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GEORGE FLOYD PROTESTS AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

News media and public attitudes toward the protests of 2020: An examination of the mediating role of perceived protester violence

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Abstract

Research Summary: This study investigates the role of the news media in shaping attitudes toward the protests of 2020. Using data from a nationally representative election survey, it examines the association between news consumption and support for law-and-order policies to address protest violence, with perceptions that the protesters were violent as a potential mediator. Findings indicate that viewers of online news are less likely to support law-and-order policies. This relationship is mediated by perceived protester violence, with perceived violence enhancing support for law-and-order policies. Further examination shows that political bias plays a role: viewers of left-leaning sites are less likely to support law-and-order policies to address protest violence, while viewers of right-leaning sites are more likely. These relationships are also mediated by perceived violence.

Policy Implications: A slight majority of respondents indicate that they lean toward solving problems of racism and police violence, indicating that much of the American public is open to criminal justice reform. Perceived violence helps to shape the association of online news media with support for law-and-order policies. Activists should avoid violence in their protests and use Internet-based media sources to publicize their peaceful activities and demands. Law enforcement agencies

> should use the Internet and social media to keep the public informed of the reality of protests, especially of any violence that occurs, in an effort to justify forceful tactics.
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> **KEYWORDS**
> law and order, news media, protests

A relatively small number of topics dominated the American media landscape in 2020. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 presidential election, the American press focused on instances of police killings of African American individuals such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Daniel Prude as well as the subsequent protests against police violence. News coverage of the police violence was bolstered by digital media, with cell phone footage of the killing of George Floyd in police custody helping to bring attention to this incident and sparking activism throughout the country. Additional footage of protests, riots, and looting that took place in the wake of Floyd's killing was captured by cell phone and publicized via both social media and the traditional news media (see Kindy et al., 2020; Taylor, 2021).

Despite the glut of raw footage of these protests that are available, there exists polarized attitudes on the nature of the protests. While instances of violence and looting did occur during and after protests, there is a question as to whether the protests were mostly peaceful or mostly violent. There are also questions as to the source of the violence that occurred during the protests: the activists themselves or the law enforcement officers tasked with maintaining order during the protests (see Betz, 2020; Dewan & Baker, 2020; Kelly & Samuels, 2020). Furthermore, a wide variety of solutions to protest violence and urban unrest have been proposed, from empowering the police to get tough on protesters to addressing issues of systemic racism and enhancing police accountability (see Falconer, 2020).

It is possible that the news media played a role in shaping attitudes toward the protests. Recent research has shown that the protests in the wake of the killing of George Floyd have shaped attitudes toward the police (Reny & Newman, 2021). To the people not directly involved in the protests, the news media likely served as the main source of information about the protests. This is especially true during the summer of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced Americans to forgo normal social activities, leaving them to fill their time with following current events in the news. Research has already found that the news media have the ability to shape people's perceptions of crime and crime policy (e.g., Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018; Pickett et al., 2015).

The purpose of the current study is to examine the association between news consumption and attitudes toward the protests of 2020. The study draws from research on cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1980) and media coverage of protests (Chan & Lee, 1984; McLeod & Hertog, 1999; Wasow, 2020) to identify ways that the news media may shape these attitudes. Using nationally representative data collected in 2020, the study examines two important attitudes toward the protests: the perception that the actions taken by the protesters were violent and support for enacting law-and-order policies to address rioting and protest violence. In particular, the study examines the possibility that perceived protester violence mediates the association between media consumption and support for law-and-order policies.

1 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Criminological and communications research has established theoretical perspectives on the association between consumption of traditional media and public opinion toward crime and crime policy. Much of this research is grounded in the cultivation thesis. Developed by George Gerbner and colleagues (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1980), the cultivation perspective starts with the idea that television programming (and the media at large) construct a "scary world" when it comes to crime. In order to garner attention from their target audience, media outlets tend to report the most sensational and extraordinary types of crimes. These are typically violent crimes that were committed by a suspect who has yet to be apprehended. Often times, the media do not go in depth into the causes of crimes, making them seem like they could happen to anyone (see Surette, 2015). This tendency to frame crime as particularly violent, rampant, and random logically leads media consumers to fear crime (see also Eschholz et al., 2003; Roche et al., 2016; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004).

Further research has sought to identify patterns in news reporting of crime as well as the reason for these patterns, with a number of models emerging. The market model, for instance, claims that the events depicted in the news are chosen by journalists and editors with the aim of attracting the largest number of consumers (see Beale, 2006; Hamilton, 2000). Thus, the reality of crime reporting in the news reflects a perceived demand of media consumers. Further models elaborate on how this is achieved. For instance, the novelty model finds that events that are less common get more media attention because of their relative rarity. Also called the law of opposites or rarity perspective, research on this model has found that the media tend to report crimes in ways that are the opposite of the reality of crime according to official statistics (see Baranauskas, 2020; Pollak & Kubrin, 2007; Reiner et al., 2003). The most obvious pattern is that the media place a disproportionate focus on violent crimes over property crimes (Frost & Phillips, 2011; Graber, 1980). Alternately, the cultural typification model starts with the idea that stories that fit in with preconceived notions about the phenomenon being reported are more appealing to an audience (see Galtung & Ruge, 1981). Stories that reflect cultural stereotypes—including racial stereotypes of the criminality of people of color—enhance the newsworthiness of a story (see Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Lundman, 2003).

The patterns in the way that the media depict crime have implications for the types of policies that media consumers may support. The media construction of crime as violent and rampant logically leads to increasing support of particularly punitive solutions to address this threat (see Surette, 2015). The law enforcement community has played a role in pushing this narrative as well. Traditionally, police officials have served as journalists' "go to" source of information on crime (Beckett, 1997; Chermak, 1995; Frost & Phillips, 2011). This has given these officials a unique ability to push solutions to crime that benefit the police and the criminal justice system, such as increases in police officers, more enforcement of laws, and harsher punishments for offenders. Logically, media consumers exposed to these narratives would be more likely to support such measures.

Research on media coverage of protests has revealed patterns in the coverage of protests and crime in general. This research generally indicates two perspectives on what influences the media's coverage of protests. The first is a top-down approach that casts the media as reflecting the interests of those in power, often the ones who are being protested against (Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Lenz, 2013; Zaller, 1992). In this vein, communications scholars have identified a "protest paradigm" that describes "a master narrative of news coverage that tends to focus on protesters'

tactics, dramatic actions, and spectacle, rather than emphasizing the protesters' grievances and motives" (Harlow et al., 2017, p. 329; see also Chan & Lee, 1984; McLeod, 2007; McLeod & Hertog, 1999). The protest paradigm details predictable narratives that the media use to cover protest events, often framing the protests as violent and casting them as a spectacle while failing to cover the demands of the protesters (Chan & Lee, 1984; Gitlin, 1980; Kilgo et al., 2018). By framing protesters as violent and confrontational, media coverage serves to delegitimize the protesters and their cause (Harlow et al., 2017; McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Such a framing of protesters may also logically lead to more support for police-based solutions to deal with the protests and quell the violence.

The other perspective to media coverage of protests focuses on the ability of protesters to influence the narrative in a bottom-up approach. This perspective finds that disruptive tactics by protesters help to elevate the protesters' demands in the public consciousness (Andrews & Edwards, 2004; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Gillion, 2013; Lee, 2002; Mazumder, 2018). According to Wasow (2020), the key in determining for whom the media will create sympathy is violence. When protesters are nonviolent or the subject of state violence, the mainstream media frame them in ways that create public sympathy for the protesters. Conversely, when the protesters are violent, media sympathy tends to shift to concerns about law and order and the maintenance of the status quo.

It is also possible that the modern media landscape facilitates activists in providing mainstream attention to their demands. In particular, the advent of the Internet and social media has led to alternate narratives on crime and protests that may shape public opinion in different ways (Harlow et al., 2017, 2020; Kilgo et al., 2018). A hallmark of modern digital media is that it has allowed a greater ability for regular people to promote their narratives on a variety of subjects (Jewkes, 2015). Via social media, anybody can post anything that could potentially be seen by a global audience, allowing average citizens to be news reporters. Many traditional news agencies have had to adapt, often turning to social media users for images and videos of criminal events happening in real time.

With social media, protesters no longer need to use the traditional media as a middleman to bring attention to their cause; now they can reach potential supporters more directly (Cammaerts, 2012; Lee, 2014; Poell & Borra, 2012). This has resulted in a shift away from the protest paradigm, wherein protests are increasingly being covered in ways that serve to legitimize the protesters, especially among Internet-based and alternative media sources (Harlow et al., 2017; Kilgo et al., 2018). It may also allow activists to counter elite claims that protests contained violence initiated by the protesters and highlight violence initiated by police; this would theoretically lead to more public sympathy toward the protesters and their cause (see Wasow, 2020).

What does this mean for the media's influence on public opinion toward the protests of 2020? The top-down perspectives posit that protests will be covered in a manner that highlights violence by the protesters, logically leading to support for law-and-order policies to address urban rioting. This may be the narrative that mainstream media outlets – especially TV news stations— are more likely to put forth. According to the bottom-up perspectives, it is possible that modern media—especially Internet-based media sources—will create a narrative that is more sympathetic to the protesters. This is particularly true if the protesters are not framed as acting violently (Wasow, 2020). The current study examines the association of different types of media with the perception that the protesters were violent as well as the association of both media and perceptions of protester violence with support for measures to address rioting and urban unrest.

2 | PRIOR RESEARCH

Criminological research has revealed a number of important ways that media consumption is associated with public opinion on crime and crime policy. A wealth of research looks at fear of crime. The most consistent finding in this literature is that viewing television news is associated with higher levels of fear (Chiricos et al., 2000; Dowler, 2003; Eschholz et al., 2003; Heath, 1984; Liska & Baccaglini, 1990; Roche et al., 2016; Winkel & Vrij, 1990). The effects of other types of media is mixed; for instance, some research indicates that reading print news is associated with fear of crime (Dowler, 2003), while other studies find no such link (Chiricos et al., 1997; Dowler, 2003). Research has also examined nonemotional reactions to crime. Consumption of TV news and crime dramas is associated with the perception that crime is rising (Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018; Pfeiffer, Windzio, & Kleimann, 2005). TV news has also been connected to higher ratings of seriousness of crime (Gebotys et al., 1988) and an increased belief in risk of victimization (Callanan, 2012).

Media consumption has also been linked to support for a variety of crime policies. Pickett and colleagues (2015) find that the media is the main source of public knowledge about the criminal justice system for people who do not have direct experience with the justice system. The implication is that the media as a source of information about the justice system serve to shape support for crime policy. Research has found that a variety of types of media have been linked to greater punitiveness, including television news (Grabe & Drew, 2007; Kleck & Jackson, 2017; Simmons, 2017; Sotirovic, 2001), television crime shows (Roche et al., 2016), tabloid newspapers (Demker et al., 2008), and reality-based television shows (Oliver & Armstrong, 1995). Consumption of various types of media have also been linked to support for the death penalty (Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018; Britto & Noga-Styron, 2014; Dardis et al., 2008; Holbert et al., 2004; Kort-Butler & Hartshorn, 2011). Essentially, the literature suggests that the media's tendency to frame crime as violent, rampant, and random sparked viewers to support measure to address crime, particularly measures that are punitive or based on "get tough" approaches to crime (Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018).

Research on the impact of the Internet on public opinion toward crime has shown that the Internet may shape attitudes differently than the traditional media. Research on fear of crime, for instance, has found that Internet news does not shape fear of crime, especially to the degree that more traditional forms of media do (Roche et al., 2016). Recent communications research suggests that criteria for "newsworthiness" that predict an event's likelihood of being reported in the news (see Jewkes, 2015; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013) may not translate to online news and social media. Namely, Internet journalists may be more concerned with "shareworthiness," a separate set of criteria that predict the likelihood that a report of an event will be shared via social media platforms (García-Perdomo et al., 2018; Trilling et al., 2017). Research indicates that "shareworthy" news stories tend to be more positive than traditional news stories (Trilling et al., 2017). Recent research on the protest paradigm also indicates a shift away from the traditional narrative with Internet and alternative sources offering narratives that are more sympathetic to protesters (Harlow et al., 2017, 2020; Kilgo et al., 2018).

Prior research suggests that the media play an important role in shaping attitudes on crime and justice. The traditional media shape public opinion in ways that lead people to believe that crime is increasing or that there is reason to fear crime. They also inspire policy preferences that are particularly punitive. As such, it is expected that consumers of traditional media will be *more* likely to believe that the protests of 2020 were violent and that law enforcement-based responses are appropriate. Given shifts in Internet-based media that divert from traditional narratives on

crime and justice, it is expected that consumers of Internet news will be *less* likely to believe that the protests of 2020 were violent and that law enforcement-based responses are *not* appropriate.

It is also important to note the impact of protester violence in shaping attitudes toward protests. Given Wasow's (2020) framework that protester violence is the key factor that determines whether coverage is sympathetic to elites or protesters, it is hypothesized that perceived protester violence will mediate the relationship between media consumption and support for law-and-order policies to address rioting and urban unrest. It is expected that perceptions of the protesters as violent will have an indirect relationship with the association between media and policy support, with those who view the protesters as violent being more likely to support law-and-order measures to address the protests, especially among consumers of Internet-based media.

3 | METHOD

Data for this study come from the 2020 American National Election Studies (ANES) time series study. This study, which is administered every election year, consists of a nationally representative sample of voting-age Americans. The study questions respondents about voting behavior and a variety of topics that are relevant to issues currently facing the United States. The 2020 study was unique from past iterations of the ANES times-series study in that it did not consists of face-to-face interviews due to COVID concerns; data were collected via self-administered online surveys, video interviews that were conducted online, and telephone interviews.

The target population for the sample was American adults living in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Potential respondents were randomly selected via address files from the U.S. Postal Service and mailed invitations, which prompted them to an online screening interview. Responding households were randomly assigned to one of the aforementioned survey protocols. Data were collected in two waves, with surveys/interviews administered both before the 2020 election (August 18–November 3, 2020) and after the election (November 8, 2020–January 4, 2021).[1] The total sample size for the current data set is 8,280 respondents.

3.1 | Measures

This study examines two key variables: (1) support for law-and-order approaches to dealing with rioting and protest violence and (2) the perception that the protests of summer 2020 were violent, which is examined as a potential mediator. For the main dependent variable, respondents were prompted, "What is the best way to deal with the problem of urban unrest and rioting? Some say it is more important to use all available force to maintain law and order, no matter what results. Others say it is more important to correct the problems of racism and police violence that give rise to the disturbances. And, of course, other people have opinions in between." Respondents were then asked to rate where they would place themselves on a seven-item scale where 1 indicates "Solve problems of racism and police violence" (34.2%) and 7 indicates "Use all available force to maintain law and order" (18.0%; no specific intermediary responses were provided for values 2 through 6). As indicated by Table 1, the mean response was about a 3.5, indicating that respondents on average leaned slightly toward "Solve problems of racism and police violence." Table 1 contains descriptive statistics for all measures.

For perceptions of protester violence, respondents were asked, "During the past few months, would you say that most of the actions taken by protestors [sic] to get the things they want have been violent, or have most of these actions by protesters been peaceful, or have these actions been

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics for all variables

	Mean	SD	Range	*N*	Pre-/Postelection
Support for law-and order policies	3.49	2.31	1–7	7713	Pre
Belief that protests were violent	3.03	1.51	1–5	8228	Pre
Online news	2.00	2.51	0–14	5290	Pre
Left-leaning sites	0.27	0.57	0–2	5290	Pre
Right-leaning sites	0.05	0.24	0–2	5290	Pre
Network news	0.97	1.22	0–8	6394	Pre
Cable news	1.84	2.04	0–14	6394	Pre
MSNBC	0.52	0.77	0–4	6394	Pre
Fox News	0.83	1.08	0–6	6421	Pre
Trust in the media	2.46	1.21	1–5	8260	Pre
Male	0.46	0.50	0–1	8213	Pre
Conservative	4.09	1.67	1–7	7056	Pre
Republican	3.89	2.25	1–7	8245	Pre
Education	3.39	1.11	1–5	8149	Pre
Income	11.75	6.75	1–22	7665	Pre
Black	0.09	0.28	0–1	8184	Pre
Hispanic	0.09	0.29	0–1	8184	Pre
Asian	0.03	0.18	0–1	8184	Pre
Support crime spending	3.73	1.16	1–5	8226	Pre
Support death penalty	2.82	1.15	1–4	8113	Pre

Note: SD = standard deviation; *N* = sample size.

equally violent and peaceful?" Responses were recorded on a five-item scale including "a lot more peaceful" (coded as 1, 23.5%), "a little more peaceful" (2, 12.6%), "equally violent and peaceful" (3, 31.1%), "a little more violent" (4, 2.8%), and "a lot more violent" (5, 30.0%).

In order to determine the association of news consumption with the dependent variables, this study examines both television and online news. For television news, respondents were presented with a list of television programs and asked to select the television programs that they watched regularly. From these responses, variables were created to reflect viewing frequency of network news and cable news. The network news variable is an additive scale of affirmative responses to regularly watching *CBS Evening News*, *ABC World News*, *NBC Nightly News, 60 Minutes, 20/20, Dateline, Face the Nation*, and *Meet the Press*. The average respondent watches about 0.97 network news shows regularly. The cable news variable is an additive scale reflecting viewership of cable news shows such as *Hannity, Tucker Carlson Tonight, The Rachel Maddow Show, The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell, The Five, The Ingraham Angle, The Story with Martha MacCallum, The Lead with Jake Tapper, Anderson Cooper 360, Special Report with Bret Baier, Cuomo Prime Time, All In with Chris Hayes*, and *The 11th Hour with Brian Williams*. On average, respondents watch 1.84 cable news shows regularly.

Due to increased polarization of news bias (Jurkowitz et al., 2020), two additional variables were created to reflect viewing of cable news shows with clear right- and left-wing political bias. The cable news shows presented by MSNBC—*The Rachel Maddow Show, The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell, All In with Chris Hayes*, and *The 11th Hour with Brian Williams*— were combined in an additive scale that represents viewership of left-leaning cable news. Similarly, the shows presented

by Fox News—*Hannity, Tucker Carlson Tonight, The Five, The Ingraham Angle, The Story with Martha MacCallum*, and *Special Report with Bret Baier*—were combined in an additive scale that represents viewership of right-leaning cable news. On average, respondents regularly watch 0.52 shows featured on MSNBC and 0.83 shows on Fox News.

For online news, an additive scale was made consisting of responses indicating that respondents regularly visit (at least once a month) a host of news websites. These websites include *Yahoo! News, CNN.com, Huffington Post, New York Times.com, Breitbart, Fox.com, Washington Post.com, The Guardian, BBC.com, NPR.com, Bloomberg.com, The Daily Caller, Buzzfeed*, and *NBC.com*. The online news variable is an additive scale of affirmative responses to viewing these websites. Table 1 indicates that respondents on average view 2.00 of these sites regularly. Two additional variables were created to reflect viewing of news sites with clear right- and left-wing political bias. Drawing from findings of the political leanings of news sources (Ad Fontes Media, 2021; AllSides, 2021), the news sites *Breitbart* and *The Daily Caller* made up the right-leaning online news variable with *Huffington Post* and *Buzzfeed* up the left-leaning variables. On average, respondents view 0.05 of the right-leaning sites and 0.27 of the left-leaning sites regularly.

One final media-related variable included in the analyses is trust in the media. Respondents were asked, "In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the news media when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly?" Responses ranged on a five-item scale from "None" (coded as 1, 29.1%) to "A great deal" (5, 5.6%).

The current study also controls for other variables that may influence the dependent variables. Since public opinion often varies by person, the analyses include variables reflecting a number of demographic characteristics. A dichotomous variable was made for gender, with males coded as 1 (45.8%). The current study includes two measures of political affiliation. Political ideology was measured on a seven-item scale with higher values indicating adherence to conservative ideology. About 38.9% of respondents reported being conservative to some degree. Political party affiliation was also measured on a seven-item scale with higher values indicating greater support for the Republican Party. About 41.74% of respondents self-identified as Republican to some degree. Variables for education and income consisted of five-item and 22-item scales, respectively. About 44.8% of respondents have a bachelor's degree or higher. The last demographic factor taken into account is respondent's race. Dummy variables were created reflecting respondents who are non-Hispanic Black (8.9%), Hispanic (9.3%), and Asian (3.4%).

It is possible that other attitudes toward criminal justice system may influence people's perceptions of violence and law-and-order policies. The current study controls for two attitudes toward crime: support for crime spending and support for the death penalty. Respondents were asked if they support increasing or decreasing funding to a host of federal programs; support for federal spending on dealing with crime was measured in a five-item scale that ranges from "decreased a lot" to "increased a lot." As for the death penalty, respondents were asked if they favor/oppose the death penalty, with responses ranging on a four-item scale from "oppose strongly" to "favor strongly." About 54.2% of respondents support increased spending on crime while about 60.8% of respondents support the death penalty to some degree.

3.2 | Methods

The analyses employ structural equation modeling (SEM) in order to examine the direct association of media consumption with attitudes toward the protests of 2020 as well as the mediating association of perceived protester violence. Through SEM, both of the protest perception variables

were simultaneously modeled. The perceptions of the protests as violent were regressed on the media variables and the control variables, while support for law-and-order policies was regressed on perceptions of the protests as violent, the media variables, and the control variables. This allowed for the separate estimation of the direct and indirect associations of the media variables.

There was missing data for a number of variables (see Table 1). In order to account for missing data, a multiple imputation strategy (Allison, 2002) was used. Twenty-five data sets were imputed in a process that included all variables in the analysis as well as the following auxiliary variables: the frequency that respondents pay attention to politics, the perception that corruption has increased/decreased under the Trump administration, and the belief that it is justified to use violence to achieve political goals. These variables were chosen because of their relevance to the variables in the model and they help to add information to the imputation process.

4 | RESULTS

Before examining the results of the analyses, the breakdown of responses for the dependent variable helps to illuminate where Americans stand on measures to address urban unrest and rioting. As noted above, about 34% of respondents indicated that they support solving problems of racism and police violence. When counting additional respondents whose responses fall on this side of the scale (those coded as 2 and 3), about 52% of respondents indicate that they lean toward solving problems of racism and police violence. Only about 34% indicated that they lean in the other direction, toward using all available force to maintain law and order. The support of the remaining respondents falls in the middle between the two policy responses.

The results in Table 2 include the SEM estimations of the direct effects of the media and control variables on the perception that the protests were violent.[2] Model 1 in Table 2 contains none of the right- or left-leaning media variables. Those who consume online media and those who trust the media are less likely to believe that the protests were violent. Neither of the TV news variables are significantly associated with the perception of violence. Conservatives, Republicans, Asian respondents, and supporters of both crime spending and the death penalty were all more likely to believe that the protesters were violent. Men, Black respondents, and those with higher education and income were all less likely to believe that the protests were violent.

Model 2 includes the variables for politically oriented online news sites. It is evident that the slant of the online news sources is associated with perceptions of protest violence. Both of these variables are statistically significant in different directions: respondents who view left-leaning sites are less likely to believe that the protests were violent, while those who view right-leaning websites are more likely to believe that the protests were violent. There is no substantial change in any of the other variables. Model 3 replaces the politically slanted news websites with politically slanted cable shows. There is no statistically significant association between either of the cable channels and perceptions of protest violence.

Table 3 presents the full SEM model with support for law-and-order policies as the dependent variable. Both the direct associations of each variable and the indirect relationships through perceptions of protest violence are displayed. Model 1 shows that the direct effects of the variables on support for law-and-order policies are similar to the previous table, with those who view online news and are trustful of the media being less likely to support law-and-order policies. Black and Hispanic respondents are also less likely to support these policies. Model 1 indicates that men, conservatives, Republicans, those with higher incomes, and those who support crime spending and the death penalty are all more likely to support law-and-order policies to address urban unrest.

TABLE 2 Structural equation models predicting the perception that the protesters of 2020 were violent (direct effects only)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	b	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*
Online news	−0.05***	0.01			−0.05***	.001
Left-leaning sites			−0.16***	0.03		
Right-leaning sites			0.28***	0.06		
Network news	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01
Cable news	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01		
MSNBC					0.01	0.02
Fox News					0.00	0.02
Trust in the media	−0.20***	0.01	−0.21***	0.01	−0.20***	0.01
Male	−0.12***	0.02	−0.13***	0.02	−0.12***	0.02
Conservative	0.17***	0.01	0.16***	0.01	0.17***	0.01
Republican	0.13***	0.01	0.13***	0.01	0.13***	0.01
Education	−0.10***	0.01	−0.11***	0.01	−0.10***	0.01
Income	−0.01***	0.00	−0.01***	0.00	−0.01***	0.00
Black	−0.41***	0.05	−0.40***	0.05	−0.41***	0.05
Hispanic	0.06	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.05	0.04
Asian	0.16*	0.07	0.16*	0.07	0.16*	0.07
Support crime spending	0.23***	0.01	0.24***	0.01	0.23***	0.01
Support death penalty	0.19***	0.01	0.19***	0.01	0.19***	0.01
N	8280		8280		8280	

Notes: b: coefficient; *SE*: standard error.
*p < .05. **p < .01. *** p < .001.

Model 1 also indicates that there is an indirect relationship of perceptions of protest violence with the significant media variables. Those who view Internet news and those who trust the media are less likely to support law-and-order policies, and this association is mediated by less agreement with the proposition that the protesters were violent. The indirect relationship through perceptions of violence accounts for about 35% of the total association with support for law-and-order policies. This indicates support for Wasow's (2020) claim that protester violence is a key determinant of whether media framing of protests leads to sympathy toward the protesters. Other variables in the model show significant indirect relationships through perceptions of violence. Of note are the political variables. The indirect relationships through perceptions of violence account for about 18% and 20% of the association of conservative and Republican identification, respectively, with support for law-and-order policies.

Model 2 in Table 3 includes the variables for left- and right-leaning news sites. Viewers of left-leaning sites are less likely to support law-and-order policies to address urban unrest, while viewers of right-leaning sites are more likely to support such policies. There are also significant indirect relationships of these variables through perceptions of protester violence. The association of viewing left-leaning websites is mediated by less agreement that the protesters were violent, while the converse is true for the association of viewing right-leaning websites. The indirect relationship accounts for about 26% of the total association for viewing left-leaning news sites and 18% of the total association for right-leaning sites. With the inclusion of these variables, there is no substantial change in any of the other variables.

TABLE 3 Structural equation models predicting support for law-and-order solutions to rioting and urban unrest with perceptions of protesters as violent as the mediating variable

	Model 1 Direct		Model 1 Indirect		Model 2 Direct		Model 2 Indirect		Model 3 Direct		Model 3 Indirect	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Belief that protests were violent	0.39***	0.02			0.39***	0.02			0.39***	0.02		
Online news	−0.03***	0.01	−0.02*	0.00					−0.03***	0.01	−0.02*	0.00
Left-leaning sites					−0.17***	0.04	−0.06***	0.01				
Right-leaning sites					0.49***	0.10	0.11***	0.02				
Network news	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.01
Cable news	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00				
MSNBC									0.02	0.03	0.01	0.01
Fox News									0.02	0.02	−0.00	0.01
Trust in the media	−0.15***	0.02	−0.08***	0.00	−0.14***	0.02	−0.08***	0.00	−0.14***	0.02	−0.08***	0.01
Male	0.21***	0.04	−0.05***	0.01	0.19***	0.04	−0.05***	0.01	0.21***	0.04	−0.05***	0.01
Conservative	0.30***	0.02	0.07***	0.01	0.28***	0.02	0.06***	0.01	0.30***	0.02	0.07***	0.01
Republican	0.20***	0.01	0.05**	0.00	0.20***	0.01	0.05***	0.00	0.20***	0.01	0.05***	0.00
Education	0.03	0.02	−0.04***	0.01	0.02	0.02	−0.04***	0.01	0.03	0.02	−0.04***	0.01
Income	0.01**	0.00	−0.004***	0.00	0.01**	0.00	−0.01***	0.00	0.01**	0.00	−0.01***	0.00
Black	−0.71***	0.07	−0.16***	0.02	−0.71***	0.07	−0.16***	0.02	−0.71***	0.07	−0.16***	0.02
Hispanic	−0.53***	0.06	0.02	0.02	−0.52***	0.06	0.02	0.02	−0.53***	0.06	0.02	0.02
Asian	−0.10	0.10	0.06*	0.03	−0.10	0.10	0.06*	0.03	−0.10	0.10	0.06	0.03
Support crime spending	0.15***	0.02	0.09***	0.01	0.16***	0.02	0.09***	0.01	0.15***	0.02	0.09***	0.01
Support death penalty	0.17***	0.02	0.07***	0.01	0.17***	0.02	0.07***	0.01	0.17***	0.02	0.07***	0.01
N	8280				8280				8280			

Notes: b: coefficient; *SE*: standard error.
*$p < 0.05$. ***$p < 0.001$. **$p < 0.01$.

Model 3 in Table 3 swaps out the politically slanted Internet news sites for politically slanted cable news shows. Neither of these variables have a significant direct association with support for law-and-order policies nor a significant indirect relationship through perceptions of protester violence.

5 | DISCUSSION

What influence do the media have on the perception that the 2020 protests were violent and that we need law-and-order policies to address rioting and urban unrest? The current study finds that viewers of news websites were both less likely to believe that protesters were violent and less likely to support law-and-order measures to address urban unrest. When broken down into left- and right-leaning news websites, the association becomes clearer. Not surprisingly, those who view left-leaning sites are less likely to both view the protests as violent and support law-and-order policies, while those who view right-leaning websites are more likely to both view the protests as violent and support law-and-order policies.

Furthermore, the association between Internet news consumption and support for law-and-order policies is mediated by perceptions of the protesters as violent. This provides support for Wasow's (2020) contention that framings of protests as violent are key in directing sympathy toward either the protesters or those being protested. The current study finds that this is true for consumers of Internet news. It also provides evidence that political leanings of the news sources matter. The perception that the protests were violent mediated the association between politically slanted news and support for law-and-order policies in different directions. Viewers of left-leaning Internet news, who are less likely to believe that the protests were violent, were less likely to support law-and-order policies; the converse is true for viewers of right-leaning Internet news. This echoes the findings of Reny and Newman (2021) that public reaction to the Floyd protests was heavily politicized.

An important implication of these findings is that news sites that lean to different sides of the political spectrum may be telling different stories about protests and urban unrest. Those that lean to the political left may be less likely to show violence by protesters or to frame any violence that does occur as initiated by protesters. This finding is in line with recent research showing that online and alternative news sources are more likely to break away from the traditional protest paradigm (Harlow et al., 2017; Kilgo et al., 2018). However, news sites that lean to the political right may continue to frame the protests as violent. It is possible that these sites may be strengthening the protest paradigm narrative.

Of course, an important consideration of these findings is reverse causation. Does viewing right-leaning websites cause people to believe that protests are violent and that law-and-order policies are appropriate, or are people who already hold these beliefs more likely to prefer the types of media that confirm these views? Data limitations in the current study do not allow for the establishment of time order. However, these findings stand as important support for the idea that crime narratives have become particularly polarized in both the media and in popular discourse.

While most types of news consumption are not consistently associated with the dependent variables, trust in the media is. Specifically, those who trust the media are less likely to view the protests as violent and support law-and-order policies to address urban unrest. It is possible that trust in the media is reflective of other political beliefs. Research by the Pew Research Center finds that Democrats are more likely to trust a wider range of news sources while Republicans are more

likely to trust a smaller number of specific sources (Jurkowitz et al., 2020) while distrusting the "liberal" media.

In all models, Black respondents are less likely to both view the protests as violent and support law-and-order policies. This finding makes sense, given the nature of the protests and the history of crime policy in the United States. The protests of 2020 were largely undertaken by supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement, a movement that advocates for racial equality. This movement is ill served by the narrative that the protests were violent, as such a narrative helps to delegitimize the cause. The protests were also sparked by the killing of George Floyd in police custody as well as the deaths of other Black individuals by police officers. Given the United States' history of using the criminal justice system as a means of racial control and legitimizing state-sanctioned violence against Black individuals (see Alexander, 2012), it is no surprise that Black individuals are less likely to support law enforcement-based policies to address urban unrest.

In terms of support for law-and-order policies, conservative ideology, Republican identification, and support for crime spending and the death penalty are consistently associated with the belief that the protests were violent and more support for law-and-order policies. This is not surprising, as support for "tough on crime" policies has been a part of the conservative political discourse in the United States for decades (Beckett & Sasson, 2004) and law-and-order measures to address urban unrest align with traditional notions of punitiveness. The current study demonstrates that perceptions of violence are a key mediator for all of these variables. In other words, those who lean to the political right and those who generally support greater measures to address crime are likely to support law-and-order measures to address protests because, in part, they are more likely to believe that the protesters were violent.

The findings of the current study carry important implications for criminal justice reform. For those seeking reform, the media can be a tool to shift public sympathy towards their cause. These reformers would be wise to utilize Internet-based media platforms which may better allow them to control their preferred narrative than traditional, mainstream media platforms might. Furthermore, activists should recognize that engaging in violence during protests could hurt their cause and lead to more public support for traditional law-and-order practices that are liable to enhance police power.

For police organizations, the implications are similar but converse. They would also be wise to use the Internet and social media to keep the public informed. If Americans are more accepting of law-and-order measures against protesters when they believe that the protesters are violent, then police departments can provide real-time updates on the protests and any violent incidents that arise in order to justify using forceful tactics against protesters. They may also be successful in this endeavor by relying on media sources that are more likely to lean to the conservative side of the political spectrum, though they should be aware that this may only reinforce support among those who already support law-and-order policies rather than winning over the hearts and minds of those who are tentative about police use of force against protesters.

Of course, a key power holder in shaping narratives on protests is the media. The current study indicates that even though news outlets of various political loyalty were covering the same events, they framed these events in ways that shaped perceptions of the protests in very different ways. It may be that despite the best efforts of protesters to avoid violence, right-leaning news sites may highlight any violence that does occur and place the blame on the protesters, even for police-initiated violence. Conversely, left-leaning news sites may deemphasize protester violence or place blame on the police. Perhaps the solution for both protesters and police is to rely more on social media to keep the public informed of events as they unfold. By using social media, they can potentially cut out the middleman and take control of the narrative, which would allow either

side to portray protest violence in a way that would sway public support to their desired policy. For the American public, the findings highlight the importance of being a critical consumer of media messages and having an awareness of the bias inherent in many media outlets, especially as it relates to issues of crime and justice.

Finally, it should be noted that about 52% of respondents indicate that they lean towards solving problems of racism and police violence as a means of addressing urban unrest and rioting. This implies that a slight majority of Americans are open to the types of reforms proposed by activists in the wake of the killing of George Floyd. The time may be ripe for reformers to take advantage of this public support.

6 | CONCLUSION

It is clear from the findings of this study that the media and perceptions of violence are key factors in shaping public opinion on crime policy. In particular, online news plays a role in shaping attitudes toward the protests. The fact that those who view online news sites are *less* likely to believe that the protests were violent indicates a shift away from both the protest paradigm and the scary world thesis on crime reporting. It is possible that the narratives produced by online news sources about other types of deviant behavior are shifting away from those produced by the traditional media. Future research should examine how crime narratives in the digital media continue to evolve and how these evolving narratives impact attitudes toward crime and justice (see Roche et al., 2016).

It is also important to note the association of the political polarization of the media with attitudes toward the protests. The association of conservative online news sites with attitudes toward the protests indicates that the narratives pushed by the activists are not permeating into all realms of digital media. One consequence of the wide variety of types of online media that are available is that media consumers are better able to consume only the types of media that appeal to their political sensibilities (see Jewkes, 2015). It is possible that media consumers who prefer narratives that align with the protest paradigm are able to choose the media sources that confirm this narrative and reinforce their perceptions. From a policy perspective, the political polarization of protest narratives implies that it may be difficult to find consensus on what to do about protest violence, making it difficult to sell a particular policy to a politically mixed electorate.

The impact of digital media was certainly important for the protests of 2020. The cell phone footage of the killing of George Floyd not only exposed this incident to the world, it helped lead to the conviction of Floyd's killer. Social media allowed for the broadcast of instances of police violence during the protests to a global audience. The availability of this footage has allowed the traditional media to be less reliant on the official narrative and more able to publish narratives that challenge the status quo. It will be interesting to see how crime narratives in digital media evolve in the future, whether they present a more holistic view of protest activity or if increasing polarization leads to further narrowcasting of information.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The minimum response rate (AAPOR) for newly recruited respondents was 36.7%. Postelection interviews were completed with 90.0% of all preelection participants.

[2] As a check on the robustness of these models, separate models were run with using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression as well as ordinal logistic regression, given the ordinal outcomes of the variable. All models told identical substantive stories.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author confirms that they have no conflict of interest to declare.

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