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Black Lives Matter vs. Anti-Lockdownand Stop the Steal: How Framing Affects Political Protests

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Political Protests

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Abstract

For eight years the Black Lives Matter Movement has made consistent efforts to combat racial injustice, however, their message is often undermined by politicians, media elites, and partisan counter protestors who claim the movement is both aggressive and unwarranted. The same critics of the Summer 2020 Black Lives Matter protests drew comparisons to Anti-Lockdown protests in early 2020, and the insurrection on Capitol Hill in January of 2021 – despite inherently different messages behind each respective protest. This project sets out to find how the framing of the Black Lives Matter movement compares to other partisan protests such as the Anti-Lockdown and Stop the Steal Movements. In doing so, this project will highlight whether there are significant differences in the framing between the protests and the implications each frame has on the overall message of a given movement.

Introduction

The United States is a republic that is by the people and for the people, however, at times the American government can be disconnected from the concerns of its citizens. In moments like this, where there could be years between the next election, there is typically one method people seek to express their grievances – protesting (Janowiecki). Under the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, citizens have the right to conduct peaceful public assembly as a part of their free speech. Protests are essential to voice critical issues, events, and injustices. In the last year, there have been three protests that have drastically transformed how demonstrators seek substantive change in governmental policies in the lives of people: Black Lives Matter, Anti-lockdown, and the Capitol Hill protests. These three protests all took on a partisan hue, and many complained that the way their movement was covered by media was unfair and

unflattering; such critics continuously compared the coverage of a movement to the other side received.

The longest movement, Black Lives Matter (BLM), began in July 2013 as an online social media hashtag (#BlackLivesMatter) in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting of 13-year-old Trayvon Martin. The hashtag, created by three Black women Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, called upon those who believe that "black lives matter to make a stand in their own spheres of influence to speak about the struggles black people routinely face" (Phoenix, Ann, et al. 2020). The hashtag expanded into a full-blown movement a year later following the deaths of Eric Garner and Mike Brown in 2014. Black Lives Matter has recently established itself as a worldwide movement after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Still, despite honorable intentions behind the movement, it has often been characterized in a negative light by the media as there have been instances of violent acts by protesters. More often, Conservative media pundits have criminalized BLM. Back in 2015, in response to the death of Deputy Darren Goforth in Harris County Texas, a white police officer shot by a black man, Fox and Friends co-host Brian Kilmeade asserted that BLM was a "murder movement" (Hanson et al 2015). There was no evidence that the shooter, Shannon Miles, had any connection to the Black Lives Matter Movement, but the Fox and Friends segment still maintained that this was the case. "Their agenda is it's OK to go ahead and kill cops," said Fox's Kimberly Guilfoyle in the same year (Lussenhop 2015). Furthermore in 2015 at a campaign stop in Iowa, Republican Senator Ted Cruz asserted "If you look at the Black Lives Matter movement, one of the most disturbing things is more than one of their protests have embraced rabid rhetoric, rabid anti-police language, literally suggesting and embracing and celebrating the murder of police officers," the Texas senator told Think Progress. "That is disgraceful" (The

New York Times 2015). These same critiques echoed five years later during the Summer 2020 Black Lives Matter protest sparked by the death of George Floyd who died in police custody after being handcuffed and pinned to the ground by an officer's knee.

The Black Lives Matter protest was not the only movement that gained attention in the last year. For the Anti-Lockdown protests in April of 2020, protesters from across America took to the streets to argue that the firm measures restricting contact and businesses were hurting citizens and that the reaction to the virus is an exaggeration. Others claim that these measures would cause long-term harm to the economy. Lockdown protesters have gone as far as to bring firearms into state Capitol's like Minnesota, Michigan, and Virginia as the state Governers debated requests to extend measures. This comes as gun rights groups have been among the organizers noting there have been infringements on their civil liberties (BBC News, 2020). Former President Trump has shown support throughout the duration of movement. In April of 2020, despite use of firearms, President Trump tweeted ""LIBERATE MINNESOTA", "LIBERATE MICHIGAN" and then "LIBERATE VIRGINIA" (Collins and Zadrozny, 2020). He took a different stance a month later when he referred to BLM protesters "thugs" and tweeted that "when the looting starts, the shooting starts" after some BLM protesters torched a police station (Dakss, 2020). This would not be the first or last time the former President and other media elites praised Conservative protests while criminalizing the BLM movement for the duration of the year.

The Capitol Hill protests, also known as the Stop the Steal movement, began as a response to the results of the 2020 election. Far right groups from across the country made their way to Capitol Hill to pressure lawmakers into overturning the 2020 election results. Conservative social media pages used the hashtag #StoptheSteal to promote four planned rallies

(Carless, 2021). Once in the capitol, a pro-Trump mob defied police, broke into the U.S. Capitol, and sent members of Congress into lockdown as protesters trespassed, stole, and damaged Congressional property, made threats to Congress members, and assaulted police officers (NPR, 2021).

Republican lawmakers and elite news sources have also made the comparison to the Capitol Hill protests and the Black Lives Matter movement – each with two separate messages but at times, similar methods of protests. The unrest that followed the death of George Floyd included looting, arson, vandalism, though a large majority of protests were peaceful (Watson, 2021). Though Black Lives Matter advocates have often denounced those inciting riots, such actions make it easy for partisan movements to be likened to one another.

Though rioting as a form of protest is unfavorable for many reasons, likening an assortment of protests with hugely different meanings undermines the efforts of those who are working to bring justice and equality in the United States. Black Lives Matter often engaged in large street protests last year with art, dancing, poems, and informational social media posts. The Anti-lockdown and Capitol Hill protests often included confronting government officials, with Capitol Hill protesters culminating an attack on the state while Anti-lockdowns supporters attempted to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer (Kapetaneas et al., 2021).

To liken the Stop the Steal Movement or the Anti-Lockdown Movement to that of Black Lives Matter, when again, message is clearly different, is to imply that unsubstantiated and disproven claims of election fraud carry the same importance as years of overt and systemic racism. For those who are not following these social movements, it is not hard to call out double standards when one is being critiqued over another.

In an election year consumed by protests, the deadly Coronavirus, and lockdown measures, American people have been exposed to different opinions at all ends of the political spectrum. When home with no other distractions, citizens have turned to the news media to make sense of such contentious subjects. Here, the news media plays a crucial role when supplying information as, "[a] different frame in a news story can lead to significant and meaningful differences in how recipients think about controversial issues … and in the degree of tolerance that they exhibit" (Lecheler and de Vreese 2019). I plan to test this argument with respect to the framing of partisan protests such as the Anti-Lockdown, Black Lives Matter, and Stop the Steal movements. These three movements are reviewed as one is mostly associated with the Left, while two are associated with the Right, and will allow me to see how each is framed. Additionally, in recent years it is Left wing protests that are typically covered; therefore, this research will also review how prominent Right-wing protests are viewed and if coverage between the two ideological protests is similar. By comparing the framing of each movement in news media, I will highlight the dangers of framing for revenue – that is, whether the media pushes stories that are buzzworthy. In the results of my research, I hope to give readers an incentive to obtain media literacy. This will help citizens seek omitted messages that the media does not put forth to the public and encourage readers to make informed decisions of each protest independently.

In my own analysis, I find three themes in the literature that underpin this research. First, though non-violent protests receive a more positive response than other methods of protests, different frames by politicians or media elites can change this view. Second, researchers recognize that at some degree, framing is used as a tactical political strategy. Third, media outlets hold a great level of credibility and thus, many (not all) people do not always question frames when they are presented. To elaborate on these themes, I will first define what framing is and its connection to news media (later applying this idea during the coding and analysis process). It is important to note that this research does *not* aim to see which method of protest is most effective

but how frames can affect perception for those who are indifferent to each respective protest. I hope to answer the question of *how does the framing by news media cover protests?*

Literature Review

Framing in Connection to News Media

The purpose of news media is to relay information and notify people of the changing events and issues in the world around them. News is readily available from a variety of platforms such as newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and now social media. The news can be fascinating or tedious, it can educate, or it can entertain, but in the end, news media is used to empower the informed (American Press Institiute). Still, news media can have major implications for readers when current events are framed to fit a media elite or partisan agenda. Researchers Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman note that the framing effect occurs when "different, but logically equivalent words or phrases causes people to alter their preferences" (Tversky and Kahneman 1987). Researcher James N. Druckman further elaborates on this point and notes that when "describing a certain issue or event, a speaker's emphasis on a subset of potentially relevant considerations causes individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions." (Druckman 2001). This is to say that the way a situation is framed will affect one's decision making and the actions they take. This fact becomes especially important when frames are coming from media elites as public opinion could vary depending on the frames they choose to use. In this way, framing by media elites can affect the way elections, policy, and political protests are affected. For purposes of this study, I will highlight the effects of news media framing on political protests.

Researchers Danielle Kilgo and Summer Harlow suggest that news coverage is essential for a protest's feasibility (Kilgo and Harlow 2019). That is, news coverage is necessary for political movements to get their message across. If the media presents a movement as negative, regardless of the movement's true intentions, it is likely that the public will view the movement in this manner as well. In their own research Harlow and Kilgo find that the media negatively

portrays protests and protesters that challenge the status quo – a pattern known as the protest paradigm (Kilgo and Harlow 2019). In examining earlier research, Kilgo and Harlow find that in general, mainstream media attention to protests tend to be negative and brand protestors as violent and deviant (Kilgo and Harlow 2019; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Gitlin 1980). The patterns in the protest paradigm thus create a complex relationship between the news media and protesters as movements must adapt and appeal to the media to receive coverage, however, when they do, the protest coverage tends to demean protesters and portray them as a danger to society. This in turn diminishes the protestors' efforts in reporting the grievances, demands and agendas of their movement (Kilgo and Harlow 2019).

These findings by Kilgo and Harlow are consistent with that of Chloe Banks, who argues that the media uses three rhetorical frames (deployment of public memory, decorum, and reproduction of post racial discourse) to delegitimize the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM). Likewise, these three frames are used to undermine the problems concerning the injustice that the political group often protests (Banks 2018). Take Banks' decorum frame for example. Decorum, or the reiteration of cultural norms of "stranger sociability" (Banks 2018), is used against protestors who do not conform to "normative forces." Therefore, if a protester moves away from a traditional approach to protesting (passive resistance) they are seen as 'unfit for citizen participation" (Banks 2018). Banks' rhetorical frame of decorum was seen all throughout the Summer 2020 BLM movement beginning on May 26th, 2020. Though the protests across the country were largely peaceful, media outlets chose to highlight the actions by rioters and looters in certain states like Minneapolis, New York, Miami, Nashville, Atlanta, or Washington DC (Walters 2020) to promote the image that the young Black protestors only attack police officers and destroy cities. It is also worth noting that these negative frames persist even when protesters are not causing unrest. For example, if a BLM protester kneels during the national anthem to silently protest police brutality, it is seen as seen as dishonoring the American flag and troops. Comparably, if BLM protesters post the Black Out Tuesday Hashtag – which was designed as a day to "take a beat for an honest, reflective, and productive conversation about what actions we

need to collectively take to support the Black community" (Heilweil 2020) – they are condemned as well with critics proposing that a black square will not solve any of underlying issues concerning race, and riots would still ensue regardless (Wulfsohn, 2020). These examples show society's propensity to invoke an idealized image of how the oppressed should behave in response to oppression (Walker 2020). In sum, despite news media's acknowledgement of peaceful protests, most of the photographs or content of BLM highlight anarchy and thus any message that protestors wish to display are often overshadowed by the negative activity by a small subset of protesters. This negative content further supports the frame that all BLM protesters are anti-law enforcement or rebels rather than a group aiming for police reform. The focus of bad protesters who do not "follow the rules of social respectability" as framed by the media and politicians helps delegitimize the larger group of Black Lives Matter protesters that are peaceful or working hard for change (Banks 2018).

This form of framing by media elites can, as suggested by Banks and Kilgo, also impact how public opinion is influenced. In their research, Pearce Edwards and Daniel Arnon look to answer whether framing events as threatening harm increases public perceptions that actions are violent and whether threatening frames increases support for repressive response (Edwards and Arnon 2019). To answer this question Edward and Arnon examine protests in Israel and the United States. They reason those political elites and journalists in both countries frame events in a way that highlights tactics and group identities. Edwards and Arnon found that framing protests as carried out by an out-group do not increase perceptions of violence but does increase support for repression (Edwards and Arnon 2019). Furthermore, "the causal effect of framing protesters as from an out-group has a larger effect that the threat of physical harm or support for repression. Yet it is not necessary for out-groups to be perceived as more violent in order for support for repression to increase" (Edwards and Arnon 2019). In other words, regardless of whether the protests are peaceful or violent, when protests are carried out by an out group, the support for suppressing protesters will increase. Additionally, protests from an out group creates more support for repression than violence itself. This theory will be tested in the examples of the

comparisons of the Capitol Hill, Anti-Lockdown, and the Black Lives Matter protests later in this paper.

Credibility of News Outlets and Media Elites/ Motivated Reasoning

The findings in the preceding articles show that framing by the news media impacts public opinion, but it is also important to point out that the media does not outwardly tell people what to think, but the frames they convey decide how an issue is talked about. These conversations framed by news media are significant as media elites hold a great level of credibility and people often look to news sources to obtain reliable information. As shown by researcher Chloe Banks, news media is traditionally viewed as impartial and an essential source for factual and truthful information in society, therefore, the knowledge they circulate is given a substantial degree of authority (Banks 2018).

In an earlier study, James Druckman, argues that though there is a widespread belief that elites enjoy using frames to manipulate citizen opinions, he rejects this position and proposes that framing effects may occur because citizens seem to turn to credible elites to help them sort through many possible frames (Druckman 2001). Here, framing by elites may not be pure manipulation but people are seeking guidance from sources they trust, or people they believe are credible. In fact, Druckman expresses that when people follow frames by sources that they believe are credible, they are more selective about which frames they believe (Druckman 2001). The results imply that perceived source credibility is a prerequisite for successful framing and common to some portrayals, elites face a clear constraint to successful framing (Druckman 2001). Also, it is likely that citizens are more susceptible to framing when they are less knowledgeable about the consequences of an issue (Chong and Druckman 2007).

With time Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman show that credibility and guidance are not the only factors that motivate framing. The researchers find that media elites can also use frames to appeal to the partisan and ideological leanings of an audience (Chong and Druckman 2007). In this way, people look to media elites not because they are credible, but because elite stances help them justify their own positions or strong attitudes about a given issue. Likewise,

Chong and Druckman observe that resistance to framing is problematic when individuals cannot recognize and accept good arguments for changing their preferences (Chong and Druckman 2007). More accurately, if citizens are continuously presented with one-side of an argument, it is not likely that their position on issue will change as they are in an echo chamber where their beliefs are reinforced. Chong and Druckman write that "Individuals who hold strong attitudes are least susceptible to new information, most likely to counter argue against contrary information, and most likely to recognize information consistent with their prior beliefs" (Chong and Druckman 2007). If debate cannot introduce new perspectives, but only serve as a reminder of their existing values, then persuasion and exchanging information by heterogeneous conversation is impossible. These studies by Chong, Druckman, and Banks become beneficial to my research for, if negative news frames are used to sustain political opinions concerning out groups, then it is not likely that in groups will change their minds on a given issue when they have elite positions to justify their opinions. In this way, those who are indifferent to political protests can be susceptible to false information not only by media elites but by people they trust who use elite stances to justify their positions.

Frames as a Political Strategy

As mentioned in the earlier paragraphs, politicians and media elites can operationalize their credibility through likability or shared ideology to serve their own interests. Here, credibility is used to push frames that maintain the status quo. Edwards and Arnon note that, "Politicians and elected leaders of democratic states attempt to reduce support for opposition movements by describing them as threatening, armed mobs composed outside of agitators" (Edwards and Arnon 2019). This form of framing could be seen again during the summer 2020 BLM protests. Researchers Christopher Marshburn, Abigail M. Folberg, Chelsea Crittle, and Keith B. Maddox, argue that due to the stay-at-home order during the COVID-19 era, individuals were confined to their homes watching more TV, using more social media, and reading more newspapers (Marshburn et al. 2020; Koeze & Popper 2020). Thus, there was more time to pay attention to activities that typically divided the public's attention (Marshburn et al. 2021).

Researchers also proposed that such changes brought awareness to how social structures affect individuals and particularly people of color especially after the George Floyd killing on May 25th, 2020. Still not all Americans believed in this cause, and protests were undermined not only by media elites but by the president himself. For example, During the Floyd protests Trumps tweeted that "thugs" were dishonoring Floyd's memory and framed BLM as an anti-White hate organization (Karni et al., 2020). The criticisms for the protests centered around the property damage frame by the media and Trump's "law and order" stance against protesters showed the images of Black protesters as violent. Marshburn, Folberg, Crittle, and Maddox also reveal that these criticisms were absent from discussions of (predominately White) anti-lockdown rallies, one of which resulted in a plan to kidnap the governor of Michigan that Trump vaguely supported (Marshburn et al. 2021; Vasquez and Carvajal, 2020). Again, these same frames by President Trump and other media elites will have implications for the way those who are indifferent to social movements at a national level perceive protesters.

Researchers Kilgo and Harlow present an alternate approach which notes that media elites do not always discredit protestors to support a political agenda, but they can frame protests for the following reasons "(1) the press does not cover movements that do not engage with newsworthy activity; (2) advocates stage events to attract media attention, which they need to distribute to get their message to distribute their message to a broader audience and to signal their strength; and (3) journalists then cover these staged events without generating substantive information about the event's background or the grievances or agendas of the movement behind the protest" (Kilgo and Harlow 2019). Here, though negative frames of political protests like Black Lives Matter are not used for political strategy, their message is once again undermined for the sake of revenue. The two studies by Kilgo, Harlow, and Marshburn become beneficial to my research as each study shows underlying motivations for the framing of Anti-Lockdown and Black Lives Matter movements. Likewise, each study reveals the consequences of negative frames to those who are indifferent to social movements.

Implications of Frames on Protesters

Moreover, whether protests are spun negatively for revenue or propaganda, such frames can have significant implications for future protesters. When negative frames in the news media persist, the media ignores the underlying injustice that led to the protests in the first place. This suggests that "critiques of racial injustice will upset that status quo, and coverage will delegitimize them, if they are covered at all" (Kilo and Harlow 2019). This is becoming especially worse given the fact that protesters need the media to spread their message. Such negative frames of the Black Lives Matter protesters as rioters and anti-law enforcement have led to counter groups like All Lives Matter or Blue Lives Matter which also seek to delegitimize problems the BLM group want to find solutions for (Banks 2018). Not to mention in later years, the negative frame of BLM as anarchists will lead to the false equivalence between Stop the Steal and Anti-Lockdown protestors. Though the message of the Black Lives Matter Movement is to convey inclusiveness and address inequality (Banks 2018) due to negative frames by media elites and politicians, this message is delegitimized and likened to the behavior of Capitol Hill Rioters and Anti-Lockdown groups who protest election results or mask mandates. This research will work to address not only how social movements are framed by news media and politicians, but also why Black Lives Matter, Anti-Lockdown, and Stop the Steal Movements can be likened to one another though there is a clear distinction between the message and methods to each respective protest.

Based on the three themes not guided by journalists in the introduction and the reviewed literature, I hypothesize that violent acts will be treated the same regarding each respective protest. Likewise, I hypothesize that the language to describe violent acts of protest will be covered the same for each protest despite the message of the movement.

Methodology and Data Analysis

For the first part of the project, to test the research question and the themes presented in above, I used Nexis Uni to find articles by searching for words related to protests, COVID restrictions, Black Lives Matter, and Stop the Steal. The research is based on articles from the

New York Times and USA Today. By the end of the downloading process, there were over 11,000 articles with 1,000-1,200 articles appearing per month between April 2020 and January 2021. The articles collected were auto coded for theme and sentiment using NVIVO. The articles appear from April 15, 2020, to January 20, 2021, marking the first Anti-Lockdown protests and cover all protests until President Biden's Inauguration. Originally, I intended to see newspaper articles from major United States newspapers such as the Washington Post, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, and Chicago Tribune. However, most of these news organizations were not available on Nexis Uni. For this reason, the research is based on articles from the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and USA Today.

It is necessary to use content analysis to conduct my research as the articles will help guide coding for the overall tone (positive or negative) within protests and highlight common biases in each newspaper as well. Initially, there was trouble bulk downloading the articles on Nexis Uni, as the articles could only be downloaded one hundred at a time. To shorten this process, I used NVivo's automated coding software which automatically codes the content of the articles. For this study, the automated feature was used to observe thematic and sentiment analysis for each respective protest (this would highlight the tone of coverage for each protest). After manually deleting articles, then later auto coding, there was a total of 1,116 articles to sort through for relevant information on Black Lives Matter, Stop the Steal, and the Anti-Lockdown protest. I also decided to remove the Los Angeles Times from the research as the sample of articles were too small.

As I progressed in my research, the automated sentiment analysis appeared to be unhelpful in investigating the tone of coverage (positive or negative) of each protest. Thus, for

the second portion of the project, using NVivo, I manually coded articles around the height of each protest to better understand its immediate coverage.

A codebook was also created to analyze the frames made by elite newspaper outlets concerning the Anti-Lockdown, Black Lives Matter and Stop the Steal protests for the 2020-2021 year. Coding variables include movements (Anti-Lockdown, Black Lives Matter, and Stop the Steal) the type of event (rally, march, demonstration, protest), crimes by protesters and counter protesters (riot, looting vandalism, assault, breaking and entering, weapons, hurling objects, criminal background, and other type of crimes.), and mention of police. Variables also include protester political affiliation, the news source, and notable mentions/key figures during the protests (Donald Trump and George Floyd). Using dictionary methods, articles were coded according to which movement they discussed. There are variables for quotes (positive and negative) from protesters, counter protesters, and the respective news source.

Data Analysis Part I - Automatic Analysis

Of the coded articles, approximately 13% (144) were covered by the news organization USA Today while the remaining 87% (972) articles were covered by The New York Times. Black Lives Matter received the most news coverage from both The New York Times (64%) and USA Today (9%). Anti-Lockdown protests follow behind with The New York Times covering approximately 19% of the protest and USA Today reporting 3%. Finally, the Stop the Steal movement appeared the least in both news sources with 10% coverage in New York Times and 1% by USA Today.
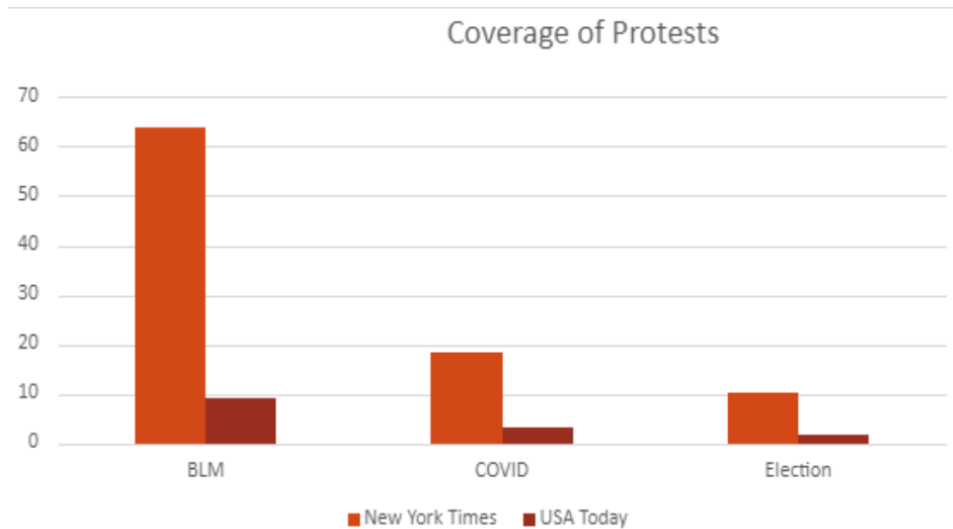
Chart 1. Coverage of Protest by News Source (Percentage of Total Articles)

In the first portion of my project, the coverage of the Anti-Lockdown and Stop the Steal movements are consistent from their first point of reference for both news sources, however, the Summer 2020 Black Lives Matter protests are mentioned the most in June and July despite protests beginning in May and receive less coverage in the later months. Unlike Black Lives Matter, there is a spike in coverage for the Stop the Steal and Anti-Lockdown movements during the first month of their coverage.
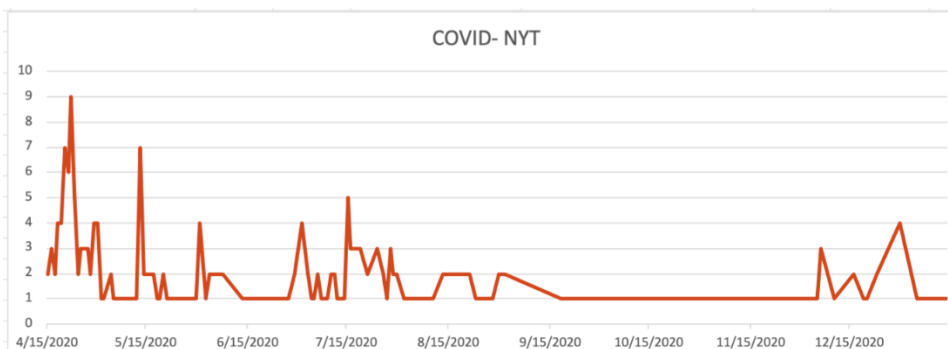

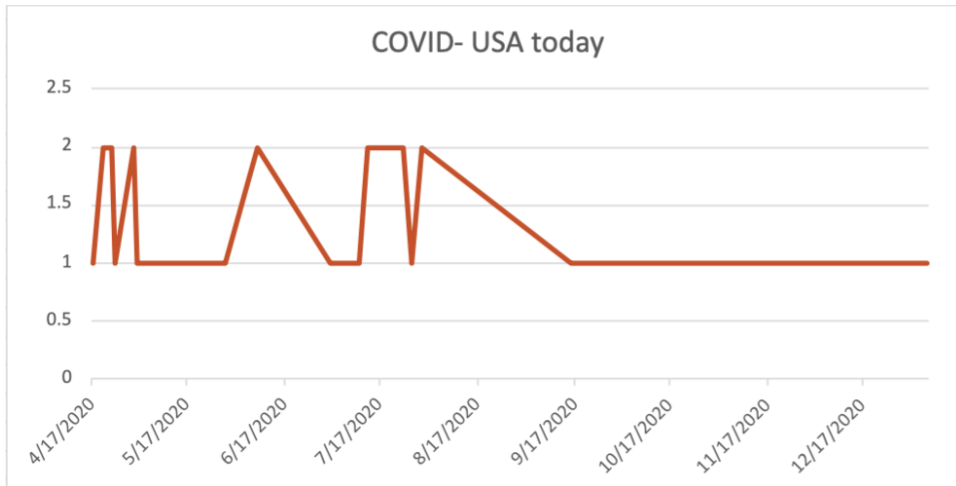**Chart 2. Coverage of Protest – Anti-Lockdown (New York Times)**

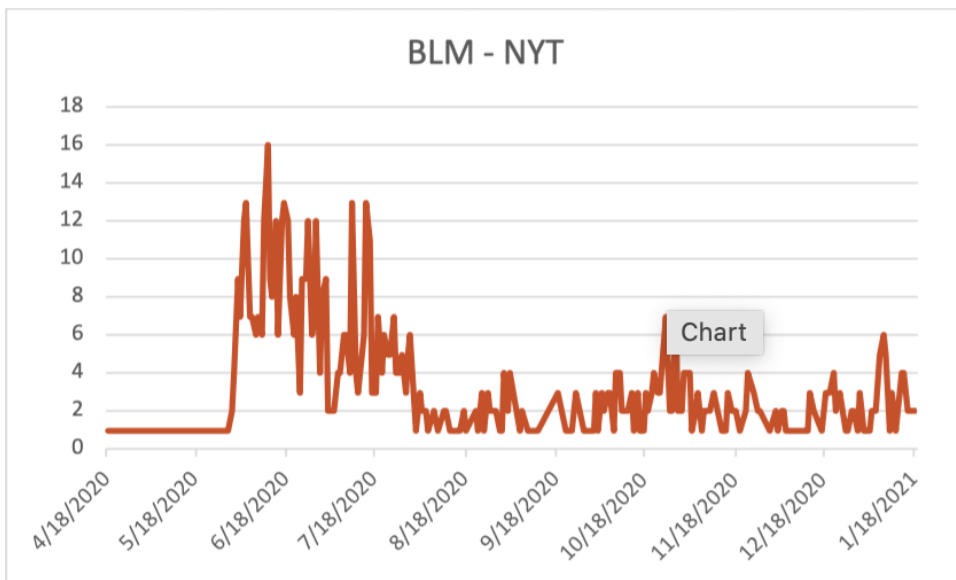**Chart 3. Coverage of Protest - Anti-Lockdown (USA Today)**

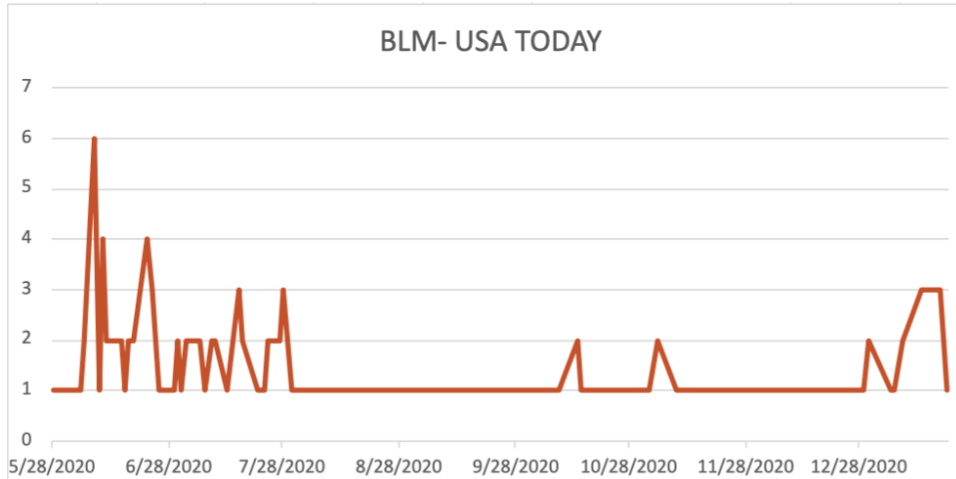**Chart 4. Coverage of Protest – Black Lives Matter (New York Times)**

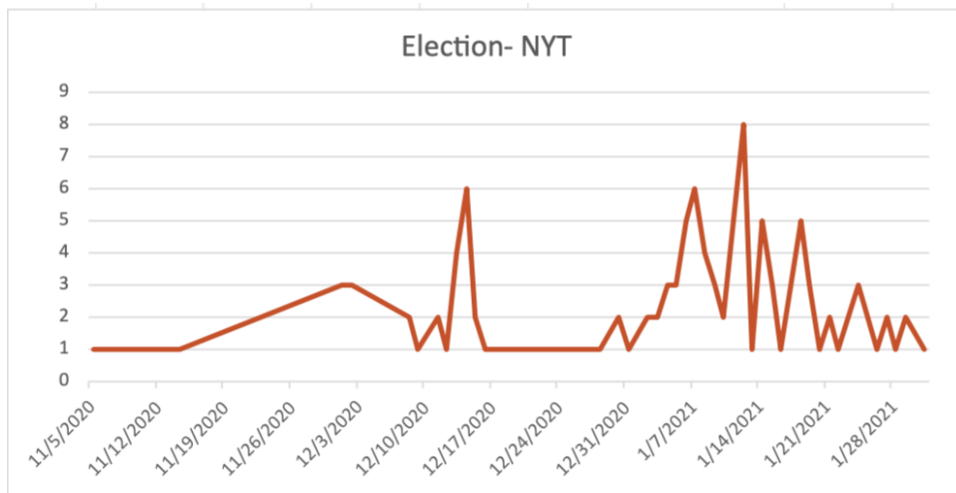**Chart 5. Coverage of Protest – Black Lives Matter (USA Today)**

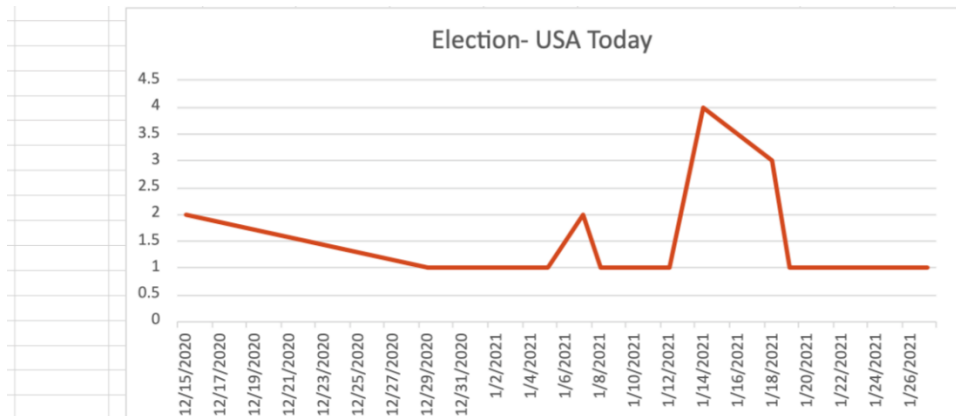**Chart 6. Coverage of Protest – Capitol Hill Protest (New York Times)**

Chart 7. Coverage of Protest – Capitol Hill Protest (USA Today)

Coverage of all protests tended to use violence framing, but the type of violence differed. For example, BLM was more likely to be characterized as crime, while Stop the Steal were covered as riots with a focus on weapons and arms.
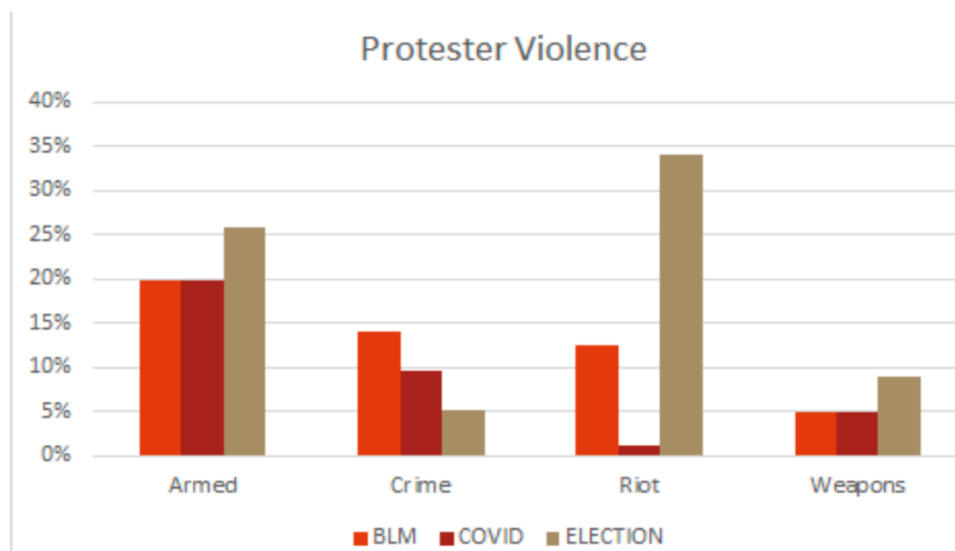
Chart 8. Automated Sentiment Analysis – Comparisons of protester violence by each movement.

It is interesting to note that like Black Lives Matter, the Anti-Lockdown protests were also documented throughout the year, still, Anti-Lockdown protests did not receive as much coverage as BLM. Of note, while BLM and Anti-Lockdown protests have the same coverage for weapons (5%) and arms (20%), BLM was coded higher for crime (14% to 10%). BLM was also described using a violent tone in in 43% of articles compared to Anti-Lockdown protests at 17%. As time went by, coverage of BLM protests became more ambiguous. For example, in the initial stages of the BLM protests, the news sources simply note that protests were peaceful before

detailing the smaller subset of negative actions by protesters. This includes reports of crime, rioting, anarchy, and violence, and other destructive activities though the protests were largely peaceful. The unique nature of the events on January 6th clearly overtakes earlier framing of the Stop the Steal movement, focusing on the unprecedented events on Capitol Hill.
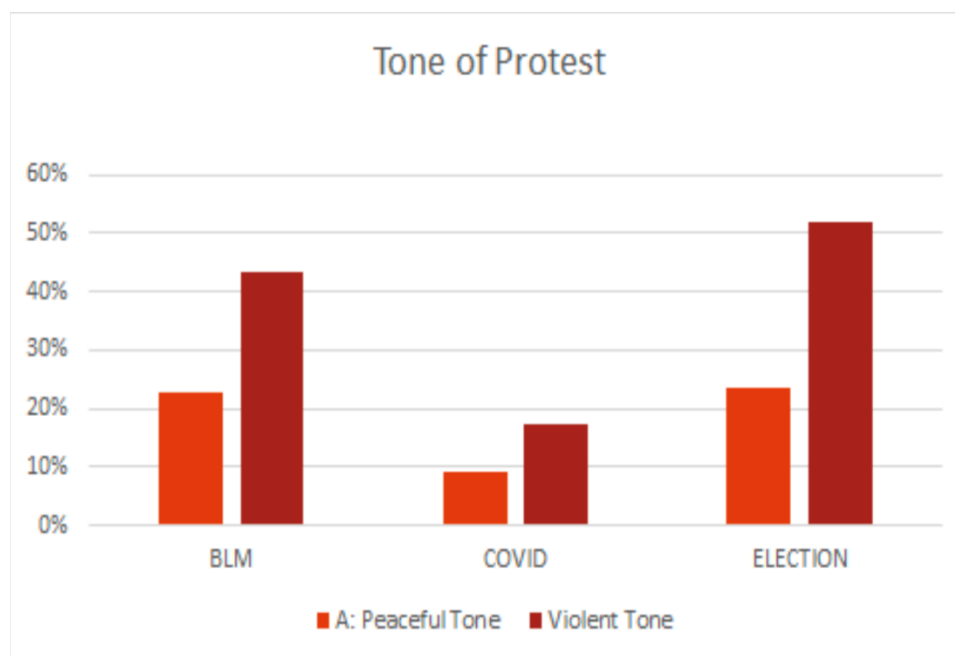
Chart 9. Automated Sentiment Analysis – Codes for peaceful and violent tones by movement.

Data Analysis Part II- A Deeper Look

As noted above, there were a few issues in the automated sentiment analysis process therefore, I went back and manually coded approximately 439 articles at the height of each protest movement (see Charts 2, 4, and 6). As most of these articles were covered by the New York Times, I will be looking at codes for crimes, mention of peace and violence, and interactions with police and other forms of law enforcement from that news source. At the height of the Anti-lockdown protest the dates range from the first day of the protests, April 15, 2020, until May 15th, 2020. For the BLM protests, coverage reached its peak on May 28, 2020, until

June 28, 2020. Finally, the most coverage for the Stop the Steal protest occurred a month before

the protests occurred from December 15, 2020, to January 15, 2021.

After manually coding then later narrowing down articles from the New York Times,

there was a total of 293 articles to sort through. Of these articles, 193 discussed Black Lives

Matter, 48 for Anti-Lockdown protests, and the remaining 52 referenced the Capitol Hill

protests. Of the newly coded articles, 12% (24 articles) of the BLM protests had a violent tone of

coverage while the Anti-lockdown protests had 4% violent coverage (2 articles), and the Capitol

Hill protests had 40% (21 articles) coverage of violence. For codes with mention of peace before

referring to violence, BLM protests had 7% (14 articles) of coverage and the Anti-lockdown

protests had 8% (4 articles). Regarding mentions of peace or positive tone of protest, BLM had

3% (5 articles) and the Capitol Hill protests had 2% (1 article). For codes with positive or

mentions of peace before referring to violence, Anti-Lockdown Protests received zero percent

coverage. Still, even with the events that transpired at the Capitol Hill protests, there is a similar

rate of coverage for mentions of peace before violence and positive framing. This is significant

as again a small subset of BLM protesters committed active crimes while a large subset of

Capitol Hill protesters engaged in transgressions.

	BLM	Covid	Election
Mention of Peace before Violence	7%	0%	8%
Peaceful or Positive	3%	0%	2%
Violent or Negative	12%	4%	40%

Chart 10. Manual Code – Codes for peaceful and violent tones by movement.

When gauging the overall tone of protester violence, I observed codes for arms, assault,

breaking and entering, and other type of crime (arson, hurling objects, vandalism, looting

altercations). Like my findings in the automated sentiment analysis, coverage of all protest

framing included violence, but the kind of violence differed. For example, the Anti-lockdown protests and the Capitol Hill protests were more likely to be covered for arms with each protest covered 13%. Of the three protests the Capitol Hill protests were more likely to engage in assault, breaking and entering, rioting, and other kinds of crime in comparison to Black Lives Matter and the Anti-Lockdown protests. Though Anti-lockdown protesters staged an attempted kidnapping of Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan, brought military style firearms to protests, and occupied local state capitols, in comparison BLM is more likely to be covered for breaking and entering, rioting, and other types of crime.

	BLM	Covid	Election
Arms	1%	13%	13%
Assault	0%	0%	8%
Breaking and Entering	4%	0%	19%
Other types of crime	9%	0%	23%
Riot	3%	0%	12%

Chart 11. Manual Code – Comparisons of protester violence by each movement.

Though at first it appeared that automated sentiment analysis would be unhelpful with examining the tone of protest for each movement, the findings in the second portion of my project are consistent with that in Part 1 for the data analysis of this paper. Again, this means that the violence tone for BLM is greater than that of the Anti-lockdown protests and the distinct events of the January 6th protest overtake the earlier framing of the Capitol Hill protest.

Discussion

The original research question posits *how does the framing by news media cover protests and is there a correlation between public opinion and coverage overtime?* I hypothesized that violent acts will be treated the same regarding each respective protest. I find that the news media

does in fact treat violent acts for each respective protest the same despite a movement's intentions or message.

Contrary to my expectations, the automated sentiment analysis did prove useful with examining the tone of protest for each movement. I did not believe that the auto coding feature was effective after the first part of my data analysis, however, it was accurate overall. When originally observing the sentiment analysis from NVivo, the software was able to catch negative or positive tones from the events of the protests, however, there was a smaller group of articles that reported peaceful or violent tones for general topics reported in articles such as recaps from movies or plays that reference racial injustice, or references to jokes and sarcasm from late night comedians regarding Coronavirus measures. Similarly, the automatic coding did not work for stories that presented contrasting frames, quotes from people that might be talking about hypotheticals, nor could it distinguish between people saying the police were violent or the protesters were. For example, if someone were quoted saying the police were violent and showed up with guns, it would be coded as a violent protest with guns, even though the quote was not talking about protestors.

As sentiment analysis cannot distinguish between an article being negative towards the events leading to the protest and speaking about the protest negatively, it appeared that the computer did not recognize enough pertinent content regarding the actual tone of each respective results and thus skewed the results. For this reason, to ensure that the content analysis of this project was reliable, I went back to manually code for tone at the peak coverage for the movements Black Lives Matter, Anti-Lockdown, and Stop the Steal. However, the results in the second part of my paper are consistent with that of the auto coding sentiment and previous literature discussed earlier in the paper

For example, results for the use of violence frames are consistent as in part one and part two of my data analysis, omitting the coding variable "arms." Black Lives Matter was coded for higher crime, with respect to breaking and entering, rioting, other types of crime (arson, looting, vandalism) and is more likely to be described in a violent tone than Anti-Lockdown protests and described as using a more violent tone compared to the Anti-Lockdown protests (Reference Charts 8-11).

These findings are consistent with some of the literature cited earlier in this paper. While I did not code articles that were overtly partisan with intentions to push propaganda by the news source, I did see the correlation that through pushing negative frames for protests like Black Lives Matter, it appears the movement's message is undermined for the sake of revenue – that is, the media pushes stories that are buzzworthy. There were articles by the New York Times and USA Today that mention the peaceful protests, but a far greater majority of these articles went into detail regarding the violence that ensued by a subset of protesters or simply mentioned that a protest was peaceful before it became violent.

Again, one of the interesting things that features hand coding revealed was the use of articles that take pains to say protests were peaceful first, then detail the subset of violence – more specifically, with violence at Black Lives Matter protests. Here are a few examples:

<u>Examples of articles that mention peaceful assemblies before describing violence:</u>

Article 17: "The protests were mostly peaceful, but reports of looting later in the night prompted"

Article 18: "Now, as protests — some destructive, others peaceful — shake up hundreds of American cities, videos continue to define the moment."

Article 247: "Scenes of peaceful protest and violence played out against the dystopian backdrop of a pandemic that has kept much of the nation at home for months. Curfews were imposed in some of America's largest cities and the National Guard was deployed."

Article 262: "For the sixth day in a row, protesters poured into the streets, sometimes peacefully and sometimes not."

Article 383: "The entire summer we had the BLM protests protesting the, at least, perceived tyranny of the police force. Yesterday we saw the pro-Trump crowd protesting the, at least, perceived, tyranny of the government. They both were majorly peaceful, they both had bad actors, they both caused damage to federal buildings, they both caused death, so what exactly spurred these on? A government that is abusing its democracy."

Article 42: "The uprising over Floyd's death has drawn a multiracial coalition into the streets. Protesters -- wearing masks because of the coronavirus -- have chanted his name as well as those of other black people killed by police officers. Although these demonstrations have been largely peaceful, there has been some rioting and looting, as well as clashes with the police, who have fired tear gas and projectiles into crowds."

Article 43: "The vast majority of the recent protests against systemic racism and police brutality have been peaceful, and they have also become increasingly popular, with public opinion of the Black Lives Matter movement shifting extraordinarily quickly. Polls show that a majority of Americans now believe, for instance, that the police are more likely to use deadly force against black people. Yet there remains an intense focus on a small subset of behavior. When a recent Monmouth poll, for instance, asked whether respondents supported the protests, it included one specific incident in the question: 'the burning of a police precinct in Minneapolis.' While 57

percent said the protesters' anger was 'fully justified,' just 17 percent said their actions, when described that way, were."

Article 56: "The protest on Saturday in Fairfax stayed peaceful for hours before descending into chaos after confrontations with the police …"

Article 62: "The protests started out largely peacefully in the Bronx on Monday, but hours later there were reports of arrests, fires, and looting."

Article 66: "Though planned protests have largely been peaceful, the national unrest has also come with escalating tensions, including attacks on law enforcement, injuries and deaths of protesters and others on the streets, and widespread looting and destruction. Police officers in several cities have been fired or disciplined for using excessive force."

Article 79: "Thousands of protesters demonstrated peacefully near the White House during the day, but by nightfall, with hundreds still in the streets, the scene turned more volatile as crowds surged forward against lines of riot police with plastic shields as the two sides vied for control of Lafayette Square across from the White House. Protesters threw water bottles, set off fireworks and burned a pile of wood and at least one car."

It is also interesting how there are not any attempts to stress that the Anti-Lockdown protests are peaceful though BLM and Stop the Steal received coverage for peace, or at least peace before violence ensued. In my own review of the articles, this is attributed to the fact that many of the articles related to the Anti-Lockdown protests frequently depict outrage or the use of arms. Namely, other than mention of arms, there were articles that depicted fears – what lockdown meant for job stability, mental health, and the economy – or partisan outrage – conspiracies behind why the governors across America would impose restrictions and conspiracies that imply the virus is a hoax and is not as severe as it was made out to be. Of the 48

articles concerning Anti-Lockdown protests at the height of the movement, only one (Article 272) mentions the word "peaceful."

Article 272: "In a webcast with Students for Trump on Friday, a conservative activist and Trump ally, Charlie Kirk, echoed the message, encouraging a "peaceful rebellion against governors" in states like Michigan, according to ABC News."

Though here, the article mentions the word "peaceful," it does not signal that the Anti-Lockdown protests itself was peaceful, therefore, the article is not identified as a "peaceful or positive" tone of protest.

With these quotes in mind and with the data results introduced in this paper, it is important to clarify biases in framing as public perceptions regarding the protests can have effects on election outcomes and public policy. In the same manner, the opinions based on the information in newspaper articles can affect attitudes towards a given movement in the years that follow.

Implications

The literature suggests that the usage of the frames could impact public opinion and government responses to protests. Looking at Black Lives Matter as an example, it is seen how negative frames can change the entire meaning of a movement. For example, until the 2020 George Floyd protests, many who were indifferent to protests interpreted the message of the movement as Black Lives matter *more,* as opposed to understanding that Black Lives Matter *too.* In their article *Benevolent Racism and the Co-Optation of the Black Lives Matter Movement*, researchers, Luigi Esposito, and Victor Romano highlight that framing has long reinforced racial fears or resentment without using direct racist language, and those who perpetuate this discourse

are a combination of journalists, law enforcement, and politicians (Esposito and Luigi, 2016).

For example, one common criticism directed at the Black Lives Matter protests is that the

movement goes too far in condemning police and has made it harder for police to fight crime.

These critics argue the "rhetoric against the police is irresponsible and incites violence against

law enforcement" (Esposito and Luigi 2016). This frame compromises the work that advocates

have done for accountability. The rhetoric of the Black Lives Matter movement is *not* to say that

all officers are bad, nor is the message that people should disrespect law enforcement. Rather,

advocates want to show that the police serve a corrupt system that needs to be reformed. The true

rhetoric of the movement is to "embrace diversity and intersectionality in its quest to challenge

the ideologies and social structures that have consistently ignored, devalued, and discounted the

lives of Black people" (Esposito and Luigi, 2016).

It is important to make the distinction between the frames of the Black Lives Matter

protests versus the Capitol Hill and Anti-Lockdown protests. Stop the Steal advocates and those

on the right often use the frame of "inciting violence against the police" to discredit the Black

Lives Matter movement. Now, after the violent actions towards law enforcement on Capitol Hill,

Stop the Steal advocates and Conservative media elites have taken back the "inciting violence

against law enforcement" frame, and claim the actions on Capitol Hill are no different than the

actions from last Summer's Black Lives Matter movement. Again, this frame undermines the

efforts of the Black Lives Matter movement and shows that the false equivalences between the

two movements, "reveals an unwillingness to listen, understand, and seriously consider the

legitimate concerns that motivate many people who speak and act under the Black Lives Matter

slogan" (Smith, 2020). Not to mention last Summer, Anti-Lockdown proponents also criticized

the hypocrisy of the Black Lives Matter movement for meeting in large groups to protest, when

earlier in the year, BLM criticized Anti-Lockdown protesters for doing the same. Anti-Lockdown proponents have also alleged that the media coverage of their protests received more criticism than that of Black Lives Matter. Moreover, negative frames in conjunction with condemnations by counter- protesters have set impossible standards for those who attempt to call attention to racial injustice, and as a result, those who are indifferent begin condemning protesters' actions and misinterpret their motivations.

Conclusion

If I had any setbacks in my work, it stems from problems with originally navigating the NVivo Software and the Nexis Uni database used for the project. For instance, once the articles were downloaded, time was taken to create a dataset with all the articles downloaded on Microsoft Excel. The dataset was created to make the process of coding less tedious (auto coding) to code the articles after duplicates were removed. Unfortunately, the dataset was not compatible with the NVivo software and thus, I began the process of coding each article manually once more before eventually learning how to do automated sentiment analysis later in the Fall.

Likewise, after initially examining the news articles, I had to revise my research question from *how does the framing in news media affect the opinions of those who do not closely follow social movements?* to *how does the framing by news media cover protests and is there a correlation to public opinion overtime?* as I did not get to use Crowd Tangle, (a Facebook-owned tool that monitors interactions of public content from Facebook groups which my mentor had access) to better understand how these frames were reflected in the public, alongside the articles downloaded.

Despite these facts and though at first the automated sentiment analysis appeared to be unhelpful in investigating the tone of coverage (positive or negative) of each protest, it did validate my own finding in the second portion of the project when I manually coded articles

around the height of each protest to better understand its immediate coverage. While the auto

coding did not always work on the individual level, and looking at individual articles caused

concern, in the aggregate it worked out well.

Future research should examine the partisan rhetoric of media elites that take advantage

of all press coverage to spread propaganda regarding protest movements. It will be important to

monitor trends of language to describe different protest movements, which news media outlets

persist in negative (or positive) frames to their advantage, and how this would shift public

opinion. Additionally, future research should make a case of how negative frames of political

protests contribute to public opinion, or what is a permissible form of protest if similar language

is used for passive resistance and outward violence in news media.

Appendix

Codebook

Research Question: *how does the framing by news media cover protests and is there a correlation between public opinion and coverage overtime?*

Hypothesis: Violent acts will be treated the same regarding each respective protest.

This codebook is intended for the analysis of frames made by elite newspaper outlets during the 2020-2021 year consumed by political protests. The aim is to compare media framing on the Summer 2020 Black Lives Matter Protests, Stop the Steal Movement, and Anti-Lockdown Movement. The unit of analysis is three political movements. For each movement, the coder sets out to measure the dominant frame/ overall tone of the newspaper article (positive or negative).

Coding items were inspired by previous work done by Dr. Rachel Navarre who examined the analysis of tweets made by presidential candidates in the 2016 election and Professor Pamela Oliver's Codebook for Content Analysis of Stories about Protest Events.

1.) Was the event/protest movement mentioned in the headline? [yes/no]

2.) Was there a graphic? [yes/no]

3.) Is there any description of the event in the article? [yes/no]

4.) Is the location of the event mentioned in the article? [yes/no]

5.) Is there any mention of/ preparation for a rally, meeting, or gatherings that took place in the days or weeks before the protest occurs? [yes/no]

6.) Is there any mention of any follow up activities after the protest (rioting, looting, vandalism)? [yes/no]

7.) Level of *detail* mentioned in the article about what people said at the event. [0 = Nothing at all
1 = A slogan or a phrase
2 = A few sentences (No more than 5)
3 = 2 or 3 paragraphs (or 6 to 15 sentences)
4 = More than 15 sentences

8.) After reading the article, what do you understand the purpose of the event to be?

9.) Does the article mention the appearance of counter demonstrators at the protest? [yes/no]

10.) Is there mention of police presence? [yes/no]

11.) Does the article mention the use of tear gas, riot gear, or rubber bullets used by police in effort to dispel the crowd? [yes/no]

12.) Does the story article any physical violence either to or by parties at the protest (i.e., police, bystanders, counter-protestors, event advocates)? [yes/no]

13.) Are the activities of the protesters mentioned (e.g., marching, chanting, praying, fighting, yelling, singing, or clapping) [yes/no]

14.) Does the article justify the existence of the movement? [yes/no]

15.) Did the article aim to justify the response of a protester (e.g., …)?

Protest Variables

Peaceful protests
Mentions of peaceful protests/nonviolence

Movements
- Black Lives Matter
- Stop the Steal (Capitol Hill Riot)
- Anti-Lockdown

Type of Event
- Rally
- March
- Demonstration
- Protest

Crimes (by Protestors/counter protestors)
- Riot
- Other types of crime - Looting, Fight, Vandalism - include mentions of property damage here, hurling objects, criminal background
- Assault - people attacking each other directly either verbally or physically
- Breaking and entering
- Arms

Mention of Police
Police response
Police presence
Non-lethal crowd control
Lethal crowd control
Background/history of previous like events
Police positive interactions general
Police negative interactions general

Protester Type
- Conservative
- Liberal
- Anti-fa
- Moderate
- Libertarian

Notable Mention
- Donald Trump
- George Floyd
- Police

News Source
- New York Times
- USA Today

Definitions:

Black Lives Matter (BLM) - A movement created in 2013 as a response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman. The goal of the BLM movement is to embrace diversity and intersectionality in its quest to challenge the ideologies and social structures that have been consistently ignored, devalued, and discounted the lives of Black people (Esposito and Luigi, 2016). This movement is not anti-police but emphasizes that police serve a corrupt system that needs to be reformed.

Stop the Steal (Capitol Hill Protest) - A movement created as a response to the results of the 2020 election results. Far right groups from around the country made their way to Capitol Hill to convince lawmakers to overturn the 2020 election results. Once at the Capitol, a pro-Trump mob confronted police, broke into the U.S. Capitol, and sent members of Congress into lockdown as the events ensued.

Anti-Mask Movement- A movement created as a response to the government recommending (then later mandating) people wear masks in public spaces to protect themselves from the Coronavirus. The main point of contention stems from the mask mandating violating personal freedoms above other reasons (masks are uncomfortable, annoying, expensive, are not convinced they work) (Stewart, 2020).

Framing - When describing a certain issue or an event "a speaker's emphasis on a subset of potentially relevant considerations causes individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions" (Druckman, 2001).

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