

The page features a red decorative shape in the top-left corner and a blue decorative shape in the bottom-left corner, both with curved edges. The main text is centered in the white space between them.

Quantifying the Effects of Protests on Voter Registration and Turnout

**Study II of "Protests, Politics, and Power:
Exploring the Connections Between Youth
Voting and Youth Movements"**

August 2021

Quantifying the Effects of Protests on Voter Registration and Turnout

Study II of “Protests, Politics, and Power: Exploring the Connections Between Youth Voting and Youth Movements”

Authors

John Holbein, PhD, Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Education, Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, University of Virginia

Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, PhD, Director, Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life

Tova Wang, J.D., Democracy Fellow, Ash Center, Harvard Kennedy School

We acknowledge the contribution of **Nicholas Flanagan** in collecting and processing the data for this report. We wish to thank **L2** for providing the voter file data and the Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC)—specifically **Jeremy Pressman** and **Erica Chenoweth**—for their large efforts in continually collecting and cleaning the protest data. We thank **Alberto Medina** for editing this report and the **Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy** for financial and logistical support.

This research was completed with generous support from: New Venture Fund, CIRCLE, League of Conservation Voters, Villanova University's Department of Education & Counseling, Harvard Kennedy School Ash Center for Democratic Governance & Innovation.

CIRCLE, the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life, served as coordinator for the research.

Suggested Citation: Holbein, J., Kawashima-Ginsberg, K., Wang, T. (2021) *Quantifying the Effects of Protests on Voter Registration and Turnout* (Study II of Protests, Politics, and Power: Exploring the Connections Between Youth Voting and Youth Movements). Medford, MA: CIRCLE, Tufts University.



Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Quantitative Approach and Key Takeaways.....	3
Key Takeaways.....	3
Estimating the Impact of Trump-Era Protests on Youth Voter Registration and Turnout.....	5
Where Did Protests Occur? How Many Youth Could and Did Attend Them?	6
Figure 1. Counties Where At Least One Protest was Reported, 2017-2020	6
Figure 2. Average Travel Distance to Protest by County of Residence, 2017-2020	7
Table 1. The Percentage of the Population (of Various Voting-Eligible Age Groups) Who Lived in a County Where At Least One Protest Was Reported in 2017-2020	7
Figure 3: Timing and Types of Social Protests During the Trump Era	8
Table 2. Community Civic, Economic and Political Climate & the Occurrence of Protests	9
Protest Participation Increased during the Trump Era, Especially among Youth	9
Figure 4. Patterns in Self-Reported Participation in Protests, Pre- and Post-Trump ..	10
Figure 5. Youth (Ages 18-24) Protest Attendance and Other Forms of Political Engagement.....	11
Data and Methods for Estimating the Impact of Social Protests on Youth Voter Registration and Voting.....	11
Impact of Social Protests on Youth Registration and Voting.....	12
Figure 6. Key Findings of the Effect of Recent Protests on Youth Voter Registration .	12
The Effect of Trump-Era Protests on Youth Voter Registration.....	13
Figure 8: Distribution of Registration Effects by Climate Protest v. Other (all age groups).....	14
Why Do We Observe a Positive Effect of Climate Change Protests on Voter Registration?	14
Why Do We Observe No Effect on Voter Registration From Many Other Protest Types?	15
The Effect of Trump-Era Protests on Youth Voter Turnout.....	15
The Effect of the George Floyd Murder and Racial Justice Protests on Voter Registration.....	16
Figure 10. Effect of George Floyd’s Murder on Voter Registration, 18-19-year-olds....	19
Conclusion and Recommendations for Youth Organizers	19
References.....	22

Introduction

The first report in this series on youth activism and voting offered qualitative interview and survey-based findings about the role of voting within youth-led social movement organizations' (SMOs) theories of change and the work they do to engage voters. In this report we shift to a set of quantitative analyses on a related topic: the impact of individual social justice protest events on youth voter registration and youth voter turnout.

These analyses use data from public-use voter files, other public data sources (e.g., the American Community Survey, IRS Charitable Donations data, etc.), and crowd-sourced data on recent protests to better understand the effect of these protests on youth voter registration and turnout. This analysis also explores how the focus, size, and location of these protests may influence their broader impacts.

Quantitative Approach and Key Takeaways

As we describe in the next section, there are reasons to suggest that protests could have positive, negative, or no effects at all on youth voting. We took a two-step approach to understanding the impact of a protest occurring in a young person's geographic area on voter registration and turnout. First, we explored the prevalence of recent protests and their geographic distribution. This involved mapping protests' location using precise geo-coding, which allows for a better understanding of the accessibility of protests to individuals of various backgrounds. This first step also involved exploring how young people participate in protests. Therein, we include evidence of an increase in self-reported rates of protesting among youth and the general population.

Second, we estimated the impact of protests on voter registration and turnout during the Trump presidency. This involved using multiple data sources and methods to estimate the effect of protests on voter registration patterns during that time period. These analyses focused on young people of various age groups (including 18-30, 18-19, 20-23, and 24-30)¹, as well as on young people of various races, ethnicities, genders, political parties, and estimated income levels. When possible, effects were separately examined by the purpose of protest activities (i.e., pro- or anti-Trump protests, Black Lives Matter protests, All Lives Matter protests, gun control protests, and climate change protests). Our description of the datasets used for the analyses and detailed explanations of the analytic approaches are provided below and in the Appendix to this report.

Key Takeaways

1. There has been a sizable increase in protest accessibility and participation among young people in the Trump era, with a sharp increase observed in 2018.

¹ The rationale for examining all "30-and-under" and smaller age groups has to do with: 1) developmental progression of voter experiences; and 2) generational differences between Millennials (born between 1982-1995) and GenZs (born 1996 and later). For instance, 18- and 19-year-olds are true "first-time" federal election voters, meaning they have more educational and information needs than other ages. In 2020, 18- to 23-year-olds represented the GenZ generation and youth ages 24-30 fell into the Millennial generation. Though generational cutoffs are not an empirical marker, CIRCLE's research tends to find meaningful differences between millennials and GenZs (many of whom were in high school or college when the Parkland school shooting occurred, and were not of voting age when President Trump was elected in 2016).

2. Most of the Bible Belt and the Great Plain residents would have to drive hundreds of miles to get to the nearest protest if they wanted to participate in person, which may have contributed to lower rates of participation among this group.
3. Communities with higher levels of civic infrastructure—as captured by the presence of youth nonprofits and high rates of charitable donation in the years prior to the Trump era—were more likely to have had protests.
4. With regards to youth voter registration, we found that:
 - a. Simply having a protest in a county typically did not have a measurable effect on voter registration among youth overall, or among any subgroup of youth, in that county or surrounding areas.
 - b. Counties where more climate change protests occurred had modestly higher rates of youth voter registration. These increases are similar across youth of various races, ethnicities, genders, political party affiliations, and estimated income levels—and are similar to the effects observed among older citizens.
 - c. The counties that had protests pushing for more gun control had slightly lower youth voter registration rates than those that had no or fewer such protests in that same month. It remains unclear whether this is because gun control protests took place in counties that were somehow different from counties that did not have protests (apart from the factors that our models can account for), such as having pre-existing lower patterns of voter registration.
 - d. There was a modest but significant uptick (which varied in size across states) in the number of voter registrations that occurred in the days after George Floyd’s murder and the large-scale protests that followed in 2020. The effect is strongest among 18- and 19-year-olds, among whom the effect is largely consistent and positive. For the general electorate, the overall effect is null, but it is statistically significant among people of color, those of high-income, and those who are Democrats.
 - e. Pro-Trump, anti-Trump, Black Lives Matter (separate from those that took place following the murder of George Floyd), and All Lives Matter protests had no effect on rates of youth voter registration in the counties in which they occurred.
 - f. In instances where protests increased youth voter registration, there is oftentimes evidence of both mobilization and counter-mobilization. Protests that better align their mission and agenda with left-leaning causes sometimes increase registration rates among Democrats and Republicans; the same is true for protests that align their mission with right-leaning causes.
5. With regards to youth voter turnout in the 2018 and 2020 elections, we found:
 - a. Simply having a protest in a county does not have a detectable effect on voter turnout among youth of any subgroup in that county.
 - b. Youth voter turnout was about 1 percentage point higher in counties adjacent to where a protest was held.
 - c. When a county had more pro-Trump protests, that county had about 1 percentage point higher voter turnout among youth (and about 1-2 percentage points among other subsets of the public) than those that had no pro-Trump protests.
 - d. When a county had Black Lives Matter or All Lives Matter protests, that county had a turnout rate among young people that was about 1-2 percentage points higher. The effect on other subsets of the electorate ranged from a 1-4 percentage point increase.

- e. The counties that had more pro-gun control rallies had slightly (1 percentage point) lower youth voter turnout. It remains unclear whether this is because gun control protests took place in counties that were somehow different from counties that did not have protests (apart from the factors that our difference-in-differences model can account for), such as having pre-existing lower patterns of turnout.
- f. Anti-Trump and climate change protests in a county did not appear to affect youth voter turnout in that county.

These findings indicate that the relationship between protest events and youth voter registration and participation is complex. Below, we describe our findings in more detail in two sections – describing the overall trends and locations of protests in the United States and then summarizing the impact of protests happening in the same or the adjacent county on voter registration and turnout among youth of various subgroups and the general electorate.

Estimating the Impact of Trump-Era Protests on Youth Voter Registration and Turnout

Protests could have four different types of observable and short-term effects:

1. A direct and positive impact on youth voter registration and voting via direct targeting.
2. An indirect but positive impact on youth voter registration and voting because young voters are influenced by what they think their peers do (Commission of Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge 2013) and what they hear about the election from family and friends and from the media (CIRCLE 2020).
3. A negative impact on youth voter registration and voting because protest participants and their non-participating peers may get demoralized about the feasibility of achieving positive social change via voting. Protests may convince young people that direct action is the only/best way to affect change in the policy arena.
4. No effect on youth voter registration and voting for several reasons. It could be that protests inspire and directly engage high-propensity young voters who would have already registered and voted even without a protest near them. Though CIRCLE has found that those who participated in protests were in fact *more* likely to say they voted than those who did not, it is possible that this difference is not because the protests *caused* participants to want to vote more, but rather that protests draw in a particularly active subset of young people who were already going to vote before attending the protest. The effect on protests on non-protesting peers is not well-understood. It is also possible that, though protesting is increasingly a common way for young people to express their views and to advance reforms, it may not be a way to influence registration and voting numbers.² This could be because protests (at least in person) are not happening near enough to young people's homes; because some protests engage a relatively small number of young people; because filling out registration forms at a protest is not effective given the surrounding conditions; or because youth-led protests have a "sleeper-effect," meaning that the impact of protests led by Generation Z may not emerge clearly for some years because young voters continue to face more barriers to voting than older voters, and it usually takes multiple cycles for young people to habituate into voting

² Some research has examined the relationship between protests and political outcomes (Enos et al. 2019; Madestam et al. 2013; Reny and Newman 2021; Wasow 2020). However, most of these look at historical protests (e.g., civil rights protests in the 1960s) and most look at election outcomes or political attitudes (rather than political *behavior*).

regularly. It's also possible that the long-term impact of youth-led protests will be observable outside of the voter registration rate and turnout figures, such as in a more diverse and progressive political pipeline for public offices at local and national levels, higher rates of donations to political candidates and causes, and other forms of civic engagement outside of voting.

Where Did Protests Occur? How Many Youth Could and Did Attend Them?

Our findings suggest that recent protests occurred throughout the country, but there were many areas where protests were inaccessible. Over the four years this study covered, 52% of U.S. counties had at least one protest, meaning the other half did not (Figure 1). Protests appear to have been less accessible in the so-called Bible Belt (regions covering most of the South, Oklahoma, Northern Texas and Northern Florida, plus Utah) and the Great Plains (the middle vertical band of the country, roughly covering North Dakota, South Dakota, Eastern Wyoming, Eastern Montana, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Northern Texas) in that people had to travel well over an hour by car—75 miles or more—in those areas. Outside of those two areas, people usually would not have had to travel such long distances to attend a protest (Figure 2). Our analysis of protest locations by topic/cause further indicated that an overwhelming majority of protests in 2017-2020 were anti-Trump, with the number of Black Lives Matter protests, for example, dwarfing the number of All Lives Matter protests. The various types of protests also varied in terms of their timing and intensity,. Additional maps of protests by protests type are included in the Appendix (see Appendix Figures 1 – 8 therein).

Figure 1. Counties Where At Least One Protest was Reported, 2017-2020

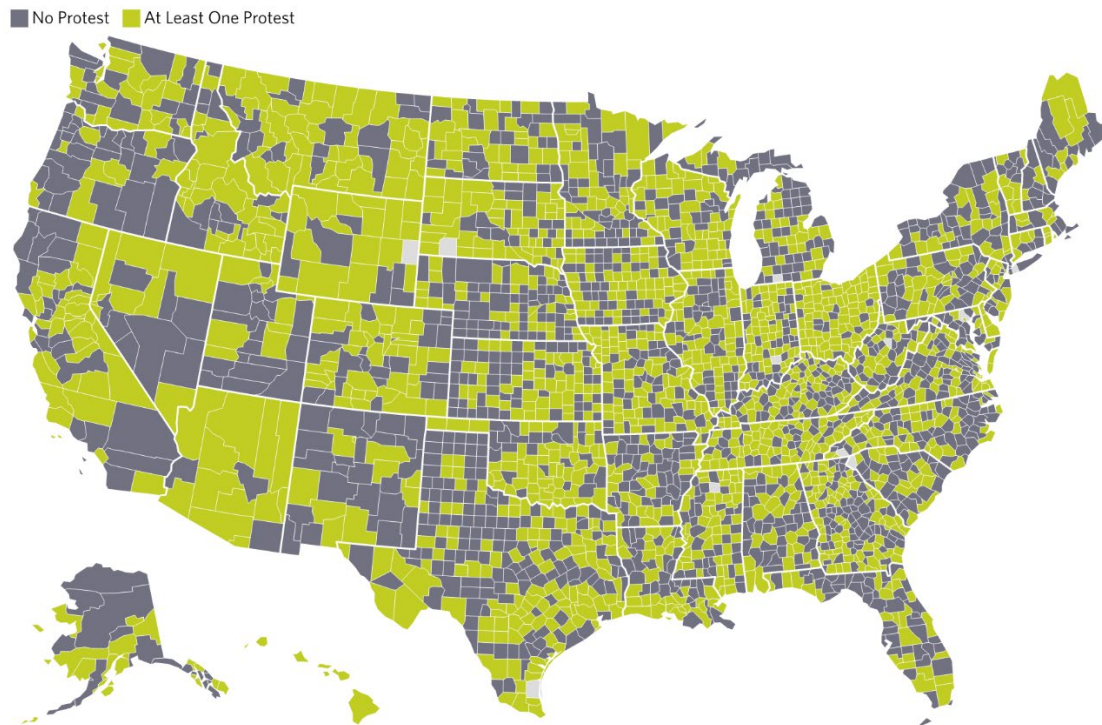
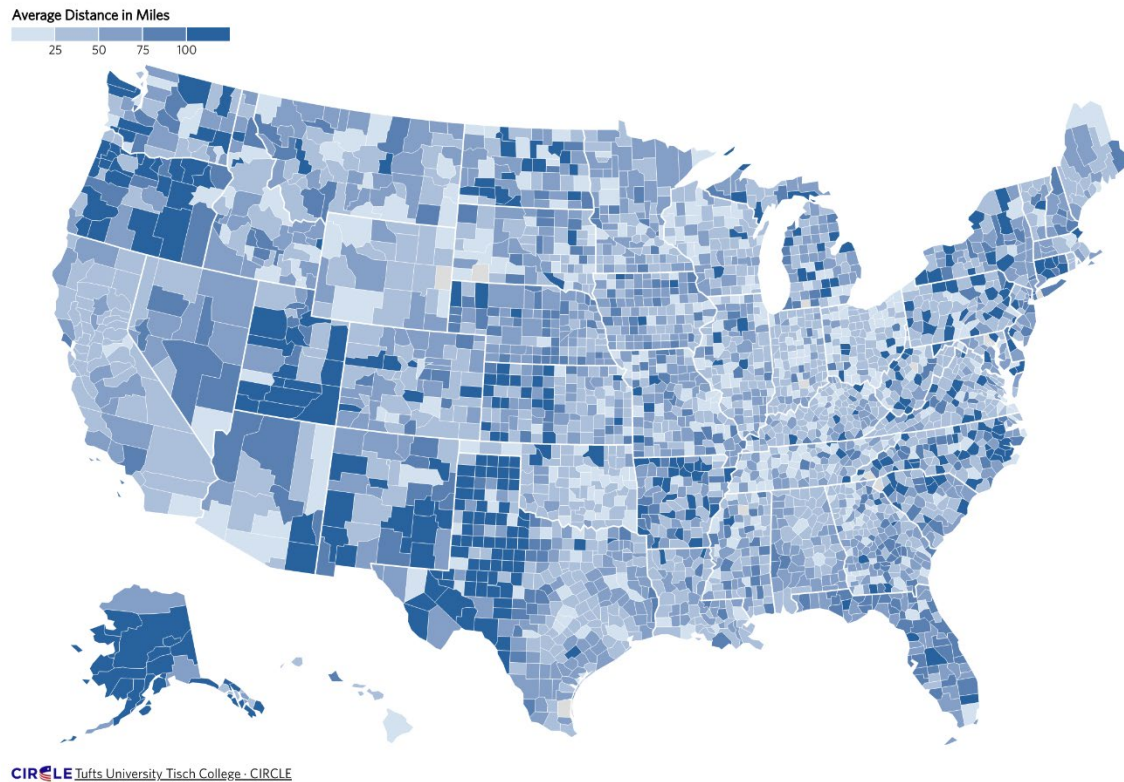


Figure 2. Average Travel Distance to Protest by County of Residence, 2017-2020



Our analysis of the data on protests during the 2017-2020 calendar years³ shows that the number of protests hit an overall high watermark in 2018. In 2020 we saw the lowest number of protests overall in the last three years, almost certainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic; the exceptions were protests organized by supporters of President Trump and those for the BLM movement, which peaked in that year (see Figure 3). except) That said, in part due to protests occurring in high-population and population-dense locations (e.g., the Northeast and the Washington, D.C., metro area), the proportion of youth and of the voting-age population who could go to a protest in the same county remained relatively high in 2020 compared to 2018 (see Table 1).

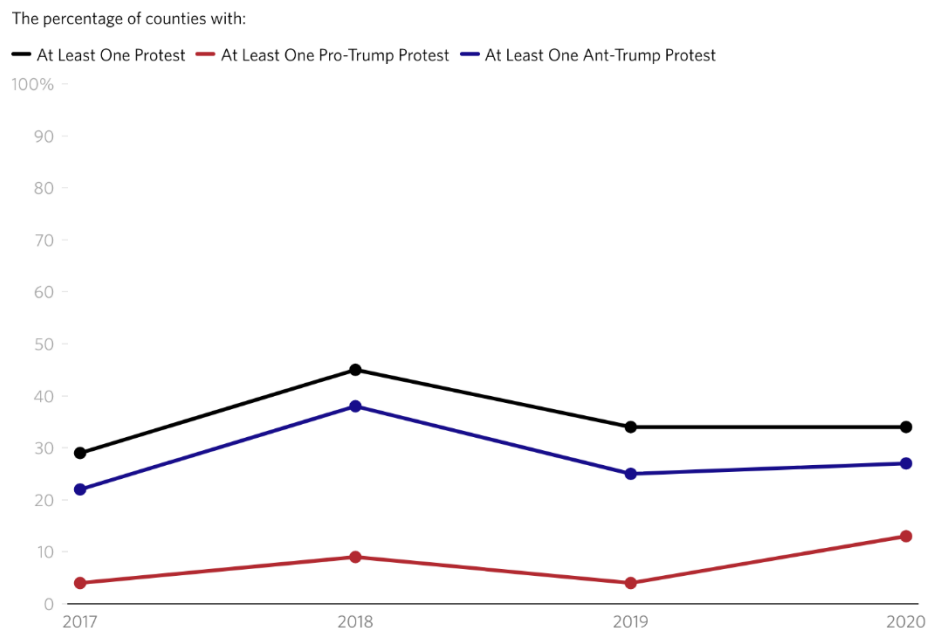
Table 1. The Percentage of the Population (of Various Voting-Eligible Age Groups) Who Lived in a County Where At Least One Protest Was Reported in 2017-2020

	2017	2018	2019	2020
Ages 18-24	34%	51%	41%	43%
Ages 18-29	34%	51%	41%	43%
Ages 30+	33%	51%	41%	42%

CIRCLE Tufts University Tisch College · CIRCLE

³ We aggregated age group (18- to 24-year-olds, 18- to 29-year-olds, and 30+) population counts from counties in which at least one protest activity was detected in each of the study years (2017-2020) and divided this figure by the national population for that same age group. By doing so, we can estimate the proportion of the U.S. population who *could have* attended a protest without traveling outside of their county of residence.

Figure 3: Timing and Types of Social Protests During the Trump Era



Note: This figure plots the fraction of counties with various types of protests in the given years shown on the x-axis. The blue line shows anti-Trump protests, while the red line shows pro-Trump protests and the black line shows all protest types.

Takeaway: Protests peaked in 2018 and declined in 2020, except for among pro-Trump protestors.

CIRCLE Tufts University Tisch College - CIRCLE

Source: Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC) dataset described in the Appendix

A notable increase in protest locations in 2018 is likely attributable to multiple youth-led marches, protests, and town hall community events that often traveled across the country as a ‘tour,’ which often accompanied voter registration activities. For example, March for Our Lives’ Road to Change 2018 bus tour visited 80 communities during the summer, and each stop included voter registration efforts. As seen in our voter registration and turnout analysis, the challenge may be that these short-term activities may inspire others and galvanize people’s commitment to a movement but do not leave local capacity, supporters, and resources behind to continue to register and turn out potential voters for months and years to come. Moreover, these efforts may simply be offering registration opportunities to young people who would have registered anyway through other means even if the event had not occurred.

To better understand why protests occurred where they did, we merged protest location data from the [Crowd Counting Consortium](#) (CCC, also see Appendix) with CIRCLE’s RAYSE Index data,⁴ which in essence describes community conditions that could be optimal for mobilizing young voters at the county level. This measure has been designed to help researchers better identify potential community conditions that may make protests—and other forms of civic engagement—more likely to occur.

In this analysis, we found that the counties where protests were happening were no more likely than counties without protests to be in “political battlegrounds.” Residents of these protest counties were also no wealthier than those of other counties. What did seem to matter is the presence of

⁴ RAYSE was first calculated as an unadjusted rating which was an average of the five factor and index scores calculated as a standardized Z-score. We then “adjusted” the RAYSE rating by subtracting scores from counties that either had; 1) very affluent; 2) already had very high youth voter participation; and 3) had population smaller than 2,000 (because estimates are unreliable for those sparse geography) because the index aimed to point to counties where *high potentials* for youth engagement existed. See more information and a full technical documentation at https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2020-01/rayse_index_sources_methodology.pdf

existing organizations—particularly those focusing on young people, long-term residents, and a culture of giving and educated residents. Each of these made it more likely for a protest to arise in that specific area. These findings largely affirm what organizers have already said: that building capacity in local communities as part of a longer-term vision is critical for a community’s ability to mobilize its citizens in various forms of civic engagement, including via protests and voter registration.

Table 2. Community Civic, Economic and Political Climate & the Occurrence of Protests

Community Characteristics	Higher in Counties where Protests Occurred Each Year	Higher in Counties where Protests Occurred Each Year	Higher in Counties where Protests Occurred Each Year	Higher in Counties where Protests Occurred Each Year
	2017	2018	2019	2020
RAYSE 2016 Unadjusted Score	+	**	*	*
RAYSE 2016 Adjusted Score	*	**	*	**
Historically Competitive Presidential Elections	-	-	-	-
Youth Population Relative to The General Electorate	-	-	-	-
Potential for Higher Youth Turnout (based on registration and population patterns)	-	-	-	-
Educational Quality and Educational Attainment	***	***	***	***
Quality of Life (amenities, access)	+	**	+	*
Economic Health	-	-	-	-
Community Safety (e.g., violent crime)	-	-	-	-
Civic Culture and Nonprofit Infrastructure	**	*	***	**
Residential Youth Stability, Adult Availability	***	***	***	***
Proportion of Nonprofits That Focus on Youth	*	**	***	***
Culture of Giving and Association (2015)	*	***	**	***

Notes: Markers indicate statistical significance: - no significant difference, + p. < 0.10, * p. < .05, ** p. < 0.01, ***, P. < 0.001. The more asterisks mean that the effects were more stable and usually larger. Each row represent a characteristic of a county that made up a “civic infrastructure” such as nonprofit organizations focused on youth development, culture of giving among its residents, and access to broadband internet and open and green space to gather. Analysis used to compare protest and non-protest communities was student’s t-test. Takeaway: communities that already had places for civic participation and social connection as well as access to information and education were more likely to have protests between 2017 and 2020.

CIRCLE Tufts University Tisch College - CIRCLE

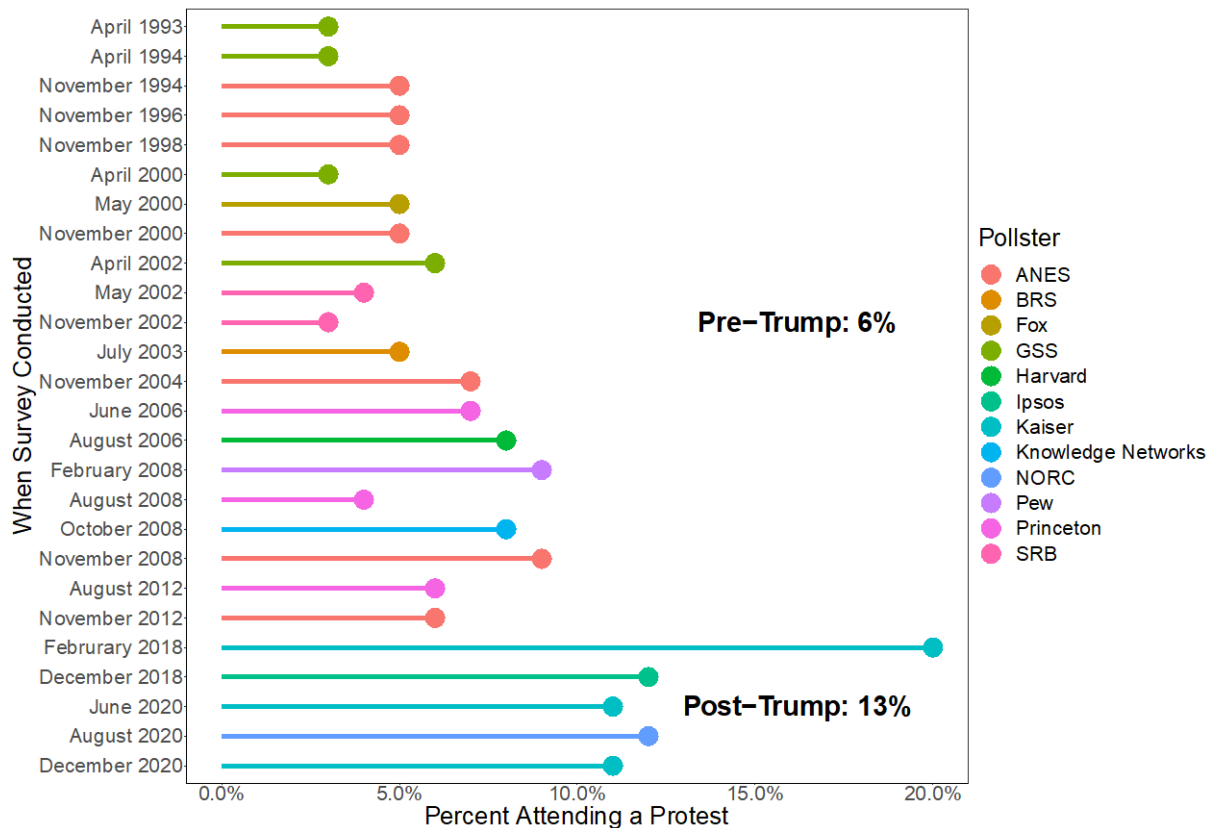
Protest Participation Increased during the Trump Era, Especially among Youth

Our data indicate that the period we are focusing on—between President Trump assuming office in January 2017 and leaving office in January 2021—has been one of the most active times of participation in social protest in our country’s recent history. Figure 4 illustrates this by plotting self-reported rates of participation in social protest in the years before former President Trump was elected and after he came into office. It includes all national representative surveys that measured protest participation among the electorate.

As the figure shows, in the pre-Trump period, participation in social protest was a relatively rare event. The percent of surveyed individuals engaging in a protest (typically these questions ask if respondents have done so in the past 12 months) varied somewhat before Trump came into power, but generally averaged about 6% (close to 1 in every 20 citizens). After Trump was elected, however, that number more than doubled to 13% (or about 1 in every 8 citizens). When it comes to young

people, there is good evidence that protest participation has surged even higher in the last five years. According to [recent nationally representative surveys by CIRCLE](#), while just 5% of 18- to 24-year-olds in the United States participated in marches and demonstration in the year before the 2016 election, this number grew to 16% and in 2018 and 27% in 2020—a *more than five-fold increase* over 2016 (see Figure 5). Though this survey data cannot be merged with geo-coded protests data,⁵ it is notable that more young people see themselves as protest-goers and are making going to protest a normative act of self-expression. Truly, “the Trump years [have] launched the biggest protest movement in U.S. history” (Chenoweth et al. 2021).

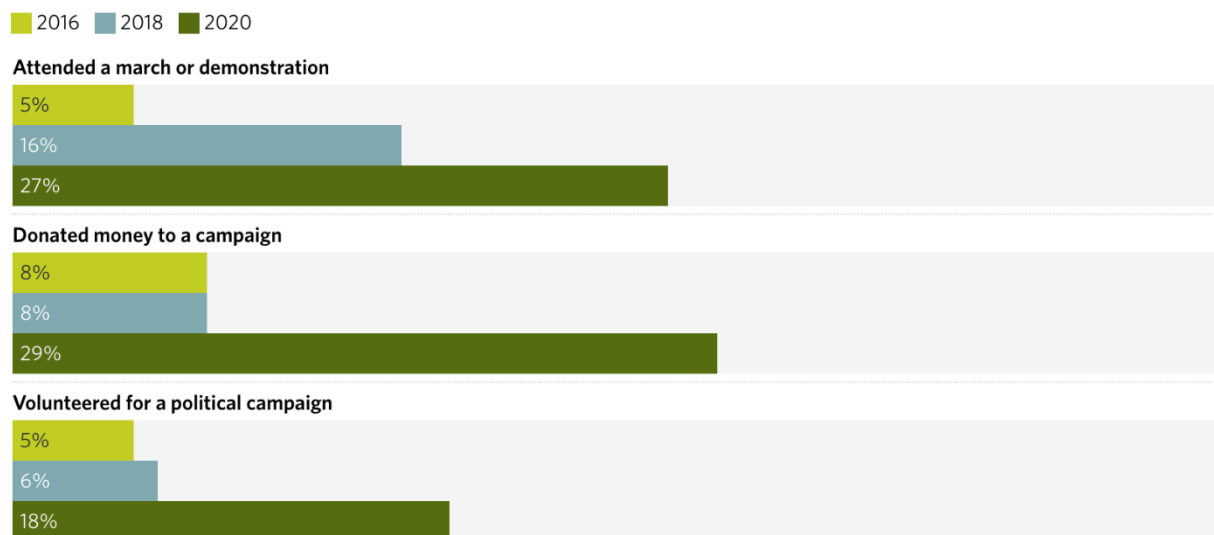
Figure 4. Patterns in Self-Reported Participation in Protests, Pre- and Post-Trump



Notes: Figure is a lollipop chart of self-reported rates of participation in protests, political meetings, or political rallies. The y-axis plots the dates that the surveys were taken (collapsing empty times between surveys for the sake of visualization). The x-axis plots the percent of respondents who said they had recently (usually in the last 12 months) engaged in this form of civic participation. Individual lollipops are colored by the pollster that ran the survey. The post-Trump period is shaded in grey. The pre-Trump and post-Trump numbers are simple averages of these surveys.

⁵ It’s possible at least some of the young people who said they joined protests in 2020 (technically between July 2019 and June 2020 because of CIRCLE’s survey question’s timing) did so in various ways, including [“online” protests or marches](#).

Figure 5. Youth (Ages 18-24) Protest Attendance and Other Forms of Political Engagement



CIRCLE Tufts University Tisch College - CIRCLE

Source: CIRCLE/Tisch College 2020 Pre-Election Youth Poll

Data and Methods for Estimating the Impact of Social Protests on Youth Voter Registration and Voting

To estimate the effect of these Trump-era protests, we draw on data from two sources. First, to measure the location and timing of social protests we use data from [the Crowd Counting Consortium](#) (CCC), which collects publicly available data on political crowds reported in the United States, including marches, protests, strikes, demonstrations, riots, and other actions. To measure voter registration and voter turnout, we use data from large-scale, nationwide, public-use voter files. We apply two methods to estimating the impact of various protest types. First, we estimate whether a protest impacts voter registration and/or turnout in the surrounding geographic area relative to areas which did not have a protest. This approach uses a difference-in-differences (Diff-in-diffs) design—a standard approach in the social sciences for estimating treatment effects with panel/longitudinal data (Abadie 2005; Angrist and Pischke 2008, 2014; Athey and Imbens; Donald and Lang 2007).

Second, we estimate whether voter registration in various areas of the country rise after a protest occurs. This approach uses a regression discontinuity design (RDD)—a standard research design for estimating causal effects in the social sciences (Angrist and Pischke 2008, 2014; Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik 2014). We specifically use a Regression Discontinuity in Time (RDiT) approach. Both of these give us different snapshots into the type of effect protests could have. (For more details about the datasets and methods we use—including their strengths and weaknesses—see the Appendix to this report.)

Impact of Social Protests on Youth Registration and Voting

We now turn to our estimates of the effect of protests on youth voter registration and voting. Our findings are nuanced and mixed. However, they broadly reflect the fact that the effect of social protests in the Trump-era depends substantially on the specific nature of the protests and the size and scale of the protests themselves. We present the key findings in Figures 6 and 7 below. Each of the key findings were produced as a result of extensive analyses, which we include in full in the Appendix attached to this report. We then outline our findings' broader significance and implications. Therein we list recommendations for vested parties involved in the organization of social movements and the mobilization of the American citizenry (and American youth specifically).

Figure 6. Key Findings of the Effect of Recent Protests on Youth Voter Registration

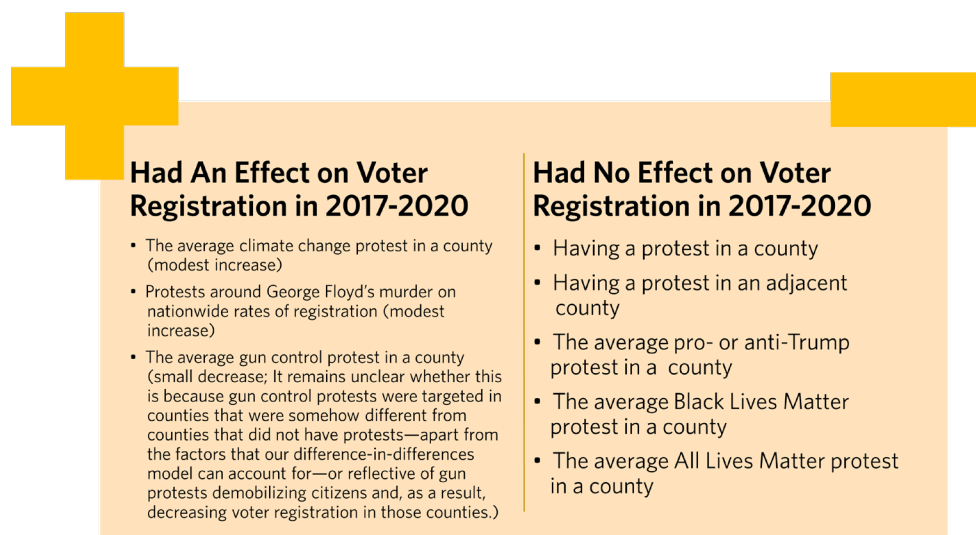
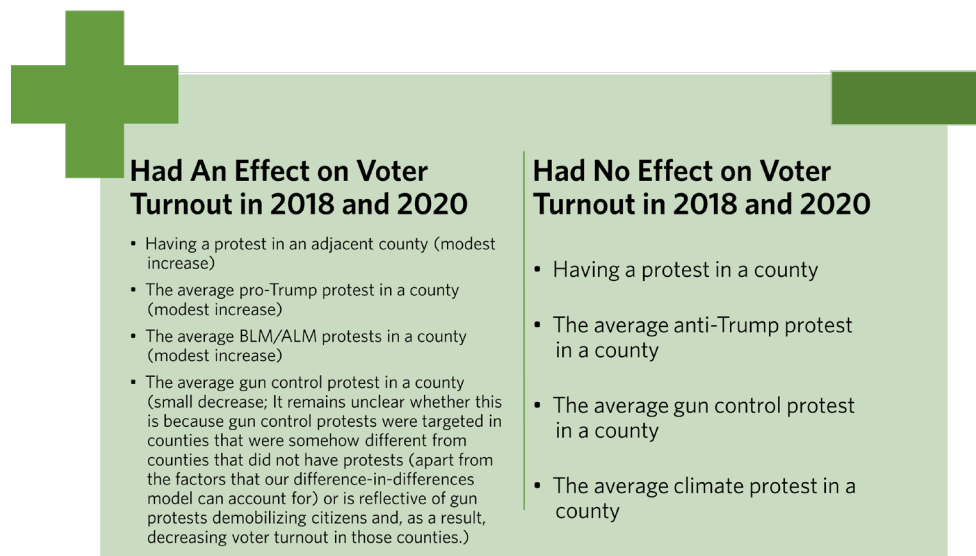


Figure 7. Key Findings of the Effect of Recent Protests on Youth Voter Turnout



The Effect of Trump-Era Protests on Youth Voter Registration

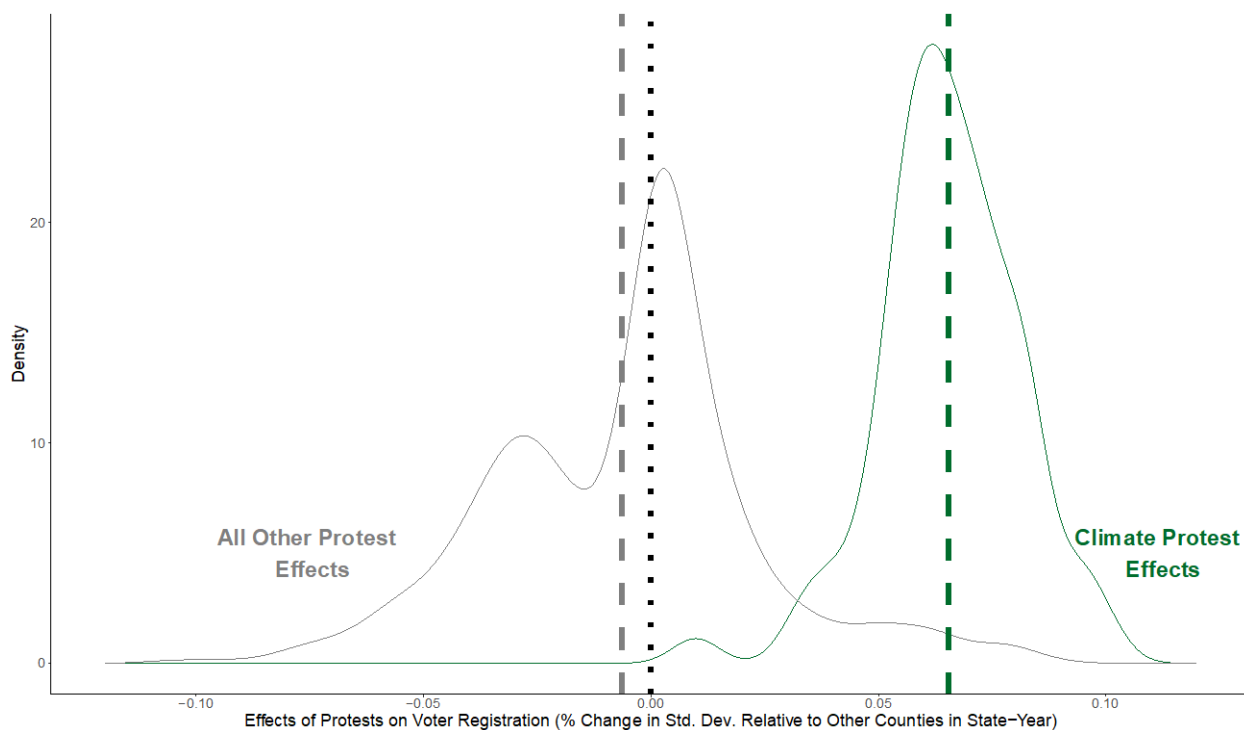
The average individual protest that occurred in a given county appears to have relatively little effect of on patterns of youth voter registration in that county—with the exception of climate change protests, which consistently increased voter registration when there was a protest for climate in the same county during the given month (2017-2020). Across most of the age/demographic groups subgroups considered, climate change protests appear to increase youth voter registration in the counties in which they occurred by around 6% relative to a standard deviation in normal registration patterns.⁶ Even though the effects of climate protests are positive, statistically significant, and larger than the effects of most of the other types of protests, by most benchmarks they are modest.

Figure 8 plots all instances of all climate change protests in a given year-month-county combination (the comparison here is between those counties that had a climate change protest and those that did not in the same month and year) in one frequency plot, and all other protests in another plot line. It illustrates that the average non-climate protest had little to no effect on patterns of voter registration in the county in which these protests occurred. In contrast, the average climate protest had a modest and consistently positive effect on patterns of voter registration in the county in which it occurred.⁷ Other than the effects described above, our analyses showed small and non-significant effects across population subgroups and other protest topics/issues.

⁶ 6/100th of a standard deviation in a normal distribution of voter registration does not mean a 6 **percentage point** increase in voter registration rates in a given county. Rather, it means that county moved up in the ranking of all counties with different rates of voter registration among different age, race, ethnicity, party, and income groups by a small margin. The actual change in the percentage of eligible voters who are registered and the number of registrants a county would gain from a specific population subgroup will vary from year to year, and from location to location. However, the analysis shows that the uptick of this magnitude is consistent across groups, counties and years, and this change represents a modest shift.

⁷ Gun control protests actually appear to exhibit a *negative* statistically significant impact on voter registration patterns in the counties in which they occurred. The effect size is very small, however (2-2.5% of a standard deviation). It remains unclear whether this is because gun control protests were targeted in counties that were somehow different from counties that did not have protests (apart from the factors that our difference-in-differences model can account for) or reflective of gun protests demobilizing citizens and, as a result, decreasing voter registration in those counties.

Figure 8: Distribution of Registration Effects by Climate Protest v. Other (all age groups)



Notes: Figure is a kernel density plot of the distribution of difference-in-differences registration effect estimates, breaking climate protests (the green distribution) from other protest types (the grey distribution). Corresponding thick dashed lines denote the mean effect estimate for each of these two groups; the dotted line denotes a zero effect on voter registration. Takeaway: aside from climate change protests (which modestly increased registration patterns of most youth subgroups), the average/median/modal protest effect estimate is 0.

The effect of climate change protests was not unique to youth registration. However, the average number of protests (of any kind), occurrence of protest in an adjacent counties, the occurrence of All Lives Matter protests (ALM), anti-Trump protests, pro-Trump protests, Black Lives Matter protests (BLM), or gun control protests had no immediate effect on the number of people registering to vote in the counties in which these protests occurred (nor in adjacent counties). For voter registration, the model is precise enough to rule out even very modest/small effects in cases other than climate change protests. Figures B1, B2, B3 and B4 in Appendix B show detailed findings with 95% confidence intervals for each age and age-subgroup combination.

Why Do We Observe a Positive Effect of Climate Change Protests on Voter Registration?

It's hard to know for sure why we observe positive effects from climate protests on youth voter registration (and also on most age and other subgroups) but not positive effects for other types of protests. One possibility is that climate protests—having access to existing infrastructure and support from the many organizations that have focused on this issue for decades—received sufficient institutional and operational support that allowed them to allocate a greater degree of resources toward voter registration as a part of their goal/mission.

This interpretation is somewhat supported by analysis of qualitative data, which suggested that some of the organizations that supported the climate protests dedicated a great deal of time, effort, and manpower to registering their participants. Climate groups were not the only ones

integrating electoral engagement, however, and it leaves some questions as to whether the access to resources and support differed across types of groups and whether climate change protests operated differently from others, especially with regards to voter registration and GOTV. Alternatively, it could be that climate protests were more likely to draw younger and therefore not-yet-registered but eligible voters. It could further be that climate protests were more likely to be organized by groups with an explicit focus on voting. Finally, It is possible that climate protests drew more attention to other organizations or activists, who then attended the events to register voters. Which of these explanations drove the effects we observe is worth pursuing in future research.

Why Do We Observe No Effect on Voter Registration From Many Other Protest Types?

Here we think it important to pause and note that our analyses up to this point have looked for a specific type of effect. The difference-in-differences models (see the Appendix for more information on this methodology) that we use look for changes in areas around where a protest occurred. However, it is possible that, given the broad media attention to protests, these events had effects on people who did not live near where the protests themselves occurred. Indeed, we speculated that this indirect mobilization may be especially important earlier on in this report. Moreover, our analyses up to this point have averaged all of the protests of various types that we examined instead of estimating the effect of individual groups, protests, or events. For example, when we are estimating the effect of climate protests, we are estimating the effect of *the average climate protest*, not any specific movement or specific protest event, or specific protest organizer. It's possible that some individual protests within these topic areas were effective at increasing voter registration, while others were not.

Finally, though difference-in-difference approaches are a useful tool for estimating causal effects, they are not without their flaws. It is unclear whether the diff-in-diffs we estimate are sufficient to purge any potential biases about where specific protests occurred during the Trump era. To help address these limitations, after our analysis of voter turnout, we add an additional analysis that looks at a specific type of protest—racial justice protests in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd—that occurred in an as-good-as random manner. This design allows us to better look for effects at the national level as well as in various individual geographic areas.

The Effect of Trump-Era Protests on Youth Voter Turnout

Similar analyses exploring the impact of protests on youth voter turnout showed that having a protest (of any type) in the same county has no effect, but having a protest in one or more of the adjacent counties may increase youth voter turnout by around 0.5 percentage points (see Figures 5-8 in Appendix C).⁸ However, the estimated effect of All Lives Matter and Black Lives Matter protests range from 2 to 4 percentage points depending on the population subgroup of interest, with the effects being around +1-2 percentage points for youth specifically. The consistency of these effects across groups and protest causes suggests both mobilization and countermobilization occur (meaning that, for instance, a BLM rally could mobilize supporters and activate opponents, both of whom may decide to make sure to vote).

⁸ Though the statistical procedures employed for our voter registration analysis is the same (diff-in-diffs model) for the turnout analysis, the model is less specified because voter turnout in federal election could be measured only twice during the study period (November 2018 and November 2020), decreasing the level of specificity in this model greatly. We opted not to use county- and municipal elections because the variability in the timing of these elections across counties is too great to function well in the model.

Similar to our voter registration results, gun control protests appear to actually *decrease* youth voter turnout in the surrounding area. It is important to again note that, when we are estimating the effect of gun violence protests, we are estimating the effect of *the average gun violence protest*, not any specific movement specific protest event, or specific protest organizer. Again, these effects are small (around +1 percentage point) and it remains unclear whether this is because gun control protests were targeted in counties that were somehow different from counties that did not have protests (apart from the factors that our difference-in-differences model can account for); is reflective of gun protests demobilizing citizens and, as a result, decreasing voter turnout in those counties; or because of pre-existing turnout patterns in that county.

The turnout effect was around +1 percentage point in counties where Pro-Trump protests occurred. This effect is fairly consistent across subgroups. The fact that the effects among Democrats and Republicans are roughly the same suggests that pro-Trump protests may mobilize through different channels—by both mobilizing supporters and countermobilizing opponents.

Whereas climate change protests had some modest impact on youth voter registration in the counties in which they occurred, these protests had no effect on youth voter turnout in the counties in which they occurred. This suggests a need to focus on the transition from voter registration to voter turnout among youth.

Some protests—including pro-Trump protests, All Lives Matter protests, and Black Lives Matter protests—modestly increased voter turnout, with an estimated 2-point increase for BLM and ALM protests and a 1-point increase for pro-Trump protests. The overall effect is small/negligible at 0.5 point.

The Effect of the George Floyd Murder and Racial Justice Protests on Voter Registration

As much as these analyses reveal about the possible impact of social protests, it remains unclear whether these effects are truly causal. Difference-in-differences models do come with sometimes strong assumptions that are hard to verify and validate. Moreover, though we have done some work to unpack the effects of protests of various types, it's possible that mobilization effects emerge for larger-scale protests. That is, for the average protest, the effects could be quite modest, whereas for the more prominent and well-attended protests the effects could be considerable. Finally, our analyses up until this point have looked for effects in the areas surrounding where protests occurred. It's possible that, given media coverage of protests, indirect effects arise on a wider geographic scale than what our previous analyses can account for.

To test this possibility, we used an approach called a Regression Discontinuity in Time (RDiT - See Appendix D). This approach allows us to look at whether voter registration in various areas of the country increased in the days after a protest (i.e., a discontinuity). This analysis uses the large increase in protests against racial injustice and violence against Black people that occurred across the country following George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020. In this analysis, we look to see whether voter registration rose in the days and weeks following these protests.

Figure 7 shows the effect of Floyd's murder on patterns of voter registration among all adults of various ages, and Figure 8 describes our findings specific to voter registration among 18- and 19-year-olds of various backgrounds. Figure 7 shows that, when we look at national aggregate rates of

voter registration among citizens of all ages and backgrounds, there was no uptick in county-level voter registration figures following Floyd's murder. However, our findings do indicate that George Floyd's murder sparked a noticeable increase in voter registration among BIPOC adults, adults of high income status, and adult Democrats. These increases in voter registration are around 8-10% of a standard deviation, and all are statistically significant at the 5% level. The 18- to 30-year-olds also experienced an uptick, but less consistently than older voters, reaching the "marginally significant" level of significance.

As shown in Figure 8, our effects are statistically significant across various subgroups of 18- and 19-year-olds, meaning that George Floyd's murder *caused* an increase in voter registration in this age group. Specifically, we observed a significant increase among 18-19-year-olds who are White, Latinx, and Asian, as well as high- and low-income, men and women, and Republicans. Interestingly, the registration increase among Asian and Latinx 18-19-year-olds—two groups whose registration and voting have lagged behind other groups of youth—increased more than those of Black and White youth.

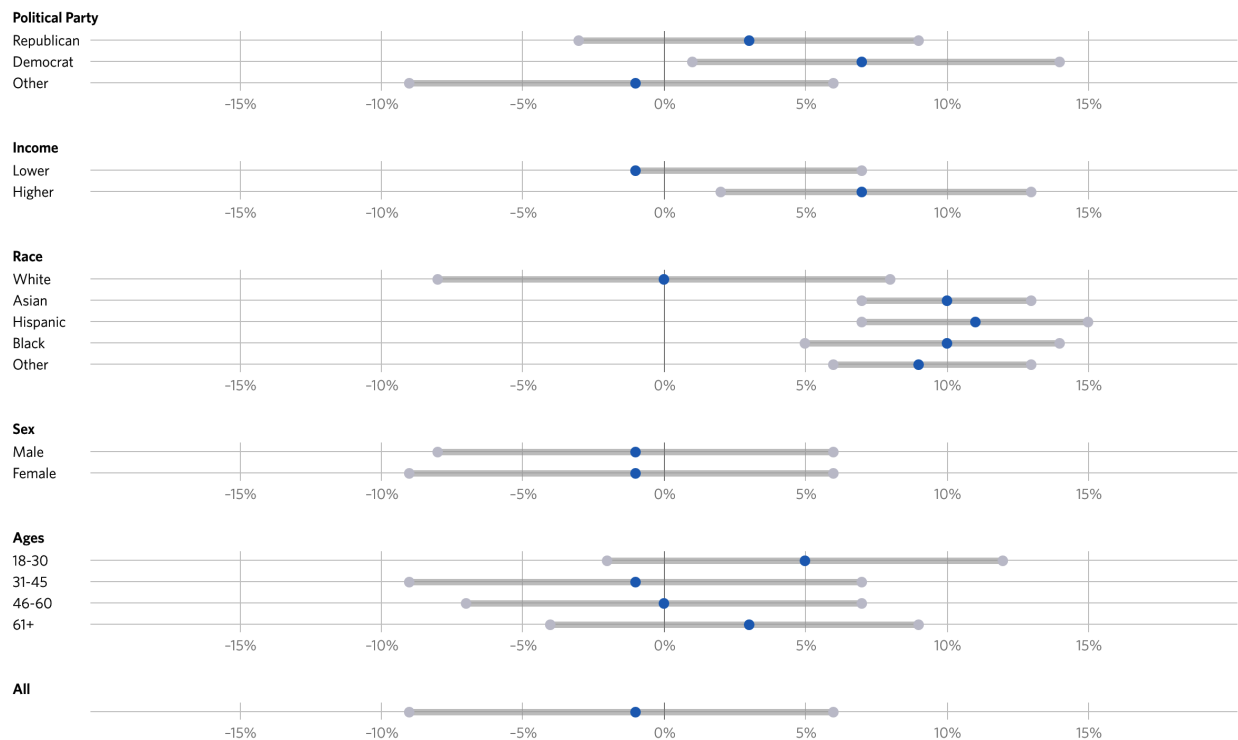
This uptick in voter registration in early summer of 2020 among 18- and 19-year-olds may be of particular significance because almost all youth in this age group are newly eligible voters each cycle (unless they vote in off-year municipal elections) and may need more support to register and vote. When the pandemic closed most educational institutions for in-person learning and many work places had to close, experts feared that youth voter registration would be difficult. Historically, 18- and 19-year-olds are often registered through on-site, in-person contact because they may need information and practical support. Many organizations and campuses had to resort to alternative means of registering new voters—such as online voter registration drives, email campaigns, and targeted advertising efforts—which proved to be difficult at times. On the other hand, young people had to learn how to register and vote while new laws were being adopted and voting methods changed to account for the pandemic, sometimes in confusing ways. Given that registration of new and young registrants in the early fall was expected to be difficult, registration during the summer increased the potential for young people to be supported by various organizations, municipal government, and candidates' public service announcements to make sure youth registered and understood their options for voting. Findings for 20- to 23-year-olds and 24- to 30-year-olds were overall similar, but not as robust as the effect observed among 18- and 19-year-olds (See Appendix C Figures C1 and C2, respectively).

In fact, there are many states where George Floyd's murder increased levels of voter registration for all age groups and among many other subgroups beyond just racial/ethnic minorities, high-income individuals, and Democrats. Figures C3-C7 in Appendix C show this visually. State-by-state variation in the effect of Floyd's murder and subsequent protests shows that many states saw an increase in voter registration, though this did not transfer to some larger states (such as Texas), which saw no change in voter registration in response to Floyd's murder. The same patterns largely applied if we look at the overall rates of voter registration for various age, racial/ethnic, sex, income, and political party subgroups. We also found that, among Republicans (see Figure C17) most of the mobilization happened in traditionally 'blue' states, whereas among Democrats (see Figure C18) mobilization happened in a broader array of states.⁹ These figures demonstrate that the political climate of states helped moderate the effects of Floyd's murder on voter registration. They also show, however, that physical proximity is not necessarily the whole story behind the effects we observe. Indeed, somewhat surprisingly, the state where Floyd's murder occurred (Minnesota) and states in the surrounding region are frequently at the bottom of the effect estimates. (This could be because of Minnesota's uniquely high rates of voter registration.)

⁹ Bars in Figure C3-C7 are also shaded by their vote share in the 2020 Presidential election. States are grouped into one of three groups—red states, purple states, and blue states—based on the terciles of democratic vote share. This allows us to see where mobilizing effects for each subgroup in an individual occurred.

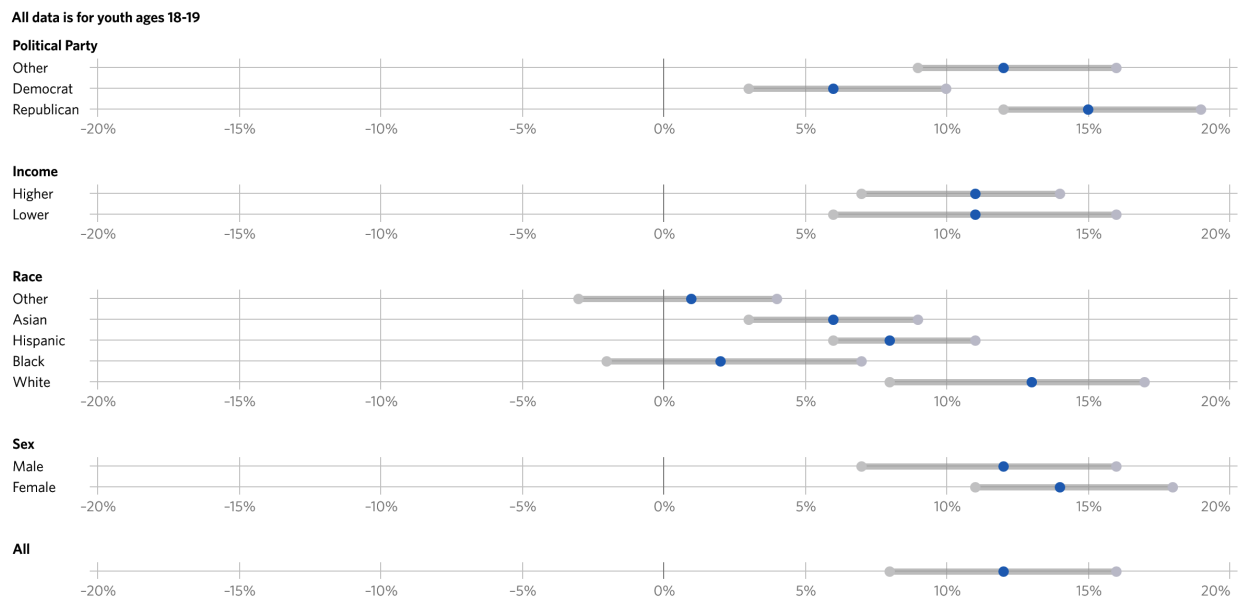
Finally, Figures C20 and C21 in Appendix C show that there were multiple pathways by which individuals were more likely to register to vote. The fact that there are effects, both in places where there were protests and where there were not, suggests that both direct (i.e., registration that came from those attending protests) and indirect (i.e., registration that came from those not attending protests but being mobilized by media coverage of them) mobilization may have come into play. That said, if anything, it appears that there are more consistent effects in areas where there was *not* a Black Lives Matter protest in the days/weeks following George Floyd’s murder. However, the estimates for counties with a Floyd protest are quite imprecise—reflecting that a minority of counties actually held these types of protests during the time after Floyd’s killing. Returning for a moment to our analysis of protest locations, it is possible that only very large-scale and widely covered stories of social movements and social justice reach young people who usually do not have access to opportunities for civic and political life participation. We have, for instance, found in our past study that about 60% of young people live in what we call “civic deserts” in which people have little to no means of exposure to civic networks and to civic and political involvement (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Sullivan, 2017). More research is needed to understand whether young people in places where they lack access to in-person social movement opportunities and civic institutions are more likely to benefit from digital and media-based outreach and awareness-building about social movements by registering to vote and others means of civic and political participation.

Figure 9. Effect of George Floyd’s Murder on Voter Registration



Notes: Figure is a coefficient plot of the effects of the George Floyd murder on the voter registration patterns of different subgroups based on a regression discontinuity in time analysis. The X axis is the percentage of a standard deviation. Coefficients (i.e., effect sizes) are shown with circles; and the bars denote the 95% confidence intervals for the effect estimates. **Takeaway:** On average, the George Floyd murder increased the voter registration patterns of racial/ethnic minorities, high income individuals, and Democrats. The average effect on 18- to 30-year-olds is marginally insignificant (p=0.148).

Figure 10. Effect of George Floyd’s Murder on Voter Registration, 18-19-year-olds



Notes: Figure is a coefficient plot of the effects of the George Floyd murder on the voter registration patterns of different youth (ages 18-19) subgroups based on a regression discontinuity in time analysis. The X axis is the percentage of a standard deviation. Coefficients (i.e., effect sizes) are shown with circles; bars denote the 95% confidence intervals for the effect estimates. **Takeaway:** On average, the George Floyd murder modestly increased the voter registration patterns of most 18- and 19-year-olds

CIRCLE Tufts University Tisch College · CIRCLE

Conclusion and Recommendations for Youth Organizers

In this report, we examined the quantitative impact of protests during the Trump-era on patterns of voter registration and voter turnout of various subgroups, focusing especially on effects among young people. We did so by leveraging unique data from the Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC) that tracked protests, paired with large-scale, public-use voter registration records from the voter file vendor L2. We paired these datasets with several methods that took into account both the timing and location of these protest events. Our results suggest a somewhat mixed bag in terms of the ability of protests during the recent past to mobilize marginalized groups.

The average protest in the Trump era had little to no effect on youth voter registration in the days and weeks that followed a protest in the counties in which they occurred. The exception to this rule is climate change protests, which modestly increased voter registration of several subgroups in the counties in which these protests occurred. While some protests—such as pro-Trump, All Lives Matter, and Black Lives Matter—increase voter turnout modestly in the counties in which these protests occurred, most of the typical protest types seen recently have little to no effect on voter turnout in the surrounding geographic areas. That said, larger-scale protests—such as those that came after the killing of George Floyd—bring new people into the political process afterward at a rate not observed after other forms/scales of protests. Our results lead us to several recommendations for vested parties interested in better tapping into mass social protests as a means of bringing more and more diverse citizens to the polls.

1. Protests alone are not sufficient to increase voter registration and voter turnout, though they may be used as mobilizing vehicles for other forms of civic participation (as we note below, future research would do well to see if this is the case). Protests are often short-lived and occur in environments that are not conducive to targeted registration efforts. Youth groups

acting more often as lead organizers of protests might also result in more youth-specific outreach at these events.

2. Protest organizers would be able to increase their impact by following up with the voters they registered to ensure they also cast/mail their ballots. While some protests registered new voters in the areas around where they protests occurred, it appears many of these new registrants may not have actually followed through and cast a ballot. Previous research suggests that young people struggle to overcome even seemingly minute obstacles, barriers, and distractions that get in the way of casting a ballot (Holbein and Hillygus 2020). Protest organizers need to provide support to registered voters to ensure that they actually show up at the polls. This might be accomplished by better collecting, storing, and distributing data on protest attendees and following up with them through various effective get-out-the-vote interventions (see Green and Gerber 2019). In so doing, protest-based movements can help young people take the important step of following through on their voting intentions. (Clearly, implementation of this recommendation requires that more resources go to these groups, which we recommend in the next section.)
3. Protest organizers might better nurture strategic relationships with existing local organizations that can help facilitate registration and mobilization. Many potential partners in this space have invaluable experience, tools, and evidence on which to build voter registration and voter mobilization supports. The challenge for many protest events is that these short-term activities may inspire others and galvanize people's commitment to a movement but do not leave capacity and resources behind to continue supporting a movement by gaining local, in-person supporters who can continue to register and turn out potential voters for months and years to come.
4. Protest organizers need to engage with the fact that many of the people who turn out to protest may already be likely to vote to begin with. Alternate pathways for targeting young people who are less engaged in politics include partnering with school-based efforts to increase voter registration. Schools offer an important touchstone for accessing youth of various interest levels in politics and voting. Moreover, as previous research has shown (e.g., Holbein and Hillygus 2020), in-school registration drives have a large impact on youth registration and turnout.
5. While large protests—such as those sparked by the death of George Floyd—have sufficient power to increase voter registration—these are the exception rather than the rule. Most protest events alone do not bring in significant numbers of new voters.

Our research should not be the last on the effects of protests. Future research would do well to better understand:

1. The effect protests of various types have on other forms of civic participation (e.g., donations, running for office, political knowledge, etc.).
2. Why some protests appear to have a larger short-term effect on youth voter registration and youth voter turnout than others.
3. How to get people who are unlikely to be engaged in voting and politics to attend protests. Many people who engage in activism like protest events may be more likely to vote in the first

place. (A fact consistent with the non-effects of many protests.) What types of programs can bring disengaged citizens to express their voice via non-violent direct action? Much of the interventions designed to increase civic participation have focused on voting, but this is not the only way to exercise one's political will.

4. The psychological motivations behind voter mobilization and counter-mobilization that comes from protests. We have shown that, in many cases, protests mobilize both supporters and opponents. Validated voting records can only go so far in understanding *why* mobilization and counter-mobilization occurs.
5. Whether policymakers respond to protests and, if so, which of these they are more likely to respond to. A gap in previous research is whether protests need to get citizens to the polls at a higher rate to effect policy change, or whether protests themselves are sufficient to provide a direct line that elicits the desired response from policymakers.

References

- Abadie, Alberto. "Semiparametric difference-in-differences estimators." *The Review of Economic Studies* 72, no. 1 (2005): 1-19.
- Ahn, Thomas, and Jacob Vigdor. "The impact of No Child Left Behind's accountability sanctions on school performance: Regression discontinuity evidence from North Carolina." No. w20511. *National Bureau of Economic Research*, 2014.
- Angrist, Joshua D., and Jörn-Steffen Pischke. *Mastering 'metrics: The path from cause to effect*. Princeton university press, 2014.
- Angrist, Joshua D., and Jörn-Steffen Pischke. *Mostly harmless econometrics*. Princeton university press, 2008.
- Athey, Susan, and Guido W. Imbens. "Identification and inference in nonlinear difference-in-differences models." *Econometrica* 74, no. 2 (2006): 431-497.
- Barney, David J. and Brian F. Schaffner. 2019. "Reexamining the Effect of Mass Shootings on Public Support for Gun Control." *British Journal of Political Science* 49(4):1555-65.
- Calonico, Sebastian, Matias D. Cattaneo, and Rocio Titiunik. "Robust nonparametric confidence intervals for regression-discontinuity designs." *Econometrica* 82, no. 6 (2014): 2295-2326.
- Chenoweth, Erica, Tommy Leung, Nathan Perkins, Jeremy Pressman, and Jay Ulfelder, "The Trump Years Launched the Biggest Protest Movement in U.S. History. It's Not Over," *Washington Post*, February 8, 2021.
- Clinton, Joshua D., and Michael W. Sances. "The politics of policy: The initial mass political effects of medicaid expansion in the states." *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 1 (2018): 167-185.
- De la Cuesta, Brandon, and Kosuke Imai. "Misunderstandings about the regression discontinuity design in the study of close elections." *Annual Review of Political Science* 19 (2016): 375-396.
- Donald, Stephen G., and Kevin Lang. "Inference with difference-in-differences and other panel data." *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 89, no. 2 (2007): 221-233.
- Eggers, Andrew C., Anthony Fowler, Jens Hainmueller, Andrew B. Hall, and James M. Snyder Jr. "On the validity of the regression discontinuity design for estimating electoral effects: New evidence from over 40,000 close races." *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 1 (2015): 259-274.
- Enos, Ryan D. *The space between us: Social geography and politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Enos, Ryan D., Aaron R. Kaufman, and Melissa L. Sands. "Can violent protest change local

- policy support? Evidence from the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riot." *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 4 (2019): 1012-1028.
- Fraga, Bernard, and John Holbein. "Measuring youth and college student voter turnout." *Electoral Studies* 65 (2020): 102086.
- Fraga, Bernard L., John B. Holbein, and Christopher Skovron. 2018. "Using Nationwide Voter Files to Study the Effects of Election Laws." *University of Virginia Working Paper*.
- Green, Donald P., and Alan S. Gerber. *Get out the vote: How to increase voter turnout*. Brookings Institution Press, 2019.
- Hall, Andrew B. "What happens when extremists win primaries?" *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 1 (2015): 18-42.
- Hassell, Hans JG, John B. Holbein, and Matthew Baldwin. "Mobilize for our lives? School shootings and democratic accountability in US elections." *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 4 (2020): 1375-1385.
- Hausman, Catherine, and David S. Rapson. "Regression discontinuity in time: Considerations for empirical applications." *Annual Review of Resource Economics* 10 (2018): 533-552.
- Heissel, Jennifer A., and Samuel Norris. "Rise and shine the effect of school start times on academic performance from childhood through puberty." *Journal of Human Resources* 53, no. 4 (2018): 957-992.
- Hersh, Eitan D. *Hacking the electorate: How campaigns perceive voters*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Holbein, John. "Left behind? Citizen responsiveness to government performance information." *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 2 (2016): 353-368.
- Holbein, John B. "Childhood Skill Development and Adult Political Participation." *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (2017): 572-583.
- Holbein, John B., and Hans JG Hassell. "When your group fails: The effect of race-based performance signals on citizen voice and exit." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 29, no. 2 (2019): 268-286.
- Holbein, John B., and D. Sunshine Hillygus. "Making young voters: the impact of preregistration on youth turnout." *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 2 (2016): 364-382.
- Holbein, John B., and D. Sunshine Hillygus. *Making young voters: Converting civic attitudes into civic action*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Holbein, John B., and Helen F. Ladd. "Accountability pressure: Regression discontinuity estimates of how No Child Left Behind influenced student behavior." *Economics of Education Review* 58 (2017): 55-67.

- Igielnik, Ruth, Scott Keeter, Courtney Kennedy and Bradley Spahn. 2018. "Commercial Voter Files and the Study of U.S. Politics" *Pew Research Center Methods Report* (February 15).
- MacKinnon, James G., and Matthew D. Webb. "Randomization inference for difference-in-differences with few treated clusters." *Journal of Econometrics* 218, no. 2 (2020): 435-450.
- Madestam, Andreas, Daniel Shoag, Stan Veuger, and David Yanagizawa-Drott. "Do political protests matter? evidence from the tea party movement." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 128, no. 4 (2013): 1633-1685.
- Newman, Benjamin J. and Todd K. Hartman. 2017. "Mass Shootings and Public Support for Gun Control." *British Journal of Political Science* 49(4):1527-53.
- Newman, Benjamin. and Todd K. Hartman. 2019. "Accounting for Pre-Treatment Exposure in Panel Data: Re-Estimating the Effect of Mass Public Shootings." *British Journal of Political Science* 49(4):1567-76.
- Prior, Markus. *Hooked: How politics captures people's interest*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Reny, Tyler T., and Benjamin J. Newman. "The Opinion-Mobilizing Effect of Social Protest against Police Violence: Evidence from the 2020 George Floyd murder." *American Political Science Review* (2021): 1-9.
- Rogowski, Jon C. and Patrick D. Tucker. 2018. "Critical Events and Attitude Change: Support for Gun Control After Mass Shootings." *Political Science Research and Methods* 7(4):903-11.
- Schafer, Jerome, and John B. Holbein. "When time is of the essence: a natural experiment on how time constraints influence elections." *The Journal of Politics* 82, no. 2 (2020): 418-432.
- Thistlethwaite, Donald L., and Donald T. Campbell. "Regression-discontinuity analysis: An alternative to the ex post facto experiment." *Journal of Educational psychology* 51, no. 6 (1960): 309.
- Wasow, Omar. "Agenda seeding: How 1960s black protests moved elites, public opinion and voting." *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 3 (2020): 638-659.

