

# Whose Side Are You On? Government Repression, Political Protest, and Public Opinion

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## Vignette

Consider the following hypothetical situation. More than 100 protesters from [An anti-immigrant organization/An immigrant organization/A pro-life organization/A pro-choice organization] were arrested on Capitol Hill yesterday after they blocked a busy intersection to press the House of Representatives to move on legislation advancing their cause. In a choreographed demonstration, the protesters sat peacefully in a circle on Independence Avenue, disrupting traffic for about 30 minutes before the arrival of the police. [Tear gas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets were used on the protesters before the arrests were made.]

## Outcome 1: Expressed Support

How likely are you to support an organization similar to the one you just read about? (randomized with treatment group)

- Very likely to support
- Likely to support
- Somewhat likely to support
- Neither likely nor unlikely to support
- Somewhat unlikely to support
- Unlikely to support
- Very unlikely to support

After answering the question, respondents are asked an open-ended follow-up in which they are instructed to explain their response:

Please explain your answer.  
**[Open text box here].**

## Research Questions

**How do government responses to protest—ranging in severity from arrest to repression—affect public support for a repressed protest movement?**

- Does government repression increase support across the board or only for respondents ideologically proximate to the goals of the protesting organization?
- Is there a differential effect for conservative and liberal respondents?
- How does this support translate into mobilization?

In order to understand the micro-foundations of political support we must be able to explain how government action affects support among three analytically distinct segments of the public: those similar to the protesting organization, those that are undecided or neutral, and those on the opposite side of the spectrum.

## Hypotheses

Recent research has shown how the relationship between the identity of the protesters and the observes—based on racial or religious cleavages—matters for perception of the contentious activity. Building on this prior research, we explore whether repression of co-partisans is perceived differently than repression of ideological opponents.

**Hypothesis 1 ( $H_1$ ):** Government repression increases support only among respondents that share the same ideology as the protest organization.

Prior research has demonstrated sharp differences between liberals and conservatives with regard to support for civil liberties and beliefs about duty, respect for authority, and law and order. We predict that even when conservative respondents observe the repression of a protest movement that is also right-leaning, their beliefs about law and order might be more salient than support they might otherwise feel for the movement.

**Hypothesis 2 ( $H_2$ ):** Conservative respondents are not more likely to support a repressed protest organization regardless of whether the protest movement is ideologically similar to them.

## Outcome 2: Signing a Petition

Suppose the organization you read about was protesting to pressure Congress to adopt Bill 213, which advances their cause.

If they were to issue a petition (see text below), calling on elected representatives to pass the legislation, would you be willing to sign it?

To: U.S. Senate  
As your constituent, I am writing you today to ask that you support Bill 213.  
Sincerely,  
(Your name)

Please choose the answer below

- Yes
- No

## Outcome 3: Money Donation

At the beginning of the survey you were told that you would receive \$5 as compensation for participation. You are welcome to keep the money or if you prefer you can donate all or part of the money to an organization similar to the [anti-immigrant organization/ immigrant organization/ pro-life organization/ pro-choice organization ] described earlier in the survey.

An organization similar to the one you read about in the vignette is [Federation for American Immigration Reform/ Immigration Works USA/ National Right to Life/ Planned Parenthood]:

Would like to to donate to this organization?

- Yes
- No

How much would you like to donate?  
**[Open text box here].**