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Public Support for Black Lives Matter

Lilian A. Morrell
Gettysburg College

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Public Support for Black Lives Matter

Abstract

I hypothesize that in a comparison of individuals, those who have believe in, or have been subject to discrimination, are more likely to support BLM. I am doing research regarding American politics and social structure; I want to take into account the whole nation, and I'm not concerned about data from outside the U.S. This data set includes information about respondents, race, gender, and sexuality, all of which I need to know if I want to take into account the effects of oppression on support of Black Lives Matter. I am only going to use the nes2016 dataset because no other dataset had information on feelings specifically towards Black Lives Matter. Lastly, rather than looking at historical data, I wanted to use information collected in the present. Since social issues are always changing and the Black Lives Matter organization is new, it is essential I use the most recent data I have available. A constraint of this survey is the data has no information on protests in general, so there is no distinction between those who only support the ideology and those who actually go out to protest.

Keywords

minorities' views on discrimination, feelings towards BLM, race and sexuality, perceived discrimination

Disciplines

American Politics | Political Science | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

Comments

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Lily Morrell

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Public Support for Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter movement started back in July of 2013 when the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was used in response to the acquittal of a white cop after he shot Trayvon Martin, an African American teen, to death. The movement called for the eradication of white supremacy and to build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes. The movement gained new traction in the summer of 2020 after a video of George Floyd being choked to death by a policeman went viral. The idea that there needs to be police reform spread rapidly, and people began protesting. Eventually there had been demonstrations in all fifty states as well as many countries around the world, and people continue to protest today.

Protests are an important part of any democracy, they allow for citizens to draw attention to an issue they believe needs to be addressed, and it's a way for the government to understand how widespread an issue is as well as what needs to be changed. The Black Lives Matter movement is no exception, but the fascinating and hopeful thing about these protests, is compared to the civil rights movement, there are many more people participating and calling for change who are not directly affected by the violence. Obviously there have been some cultural and societal changes since the civil rights era that could account for this participation, but these protests still were not without controversy. While it is true that many people not directly impacted by the message decided to join, there are still many others who are vehemently against

the movement, calling it a terrorist organization, claiming they are nothing more than riots or, even if they do say they are protests, then they say are protesting in the wrong ways. Counter slogans and movements were created in backlash and people try to discount the purpose of the movement by denying systemic racism. After I encountered people from both sides of the spectrum, as well as looking back to the civil rights movement compared to the Black Lives Matter movement, it forced me to consider what is the difference? What changed? What causes people to go participate in BLM? Does it have more to do with the aspects of the protest itself, or is it characteristics of an individual that draws them to action? While Black Lives Matter is currently the most relevant movement to spur on protests, it's not the only organization with concerns about black oppression and white supremacy, and yet it became the beacon for people to rally around. Venturing outside Black Lives Matter for a moment, there have been other protests that gain the attention of millions, like the 2017 Women's March, while other movements fade into obscurity, or never even gain enough traction to be known in the first place. Under what conditions and why does BLM generate support?

The ability to gain public support and generate mobilization is essential for social movements ability to achieve their goal, (Gamson 2004) and successful social movements are arguably effective in creating real, long lasting consequences on modern society. Weldon, L. (2011) asserts that for systematically disadvantaged groups, social movements can potentially be the most important method for voicing their perspective and effecting change. Understanding why people will participate in BLM, and on the other hand, why people will speak out against it, is important in our current political world; and I intend to do my best to figure it out

Academic and casual commentary on protests is not lacking; political analysts, social scientists, public surveys and just citizen discourse have all had something to say over the years.

While there is a lot of previous research and opinions on what type and why people protest, there is an issue with commenting on current events and why they are happening; they are always changing. Each new generation lives in a culture that has evolved from the previous one, and every generation faces hardships that define their way of thinking. Even though past cultural attitudes and political unrest that spurred on protests have been analyzed, there still needs to be new questions with new research in order for our political and social knowledge to evolve with the culture we are creating.

Despite this need to continuously update our research, there are still valid articles that offer a starting point to analyzing the support of BLM. If we want to focus on the varied support of BLM, it's important to know how the idea of protesting is received in general, and why. Corwin D. Smidt (2012) in their survey research, makes the connection between how coverage of different political actors and events drives an issue's placement on the public agenda. They find that rather than groups or political biases driving public opinion, coverage of citizen demonstrations will consistently work better in shaping the public agenda, even better than news coverage of elected officials who have greater access to news media. Smidt draws on Gamson, W. A., & Wolfsfeld, G. (1993) and Iyengar Shanto and Kinder Donald R (1987) to support his claims. These American behavioral scientists demonstrate how television, news and the media interact with social movements, and how size, emphasis on the visual, and emphasis on entertainment values as influencing movements can shape Americans' opinions.

Staying on the topic of the overall perception of protests, since the question of what motivates individuals to gather and protest is so important to sociology and political science (Davies, 1971) there has been debate among scholars about what externally motivates a citizen to participate. Some argue that if anyone is in a position where they are subject to less than humane

conditions, there will be an innate need to strike at the cause of it and put a stop to the pain. (Gurr 1970) On the other hand, other observers see a more passive outlook and claim that rebellion is rare and temporary, since there are many more examples of submission to and exploitation by authority than successful revolts. (Zinn 2002) Jost, J., Chaikalis-Petritsis, V., Abrams, D., Sidanius, J., van der Toorn, J., & Bratt, C. (2012) furthers this research, and in three studies they examine the question if system justification is negatively associated with collective protest against ingroup disadvantage. System justification is essentially a societal understanding that there are aspects of the system that will negatively impact individuals, but it's justified for reasons such as it's the norm for a given society or the positive impacts outweigh the negative ones. In this study they look at the effects of uncertainty salience, ingroup identification, and disruptive versus non disruptive protest but ultimately, despite exploring different contexts, measures, and methods, the results demonstrate that, even among political activists, system justification had a significant effect on deterring people's willingness to protest and mobilize.

There have also been scholars who look at the principles of the individual rather than the concept of the protest. One topic that has been explored more thoroughly in recent years is the concept of morality and how it affects the participation in protests. Van Zomeren et al., (2012) talks about moral conviction and Vilas and Sabucedo, (2012) commented on moral obligation, but it's Sabucedo, J., Dono, M., Alzate, M., & Seoane, G. (2018) that first decided to compare to two and measure the differences. Their results showed that not only is moral obligation different to moral conviction and moral norm, but also that it is a more effective predictor working both for intention and real participation. They present that people who show moral obligation as a key precedent of protest participation.

Gutting, R.S. (2020) continues to look at individual aspects when they identify how different people's political ideology can affect how they respond to protests and the chance of mobilization. They note that protest has in general, been a tool utilized more by the left than the right, and by using contextual elements of a protest, they explore why. They keep a concise number of variables, only looking at liberal, conservative and authoritarian ideals, and then they look at their responses to both violence and disrespect for police and how these contextual factors affect support and potential mobilization. In their research, they identify that compared to liberals, conservatives are less supportive of protests that disrespect police and did not participate if the protest were shown to be violent. For authoritarians, however, violence had no effect on whether or not they show support or mobilize. Instead, only protests that are disrespectful of police decreases support and mobilization among authoritarians.

All these scholarly research papers are helpful for an overarching tone on the topic of protest, but none of them are looking at the Black Lives Matter movement in particular. Scholars of social movements like Snow and Benford (2000) have long emphasized the importance of “social movement frames”, essentially the connotation of a movement created by how it is presented within the society it is exhibited in. These frames affect the support generated for and mobilization of individuals to participate in social movements, and in this era, modern technology and the wide use of social media makes the Black Lives Matter protests a more unique movement that requires a closer look. (Yoo, J., Brown, J., & Chung, A. 2018) By utilizing a survey experiment, Bonilla, T., & Tillery, A. (2020) identify what identity frames boost support for Black Lives Matter among African-American people. In their survey, they test the effects on mobilization of three different frames for BLM; Black Nationalist, Feminist, and LGBTQ+ Rights on the mobilization of African Americans. While the results were interesting;

with the Black nationalist treatment getting a positive response but garnering no significant difference in support, meanwhile Black feminist and Black LGBTQ+ treatments negatively affecting support for the Black Lives Matter, the researchers didn't explore the "why". This research supports that social movement frames with emphasis on subgroups within a culture can generate divided public support for those movements. This has broad implications for the study of social movements and will give me something to fall back on when exploring characteristics of an individual and their opinions of BLM.

Ince, J., Rojas, F., & Davis, C. (2017) recognizes this and by focusing on the social media presence of Black Lives Matter, they see how users interact with BLM by using hashtags and therefore shape the framing of the movement. They find that #BlackLivesMatter is associated with five types of hashtags, these include solidarity or approval of the movement, reference to police violence, movement tactics, mentions of Ferguson, or expressing counter-movement sentiments; this research talks about development of movement framings through social media that can be used in future research.

Gallagher, R., Reagan, A., Danforth, C., & Dodds, P. (2018) continues the discourse around social media and its effects on BLM. The protest hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has come to represent a major social movement, and while there has been research done on the origin and initial spread of the hashtag, less has been done on its ability to remain relevant despite the numeral counter hashtags that have been created in opposition of it. Black Lives Matter is no stranger to counter movements, from #AllLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter, to #BackTheBlue, there have been many attempts to discount BLM. To get a better understanding of the movement, we can use their research to recognize how supporters of Black Lives Matter and the use of the hashtags are responding to each other. Their findings suggest that Black Lives Matter movement

was able to grow, exhibit diverse conversations, and avoid derailment on social media because most of the discussion on #AllLivesMatter and other opposing hashtags, was about its counter-protest opinions, rather than the goals and message of the movement itself. A good amount of the use of #AllLivesMatter comes from those who support #BlackLivesMatter hijacking and confronting the counter protest. Rather than only trying to make #BlackLivesMatter content louder than #AllLivesMatter content, they use the opposing hashtag to make comments that counter it.

Finally, I looked at some scholars who take into the past and current implications of race relations. I have already looked at how protests and BLM are covered and talked about, but Arora, M., & Stout, C. (2018) bring up “who”. Their study is very limited in the context of what I want to research given that they only talk about white and Asian-Americans, but they were influenced by previous studies that explored similar topics. Kuklinski, James H., Hurley, Norman L. 1994 and Nelson, Thomas E., Sanbonmatsu, Kira, McClerking, Harwood K. 2007 demonstrate in their research that white and black people are significantly more likely to adapt to the beliefs and ideologies of co-racial leaders. I want to expand this research beyond just leaders and significant figures and see if the same holds true in day to day relationships; are people more likely to listen to peers of similar race or does it have little to no effect on the formation of opinions?

When talking about Black Lives Matter, there are many different opinions, aspects, and ways of thinking about the movement. I will admit I am biased to the side of support, but I intend to explore and come to an understanding of multiple different perspectives.

I hypothesize that in a comparison of individuals, those who have believe in, or have been subject to discrimination, are more likely to support BLM.

There is already evidence that the media we consume shapes our opinions and how we perceive social movements, but just by looking at the wide variety of responses to BLM, there's clearly not one singular way to report on it. Since people tend to listen to authority figures who are of similar race and opinion, people who have never been subject to discrimination, will get their information from other people who have never been subject to discrimination. Even if it is not intentional, this creates a disconnect and sometimes even an animosity between people who are fighting for equal rights, and people who don't believe inequality exists in the first place. The same theory holds true for how people interact with social media. What we see on social media is quite literally tailored to our interests and experiences, our beliefs will be reinforced. If discrimination has never been felt, or even witnessed, there's no moral obligation to make change and no way to understand the unrest that spurred on the protest, so they will think it is just violence that came out of nowhere. On the other hand, other marginalized people should be able to empathize with the movement. Women, other racial minorities, and the LGBTQ+ community have had, not the same, but similar experiences with discrimination, so in theory there should be more empathy and support of black people and BLM. There are still problems with this theory, some could argue that the attention on BLM is taking away from other organizations, and therefore makes other marginalized communities less supportive rather than more.

Introduction:

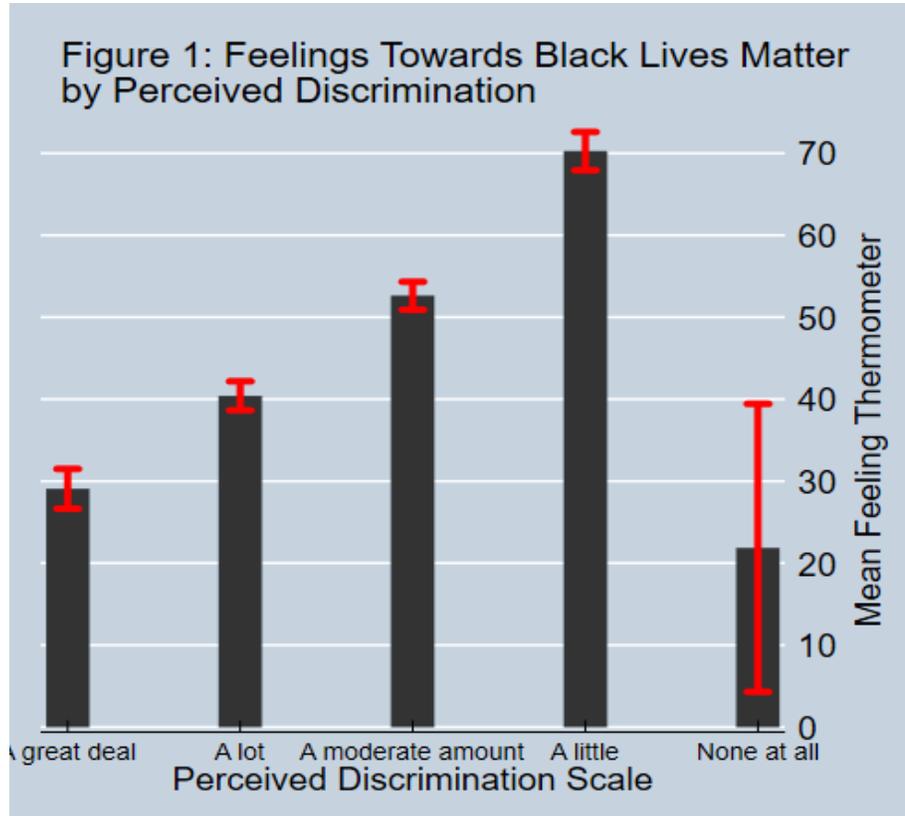
In order to test the hypotheses, I examined data from the National Election Survey 2016. The data included in the dataset is a pre- and post-survey of the 2016 presidential election and has 4,271 respondents. All respondents were eligible U.S. voters. I will only be using data from the post-election survey.

I selected this data because I am doing research regarding American politics and social structure; I want to take into account the whole nation, and I'm not concerned about data from outside the U.S. This data set includes information about respondents, race, gender, and sexuality, all of which I need to know if I want to take into account the effects of oppression on support of Black Lives Matter. I am only going to use the nes2016 dataset because no other dataset had information on feelings specifically towards Black Lives Matter. Lastly, rather than looking at historical data, I wanted to use information collected in the present. Since social issues are always changing and the Black Lives Matter organization is new, it is essential I use the most recent data I have available. A constraint of this survey is the data has no information on protests in general, so there is no distinction between those who only support the ideology and those who actually go out to protest.

Variable measurements:

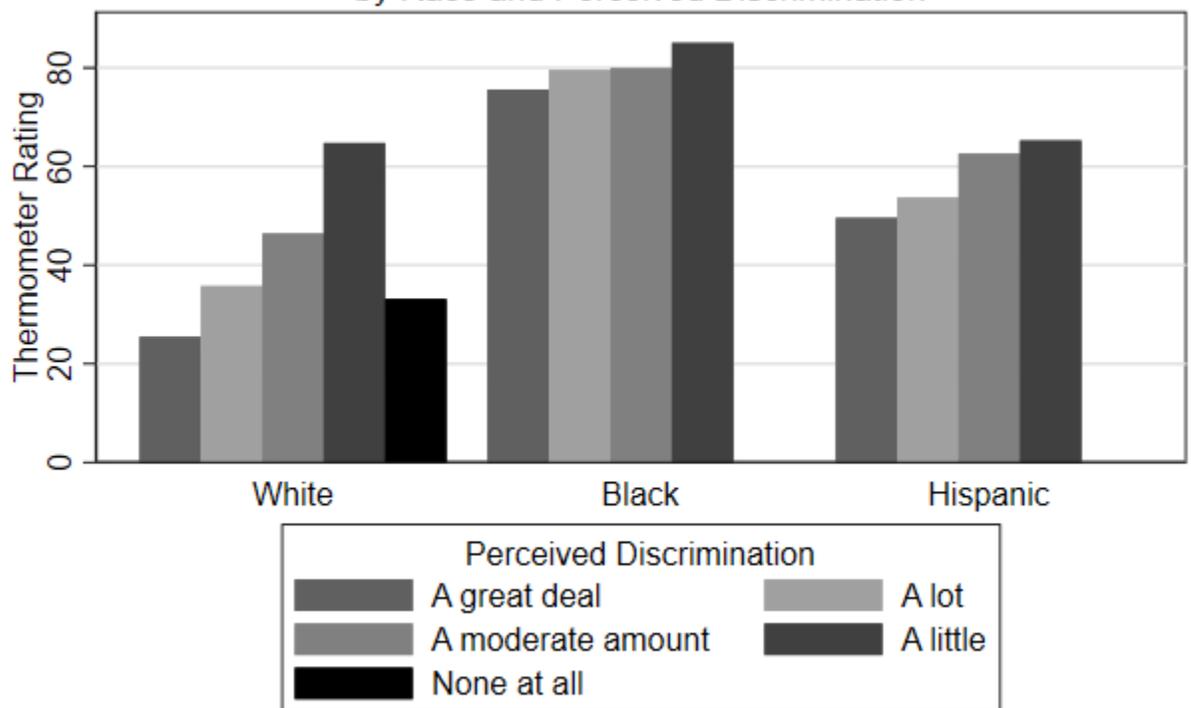
In order to operationalize what type of individuals support Black Lives Matter, I use the feeling thermometer: Black Lives Matter variable. The respondents had to answer the question, "How would you rate Black Lives Matter movement" on a scale from 0-100, 0 being the lowest

Before understanding how discrimination effects the respondents support of Black Lives Matter, I need to know I need to know who is affected by discrimination. Respondents perceived discrimination was surveyed with the question, “How much discrimination is there in the United States today against each of the following groups? Blacks, Hispanics, Gays and Lesbians, Women, Muslims, and Transgender”. Each was a separate question with a scale labeled as “1. A great deal”, “2. A lot”, “3. A moderate amount”, “4. A little” and “5. None at all”. The answers to each question were added together to make a Discrimination Scale variable with a 6-30 scale, 6 representing the least perceived discrimination and 30 bring the most. The medium of perceived discrimination is 15; the mode is 18; and the mean is 15.39. To easier understand the data in this section, “Discrimination Scale” was recoded to “Discrimination”. I generated the five groups, 6/10=1. “None at all”; 11/15=2. “A little”; 16/20=3. “A Moderate Amount”; 21/25=4. “A lot”; 26/30=5. “A great deal.”



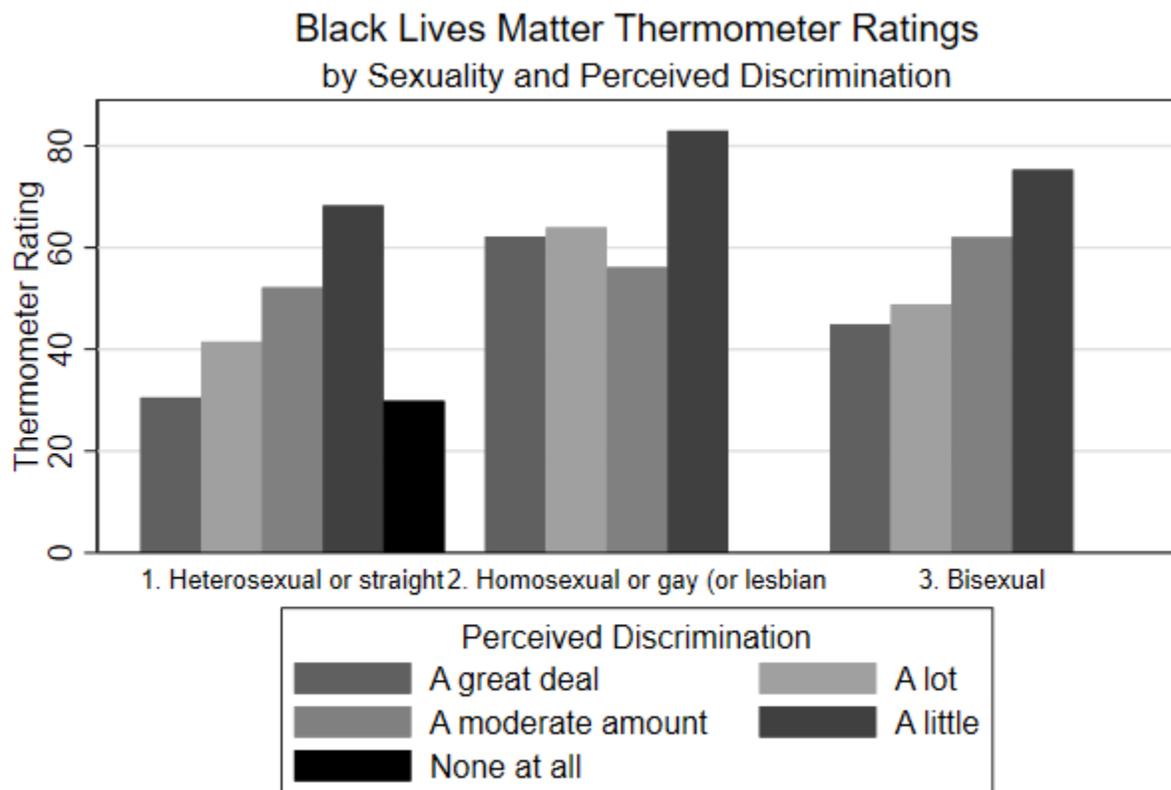
Respondents' race was recorded by asking "Please choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be (Mark all that apply): white, black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander?" Those who said they were Hispanic were to be recorded in a separate variable that specified all other races as "non-Hispanic." I will be focusing on the effects of black people versus white people, the mode of the variable is white people with 88.42% of respondents. Figure 2 displays the feeling thermometer of people's opinion on Black Lives Matter by their perceived discrimination and accounting for race.

Figure 2: Black Lives Matter Thermometer Ratings by Race and Perceived Discrimination



Source: 2012 National Election Study

In the survey, respondents were asked their sexuality with the question “Do you consider yourself to be heterosexual or straight, homosexual or gay or lesbian, or bisexual?” with three categories to choose from. The categories were coded as 1. Heterosexual or straight 2. Homosexual or gay or lesbian 3. Bisexual. Those who refused to answer were not a part of the survey. The mode is heterosexual or straight, with 94.53% of respondents. Since the information is nominal there is no need for other descriptive stats. Figure 3 shows the respondents feelings about Black Lives Matter by their perceived discrimination and accounting for sexuality.



Source: 2012 National Election Study

Respondents were asked about their education level with the question “What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?” with 16 categories as follows: Less than 1st grade, 1-4th grade, 5-6th grade, 7-8th grade, 9th grade, 10th grade, 11th grade, 12th no diploma, Highschool, Some college but no degree, Associate degree in college - occupational/vocational program, Associate degree in college – academic program, Bachelors, Masters, Professional school degree, and Doctorate degree. The mode of this variable is Bachelors with 22.59% of respondents; the median is Associate degree in college - occupational/vocational program; the mean is 11.17.

The survey recorded income with the question “What was [the total income in 2015 of all your family members living here / your total income in 2015?” It is measured with 1-7 scale, 1 being low and 7 being high. The exact data is unavailable for privacy reasons, but the mode is 5 with 19.5% of respondents, the median is 4 and the mean is 3.94.

Ideology was recorded by asking “Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this?” The scale was organized 1-7 as follows, 1. Extremely liberal, 2. Liberal, 3. Slightly liberal, 4. Moderate, middle of the road, 5. Slightly conservative, 6. Conservative, and 7. Extremely conservative. The mode of the data is Slightly conservative with 23.58% of respondents, the median is Moderate, and the mean is 4.18.

Model estimation:

The dependent variables I used, a feeling thermometer of Black Lives matter, and a scale of perceived discrimination, are both interval variables so I used OLS regression. I ran two separate regressions. Both regressions had the same independent variables of race and sexuality, but one had the dependent variable of feelings towards Black Lives Matter and the other had the

dependent variable of perceived discrimination. Additionally, I controlled for the respondent income, education level, and political ideology. All of the control variables are interval, so I held them at the mean, for income it is 3.95, education level 11.17 and ideology is 4.18.

Results:

Model 1: Interaction with Perceived Discrimination by Gender and Sexuality

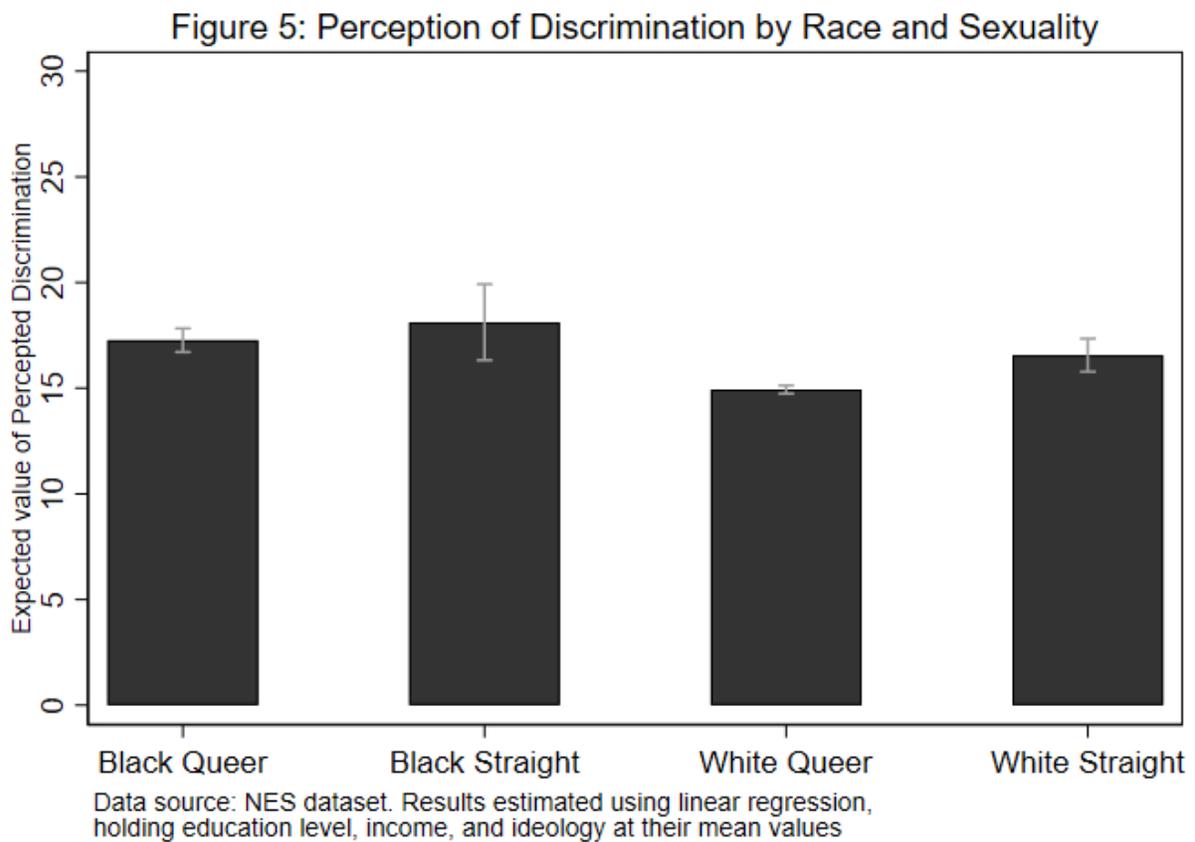


Table 2: OLS Regression for Individuals on Perceived Discrimination	
Variables	Perception
Queer	-1.61911 (0.4216759)
White	1.563524 (0.994821)
Queer, White	0.7643901 (1.038236)
Education	0.0301339 (0.043394)
Income	-0.0046836 (0.0514141)
Ideology	-1.421324 (0.0590841)
Constant	22.18185 (0.6528222)
Observations	2,629
R-squared	= 0.2348

This model shows a mixed support of the hypothesis that those most likely to experience discrimination are more likely to perceive it, and it was not what I was expecting. The R-squared value is 0.235 so about 24 percent of the variation of discrimination perception is explained by the independent variables with the other 76 percent not being accounted for in this model. According to the regression, when controlling for income, education and political ideology, non-queer and queer black people were the only groups to be statistically significant and rejects the null hypothesis with t values well outside the 2/-2 range and p values being 0.00; clearly lower than 0.05. Queer black people, however, was the only group to have a negative coefficient, which I found surprising. In addition to this, there is a strong negative relation between their sexuality of the respondents and their perception of discrimination. On the other hand, both queer and non-queer white people have a positive coefficient of perception of discrimination. However,

they have a p value greater than 0.05, and t values within the range of $-2/2$, therefore the null hypothesis is accepted and there is no statistically significant difference between these groups and straight black people. An interesting thing to point out is while white people have a lower expected value than black people, in both categories, queer people have a lower expected value than straight people even after taking into account overlapping confidence intervals of black and white people. This is the exact opposite of what I had expected. In this analysis, income and education level were found to have no statistically significant findings, however political ideology was significant with a p-value below 0.01.

Model 2: Interaction with Feeling's Towards Black Lives Matter by Gender and Sexuality

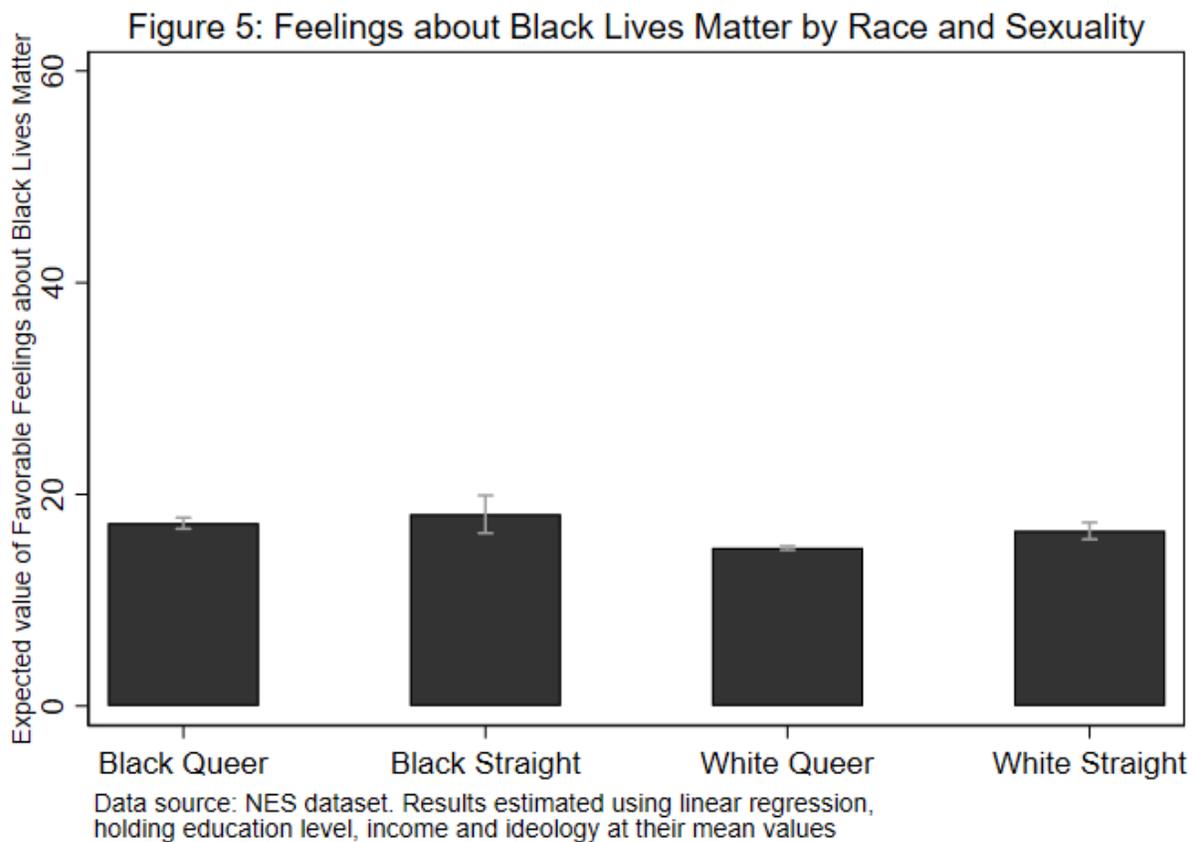


Table 3: OLS Regression for Individuals on Feelings on Black Lives Matter	
Variables	Effects on Perception
Queer	-5.465103 (2.696524)
White	23.34424 (6.398802)
Queer, White	4.067046 (6.647346)
Education	1.069099 (0.2693037)
Income	-.8750534 (0.3158449)
Ideology	-9.104001 (0.3746961)
Constant	71.62393 (4.13172)
Observations	3,145
R-squared = 0.2531	

In this model also shows interesting results that do not entirely support the hypothesis that those most likely to experience and perceive discrimination are more likely to have warm feelings towards Black Lives Matter. The R-squared value is 0.2531 so about 25 percent of the variation of discrimination perception is explained by the independent variables. To begin with, it's important to point out that all the expected values are very low, and all of them are fairly close to one another, much like the discrimination scale regression. According to the regression, queer black people, non queer black people, and non queer white people all have p values less than 0.05, while queer white people have a p value over 0.05 so they are not statistically significant. Once again, queer black people are the only group with a negative coefficient, although curiously white straight people have the second highest positive coefficient. Since both groups are statistically significant, there is a relation between the race and sexuality of the

respondents and their feelings towards Black Lives Matter. In addition to this, queer people in both races again have lower expected values than straight people, which again was not something I was expecting and causes the results to not fit the theory. In this analysis, income and education level were found to have no statistically significant findings, however political ideology was significant with a p-value below 0.01.

Discussions and conclusions:

My findings were not what I had expected them to be and a little all over the place. Queer and non queer black people rejected the null hypothesis for both Feelings on Black Lives Matter and Perceived Discrimination; white non queer people rejected the null hypothesis for Feelings on Black Lives Matter but could not reject it for Perceived Discrimination; and white queer people was unable to reject the null hypothesis of either. Since I was not able to collect all the data I need, I can't make an absolute comparison in order to confirm if those who experience or perceive discrimination are more likely to have warm feelings towards Black Lives Matter. However, I did come across some interesting findings, and while this research cannot prove that race and sexuality of white people are the main cause of these results, I can still use this as a starting point for future research.

For both dependent variables, queer people were shown to consistently have lower expected values than straight people of their same race, with black queer people being the only group to have a negative coefficient. By contrast, non queer white people had one of the highest coefficients in the Black Lives Matter regression with 23.34. The constant (non queer black people) was 71.62 but queer white people was 4.07 and queer black people had a -5.47. There has been research on the anomaly that is white people taking a far more progressive stances than

black people in social issues that do not necessarily affect them. Since Gutting, R.S. (2020) notes that protest has in general been a tool utilized more by the left, I wasn't too surprised by the high coefficient of white people for Black Lives Matter support, I was however curious about queer people. Bonilla, T., & Tillery, A. (2020) found that by framing Black Lives Matter with a Black feminist or Black LGBTQ+ treatments, it would negatively affecting support from African Americans; I hadn't considered if a similar situation was true for support from the LBBTQ+. My findings do not prove, but suggest a disparity in support of the Black Lives Matter movement among queer and straight people; it would be beneficial to figure out why and eventually expand to other social minority groups to see if there is a trend. Bonilla, T., & Tillery, A. (2020) discovered the importance of the social frame of a movement; if oppressed communities are unwilling to help other oppresses communities during protest because of the way it is socially framed or if it is something else, it would be advantageous to understand the reason rather than everyone getting stuck in a social issues loop. The only other theory I can think of is people of the LQBTQ+ community feeling as though the Black Lives Matter movement is taking attention away from their movement and in a way, it is a competition.

On the other hand, I have a few theories about the lower perceived discrimination from queer people. It can be argued that queer black people have been subject to the most forms of discrimination. When asked if perceiving discrimination in other races, they may not be seeing the type or to the extent that discrimination affects them. The code used to generate the variable is several different questions added together so unfortunately, we don't get to separate the responses. Additionally, compared to America 10-20 or so years ago there is less discrimination based on sexual orientation. Queer people who lived though that time and experienced sever discrimination, could perceive the world as less discriminatory now by association. Lastly people

who do not experience discrimination but still acknowledge it, tend to feel the need to overcompensate. They try to be uber “woke” and find acts of discrimination in everything even if there really is not any, so in this situation, that could be making the straight white people have high coefficients.

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