

Can Violent Protest Change Local Policy Support? Evidence from the Aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles Riot ^{*}

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Abstract

Violent protests are dramatic political events often credited with causing durable and significant changes in public policy. Scholarly research usually treats violent protests as deliberate acts, undertaken in pursuit of specific policy goals. However, due to a lack of appropriate data and difficulty in causal identification, there is little evidence of whether riots accomplish these goals. We collect unique electoral measures of policy support before and after the 1992 Los Angeles Riot—one of the most high-profile events of political violence in recent American history—which occurred just prior to an election. Contrary to some expectations from the academic literature and the popular press, we find that the riot caused a marked liberal shift in policy support at the polls. Investigating the sources of this shift, we find that it was likely the result of increased mobilization of both African American and white voters. Remarkably, this mobilization endures over a decade later.

Riots are political acts in which participants undertake violence to express grievances and attempt to spur policy change. Scholars and journalists often claim that riots cause short and long-term changes in political mobilization and attitudes and behaviors, both among riot participants and those exposed to the riot as observers or victims. Classic survey evidence has demonstrated that rioters ascribe political motivations to their actions (Sears and McConahay, 1973), and scholars have argued that the series of riots in the 1960s

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caused shifts in the policy mood of the American electorate that had long-term consequences for national politics (Rieder, 1985; Massey and Denton, 1988; Edsall and Edsall, 1992; Olzak, Shanahan and McEneaney, 1996; Western, 2006; Manza and Uggen, 2006; Wasow, 2016). Similar claims have also been made about political violence in other countries (De Waal, 2005; Hayes and McAllister, 2001; Beber, Roessler and Scacco, 2014*a*). In the wake of recent violent protest in African American communities in the United States and around the world, the subject of political violence has renewed importance.¹

But can riots actually change policy? Measuring the effect of a riot on the policies said to motivate the rioters has been, as of yet, impossible. Despite the long literature examining riots and other protests as political acts, we have little understanding of whether these acts can achieve the goals ascribed to the rioters. We address this question by examining local shifts in referendum voting on goods targeted at urban-dwelling racial minorities after the 1992 Los Angeles riots. We find that the riot caused a shift in support for allocating these goods and that much of the shift is attributable to changes in mobilization among both African Americans and whites. We also find that this mobilization persists over time, evidence that the riot’s political consequences were long-term.

In order to identify the effect of the riot on support for local referenda, we need not assume the underlying causes of the riot are unrelated to downstream changes in policy support. Rather, we assume the riot was exogenously timed relative to events planned long before the riot, namely an upcoming primary election. The triggering event for the 1992 Los Angeles riot was a video recording of police brutality and the subsequent acquittal of the police officers involved. Although the riot was a non-random event, the timing of the video recording and subsequent trial and conviction were exogenous to the timing of a primary election, thus granting causal leverage not found in most previous studies of political violence. We interrogate the validity of this causal claim by examining the spatial correlation between changes in policy support and the epicenter of the riot. We find that these changes were correlated with distance from the riot and not from other locations in Los Angeles, including other African American population centers.

Political Violence and Public Policy

By examining how a riot affected public goods allocation, our study addresses the effectiveness of rioting as a political activity. In doing so, we broaden our understanding of how political activity can bring about policy change, a question that typically examines more common political behaviors, such as voting, lobbying, or non-violent protest. While such activities are often argued to be ineffective in changing policy, especially

¹We use the terms “riot,” “violent protest,” and “political violence” to describe large-scale violent protest in general, and the particular event in Los Angeles from April 29 to May 3, 1992. This is done for simplicity and without making assumptions about the motivations of the participants. We acknowledge that other writers prefer “uprising” and similar terminology.

for low-status groups (Gilens, 2012) such as poor African Americans, we show that violent protest is an arguably efficacious political activity.

Of course, not everyone views rioting as politically motivated and not all riot participants are similarly motivated. However, social scientists often view rioting as a political act (e.g., Huntington, 1968) and classic studies of riots show that participant aims include demanding redress for political grievances (Sears and McConahay, 1973). Scholarly examinations of the 1992 Los Angeles riot also interpret the event as collective action against poor economic and social conditions (Tierney, 1994). Indeed, post-riot polls indicated that 67.5% of African Americans in Los Angeles County viewed the riots as a protest against unfair conditions (Bobo et al., 1994). In addition to immediate grievances such as police brutality, riots are often characterized as demands for policy reform (Fogelson and Hill, 1968). In the United States, these policies include spending on public goods benefiting the urban poor, including education, housing, and poverty assistance.

If participants riot in pursuit of policy, then understanding how riots affect policy support is important to understanding the effectiveness of this political tactic. Previous studies suggest that riots decrease support for racially liberal policies (Sears and McConahay, 1973; Wasow, 2016) or, conversely, that riots both increase negative attitudes toward the rioting group, and increase support for the policies advocated by riot participants (Beber, Roessler and Scacco, 2014*a*). But because previous scholarship was limited to measuring post-treatment outcomes, considerable uncertainty remains about whether the riots actually caused these changes.

We concentrate on the effects of rioting on a local population. While the riot had national prominence, certain effects of the riot may have been localized—after all, a riot is a locally destructive event. Individuals close the riot were more likely to be materially and psychologically impacted by the event and, as such, to be more motivated in the aftermath. Few studies have examined the localized effectiveness of a riot, instead treating the events as part of a larger phenomenon (e.g., Western, 2006). While a broader focus can be valuable, it might mask differences between local and distal effects: for example, while the consensus in the literature that a riot makes citizens unsympathetic to the rioters may be accurate on a national scale, local opinion may become more sympathetic because of shared identity, special knowledge of local circumstances, or fear of further unrest. Additionally, examining the effects of a riot on national-level opinion, while potentially important, overlooks that much policy, especially in the domains of welfare and education, is controlled at the local or state level.

The 1992 Los Angeles Riot

On April 29, 1992, a court acquitted four white police officers for assault in the beating, captured on video, of an African-American man named Rodney King. The trial, relocated from Los Angeles to homogeneously-white Ventura County, concluded with an all-white jury acquitting the four officers of all charges.

Within hours of the verdict's announcement, a series of violent and destructive incidents occurred around the intersection of Florence Avenue and Normandie Avenue in south central Los Angeles, a predominantly African-American neighborhood. Reminiscent of the Watts Riots thirty years earlier, police officers abandoned the area, leaving residents to defend themselves against looters, arsonists, and widespread violence. For the next three days, the area suffered freeway shutdowns, suspension of municipal services, racial violence, and destruction of property. The violence proceeded unchecked until May 3, when 3,500 federal troops arrived to supplement 10,000 members of the National Guard. On May 27, one week before the 1992 primary election, the last troops withdrew from the area. The Los Angeles Riot resulted in 53 deaths, more than 2,300 injuries, and arrests in excess of 11,000; estimates of material losses exceed \$1 billion (CNN, 2013).

Much of the violence was covered live on television by news helicopters, including the beating and attempted murder of white truck-driver Reginald Denny as he attempted to drive through the intersection of Florence and Normandie. Contemporary accounts of the events describe great anxiety among the white residents of Los Angeles. In the aftermath came a flurry of reporting, often backed by survey data, speculating on the riot's effects on public opinion. Major themes in the media included an increase in fear, and a recognition that the conditions in which urban minorities lived needed to change (Toner, 1992).

This initial view of aggregate opinion suggests that the riot represented a profound experience for Angelenos. Whether and how those experiences translated into policy support is our focus. Despite the fear and destruction caused by the riot, less than a month later voters in Los Angeles went to the polls in a statewide primary for electoral offices and ballot propositions. To understand the effects of the riot on voting in this election and in subsequent elections, we exploit the timing of this event to study changes in policy support.

The Local Effects of Violent Protest

In order to test for the localized effect of a riot on policy, we concentrate our study in the area of Los Angeles County closest to the riot. The impact of the riot is likely heterogeneous, with the greatest material and psychological impact on those closest to the riot. Unlike previous studies of riots that rely on aggregate units, we exploit geocoded individual- and precinct-level data to measure the effects of the riot on voters at any proximity to its epicenter, including those who lived at very close range. Using individual voters and

precincts avoids problems of aggregation that are common to this type of analysis, such as the modifiable areal unit problem and problems of scale.

Los Angeles County is very large—spanning an area the roughly the size of Connecticut, it is the most populous county in the United States. As such, treating the riot as homogeneous in this area may hide important variation. As a principled way of defining “local” so as to avoid making arbitrary choices about the relevant distance from the riot, we focus on voters who are not separated from the riot by topographic features that may lower the salience of the riot. We concentrate our study in the area known as the Los Angeles basin, consisting of parts of the city of Los Angeles and other municipalities.² With this we exclude areas of the county further away from the riot, such as the desert communities to the east, and from areas that were separated from the riots by physical barriers, such as residents in the mountainous areas of the county or of the San Fernando Valley, who were separated from the riots by the Santa Monica Mountains. All data we describe below is limited to this area, which is entirely within thirty kilometers of Florence and Normandie, the epicenter of the riot.

We concentrate our study on two groups: non-Hispanic whites and African Americans.³ These groups had substantially different baselines in terms of pre-riot ideology and political involvement, as well as divergent on-the-ground and psychological experiences with the riot. African Americans, whether riot participants or not, were much more likely than whites to share a social identity with the rioters and, perhaps, to sympathize with their grievances. Whites were *a priori* less likely to share a social identity with the rioters or to agree with their actions. In a nationally representative survey fielded during the riot, when asked whether the violence of the riot “was justified by the anger that blacks in Los Angeles felt over the verdict in the trial” only 17% of white respondents said it was, while 35% of African Americans did so.⁴ Furthermore, the policy attitudes of the white population, compared to the African American population, were likely more heterogeneous, including more political conservatives: prior to the riot, whites, on average, would have been less likely to share the policy demands of the rioters than were African Americans.

We attribute differences in vote outcomes and other behavior before and after to the effect of the riot. This is necessarily a “bundled treatment” because a riot is associated with changes on a number of fronts, including psychological effects, media coverage, action by politicians, changes in property values, reactions to the verdict, and many others. The purpose of this study is not to isolate the effect of each of these treatments, but rather to speak to the overall effects of a riot. As a large-scale collective political act, a riot

²We define a polygon that is south of the Santa Monica Mountains, extends east to the area of the city of Whittier and the small mountain range of Hacienda Heights and La Habra Heights, extends west to the Pacific Ocean, and south to Orange County. In our analysis we use precincts that intersect with this polygon.

³Hispanics, Asians, and other groups are excluded because of insufficient data, and because the theoretical expectation for these groups is less clear.

⁴Yankelovitch/Time Magazine/CNN Poll, April 30, 1992.

is not unlike other such large-scale political acts, such as campaigns, where scholars have measured overall effects without identifying precise mechanisms. As such, we use the phrase “effect of the riot” as short-hand for the bundled effect of all the treatments associated with the violent protest.

To estimate the effect of the riot, we use differences in vote outcomes between June 1990 and June 1992. Other events associated with, but prior to, the riot, such as the beating of Rodney King or the subsequent trial, also occurred during this period and could affect policy support as well. We assume, however, that these events did not affect voter behavior nearly as much as the riot itself: there is no literature indicating that these types of events, even when racialized, can dramatically change voter behavior. With these assumptions in mind, in our empirical analysis we show that the effects we measure are likely attributable to the riot itself, not other associated events.

Are riots effective in bringing about policy change? In gauging the influence of a riot, researchers could examine survey data or the behavior of legislators and other policy makers. However, surveys may simply capture “cheap talk” or unstable attitudes (Zaller, 1992) and the actions of legislators only indirectly reflect public opinion. As such, we directly examine local changes in mass-public voting on resource allocation to public schools.

We focus on support for spending on public schools as a public good which is associated with African Americans and racial minorities more generally and is often implicated in the social welfare demands of riot participants. Public schools have long been part of policy debates over how to address urban social and economic problems, including in official reports in the aftermath of urban rioting (California Governor’s Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, 1963). Research has demonstrated that demographic considerations play a role in opinions about public school spending (Hopkins, 2009), with the non-white composition of schools affecting white support for spending. In 1992, on the eve of the riot, the Los Angeles Unified School District was 72% non-Anglo-white. Near the riots, public schools were even more non-white, with enrollment at the 20 schools closest to Florence and Normandie 55% African American and less than 1% white.⁵

Our inferential strategy holds constant general attitudes about educational spending not associated with African Americans by comparing changes in support for public school spending to changes in support for university spending. Our assumption in doing so is that attitudes about university spending are not plausibly linked to African Americans and would not be as widely seen as a method of addressing problems made apparent by the riot. Thus, when white voters were asked to cast ballots with the demands of the African Americans rioters fresh in their minds, these demands would have no effect on votes on university spending. We believe this assumption is plausible: in our review of the literature, we found no scholarship claiming

⁵Those numbers were largely unremoved after the riot, with the percent African American dropping by 1.5% in the 1992/1993 academic year <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/filesenr.asp>

that attitudes about university spending were associated with attitudes about race or racial demographics.

The riot may have changed local vote outcomes through several channels, including mobilization, a general change in ideology or political outlook, or by altering the considerations citizens use when voting. The latter refers to the fact that most citizens do not have well-developed policy attitudes and so, when citizens form opinions, they are influenced by recent salient cues (Zaller, 1992; Sands, Forthcoming) which have been shown to influence vote choice (Berger, Meredith and Wheeler, 2008). For citizens voting on questions of public policy so soon after the riot, the riot itself was likely one of these cues.

Effect on White Policy Voting

When the riot made salient to whites the policy demands of the rioters specifically and African Americans more generally, in what direction would this move their support for spending on public schools? We might expect a riot to increase support for spending by making white voters more aware of the needs of African Americans and the demands of the rioters. In particular, the signal generated by rioting—an extreme behavior—may have caused them to update their opinions about the severity of the needs of the African American community. The riot may have also activated pre-existing sympathy for these policy positions. Or, the destructiveness of the riot may have caused white voters to favor investment in programs that would prevent further violence (Beber, Roessler and Scacco, 2014*b*).

Among elites, there is a history of such reactions to riots in the United States. The Kerner Commission, formed by Lyndon Johnson, attributed the urban unrest of the late 1960s to a host of inadequate welfare institutions. The commission recommended reforms of social welfare programs to prevent further riots (United States National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968). A report after the 1963 Watts Riots by a commission chaired by former CIA Director John McCone made similar recommendations on reforms, including for improved schooling for African American children (California Governor’s Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, 1963). After the 1992 riot, there is evidence that voters nationwide drew similar lessons. A series of post-riot surveys found that 65% of respondents agreed that “the violence in Los Angeles... has made it more urgent to address poverty”.⁶ and that 51% wanted to see an increased emphasis on providing social services, as compared to 37% who supported an increased emphasis on promoting law and order.⁷ Moreover, 38% of respondents desired more spending for minorities in urban areas, while only 13% preferred decreased spending.⁸ Perhaps the relatively liberal voters of the Los Angeles basin were moved by the logic of needing improved social institutions and, thus, more spending to prevent future riots.

However, when asked to make consequential decisions about spending rather than merely state preferences

⁶Time, Cable News Network Poll. , May 13–14, 1992.

⁷NBC News, Wall Street Journal Poll. May 15–19, 1992.

⁸Gallup Organization Poll, May 7 - May 10, 1992.

on a survey, would white voters of Los Angeles County, where the riot had the greatest impact, have the same liberal reaction? The literature offers reason to predict that the riot would dissuade voters from spending on public goods associated with a racial outgroup.

For example, it is well-established that individuals display ingroup bias in attitudes, behaviors, and resource allocation, all else equal (Fiske, 2000). This behavior, repeatedly observed in the laboratory, is often cited as one of the primary reasons for the well-established finding that cross-nationally, diversity is negatively correlated with public goods provision (Alesina and Zhuravskaya, 2008; Habyarimana et al., 2009; Enos and Gidron, 2016). Scholars have drawn direct connections between local ethnic diversity and the willingness of voters to allocate funds for public goods, including schools (Alesina, Baqir and Easterly, 1999; Rugh and Trounstein, 2011).

Furthermore, research has shown that whites in the United States draw on negative stereotypes about African Americans when forming policy attitudes about benefits perceived to disproportionately target African Americans (Gilens, 1999). In laboratory experiments, making race or other group-based identities salient leads to group-based discriminatory attitudes and behaviors (Sidanius and Pratto, 2001; Enos and Celaya, 2015; Reicher et al., 2016). With negative stereotypes made salient by the televised images of violence and looting, it is possible that whites drew on these stereotypes when asked to make decisions about allocating to public schools. With this substantial literature in mind, we might also predict that the riot, which brought attitudes about the outgroup to bear on voting decisions, would precipitate a decrease in support for those public goods.

Effects on African American Policy Voting

African Americans' perspective on the riot was likely divergent from that of white voters: a group with whom they share a racial identity participated in widespread violent protest. Given the strong connection between group identity and policy attitudes, grounded in shared history (Dawson, 1995), the riot may have increased African Americans' awareness of ingroup policy demands, thereby causing a shift in attitudes.

Salient political events, such as electoral campaigns, can help citizens learn about the policy preferences of groups with which they share an identity. This learning process can bring attitudes into line with the dominant attitude of the group (Lenz, 2013). This might occur because voters use group membership as a heuristic for the "right attitude", which they adopt upon learning about the group's preferences (Cohen, 2003). The salient politicized event of a riot could serve the same function as a campaign: the policy demands of the rioters are extensively covered by the media and likely transmitted through social networks, thus the attitudes of people who identify with the rioters will change to reflect these demands. Of course, African Americans in Los Angeles may have already had largely liberal policy preferences and attitudes that were

Initiative	Year	Title	Dollar Amount	Statewide %	LA County %
121	1990	Bonds for Higher Education Facilities	\$450 M	55.0%	59.7%
123	1990	Public School Construction Bonds	\$800 M	57.5%	60.3%
152	1992	Bonds for Public Schools	\$1.9 B	52.9%	57.7%
153	1992	Construction Bonds for Higher Education	\$900 M	50.8%	56.8%

Table 1: Summary of Ballot Initiatives.

crystallized before the riot; if so, the riot itself may have little or no effect on their attitudes. However, we do not see how the riot could cause a *decrease* in support for spending among African Americans.

Data and Estimation Procedure

We test for the effect of the riot on support for policies favored by the rioters by examining voting on ballot initiatives related to funding for public schools. To isolate the effect of the riot, we examine votes on two related sets of public goods: public schools, which were closely linked to African Americans and may have been seen as a way to address to policy concerns of the rioters, and universities, which were not linked to African Americans and were, at most, a very indirect way to address the policy concerns of the rioters.

We focus on four initiatives that appeared on the ballot in the June election in 1990 or 1992: Prop 121 (1990), Prop 123 (1990), Prop 152 (1992), and Prop 153 (1992). These propositions are summarized in Table 1. We rely on the symmetry of ballot initiatives from 1990 to 1992 for our test of the effect of the riot: both elections have both a public schools and a university education initiative and the monetary amounts associated with both initiatives in 1992 are approximately twice what they were in 1990.

We measure a “difference-in-differences” from these four ballot initiatives:

$$\text{EdDiff}_i = (\text{PubSchool}_{i1992} - \text{PubSchool}_{i1990}) - (\text{HigherED}_{i1992} - \text{HigherED}_{i1990})$$

EdDiff_i is the change in support for public schools in precinct i between 1990 and 1992, net the change in support for universities. Our primary quantities of interest are the population-weighted mean of EdDiff_i for all voters, and for white and African American voters separately. By “differencing out” the change in support for universities from the change in support for public schools we substantially reduce the threat of omitted variable bias. Our estimate of the effect of the riot on public school spending will be biased if there was a shock to support for university funding between 1990 and 1992 that was not also a shock to public school funding; however, we know of nothing that would cause such a shock during this time period. Because our estimation strategy nets out any secular change in, for example, voter ideology, we believe we have isolated the change in support for public schools that is due to the riot. To further isolate the effect

of the riot, we also check for correlations between EdDiff_i and distance from the riot. As noted below, significant correlations between these variables give us confidence that we are isolating the riot’s effect; for an omitted variable to bias our estimate it would have to be correlated with both distance and EdDiff_i .

To acquire precinct-level data, we digitized vote returns from the Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder County Clerk’s Elections Division. This data set allows us to examine the aggregate effects of the riot. However, while we know the total vote outcomes and the racial demographics for each precinct, to understand the distinct voting patterns of different racial groups requires individual-level vote data. This presents an “Ecological Inference Problem” (Robinson, 1950). We use the Ecological Inference methods developed by King (1997) to isolate behavior by racial group. While, as with all estimation techniques, this method relies on assumptions for validity, the technique has been validated on well-known problems (O’Loughlin, 2000) and used for inference in other important questions (Enos, 2016).

The inputs to the EI model are: the proportion of whites, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and others in each precinct; and the proportion of Yes and No votes for each ballot initiative. The outputs are estimates of what proportion of each group voted Yes on a given ballot initiative, for each precinct in the data set. With these outputs, we separately measure EdDiff_i for whites and African Americans using the equation above. Our measures of precinct-level demographics, including the racial characteristics of each precinct, come from the California Statewide Database, which merges local voter files and decennial U.S. Census data with precinct geographies to create demographic counts by precinct.

To explore mobilization, we use data from the 1992 Los Angeles County voter file, which includes 3,743,468 registered individuals, and contains address, sex, age, and party registration information for each person. Using ArcGIS, we geocode voter file addresses to match individuals to spatial coordinates, then place those coordinates inside precincts, which allows us to measure the distance of voters and precincts from the riot and to validate our claim that changes in policy support were caused by the riot. We measure the geospatial distance between the center of the riot at Florence and Normandie and the interior centroid of the voting precincts used in our analysis. Because precinct-level GIS data from this time-period do not exist, to create this data, we geocoded every address from the 1992 Los Angeles County voter file⁹, and calculated population-weighted precinct centroids from the addresses of every voter in the precinct. To validate these geocodes, a team of research assistants used Google Earth to digitize precinct maps.

We supplement the voter file with imputed information about the voters’ race. We merge the voter file with two additional data sets: Census Block-level race and ethnicity data, and the Census surname list, which indicates the probability of belonging to each race given a surname. Using the surname probability as a prior, we apply Bayes’ Rule to compute the posterior probability that an individual is White, Hispanic,

⁹Of the 3.7 million addresses in the voter file we successfully geocoded 99.62% in ArcGIS.

African-American, Asian, Native American, or other, conditioning on their address and surname (Enos, 2016).¹⁰ From this vector of posterior probabilities, we identify the race with highest probability and use it as the imputed race of the voter. Such imputations have been used successfully in prior research and are likely quite accurate in a segregated area like the Los Angeles basin.

Mobilization Data

From the 1992 voter file, we measure the change in partisan registration between the period just before to the period just after the riot. We do this by comparing a one week window on either side of the riot, which lasted from April 29 to May 3. This means we compare a pre-riot period of April 22 to April 28 and a post-riot week of May 4 to May 8. In the pre-riot week, we omit the Saturday and Sunday of April 25 and 26. Note that these periods contain the same days of the week, which is advantageous because registration tends to vary by day of the week.

However, if voters are more likely to register in weeks closer to the registration deadline, our pre-post comparison may be confounded. The coincidence of the timing of the riot vis-à-vis the voter registration deadline of May 4 allows us to overcome this problem. Because the riot occurred in the days leading up to the registration deadline and prevented people from registering, election officials announced after the riot that they would extend the registration deadline by three days. This provides a unique opportunity because it means there are two roughly equal periods of time prior to the registration deadline. Prior to the riot, people had no way of knowing that the deadline would be extended and thus would register as normal. After the riot, a new deadline appeared and everyone who was motivated to register because of the riot was able to do so. In this way, we can capture the marginal effect of the riot on the propensity to register as a Democrat or Republican, while controlling for seasonal and other unobserved trends that also affect registration.

Attitude Data

We use individual-level survey data from the Los Angeles County Social Survey (LACSS) to measure attitude change. The LACSS, conducted annually from 1992 to 1998 (University of California, Los Angeles. Institute for Social Science Research, 2011), captured a county-representative sample generated by Random Digit Dialing. The 1992 LACSS, themed “Ethnic Antagonism in Los Angeles,” provides a picture of racial attitudes and policy preferences expressed by a random sample of Angelenos before and after the riots. By coincidence,

¹⁰We were unable to create a geographic prior for a small portion of the names on the voter file. This was either because a slight imprecision in geocoding placed the addresses in a zero population Census Block (for example, an all-commercial block), or because we were unable to geocode the address to begin with. In these cases, we rely exclusively on surname data to impute race. Similarly, individuals whose surnames do not appear in the census surname list have their race imputed using their census geography only. These two methods were used for 3.6% of the voter file. For no individual did we have neither surname- nor census-based racial information.

the verdict and the riot occurred in the middle of survey implementation, enabling us to leverage variation in survey responses recorded immediately before and after this exogenous shock, as done by Bobo et al. (1994).

Long-term Data

Finally, to examine long-term partisanship and participation, we merge the 1992 Los Angeles County voter file with a statewide California voter file from 2005. This was the earliest voter file we could obtain that included voter turnout data. By examining names, gender, and date of birth of the 30,166 voters who registered in the 10 weekdays before and after the riot, we successfully locate 15,244 of them in the 2005 file. Our calculations suggest that after accounting for voters who moved out of state, died or changed their name, we successfully locate a high proportion of our sample who were still registered in 2005. We detail this matching process in the Appendix.

Results: Changes in Policy Support

We first consider the aggregate change in Angelenos' support for public school spending as a result of the riot. If, on average, the riot served as a negative shock to support for public school funding, then the mean of EdDiff_i should be negative. If the riot served as positive shock for support public school funding then the mean of EdDiff_i should be positive. These results do not rely on ecological estimates and, therefore, there is no model-based uncertainty around the result.

The distribution of EdDiff_i is displayed in the top panel of Figure 1. The vertical dotted line is at the mean of the distribution. Pooling together all precincts in the Los Angeles basin, we see a population-weighted mean EdDiff of 0.052 (95% confidence interval: $[0.048, 0.055]$)¹¹, indicating that average support for public schools, net of the change in support for higher education, increased. The difference in support for university funding between 1990 and 1992 was -0.021 ($CI : [-0.025, -0.017]$), clearly showing that overall support for education spending did not increase, but rather this change in support was specific to local public schools.

Voters proximate to the riots experienced a large positive shift in their support for public schools, even when accounting for their overall shift in support for education. Because public schools are a public good closely associated with the issues related to the riot and to the social identity of the rioters (as African Americans), this provides initial evidence that the riot was effective in generating support for the rioters' policy demands.

Comparing these results to the same difference-in-differences in other parts of California bolsters the claim that this effect is due to the riot. The statewide difference-in-differences was close to zero, and the

¹¹All confidence intervals in this manuscript are bootstrapped.

county-level difference-in-differences in other large, urban counties not experiencing the riot, such as San Diego County (-0.007) and San Francisco County (-0.009), were also close to zero.

Results by Race

The population weighted means for both whites (0.033, CI: [0.029, 0.036]) and, especially, African Americans (0.080, [CI: 0.077, 0.083]) demonstrate an increased willingness to pay for public schools relative to universities (see bottom panels of Figure 1). Also evident in Figure 1, the distribution of EdDiff_i is wider for whites than it is for African-Americans, reflecting more variation in responses to the riot, as might be expected given more pre-riot heterogeneity among white voters in terms of distributive preferences.¹² The larger and more uniform shift by African Americans compared to whites is consistent with the claim that these changes are responses to the riot and not something else, and suggests that a significant portion of the effectiveness of violent protest comes from rallying support from people sharing an identity with the rioters, rather than from gaining support from outside groups.

This initial evidence establishes that a riot can be locally effective in driving policy support, whereby members of the public, even those perceived to be the target of the riot (whites) and especially those sharing an identity with the rioters (African Americans), vote in a way that meets the policy demands of rioters.

Changes in Policy Support by Distance from the Riot

We now turn to tests to better establish that the changes we observe were caused by the riot itself and are not a spurious association. Because we lack sufficient data to show parallel trends—the standard validity check in difference-in-differences analyses—we turn instead to correlations with distance to buttress our causal claims.

If changes in policy support were caused by the riot, then we would expect these changes to be correlated with distance from the riot because the salience of events can vary with a subject’s proximity to the event (Latané, 1981). Note that the direction of this effect may cut both ways; changes in support for public schools may increase or decrease with distance. Since the overall effect of the riot was an increase in support for school spending, we might expect this increase to be largest nearer to the center of the riots. However, there could be psychological forces that diminish as proximity to riot increases: a literature from psychology has demonstrated that traumatic events, such as violence, can induce increased discrimination toward the outgroup because of basic psychological motivations to look to the ingroup for protection during threat (Navarrete and Fessler, 2005) or because fear induces a need for belief-reinforcing self-esteem (Greenberg,

¹²A weighted T-test of the differences in means between EdDiff for whites and African Americans, yields $t = -38.75$, corresponding to a p-value < 0.01 .

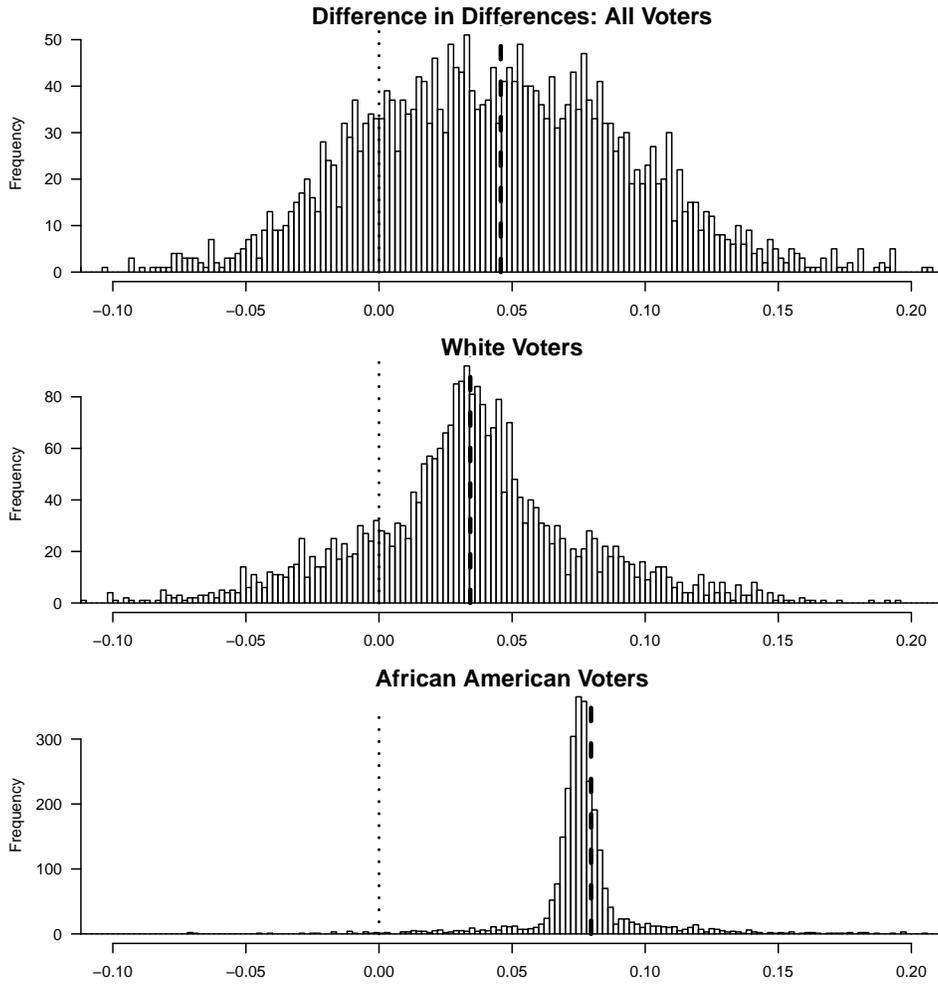


Figure 1: Histograms represent distribution of EdDiff_i for all voters (top), whites (middle), and African Americans (bottom) at the precinct level. Positive values represent an increase in support for public schools, net of changes in support for universities. The vertical line is the population-weighted mean of the difference-in-differences.

	White	Black	White	Black
Distance	-0.006 (0.004)	-0.011* (0.004)	0.063* (0.022)	-0.021 (0.017)
Distance ²			-0.028* (0.009)	0.006 (0.009)
Constant	0.041* (0.006)	0.085* (0.003)	0.001 (0.013)	0.088* (0.006)
Observations	1,534	1,534	1,534	1,534
R ²	0.002	0.006	0.010	0.006

Table 2: Relationship between **EdDiff** and distance from Florence and Normandie. OLS regression of **EdDiff_i** and distance from Florence and Normandie, measured in units of 10 kilometers. Standard errors are in parentheses. * represents $p < .05$.

Pyszczynski and Solomon, 1986). In fact, medical accounts of witnesses to the riot describe severe emotional trauma, and symptoms resembling post-traumatic stress disorder (Kim-Goh et al., 1995). Drawing on this literature, we might expect that white individuals for whom proximity to the riot induced greater fear will be more likely to withhold public goods from the outgroup than those living further away.

To test the relationship between distance and **EdDiff**, we estimate population-weighted precinct-level regressions treating **EdDiff_i** as our dependent variable and distance as our explanatory variable. These results are in Table 2. We include both linear and quadratic terms on distance to account for potentially nonlinear effects and find that as distance from Florence and Normandie increases, whites are more likely to support public schools relative to universities. In other words, whites closest to the riots experienced less change in their support for public school spending compared to whites further away.

In substantive terms, the quadratic model in the third column of Table 2 shows that a white voter residing in a precinct located 1 km from the epicenter of the riots has a predicted **EdDiff** of 0.006, a relatively small change in support for public schools relative to universities. Meanwhile, a white voter located 10 km from the riot has a positive predicted **EdDiff** of 0.035, suggesting a large increase in likelihood of supporting public schools relative to universities.¹³ That the riot increased support for public schools, a public good disproportionately serving African Americans, speaks to the effectiveness of the riot in achieving policy change. However, that this support declined for those closest to the riot speaks to a potential for reduced effectiveness of political violence to garner support if the fear and damage it engenders counteracts increases in sympathy.

By comparison, the relationship between distance and **EdDiff** for African American voters is substantially

¹³One potential explanation for this is that the pre-riot levels of support near the riot center were so high that this would present a “ceiling effect” whereby there was no room to increase. However, this appears not to be the case. Precincts within 1km of Florence and Normandie had 1990 levels of support at 57.7% for the universities initiative and 55.6% for the public schools initiative. These were close to the averages for precincts further away.

weaker and appears to be in the opposite direction of the relationship for whites. The relationship between distance and African American voter behavior is better captured by the linear model in column 2. For this group, the estimated coefficient on distance is negative and statistically significant, but relatively small in magnitude. For a African American voter residing 1 km from the riot epicenter, the predicted value of `EdDiff` is 0.084; her counterpart living 10 km away has a predicted value of 0.074. This is further evidence that African Americans experienced a more uniform change in support that cut across income and demographic lines, as might be expected if African Americans widely identified with the rioters.

That policy support change was correlated with distance from the riot reinforces the claim that the observed shifts were in response to the riot and not to some spurious variable. In order for an observed or unobserved variable to threaten the validity of our analysis it must be correlated with *both* `EdDiff` and with distance from the riots. In other words, any potential confounder would need to correlate with the difference in the change in voting over time and also with our measure of distance. Furthermore, this is evidence that the effect we measure in `EdDiff` is the effect of the riot itself and not of other related events, such as the media coverage of the trial or the beating, because there is no reason to believe changes in support for public goods caused by those events would be correlated with distance from the location of the riot.

Changes in Policy Support by Distance from other Places in Los Angeles

As a placebo test, we check for a systematic relationship between `EdDiff` and distance from locations other than Florence and Normandie. If there are no such relationships, this gives us greater confidence that the change is a reaction to the riot and not an unobserved variable. For each voting precinct in our data, we calculate the distance to that precinct from every other precinct, and, for white voters, regress `EdDiff` on distance using these alternative distance measures. We then compare the magnitudes of the resulting coefficient estimates to those described in Table 2.

We plot the results of this placebo procedure in Figure 2. Areas are shaded by the size of the African American population and the white star indicates the location of Florence and Normandie. Each point represents a placebo test, using distance from that location as the independent variable in the regression on `EdDiff`. The largest points correspond to places where the coefficient on distance is similar to that described in our original analysis above; smaller points indicate smaller coefficients. Note that the only area of statistically significant coefficients is located immediately south and west of Florence and Normandie; similarly, placebo tests conducted using distance from the large African American populations to the northwest produce coefficient estimates close to zero. Overall there is no evidence of a similar relationship between changes in policy support among whites and distance from any other point, other than those also near the riot. In the Appendix we show results from an additional placebo test, examining the relationship between

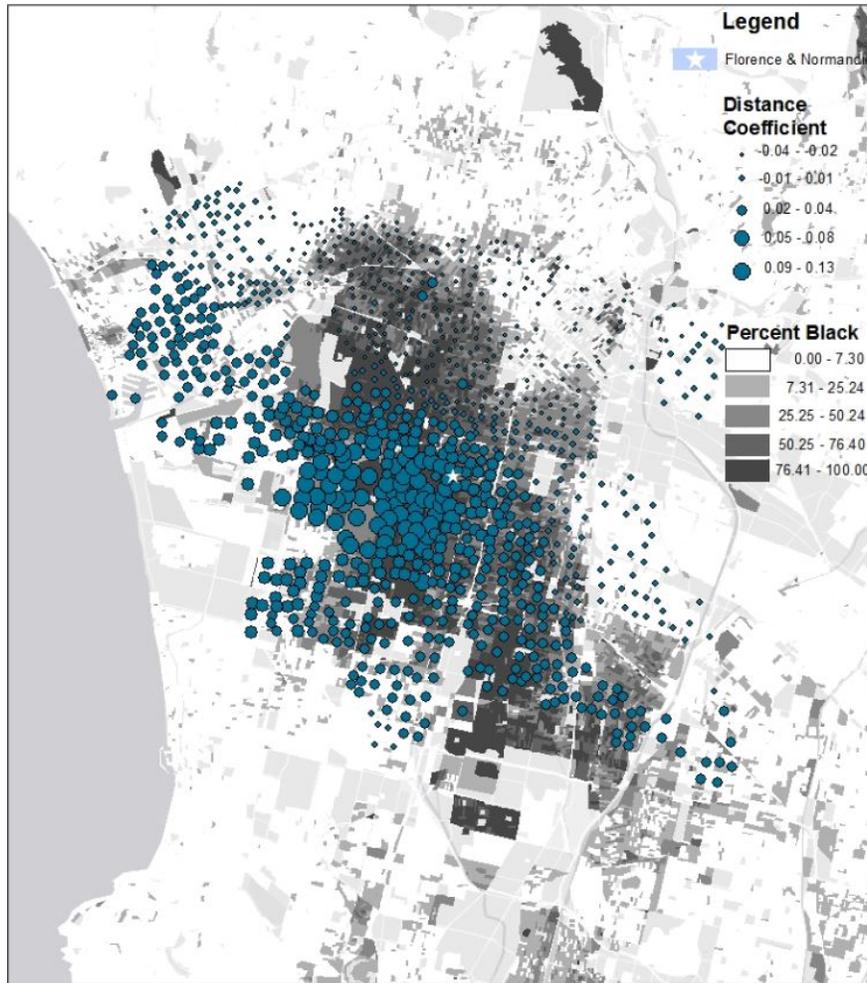


Figure 2: Relationship between distance and other points in the LA Basin. The coefficient on distance from other points and $EdDiff$. Larger points indicate higher (more positive) coefficients. Precincts are shaded by percent African American.

distance and the trend in ballot measure support in the years prior to the riots.

Exploring Possible Mechanisms for Increases in Policy Support

We have shown that Los Angeles voters increased their support for spending on public schools after the riot, holding constant support for spending on education more generally. Public education is a policy area associated with urban poverty and implicated in the demands of the rioters. This change, we claim, was a reaction to the riot, implying that violent protest can be a locally effective policy tool. We demonstrated that the change in support was much greater for African Americans than for whites, that changes in support were correlated with distance from the riot, and that changes in support were not correlated with distance

from other locations.

We now turn to testing the mechanisms for this phenomenon by examining attitude change, changes in the electorate, and changes in mobilization. While we cannot establish definitive connections between these variables and shifts in policy support, we believe the data more convincingly point to mobilization as the primary driver of the change.

Attitude Change

The LACSS data, the collection of which spanned the weeks surrounding the riot, allows us to test whether changes in aggregate policy support were accompanied by changes in attitudes among survey participants. The validity of our claims in this section rests on the assumption that those selected to be surveyed prior to the verdict are not systematically different from those sampled afterwards. To test this assumption, we examine balance on available covariates separately for whites and African Americans before and after the riots. The white sample is small ($n = 185$) and fails this balance test. As such, we do not examine changes in white policy attitudes. African American subjects, on the other hand, were well balanced across pre- and post-riot samples and comprised a sufficiently large sample ($n = 426$). Balance tables for both groups are displayed in the Appendix.

Regressions based on these survey results suggest that, despite changes in aggregate voting behavior, African American support for spending on “improving our nation’s education system”, as well as ideology on a liberal to conservative scale, remained constant post riot.

Changes in the Electorate

Another possible explanation for changes in policy support is that citizens exited the electorate due to the riot or to other, non-riot related, factors occurring at the time. Citizens may have moved, or simply “hunkered down” after the violence. Perhaps, for example, citizens opposed to spending on public education disproportionately moved out of the basin after the riot. Although difficult to test directly, we believe it is implausible that citizens relocated *en masse* within the brief intervening time period between the riot and the June election.

On the other hand, that citizens hunkered down and chose not to participate because of the riot seems more plausible. If this occurred, it would be evident in changes in voter turnout rather than registration rates. This is not immediately apparent in the data: turnout among registered voters in Los Angeles County increased by 10.6 percentage points between the 1990 and 1992 June elections. However, changes in turnout must be considered in light of secular changes that typically occur between a midterm election year, like 1990,

and a presidential election year, like 1992. Because turnout will be higher in a presidential year, decreases in turnout caused by the riot may have been masked by this secular trend. However, this does not appear to be the case in Los Angeles County because the increase in turnout between 1990 and 1992 was unusually high: it was higher than the average change of 6.0 percentage points in the next five largest California counties.¹⁴ This increase was also higher than the average change in turnout in the county between the two previous midterm and presidential primaries (2.1 percentage points) and the following two midterm and presidential primaries (7.6 percentage points). Contrary to a hunkering down mechanism, it appears that voter turnout did not decrease in Los Angeles because of the riot, and in fact may have increased dramatically.

Mobilization

Salient political events, such as elections, can cause voters to become active in politics through increased voter registration (Meredith et al., 2009). Could citizens have become politically active because the riot—a salient political event—raised their interest in politics, or because politicians used the riot to mobilize voters?

The riot may have mobilized African American voters who saw members of their ingroup intensely involved in politics, serving as a cue for the importance of political involvement or allowing for network effects to activate political participation. Recent violent protests in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland were followed by other forms of political participation in African American communities, such as continued protest via the Black Lives Matter movement. However, riots are also described in the scholarly literature as a form of political action undertaken because other forms are ineffective or unavailable (Sears and McConahay, 1973). Thus it is possible that African Americans, having turned to rioting because of frustration with more mainstream forms of participation, will not be mobilized by the riot into mainstream politics.

White voters may also be mobilized by the salient political event of the riot, but the ideological direction of the mobilization is less clear than for African Americans. Both conservative and liberal politicians may exploit the event to register sympathetic voters. While previous scholarship finds that African American political activism, especially when violent, leads to a conservative backlash in voting among whites, these studies do not explore voter registration and so it is unclear whether this backlash comes from newly mobilized voters. Alternately, low-propensity voters are also more likely to be Democrats (Enos, Fowler and Vavreck, 2014), so it may be previously unregistered Democrats who are most motivated by riot, causing an liberal uptick in registration.

Because we measure mobilization through changes in voter registration, we cannot separate political conversion, where voters who would have registered anyway register with a different party, from pure mobi-

¹⁴In 1990, by number of registered voters, these were San Diego, Orange, Santa Clara, Alameda, and Sacramento Counties.

lization, where voters who would not otherwise have registered do so because of the riot. However, in the survey data we see little ideological change among African Americans and, as we show below, levels of new registration were unusually high after the riot. Thus we have some reason to believe our findings reflect “pure” mobilization rather than conversion.

The riot appears to have a significant mobilizing effect. Examining the voter file, we see that in the week after the riot, despite the passage of the original registration deadline, 24,587 Los Angeles basin residents registered to vote. In the 20 weeks leading up to the riot, the mean number of registrants per week was 3,614 and the median was 3,292. In the week immediately prior to the riot, with the registration deadline looming, 5,579 people registered. The riot appears to be a tremendous mobilizing force.

A question remains as to whether this spike in registration was simply due to pent-up demand, i.e., a result of those who would have registered anyway but were prevented by the riot from doing so, or whether it reflects those who would not have otherwise registered in the absence of the riot. Isolating these two groups is impossible, but comparisons to other elections suggest that this spike reflects registration by those who would otherwise not have registered. The 2004 presidential primary in California provides a reasonable baseline because, as in 1992, the primary election involved choosing a Democratic candidate to run against an incumbent Republican president in the general election. Prior to the 2004 presidential primary, 31% of Angelenos who registered in the four weeks prior to the deadline did so in the last five weekdays leading up to the deadline. Meanwhile, those who registered in the five weekdays before the new, post-riot registration deadline in 1992 represent 45% of those who registered in the preceding four weeks.

Not only did the riot appear to be a mobilizing force, but it appears to have registered a different demographic than those registering in the absence of a riot. Using the covariates available in the voter file, we see systematic differences in the composition of those who registered just before and just after the riot. We summarize this data in Table 3. Notably, compared to those registering before the riot, those registered after the riot are of similar age, but are more likely to be African American, less likely to be white, more likely to be female, and more likely to live closer to Florence and Normandie (see Appendix). This too is consistent with a mobilizing effect of the riot.

We also examine whether the riot changed the probability that new voters register as Democrats or Republicans. We display these results in Table 4, where $\text{Pr}(\text{Reg Republican})$ is the proportion of registrants who affiliated with the Republican party out of the total new registrants, and $\text{Pr}(\text{Reg Democratic})$ is the proportion who registered as Democrats. Consistent with the overall liberalizing effect of the riot, both white and African American voters decreased Republican registration and increased Democratic registration; however, given the already very high Democratic identification among African Americans voters, the changes among this group are small.

	Before Riot	After Riot
African American	0.14	0.28
White	0.66	0.54
Age	35.23	34.26
Male	0.52	0.53
Distance from Florence/Normandie	14,649	12,387
N	5,579	24,587

Table 3: Demographics of registrants immediately before and after the riot. Before Riot includes new registrants on the five weekdays before the riot (4/22–24 and 4/27–28) and After Riot includes the five weekdays after the riots (5/4–8). All variables are proportions, except for age (years) and distance (meters).

	Before riot	After riot	Difference	p value	N
White Pr(Reg Republican)	0.36	0.25	-0.11	0.00	3,392
White Pr(Reg Democratic)	0.64	0.75	0.11	0.00	9,083
Black Pr(Reg Republican)	0.04	0.03	-0.02	0.05	184
Black Pr(Reg Democratic)	0.96	0.97	0.02	0.05	6,104

Table 4: Post-riot partisan shift among new voter registrations by White and African Americans. P values generated by T-test for difference of means.

Our ballot data indicates that the difference in votes cast for public schools and universities went from -7,798 votes in 1990 to 64,448 votes in 1992, a swing of 72,246 votes. Although it is impossible to determine how much of this swing was due to the mobilizing effect of the riot, we note that the 24,587 people registered in the wake of the riot could represent a large portion of that shift. Furthermore, most of the new registrants were African American Democrats, the voters who appear to have shifted the most in support of public schools.

As noted above, the riot may have increased mobilization through a variety of channels and, as such, is a bundled treatment. The increase could come from a piqued interest in politics that results directly from the riot or from the indirect effect of politicians using the riot to mobilize supporters. However, these shifts are particularly notable because such large-scale changes in party registration over this short of a period do not usually occur in modern American politics (e.g., Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002); Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson (2002)), suggesting that the riot was a rare and dramatic political event.

Long-term Shifts in Registration and Participation

This mobilization may have downstream effects as those mobilized remain active in politics and influence policy at a later date. We check for the long-term persistence of both party identification and voter participation among those mobilized by the violent protest to measure the long-term effectiveness of violent protest as a policy tool. Voters are socialized by salient events which shape their long-term partisanship, so we might believe that voter registration resulting from the riot will show greater partisan stability than

White Before-Riot				
		2005		
		Dem	Rep	Total
1992	Dem	0.82 (683)	0.08 (70)	0.90 (753)
	Rep	0.12 (52)	0.77 (327)	0.90 (379)

White After-Riot				
		2005		
		Dem	Rep	Total
1992	Dem	0.81 (2993)	0.08 (292)	0.89 (3285)
	Rep	0.13 (145)	0.77 (831)	0.90 (976)

African American Before-Riot				
		2005		
		Dem	Rep	Total
1992	Dem	0.87 (291)	0.03 (10)	0.90 (301)
	Rep	0.35 (6)	0.59 (10)	0.94 (16)

African American After-Riot				
		2005		
		Dem	Rep	Total
1992	Dem	0.87 (2598)	0.04 (118)	0.91 (2716)
	Rep	0.36 (29)	0.52 (42)	0.88 (71)

Table 5: Long-term partisan stability for those registering pre and post riot. Proportion of party registrants in 2005 by registration in 1992, separately for whites and African Americans registering before and after the riot. Columns totals do not add up to 100% because of movement to minor parties or non-declared.

usual. However, the riot being an extraordinary event, possibly used by politicians to register voters who would otherwise not be registered, might mean that voter participation activated by the riot will wane over time.

Merging the 1992 voter file with the 2005 file allows us to observe the behavior of those treated by the riot, over a decade after it occurred. In Table 5, we show changes in party registration probabilities between 1992 and 2005 of both white and African American voters, among those who registered immediately before or after the riots. Both white and African American voters who registered after the riots were more likely to register as Democrats, and less likely to register as Republicans, in 1992. Looking at those same individuals in 2005, party registration is highly consistent, with those registering after the riot, regardless of party, as likely, if not more, than those registering before to have the same partisan affiliation in 2005 as in 1992.

Among white voters, 82% of Democrats and 77% of Republicans registering after the riot kept their party affiliation, comparable to those registering before the riot. For African Americans, 87% of Democrats registered after the riot remained Democrats. This is identical to the stability for Democrats before the riot and higher than the stability for whites. African American Republicans show considerably less stability, but their number is small.

We can benchmark this registration by examining the stability of partisanship reported in Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002), who argued that partisan identity is a social identity after comparing its long-term stability to other important identity-categories, such as race and religion. Using survey panel data, they found that between 1992 and 1996, 78% of partisans kept their same affiliation. In our data, those registering in Los Angeles in 1992 in the wake of the riot were at least, if not more, likely to keep their same partisan affiliation.

Having established that the extended registration period produced lasting effects on registrants' party

affiliations, we turn to the question of long-term participation. In tables in the Appendix, we examine the difference in turnout in the 2004 primary and general elections for those registering before and after the riot by regressing turnout in those elections on the variable indicating whether an individual registered immediately before or after the riot. Notably, both with demographic controls and without, for both whites and African Americans over 10 years after the riot, the coefficient on registering before or after the riot does not attain statistical significance and, in several cases, is a precisely-estimated zero, indicating that those who were motivated to register by the riot voted just as regularly as those registering under normal circumstances, even when holding demographic differences constant. This is true even in primary elections where participation is often limited to the most politically active citizens. Combined with the stability of partisanship, the long-term mobilization of post-riot registrants as regular participators is a sign of the potential long-term effects of the riot: citizens appear to have joined the party sympathetic to the demands of the rioters and not only remained in that party, but remained active citizens. If the shift in policy support observed in the referendum voting remains in the long-term vote choices of these citizens, this speaks to the long-term ability of rioting to affect policy.

Conclusion and Discussion

We have provided evidence, which is plausibly causally identified, for the effect of a violent protest on local policy support. Our results indicate that a riot can help to accomplish policy or symbolic goals by mobilizing supporters or building sympathy among others. We showed that white and African American voters were mobilized to register as Democrats and shifted their policy support toward public schools, net of a general shift in support for education. This mobilization appears to have persisted: those mobilized by the riot remained regular participators over a decade later and remained more Democratic than the general population, even after accounting for demographics.

Why Do Our Results Differ from Previous Scholarship?

Our finding is strikingly inconsistent with previous literature. In both the American and comparative context scholars have found that political violence is associated with a “backlash” effect; voters behave unsympathetically towards the perceived rioting group. In the United States, this means increased support for social and politically conservative candidates and policies. A common argument in the literature is that the string of riots in the 1960s caused large proportions of white voters to abandon support for the liberal welfare state, which, especially since the Great Society of Lyndon Johnson, had been rhetorically framed around curing inner-city poverty associated with African Americans. Those riots are said to have caused

changes in partisanship and voting behavior that ushered in the rise of Nixon and Reagan-era conservatism that still affects American politics today.

Our findings may differ from these prior studies because the series of riots in the 1960s had non-linear effects; perhaps while a single riot invokes sympathy, a series of riots provokes backlash. The difference between local and non-local effects may also be consequential: those observing the riot from afar may lack sympathy because they do not share an identity with the rioters. Much of the previous literature examining the political effects of urban riots in the United States neglects whether those riots helped galvanize African American voters, a population that could be consequential in local policy voting, especially given the large populations of African Americans in the areas where riots occurred.

Our findings may also differ because of the distinct context of the riots being studied—perhaps Los Angeles is unusually sympathetic to demands of the rioters. However, this explanation is unlikely given that Los Angeles County in the early 1990s was the type of place in which one would *a priori* expect a backlash against a riot. At that time, Southern California was considered a conservative stronghold in a Republican-leaning state (between 1900 and 1992, California elected only three Democrats as governor).

Another important consideration is that previous findings may be biased: despite making widespread claims about the effects of riots, most previous studies lack reliable evidence about whether riots actually cause the changes ascribed to them. To our knowledge, there have been no well-identified studies of the effects of violent protest on policy outcomes.¹⁵ Rather, to understand the effects of riots, scholars have had to depend on post-treatment measures of single riots or cross-sectional studies of riots across multiple cities. Such cross-sectional studies must rely on the strong assumption that a riot’s occurrence is uncorrelated with other variables that may affect politics downstream. Given that policy-oriented and scholarly accounts of riots treat them as non-random events caused by particular social and institutional forces (United States National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968; Olzak, Shanahan and McEneaney, 1996), this assumption seems implausible.

In fact, the use of cross-sectional data presents an acute threat of bias in the estimates of the effects of riots on behavior that may explain why previous studies have associated riots with a backlash. If there is a pre-existing trend in attitudes or policies to which rioters are reacting—that is, if riots are motivated by actions or policies that reflect locally unfavorable treatment or opinion by the majority, as the scholarly literature asserts—then local public opinion measured after a riot will be confounded by the conservative shift already underway.

¹⁵One possible exception is Wasow (2016), who uses an instrument for riots following the death of Martin Luther King to measure the effects of riots on conservative voting.

Conclusion

Here we offer evidence that riots may change policy support locally in a direction sympathetic to the demands of the rioters. As such, we provide a nuanced understanding of how large-scale changes in American politics in the last half-century are linked to urban unrest, and how recent events may shape local politics in the future.

We have focused on violent protest as a political tool for a low-status group in the United States. While other scholarship has examined other forms of political action and asked if it is efficacious for racial minorities and other low-status groups (Verba et al., 1995), the scholarly literature has largely failed to ask whether rioting is a useful tool for accomplishing political goals, even though, from the perspective of the rioters, this question is paramount. Here we show that violent political protest can spur political participation among people who share an identity with the rioters.

Although it often seems extreme from the American perspective, political violence is not isolated to a particular time and place and is not rare in many parts of the world. Moreover, the implicit threat of violence underlies the relationship between governments and citizens in many places. As the use of violence continues to be an active feature of our political system, our findings and approach may help future scholars better understand this important topic.

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