	--0.093 *
	(0.020)	(0.017)	(-0.020)
Income in thousands of dollars	--0.001	--0.001 *	0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Attendance at religious services	--0.023	--0.022	0.072 *
	(0.021)	(0.017)	(0.019)
Log of distanced traveled	--0.016	0.006	--0.030 *
	(0.013)	(0.011)	(0.014)
Months since January 2017	--0.009	--0.008	--0.012
	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.011)
Event categorical variables	Reported in Supplement A		
Cut 1	--0.253	--0.461 *	--0.068
	(0.227)	(0.219)	(0.232)
Cut 2	0.489 *	0.109	0.522 *
	(0.225)	(0.219)	(0.232)
Cut 3	1.250 *	0.542 *	1.119 *
	(0.226)	(0.218)	(0.231)
Cut 4	1.580 *	1.315 *	1.504 *
	(0.228)	(0.219)	(0.233)
Sample Size (N)	3,375	3,568	3,300
F statistic	14.27 *	18.23 *	19.06 *
F degrees of freedom	36, 3,316	36, 3,509	36, 3,241

Note: * $p \leq 0.05$.

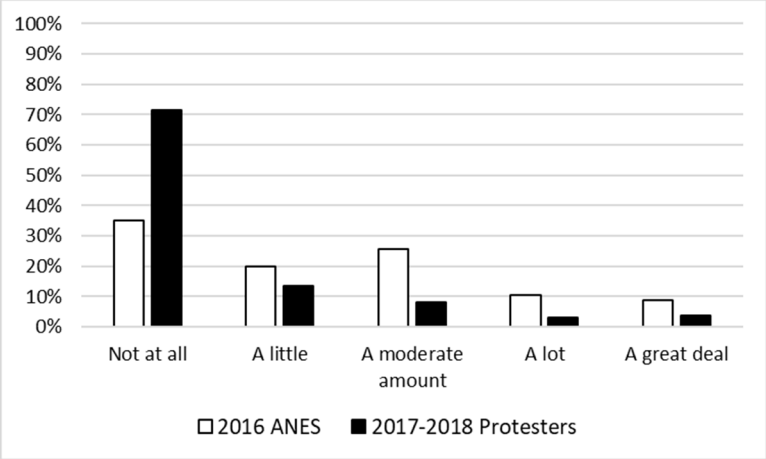
Figure 1: Washington, DC protesters compared to eligible voters nationwide.

A. How much is political violence justified in the United States?



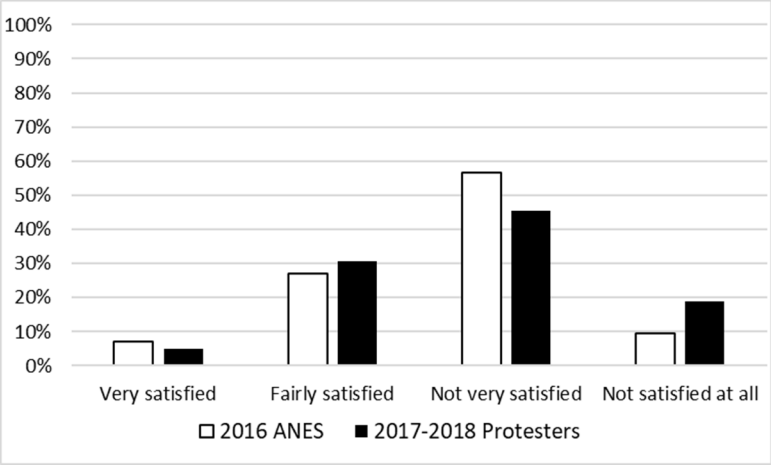
Notes: 2016 ANES N=4,216; 2017-2018 Protesters N=3,375; $\chi^2_{(df=4)} = 183$, $p \leq 0.05$.

B. Do protesters get what they deserve when they get "roughed up"?



Notes: 2016 ANES N=4,189; 2017-2018 Protesters N=3,402; $\chi^2_{(df=4)} = 1{,}098$, $p \leq 0.05$.

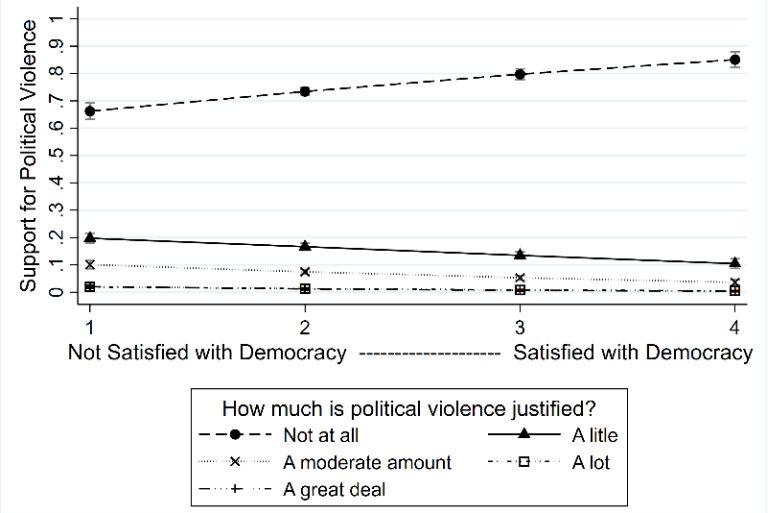
C. How satisfied are you with the way that democracy works in the United States?



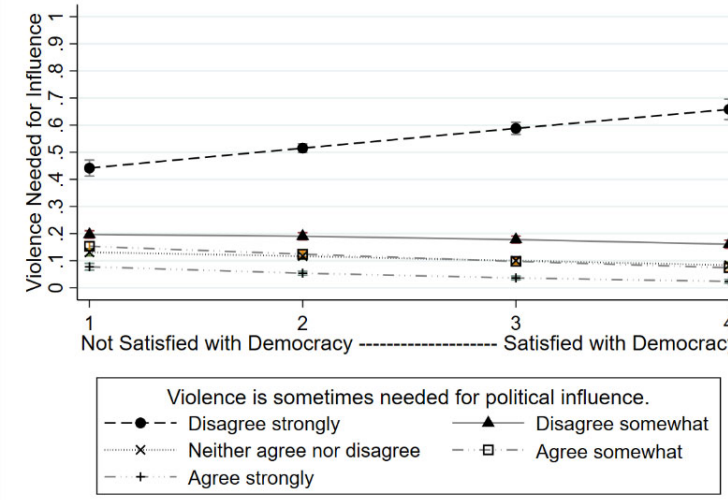
Notes: 2016 ANES N=4,217; 2017-2018 Protesters N=3,479; $\chi^2_{(df=4)} = 3{,}363$, $p \leq 0.05$.

Figure 2: Association between support for political violence and satisfaction with democracy.

A. How much is political violence justified in the United States?



B. Violence is sometimes necessary for influence.



C. Do protesters get what they deserve when they get "roughed up"?

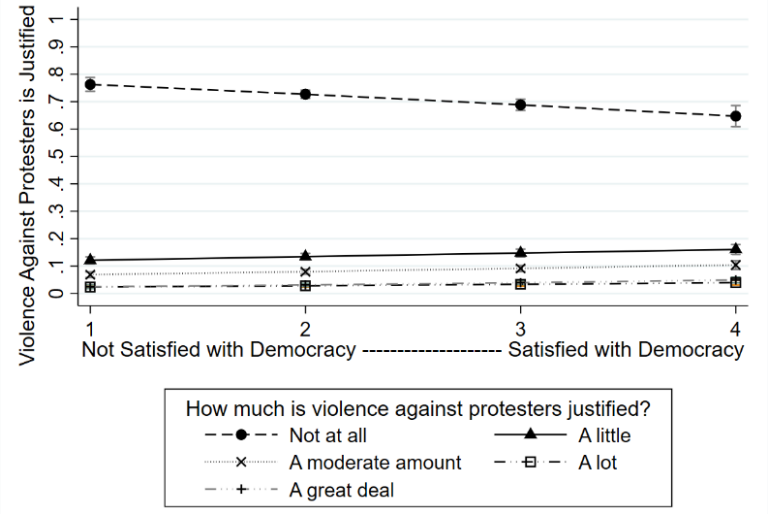
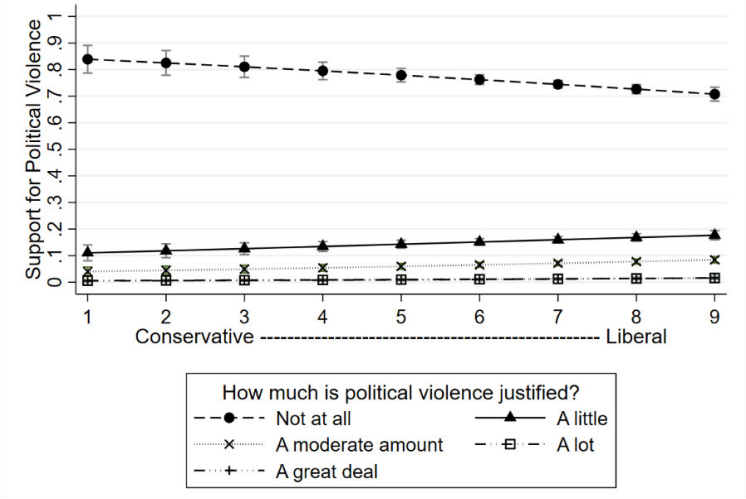
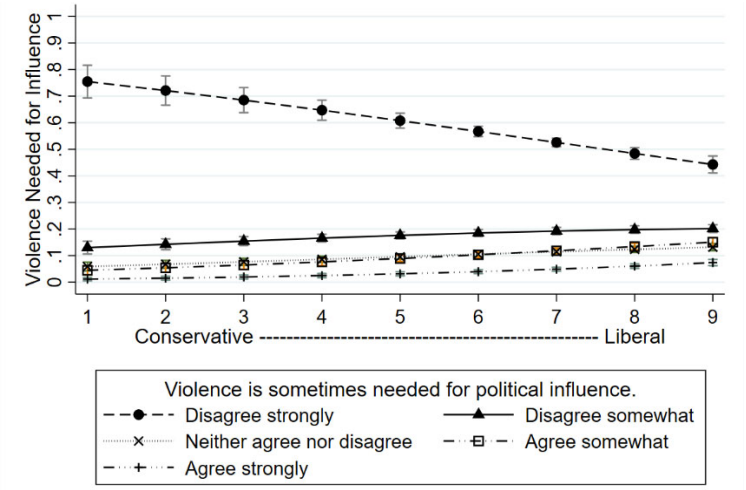


Figure 3: Association between support for political violence and ideology.

A. How much is political violence justified in the United States?



B. Violence is sometimes necessary for influence.



C. Do protesters get what they deserve when they get "roughed up"?

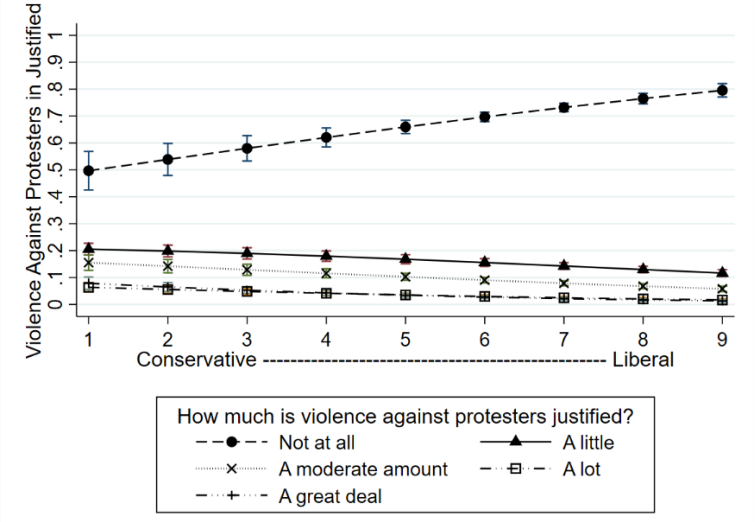
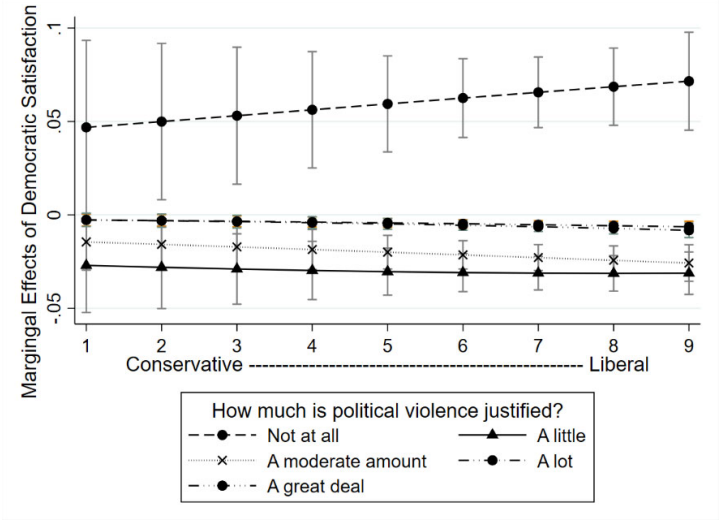
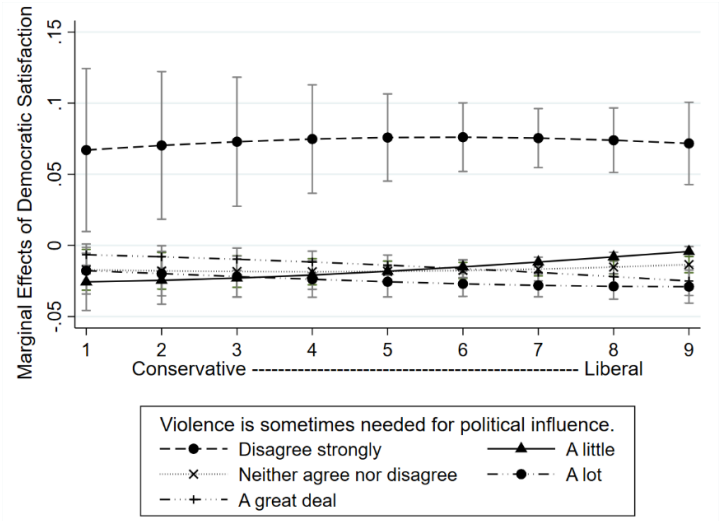


Figure 4: Marginal effects of satisfaction with democracy on support for political violence.

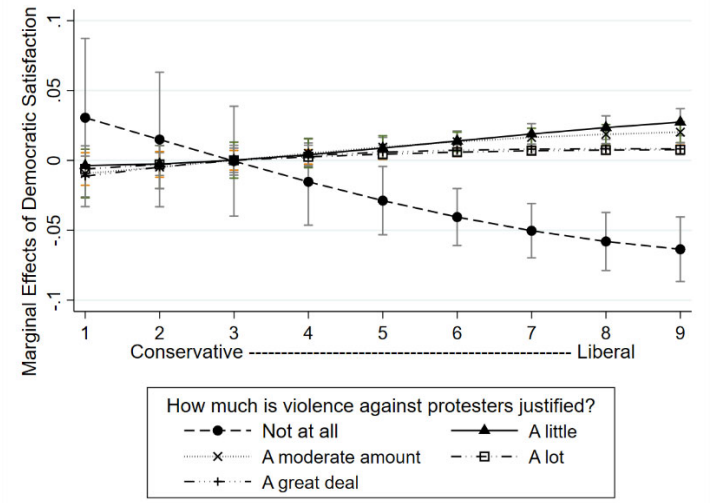
A. How much is political violence justified in the United States?



B. Violence is sometimes necessary for influence.



C. Do protesters get what they deserve when they get "roughed up"?



Appendix A. Questions used to construct independent variables.

Partisan identity folded: "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a . . .". Options: Strong Republican [Value = 3]; Not very strong Republican [Value = 2]; Independent who leans Republican [Value = 1]; Independent [Value = 0]; Independent who leans Democrat [Value = 1]; Not very strong Democrat [Value = 2]; Strong Democrat [Value = 1]; Other (please specify) [Value = Missing].

Organizational member: "Are you a member of any political organizations, social movement organizations, interest groups, or policy advocacy groups?" Options: Yes [Value = 1]; No [Value = 0].

Activist identity: "Some people think that being an 'activist' – meaning someone who tries to improve the world by working on certain issues or causes – is a very important part of who they are, while other people do not think of themselves as activists. How important is being an 'activist' to your personal identity?" Options: Core to my personal identity [Value = 4]; Somewhat important to my personal identity [Value = 3]; Not that important to my personal identity [Value = 2]; Not a part of my personal identity [Value = 1]; Don't know [Value = Missing].

Activist networks: "Prior to coming to this rally this week, did you already personally know many people here, or are you largely meeting people for the first time?" Options: I knew many people here before arriving at this rally [Value = 3]; I knew some people here, but only a few [Value = 2]; I knew hardly anyone here before arriving at this rally [Value = 1].

Sex / gender is female: "What is your sex/gender?" Option: Open ended.

Race / ethnicity is nonwhite: "What is your race/ethnicity? Please circle as many as apply." Options: Native American/American-Indian [Value = 1]; White / Caucasian [Value = 0]; Black / African American [Value = 1]; Latino / Hispanic [Value = 1]; Asian / Asian American/ Pacific Islander [Value = 1]; Other [Value = 1].

Age in years: "How old are you?" Options: ____ years [Value = Numeric].

Level of education: “Could you please tell us the highest level of formal education you have completed?” Options: Less than high school diploma [Value = 1]; High School diploma [Value = 2]; Some college / Associate’s degree or technical degree [Value =3]; College degree [Value = 4]; Some graduate education [Value = 5]; Graduate or professional degree [Value = 6].

Income in thousands of dollars: “Could you please tell us your level of annual income in 2016 [or 2017]?” Options: less than $15,000 [Value = 7.5]; $15,001 - $25,000 [Value = 20]; $25,001 to $50,000 [Value = 37.5]; $51,001 to $75,000 [Value = 67.5]; $75,001 to $100,000 [Value = 87.5]; $100,001 to $125,000 [Value = 112.5]; $125,001 to $150,000 [137.5]; $150,000 to $350,000 [Value = 250]; More than $350,000 [Value = 450].

Attendance at religious services: “Do you go to religious services?” Options: Every week [Value = 5]; Almost every week [Value = 4]; Once or twice a month [Value = 3]; A few times a year [Value = 2]; Never [Value = 1].

Log of distance traveled: “What is the ZIP code of your primary residence? (If you don’t live in the U.S., please tell us in what city and country you live.)” Options: Write in. Calculated as the log of the driving distance from their residence to the site of the protests, as indicated by Google Maps (2020).

Months since January 2017: Based on the date of the survey.

Appendix B. Descriptive statistics and information on missing data.

Independent variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
		Mean (Standard deviation) [Percent Missing]	
Satisfaction with democracy	2.212	2.211	2.2000
	(0.800)	(0.801)	(0.800)
	[2.19%]	[5.41%]	[0.97%]
Ideology	6.857	6.856	6.881
	(2.189)	(2.200)	(2.191)
	[10.67%]	[15.08%]	[12.64%]
Partisan ideology folded	2.043	2.035	2.038
	(1.084)	(1.088)	(1.088)
	[13.51%]	[16.56%]	[12.93%]
Organizational membership	0.476	0.478	0.478
	(0.499)	(0.500)	(0.500)
	[3.08%]	[6.42%]	[2.29%]
Activist identity	2.823	2.828	2.838
	(0.968)	(0.968)	(0.969)
	[3.11%]	[9.16%]	[6.44%]
Activist networks	1.791	1.789	1.793
	(0.740)	(0.743)	(0.739)
	[7.91%]	[12.58%]	[9.88%]
Sex / gender is female	0.634	0.630	0.632
	(0.482)	(0.483)	(0.482)
	[7.02%]	[11.66%]	[9.11%]
Race / ethnicity is nonwhite	0.178	0.177	0.178
	(0.383)	(0.382)	(0.383)
	[10.40%]	[14.88%]	[12.35%]
Age in years	42.637	42.745	42.563
	(0.383)	(17.376)	(17.373)
	[8.41%]	[13.03%]	[10.35%]
Level of education	4.554	4.555	4.550
	(1.420)	(1.420)	(1.423)
	[6.58%]	[11.21%]	[8.58%]
Income in thousands of dollars	92.054	91.807	91.274
	(91.456)	(91.195)	(90.882)
	[12.30%]	[16.73%]	[13.93%]
Attendance at religious services	2.160	2.162	2.145
	(1.451)	(1.453)	(1.446)
	[6.93%]	[11.74%]	[9.14%]
Log of distanced traveled	4.352	4.357	4.337
	(2.089)	(2.085)	(2.093)
	[10.81%]	[15.30%]	[15.30%]
Months since January 2017	8.184	8.060	8.175
	(6.535)	(6.541)	(2.093)
	[0.00%]	[0.00%]	[0.00%]