Partisan Media and Support for Radical Protest Tactics across Ideological Lines

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News coverage of protests varies widely, and public opinion on their democratic value evolves. While the protest paradigm outlines coverage norms, the hierarchy of social struggle shows that coverage favorability varies by group. This study explores factors influencing support for liberal and conservative protest groups, focusing on the relationship between media use and support for Black Lives Matter, Antifa, Proud Boys, and QAnon. Our findings reveal that higher general news consumption lowers support for protest groups, while conservative media use boosts support for conservative groups. Support for protest groups is linked to backing radical protests, indicating growing extreme political attitudes in the United States.

Keywords: Violent protest, media use, protest tactics, political groups, partisan news

The United States has recently been home to multiple violent protests over politically polarizing issues. The murder of George Floyd in 2020 reignited the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, with an estimated 15–26 million people peacefully protesting across the country against racism and police brutality (Buchanan, Bui, & Patel, 2020). In contrast, a year later, a mob of 2,500 supporters of President Donald Trump (2019) attacked the Capitol Building in Washington, DC. Similarly, conservative militia groups organized armed rallies and protests against COVID-19 government-imposed lockdowns (Beckett, 2020). The news coverage of these events varied considerably, and public opinion in support of different types of demonstrations and their service to democracy is constantly evolving.

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Media coverage is a vital element of social movements and protests. Activists seeking visibility for their cause rely on media coverage to reach a wider audience and gather support and sympathizers (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). However, media coverage can be a double-edged sword for certain movements. Extreme protest tactics—that is, inflammatory rhetoric, blocking traffic, and damaging property—can effectively attract the public's attention. However, extreme protest tactics decrease popular support for a cause because they reduce feelings of identification with the movement, yet self-identified political activists are willing to use extreme tactics because they can be effective in recruiting supporters (Feinberg, Willer, & Kovacheff, 2020). Mainstream media typically provides delegitimizing coverage of protests that use extreme tactics or advocate for a radical change to the hegemonic status quo. Therefore, conservative protests tend to receive more favorable coverage than protests seeking radical change (Harlow, 2021). Research shows that anti-immigration, anti-LGBTQ, pro-Trump, and pro-gun protests are less likely to receive negative news coverage or to be framed as "riots" than racial protests (Brown & Harlow, 2019). Yet, BLM protests are more likely to receive delegitimizing news coverage, with reports focusing on violence and police confrontation, even when the protests are largely nonviolent (Harlow, Kilgo, Salaverría, & García-Perdomo, 2020). Most incidents of violence and property damage stemmed from police actions or individuals unaffiliated with the protests. Kearns and Betus (2022) found that relative to other attacks, far-right attacks in the United States receive far less coverage on average, and that coverage is significantly less likely to frame the attack as terrorism.

Recent "alt-right" protests might be changing the media landscape. The differences in coverage for conservative and liberal protests started to change after the January 6 Capitol attack. Research on news coverage during and after the Capitol attack showed that the initial news coverage framed the events around the word "protest" or "protesters," but as the week unfolded, news reports started favoring the labels "riot," "attack(s)," and "insurrection" (Zulli, Coe, & Isaacs, 2022). Researchers indicate that news media covered the insurrection using spectacle frames, emphasizing the protest as a trivial show or circus (Brown & Harlow, 2019).

This study aims to explore the factors that influence support for political liberal protest and conservative protest groups. We tested two different models that used support for liberal and conservative protest groups as dependent variables for each model and demographics, media consumption, political ideology, attitudes toward protest tactics, and attitudes toward the service of violent and nonviolent protests on democracy as independent variables (see Figures 1 and 2). This study contributes to understanding why certain individuals approve of extreme protest tactics for some movements, but not for all social issues.

This study focuses on four protest groups: the conservative Proud Boys and QAnon, and the liberal Antifa and BLM. While all four of the protest groups engaged in physical violence and vandalism (Glick, 2023; Jones & Doxsee, 2021; Kokotakis, 2023), they are distinctly different, with BLM perhaps the greatest outlier. Both Proud Boys and QAnon spearheaded the attack against the Capitol (Glick, 2023; Kokotakis, 2023; Whitehurst, 2023). Antifa is a decentralized network of people that conducts counter-protests to break up far-right protests, and these clashes sometimes produce violence (Jones & Doxsee, 2021). BLM is a political group that fights racism, discrimination, and inequality aimed at people of color—abuses they have endured since the days of slavery (Culver & McLeod, 2023). While the evidence demonstrates that BLM and Antifa protestors paled next to Proud Boys and QAnon militia forces in terms of instigating violence,

Trump, his Republican supporters, and the conservative media employed Antifa and BLM as scapegoats to try to deflect attention from right-wing militia groups like Proud Boys (Anderson, 2021).

Defining QAnon can be challenging, as it initially started as a "backless set of conspiracy beliefs" (Garry, Walther, Rukaya, & Mohammed, 2021) that circulated on 4chan. Mike Rothschild (2021) defined QAnon as "a cult, a popular movement, a puzzle, a community, a way to fight back against evil, a new religion, a wedge between countless loved ones, a domestic terrorism threat, and more than anything, a conspiracy theory of everything" (p. 9). We define them as a protest group because followers of QAnon have "mobilized offline committing real acts of violence" (Garry et al., 2021, p. 153) that are politically motivated. Examples of QAnon followers who participated in the Jan. 6 events include Jacob Chansley (the QAnon Shaman), Douglas Jensen, Cleveland Meredith Jr., Rosanne Boyland, and Ashli Babbitt.

Trump and his supporters claimed that Capitol rioters were members of Antifa dressed up as Trump supporters. Republicans in Congress wrongly claimed that violence and property damage incurred during summer protests in large urban areas like Portland was largely caused by BLM "rioters." Republican Congressmen torpedoed an independent commission investigation of January 6 by insisting that January 6 be linked to investigations of Antifa and BLM's role in the summer riots (Broadwater, 2021). The Republican strategy worked. A Reuters/Ipsos survey revealed that 55% of Republicans believed that the January 6 attack was led by violent left-wing protesters like Antifa (Lange, 2022). Therefore, while both the Proud Boys and QAnon produced far more violence than either Antifa or BLM, many Americans, particularly Republicans, perceived Antifa and BLM instigated the summer of 2020 and Jan. 6 violence.

Media and Protest

Both *whether* and *how* the media cover protests are influenced by journalistic norms, routines, and values concerning newsworthiness (Harlow & Kilgo, 2022). Protesters who challenge the status quo by engaging in violence and destroying property are covered more negatively than those who operate within the political system (Boyle, McLeod, & Armstrong, 2012; Harlow & Bachmann, 2024; Harlow & Brown, 2023; McLeod & Detenber, 1999). The protest paradigm focuses on the legitimizing and delegitimizing frames used to characterize coverage. Delegitimizing coverage is marked by *riot* (emphasis on protesters engaged in violence and destruction), *confrontation* (arrests or confrontations between protesters, opponents, and police), and *spectacle* (sensational coverage of unusual behavior and attention-seeking actions) frames, increased mentions of violence, and reliance on official sources. Research has found that moderate and radical protests are more likely to be treated critically by the news, with coverage emphasizing specific events over themes and goals (Boyle et al., 2004). Under the protest paradigm, the mainstream media delegitimizes protesters by blaming them for violence and vandalism, justifying police actions (Cammaerts, 2012; Harlow & Bachmann, 2024).

The protest paradigm is based on the idea that media outlets function as agents of social control, especially when a protest group seeks to challenge the existing status quo by altering social conditions, norms, or policies (Boyle, McCluskey, McLeod, & Stein, 2005). Protesters perceived as more radical, such as racial protests, receive more delegitimizing coverage (Brown & Harlow, 2019). Defining the status quo during the Trump presidency is challenging, as he made sexist, racist, and xenophobic public

remarks. For example, news coverage of the Unite the Right Rally functioned to de-emphasize and normalize White supremacy and racism, deviating from the protest paradigm (Chuang & Tyler, 2023). While the protest paradigm sets out how protests are covered, the hierarchy of social struggle (Kilgo & Harlow, 2019) shows that both the amount and favorability of coverage can differ depending on the group being covered.

Conservative protests, such as anti-immigration, gun rights, and pro-Trump demonstrations, tended to receive more favorable coverage than liberal protests seeking radical change (Harlow, 2021; Kilgo & Harlow, 2019). Jiménez-Martínez (2021) indicates that news coverage of violence can be exploited by political actors for political, ideological, or commercial purposes. In line with the hierarchy of social struggle, studies suggest that BLM receives some of the most negative coverage, with protests regularly framed as riots and the news focusing on violence, property damage, and police confrontations (Harlow, 2021; Kilgo & Harlow, 2019; Kilgo & Mourão, 2021; Mourão & Brown, 2022; Reid & Craig, 2021), even though research indicates that BLM protests have been largely peaceful (Chenoweth & Pressman, 2020). Kim, Kotva, Zain, and Chen (2024) discovered that conservative media consumers held more negative views of BLM, even after controlling for ideology, party identification, and attitudes toward racial inequality. Reid and Craig (2021) similarly found that BLM coverage focused on violence and property damage attributed to fringe individuals. Coverage minimized police violence and framed protesters as a danger to public safety and property. Based on the protest paradigm literature, our first hypothesis focuses on the relationship between levels of media use in general and support for political protest groups associated with radical protests:

H1:   *Higher levels of media use, in general, will lead to lower levels of support for politically conservative (QAnon and Proud Boys) and liberal (BLM and Antifa) protest groups.*

Protest Coverage in Partisan and Hyper-Partisan Media

Studies on the protest paradigm have found that partisan media deploy marginalization and legitimation frames in ways that are consistent with their respective ideological hues (Weaver & Scacco, 2013). Skocpol and Williamson (2016) demonstrated that conservative media coverage aids conservative movements. Likewise, the perception that conservative movement activists have of liberal media bias assists its ability to mobilize (Kilgo & Harlow, 2019). For instance, research has shown that Fox News's coverage of the Tea Party was instrumental in its rapid expansion and legitimizing its activism (Rafail, McCarthy, & Sullivan, 2019; Skocpol & Williamson, 2016; Williamson, Skocpol, & Coggin, 2011). Therefore, the consumption of conservative media leads to negative views about BLM (Azevedo et al., 2022; Kilgo & Mourão, 2021). However, scholars are split on whether liberal media are more likely to support liberal protest groups. Some studies suggest that liberals are more likely than conservatives to support civil rights issues (Azevedo et al., 2022); therefore, liberal media are more likely than their conservative counterparts to write positively about protests in general and BLM in particular (Kim et al., 2024).

The liberal media ecosystem consists of media outlets that stress fairness and balance and typically provide both positive and negative coverage of issues, such as CNN, NPR, MSNBC, and the New York Times, along with more partisan sources, such as the *Huffington Post* (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). As a result,

the liberal media ecosystem may lack a consistent reinforcing mechanism so that liberal media has a weaker effect on protest views than conservative sources. Indeed, studies are mixed on whether those who consume liberal media are more likely to support BLM protests and core beliefs. Some studies found that liberal media consumption leads to increased support for BLM (Kim et al., 2024), particularly MSNBC—which was more likely than other mainstream or partisan media to stress the protester's grievances and less likely to report protester violence, protester deviance from the status quo, and confrontations with police (Brown & Mourão, 2022). Other studies have demonstrated that the consumption of liberal media did not affect attitudes toward BLM activism (Kilgo & Mourão, 2021). The following hypotheses focus on the relationship between partisan media use and support for liberal political groups:

H2:   *Higher levels of conservative media use will lead to lower levels of support for BLM and Antifa.*

H3:   *Higher levels of liberal media use will lead to lower levels of support for Proud Boys and QAnon.*

H4:   *Higher levels of conservative media use will lead to higher levels of support for Proud Boys and QAnon.*

H5:   *Higher levels of liberal media use will lead to higher levels of support levels for BLM and Antifa.*

While mainstream media coverage follows the protest paradigm, alternative media, as the name suggests, offers different perspectives, such as legitimizing coverage of protest movements that support their ideology and focusing on aspects that the traditional media ignores (Harlow et al., 2020). In contrast, conservative hyper-partisan media websites attack liberal political groups like Antifa as violent groups involved in the destruction of property, rioting, or looting. We define hyper-partisan news as those characterized by sites that present a one-sided political agenda, a type of news that amplifies anti-system messages criticizing mainstream media and traditional politics (Barnidge & Peacock, 2019). Ultra-conservative media has helped alt-right groups by not connecting them to anti-racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-immigrant language. Ultra-conservative media have elite voices, such as Ann Coulter, bringing their talking points to the mainstream (Hawley, 2017; Speakman & Funk, 2021). Hyper-partisan conservative media have a foundational devotion to White supremacy ideology, but they obscure that devotion by branding themselves with language that masks this connection to racism using terms such as White nationalism rather than White supremacy (Hartzell, 2018; Speakman & Funk, 2021). Hence, we suggest that ultra-conservative media does not follow the protest paradigm when the protests involve right-wing politics. For example, Ostafiński (2022) found that conservative news sites covered the January 6 events as both chaos and rightful protest.

One aspect to note is that hyper-partisan news differs from old partisan news because they are not just partisan, but also alternative. Like nonmainstream media, hyper-partisan news rejects journalistic norms and routines and attempts to challenge mainstream narratives (Barnidge & Peacock, 2019). Alternative media in communication studies has historically referred to radical, independent media, which are mostly ideologically liberal (Atton, 1996, 2003; Downing, 2000, 2001). However, Holt, Ustad-Figenschou, and Frischlich (2019) argue that right-wing media should be understood as alternative media. They indicate that labeling right-wing media as "alternative" exposes these implicit biases, prompting

scholars to reconsider what qualifies as "alternative" beyond just political orientation. They also show that right-wing media often use similar discourses on power, resistance, and hegemony, positioning themselves as outsiders challenging mainstream media, which aligns them discursively with traditional alternative media. Alternative media can serve as an attitude intensifier to facilitate participation in a movement (Shen, Xia, & Skoric, 2020).

Scholars have indicated that the conservative media ecosystem is more coordinated and hegemonic than the traditional mainstream media (Hemmer, 2016; Hopkins, 2017). This is because conservative media evolved from "feelings of isolation from, and victimization, by mainstream media" (Speakman & Frunk, 2021, p. 658). Specifically, Benkler and associates (2018) claim that conservatives live in a propaganda feedback loop, in which conservative media—such as Fox News and Breitbart—promote a conservative agenda that is then amplified by other conservative media sites, endorsed by conservative elites and spread through social media by the conservative public. Hyper-partisan media will embrace White supremacist groups like Proud Boys, but they will repackage and dilute the message to make them more appealing to mainstream audiences. Our study didn't include measures of hyper-liberal media, so we focused on studies examining hyper-conservative media. In that sense, our first research question looks at the relationship between hyper-partisan media and support for political protest groups:

RQ1:   *What is the relationship between ultra-conservative media use and support for Proud Boys and QAnon?*

Protest Tactics

Public acceptance of protest tactics varies over time and is based on how often they are used. Moderate tactics align with political procedures, such as signing a petition and attending a protest rally or an organizational meeting (Kilgo & Mourão, 2019). Radical tactics disrupt everyday life. The protest paradigm suggests that media coverage tends to include more marginalizing frames and descriptions when the protesters use radical protest tactics (Boyle et al., 2012; Brown, Harlow, García-Perdomo, & Salaverría, 2018). Frames that describe protesters as violent create associations with lawlessness, riotness, and disorder. Meanwhile, descriptions of a peaceful protest can have a counter-effect. Mentions of a peaceful protest can serve as a legitimizing device, even if the news focuses on actions instead of demands (Harlow et al., 2020). Scholars have found that preexisting attitudes toward protest tactics are a stronger predictor of opinions about the protest than exposure to mainstream media coverage of the movement (Arpan, 2009). Under certain conditions, media coverage of protests can motivate citizens to protest (Geise, Panke, & Heck, 2021). Kilgo and Mourão (2019) found that preexisting attitudes toward protest tactics were not significant factors in explaining attitudes toward BLM. Media consumption is a more influential predictor of attitudes than preexisting attitudes toward protest tactics. Research question two focuses on personal attitudes toward protest tactics and attitudes towards political protest groups.

RQ2:   *How do attitudes toward radical and moderate protest tactics affect attitudes toward political protest groups?*

Protest and Democracy

Protests bring visibility to a movement and can be effective in gaining widespread support. Popular approval can translate into policy changes as policymakers perceive benefits by embracing the movement, while public rejection can lead to suppression and unfavorable views (Burstein & Linton, 2002; Hsiao & Radnitz, 2021). Nonviolent tactics are often more successful (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Schock, 2005; Thomas & Louis, 2013), but extreme tactics can grab mainstream media attention, creating what experts call the activist's dilemma: the same actions that gain publicity may undermine popular support (Feinberg et al., 2020). Few studies have explored whether judgments of protest legitimacy are based solely on tactics or influenced by preexisting beliefs, such as political ideology or partisan media use.

McLeod and Detenber (1999) suggest that public perceptions of protest's democratic utility can shift over time because of repeated exposure to protest paradigm frames. McLeod (1995) found that respondents who viewed protest as a useful form of democratic expression were less likely to criticize protesters and more likely to identify with them. However, Conservatives rated the utility of protests lower than liberals did.

Hsiao and Radnitz (2021) argue that people's alignment with partisan bias and a group's political identity shapes how violent or nonviolent they perceive protests to be. Republicans tend to view protestors as more violent than Democrats and distinguish between identical tactics depending on whether the group is liked or disliked. Kalmoe and Mason (2022) show that doubts about election legitimacy significantly increase the likelihood of political violence, as beliefs about fraud undermine democracy's role in reducing unrest. They found that approximately 20% of American partisans supported violent rebellion against the government, with belief in election fraud strongly predicting support for violent resistance. The following research questions address the relationship between levels of agreement on violent protests serving democracy and protest group ideological leaning, partisan media use, and political ideology:

RQ3:   *What is the relationship between conservative protest group support and levels of agreement for violent protests serving democracy?*

RQ3b: *What is the relationship between liberal protest group support and levels of agreement for violent protest serving democracy?*

The associations between the agreement of violent protest serving democracy and individual attitudes toward protest groups can be contingent on individual consumption of partisan media. The media landscape after the 2010s is highly partisan (Frisby, 2018), with outlets offering biased perspectives favoring specific political opinions (Levendusky, 2013). Individuals consume like-minded media that reinforces their beliefs and overemphasizes in-group sentiments, which can lead to extreme views. Kalmoe and Mason (2022) found partisan support for political violence toward rival parties. Mernyk, Pink, Druckman, and Willer (2022) noted that while most people did not support violent protests, exaggerated perceptions of opposing partisans led some to believe that their rivals supported violence. Partisan media consumption is also associated with differing perceptions of protest behaviors. Lorenzano, Moon, and Borah (2023) found that

individuals who consume conservative partisan media are more likely to believe disruptive protesters deserve to be "roughed up," while liberal media consumers tend to reject that idea.

Because partisan media spreads like-minded information (Levendusky, 2013), individuals may favor protests that align with their political views. Their opinions are reinforced by continuous media consumption and identification with in-group members (Brewer, 1979). Support for violent or nonviolent protests can vary based on partisan valence toward violence. Thus, research questions four and five ask about moderating roles for supporting violent and nonviolent protests.

RQ4:   *How do levels of agreement for violent protests influence the effect of partisan (a) ultra-conservative, (b) conservative, and (c) liberal media consumption on attitudes toward political protest groups?*

RQ5:   *How do levels of agreement for nonviolent protests influence the effect of partisan (a) ultra-conservative, (b) conservative, and (c) liberal media consumption on attitudes toward political protest groups?*

Methodology

Sample

Data were collected from a nationally representative U.S. survey. The polling group Dynata recruited participants online who answered a questionnaire administered through Qualtrics. Based on Pew data (Pew Research Center, 2019), this study implemented a quota sampling strategy to obtain a representative sample of U.S. Internet users, concerning race, ethnicity, gender, age, level of education, and income. A representative sample (n = 1003) was completed in March 2022 (see Appendix A).

Measures

Dependent Variables

Support for political protest groups was created as a composite variable using a 7-point scale. Participants were asked, "How much do you agree with what this group stands for?" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The items were divided into support for conservative political protest groups ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.79$, $r = .78$): QAnon ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.93$) and Proud Boys ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.87$) and liberal political protest groups ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.73$, $r = .51$): Antifa ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.88$) and Black Lives Matter ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 2.11$).

Independent Variables

Media Use

General Media Use

Participants rated how often (1 = never; 7 = very frequently) they followed politics and public affairs in the news on a 7-point Likert scale (M = 4.58, SD = 1.77).

Ultra-Conservative Media Index

Participants rated how often (1 = not at all; 7 = several times a day) they received their news and information from Info Wars, Breitbart, and Newsm*ax* on a 7-point Likert scale (a = 0.88, M = 1.74, SD = 1.39).

Conservative Media Index

Participants rated how often (1 = not at all; 7 = several times a day) they got their news and information from the *Wall Street Journal* and FOX News (r = .45, M = 2.64, SD = 1.65).

Liberal Media Index

A liberal media consumption index was created by averaging the responses using the same scale to the following five items: *MSNBC, CNN*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Huffington Post* (a = 0.87, M = 2.47, SD = 1.55).

An index for ultra-liberal media was not created since these are not widely recognized or consumed[1]. The items in the conservative and liberal indexes were created based on previous survey research testing partisan media effects (Hmielowski, Hutchens, & Beam, 2020).

Attitudes Toward Protest Tactics

Participants were asked to indicate to what extent (1= strongly disapprove; 7 = strongly approve) they approve or disapprove of people engaging in the following activities: Creating, sharing, or signing a petition as a form of protest; participating in legal street demonstrations; participating in the blocking of roads to protest; seizing private property or land to protest; boycotting a product as a form of protest; and participating in a group to violently overthrow the government. Based on previous research (Kilgo & Mourão, 2019; Lee, 2014), protest tactics were divided into moderate and radical. To ensure reliability, a factor analysis was conducted using the six items described above. Table 1 shows the results of the factor analysis.

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[1] According to the Ad Fontes Media Bias Chart, at the same level as Breitbart, Newsmax, and Infowars, on the left are Jezebel, The Root, and Daily Kos.

Table 1. Factor Analysis for Protest Attitudes.

	Component	
	Radical	Moderate
Creating, sharing, or signing a petition as a form of protest	0.026	**0.895**
Participating in legal street demonstrations	0.258	**0.83**
Participating in the blocking of roads to protest	**0.855**	0.226
Seizing private property or land to protest	**0.911**	0.103
Boycotting a product as a form of protest	0.13	**0.858**
Participating in a group working to violently overthrow the government	**0.903**	0.082
Initial eigenvalue	3.09	1.66
Percentage explained variance	41.01%	38.25%
Cumulative percentage	41.01%	79.26%

Political Ideology

Participants were asked whether they generally consider themselves Republicans, Democrats, or Independents on a scale from 1 to 7 in which 1 = strong Republican, 4 = Independent, and 7 = strong Democrat (*M* = 4.25, SD = 1.99).

Attitudes Toward Violent and Nonviolent Protest and Democracy

Participants were asked to state whether they agreed or disagreed (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) with the following statements: "Violent protests, in general, provide a useful service to our democracy" (*M* = 2.75, SD = 1.97), and "Non-violent protests, in general, provide a useful service to our democracy" (*M* = 4.97, SD = 1.66). These statements were modeled after Hsiao and Radnitz (2021) to test whether political ideology shapes public opinion about violent and nonviolent protests.

Covariates

In our analysis, we controlled for age (*M* = 42.20, SD = 17.04), gender (female, 54.0%, *N* = 542), race (non-White including Latino, Asian, African American, etc., 25.7%, *N* = 257), education (*M* = 3.45 [some college but no degree], SD = 0.41), income (*M* = 2.74 [$50,000 to $74,999], SD = 0.43), and the frequency of following politics and public affairs in the news. We measured the respondents' frequency of news consumption on a Likert scale ranging from 1 = "never" to 7 = "very frequently" (*M* = 4.58, SD = 0.49).

Analysis

We conducted two multiple Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analyses, with support for liberal and conservative protest groups as dependent variables, respectively. The first block included demographic variables, such as age, gender, race, level of education, and income. The second block

represented media consumption, which consists of following politics in mainstream news and partisan media uses (ultra-conservative, conservative, and liberal). The third block was political ideology. The fourth block represented attitudes toward protest tactics, which were divided between support for radical and moderate protest tactics. The fifth block was attitudes toward violent and nonviolent protests, which was divided between support for violent protests as important for democracy and nonviolent protests, respectively.

We also conducted two moderation analyses using Hayes PROCESS macro models to test RQ4 and RQ5. Model 2 was adapted to address two moderations (media use × violent and nonviolent protests) with all variables in OLS regression models as control variables.
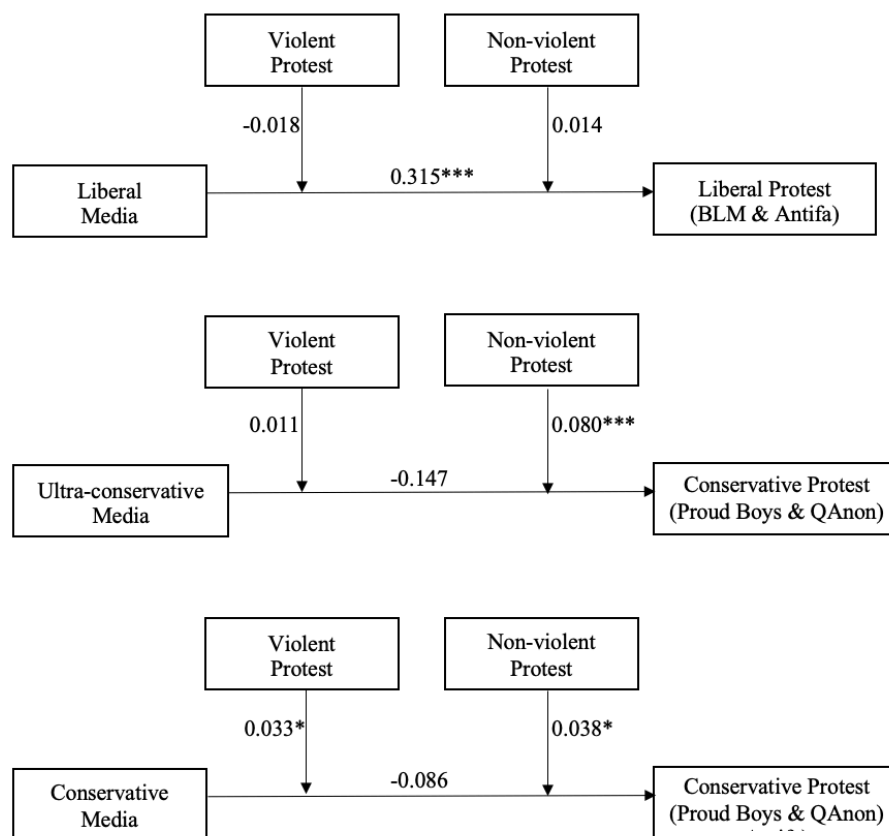

Figure 1. Results of moderation analyses.

Findings

H1 postulates that there is a negative relationship between general media use and support for political protest groups. The results of the hierarchical linear regressions indicated that the frequency of media use was a negative predictor of liberal ($\beta = -.05$, $p < .05$) and conservative ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .01$)

protests, supporting *H1*. On the other hand, *H2* predicted a negative relationship between conservative media use and supporting liberal protest groups. The results indicated nonsignificant associations between the two variables, rejecting *H2*. *H3* predicted a negative relationship between liberal media use and support for conservative protest groups; the results did not show significant associations, rejecting *H3*. *H4* investigated the associations between conservative media use and support for conservative protest groups, and RQ1 examined the relationship between ultra-conservative media use and support for conservative protest groups. We examined *H4* and RQ1 by 1) measuring the associations between ultra-conservative and 2) conservative media consumption. The results indicated that both ultra-conservative (β = .25, p < .001) and conservative (β = .20, p < .001) media consumption is positively related to support for conservative protest groups (QAnon and Proud Boys). *H5* tested the positive associations between liberal media use and support for liberal protest groups. The results showed that liberal media consumption was a positive predictor of supporting liberal protest groups (β = .33, p < .01).

When it comes to protest tactics, *RQ2* tested the relationship between attitudes toward protest tactics and attitudes toward political protest groups. The results of hierarchical linear regression analyses suggested that individual attitudes supporting radical protest tactics are positively associated with support for liberal protest groups (β = .19, p < .001). In contrast, the attitude supporting moderate protests was not significant. On the other hand, individual attitudes supporting radical protest tactics were positively associated with support for conservative protest groups (β = .20, p < .001), and the attitude supporting moderate protest tactics was negatively associated with support for conservative protest groups (β = -.10, p < .01).

When looking at whether people think violent or nonviolent protests support democracy, *RQ3* investigated the relationship between levels of agreement of violent and nonviolent protests serving democracy and support toward conservative protest groups. The results indicated that both individual attitudes supporting violent (β = .15, p < .01) and nonviolent (β = .12, p < .01) protests were positively associated with support for conservative protest groups. Similarly, *RQ3b* looked at the relationship between support for violent and nonviolent protests in service of democracy and support for liberal protest groups. The result indicated that both individual attitudes supporting violent (β = .13, p < .001) and nonviolent (β = .14, p < .001) protests were positively associated with support for liberal protest groups. Finally, while the model of support for liberal protests explained 49.1% of the variance observed, the model of support for conservative protests explained 40.6% of the variance observed (Table 2).

Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regression Predicting Protest Goals.

		Support for liberal protest groups	Support for conservative protest groups
Demographics	Age	−0.13***	−0.13***
	Gender	0.06*	0.09**
	Race	−0.01	0.04
	Education	−0.02	−0.03
	Income	−0.06*	−0.02
Media consumption	Following politics & public affairs news	−0.05*	−0.11**
	Ultra conservative	−0.04	0.25***
	Conservative	−0.06	0.20***
	Liberal	0.33**	−0.06
Political Ideology	Political Ideology	0.28***	−0.06*
Protest Attitudes	Radical	0.19***	0.20***
	Moderate	0.01	−0.10**
Protest Democracy	Violent	0.13***	0.15***
	Nonviolent	0.14***	0.12***
R²		0.491	0.406
F		67.84***	47.94***

Note. The score is a standard deviation (β).

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

RQ4 examined the moderating role of individual levels of agreement for violent protests in relation to partisan media consumption and attitudes toward political protest groups. The Hayes PROCESS macro model 2 suggested mixed results. A moderation between liberal media consumption and individual agreements for violent protests was not associated with support for liberal protest groups. In addition, a moderation between ultra-conservative media consumption and individual agreement for violent protests did not yield any significant association with support for conservative protest groups. We found a significant moderation of conservative media consumption and violent protest in predicting an association with conservative protest groups (β = .03, se = .01, $p <$ .05, LLCI = .0032, ULCI = .0567). This result indicates that a positive correlation was observed between the consumption of conservative media and the propensity to endorse violent protests; this tendency was further associated with support for conservative protest groups.

RQ5 tested the moderating role of individual agreement for nonviolent protests in predicting the association between partisan media consumption and attitudes toward political protest groups. Based on the results of Hayes PROCESS macro model 2, support for nonviolent protests significantly moderated associations between both forms of conservative media consumption and support for conservative protests (ultra-conservative: β = .08, se = .05, $p <$ .01, LLCI = .0345, ULCI = .1158 & conservative: β = .04, se = .02, $p <$ .05, LLCI = .0071, ULCI = .0670). The findings of this analysis suggest that individuals who

frequently consume ultra-conservative media and concurrently manifest a pronounced endorsement of nonviolent protests exhibit a higher propensity to support conservative protest movements. Similarly, an affinity for conservative media coupled with robust approval of nonviolent protests appears to correlate with an increased likelihood of backing conservative protest initiatives. Support for nonviolent protests could not moderate the association between liberal media consumption and support for liberal protests. These findings reflect a broader trend in conservative activism. Freelon et al. (2020) illustrate that right-wing activists often operate within ideologically exclusive media ecosystems, largely because of the long-standing mistrust of mainstream media and Big Tech platforms. This separation has led conservative activists to develop unique pathways for mobilization that include engagement with partisan media and migration to alternative digital spaces. Scholars have called this phenomenon "asymmetric polarization." This media strategy could amplify the endorsement of nonviolent conservative protest movements among dedicated conservative media consumers by reinforcing in-group messaging and providing a coherent ideological framework that aligns protest activities with their worldviews.
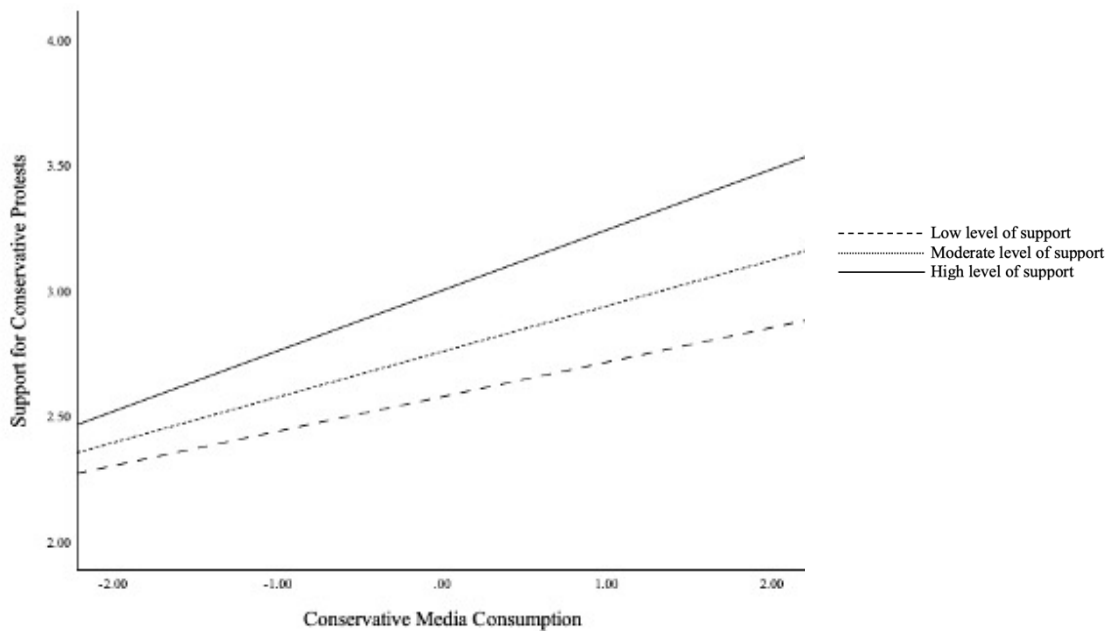

Figure 2a. Moderation analysis of conservative media consumption and support for violent protests in predicting support for conservative protests.
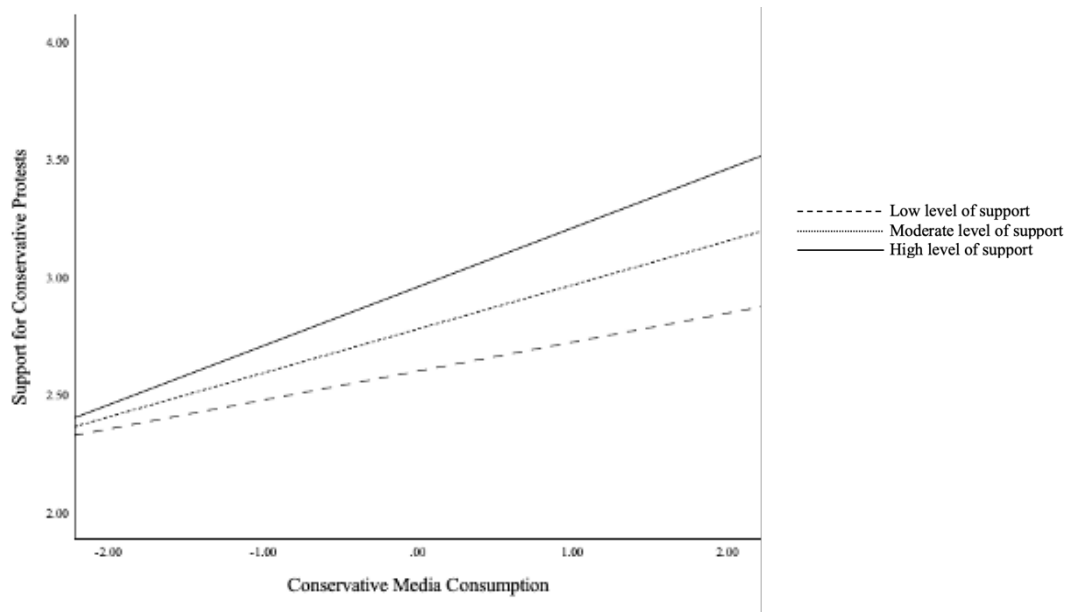
Figure 2b. Moderation analysis of conservative media consumption and support for nonviolent protests in predicting support for conservative protests.
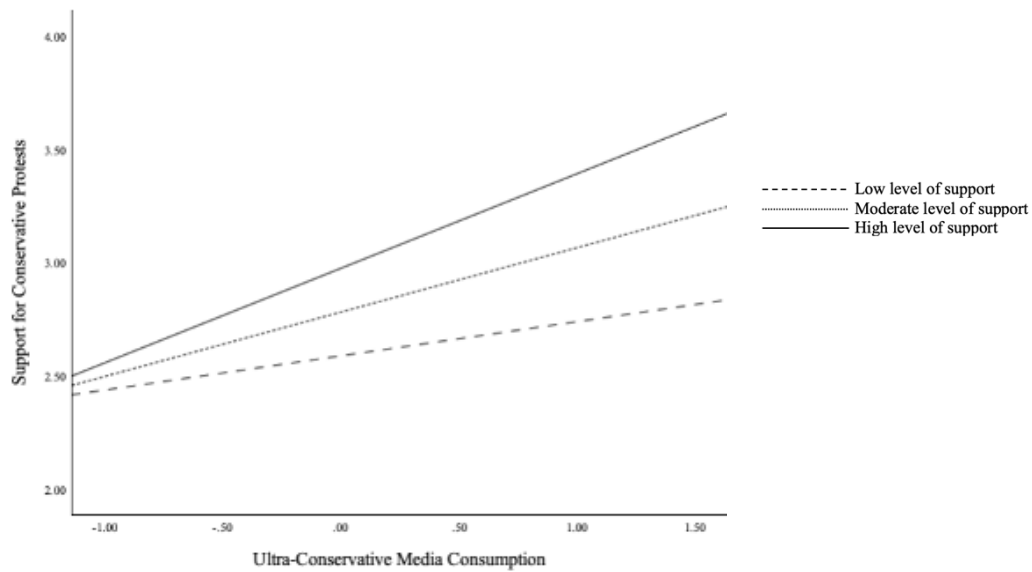

Figure 2c. Moderation analysis of ultra-conservative media consumption and support for nonviolent protests in predicting support for conservative protests.

Discussion

This study investigates the factors influencing support for liberal and conservative protest groups, as well as the perceived utility of violent and nonviolent protests for democracy. The findings show that higher news media consumption leads to lower support for political protest groups across the political spectrum. Surprisingly, higher levels of conservative media use do not predict lower support for liberal protest groups, contradicting earlier research indicating that conservative media consumption reduces support for BLM demands (Kilgo & Mourão, 2019).

The findings confirm the polarizing U.S. media and political environment, where partisan media consumption fosters support for protest groups aligned with one's political ideology. Liberal media consumption leads to support for liberal protest groups, challenging previous studies that found no such relationship (Kilgo & Mourão, 2019). Meanwhile, the consumption of conservative and ultra-conservative media drives support for conservative protest groups, aligning with critiques from BLM activists who argue that equating BLM protests with the Capitol siege is both dangerous and unfair (Watson, 2021). This suggests that conservative and ultra-conservative media have played a role in normalizing harmful White supremacist narratives.

One increasingly problematic assumption is that the cries of conservative protest groups are being equated to those of liberal groups. For instance, Republican politicians and conservative news media compared the Capitol insurrection with the BLM protest for racial injustice. The BLM protests following the death of George Floyd were mostly peaceful; the U.S. Crisis Monitor found that 93% of all BLM protests happened without violence. On the other hand, the Capitol siege was a planned and intentional direct attack on a democratic institution aimed at overturning a fair election in which people lost their lives (Watson, 2021). Our findings suggest a partisan distortion of the protest paradigm. Whereas liberal protests like BLM are traditionally framed through the lens of violence and disruption, conservative media have reframed these protests to appear equivalent to far-right, violent insurrections, thus shifting blame and justifying radical conservative tactics.

Protest Tactics and Support for Protest Groups

We found that support for radical protest tactics is positively associated with support for liberal and conservative protest groups. Yet, support for moderate protest tactics is not related to support for either conservative or liberal protest groups. This finding suggests that support for protest groups, regardless of political ideology, is strongly related to support for radical protest tactics, which points to the development of extreme political attitudes in the United States (Moss & O'Connor, 2020). Similarly, we found that both individuals who support liberal protest groups and those who support conservative protest groups tend to agree that both violent and nonviolent protests serve democracy, which indicates that liberals and conservatives approve of radical tactics if wielded by a liked group, confirming a growing polarized political environment.

Protest Groups and Support for Violent and Nonviolent Protest in Service of Democracy

This study found that individuals who support conservative and liberal protest groups are more likely to believe that violent protests serve democracy. This finding aligns with the results of a recent poll by the COVID States Project, which found that ideological liberals and conservatives are about evenly split over whether political violence is ever justified (Thomas, 2022). The growing justification for political violence emerges as more Americans become alienated from democratic institutions and mistrust in the government increases (Nadeem, 2022). The extreme political polarization and the spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic also played an important role in the political and cultural environment. Moreover, the tendency to support violent protest from both ideological camps can be linked to institutional polarization processes—that is, political elites, news media, and social media—that increase misperceptions of division among the electorate, which can contribute to the affective polarization of the tendency for partisans to dislike and distrust those from the other party (Druckman et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2020). Kleinfeld (2021) indicates that recent alterations to the political landscape, including highly competitive elections that can shift the balance of power, partisan divisions based on identity, electoral rules that enable winning by exploiting identity cleavages, and weak institutional constraints on violence, have created a latent force for political violence. And while far-left violence is lower than on the right, it is rising. A 2020 poll found that 11% of Democrats and 12% of Republicans agreed that it was at least "a little" justified to kill opposing political leaders to advance their own political goals (Kalmoe & Mason, 2022).

Moderating Effects of Partisan Media

Finally, the moderation analysis showed that liberal media consumers who support liberal protest groups also agree that violent and nonviolent protests serve democracy. Conservative media consumers who supported both violent and nonviolent protests also supported conservative protest groups. While the main associations in our model supported selective exposure to politically aligned media for partisans (Lorenzano et al., 2023), the differences in moderated associations of support for violent and nonviolent protests among partisan media consumption suggested different characteristics of partisan media consumers. That is, the relationship between consuming conservative and ultra-conservative media and support for conservative protest groups was positively moderated by the belief that nonviolent protest serves democracy. Regardless of support for violent or nonviolent protests, liberal media consumers support political protest groups that are in line with their ideology.

On the other hand, support for nonviolent protests and conservative and ultra-conservative media consumption predicts support for conservative protest groups. This finding regarding support for conservative protest groups and nonviolent protests is interesting and perhaps somewhat contradictory, as the survey was conducted after the Capitol Insurrection, which comprised several violent incidents. Two points might be particularly relevant to understand this finding.

One is that conservative individuals do not believe that conservative protest groups were behind the attack. The second point is that members of both the Proud Boys and QAnon have been focusing less on elections and more on LGBTQ-related protests, particularly anti-trans and anti-drug protests. The

Southern Poverty Law Center indicated that Proud Boys now focuses on LGBTQ-related protests, especially anti-trans and anti-drug protests, to fuel right-wing outrage and build new alliances (Wendling, 2023). This shift in focus from conservative protest groups might explain the preference for nonviolent protests in the service of democracy. Another possibility might be that some conservative activists endorse nonviolent protest if it aligns with values such as patriotism or free speech. However, support for radical tactics could emerge when they feel that those values are under threat or are used to justify more extreme actions.

Our finding aligns with Hmielowski et al. (2020), who indicated that conservative political beliefs are more likely to shape a polarized conservative media echo chamber than liberal beliefs are to create a liberal media echo chamber. Jost (2017) also indicated that conservatives were more likely to distrust the government when their party was not in control. The attack on the Capitol was an example of conservative protests that originated from conservatives' beliefs that the result of the 2020 presidential election was fraudulent at the time of the presidential transfer of power (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). Our findings support these arguments and phenomena.

There are some limitations to this study. This project relies on cross-sectional data, which only captures associations between variables and does not prove causality or the direction of media effects. A robust experimental or longitudinal design would better capture cause-and-effect relationships. Additionally, this study does not include social media use, which future research should explore in relation to protest attitudes and echo chambers.

We also encourage the use of this research for cross-national comparisons with countries sharing a partisan media landscape, such as Brazil. The 2023 attack on Congress in Brazil mirrors similarities to the Capitol insurrection. While U.S. protests have historically been led by liberal groups, right-wing militia groups account for the most recent domestic terrorism. For instance, the National Institute of Justice reports that far-right extremists committed 227 ideologically motivated attacks claiming 520 lives, compared with 42 attacks claiming 78 lives by left-wing and radical Islamist groups (Chermak et al., 2023).

Unlike right-wing groups, such as the Proud Boys or QAnon, the left lacks equivalent militia groups. Antifa and BLM are often conflated, but they are not equivalent. Although some Antifa counterprotests produced violence, 94% of BLM protests were peaceful. Despite this, Trump, Republicans, and conservative media lumped the two groups together, blaming them for the violence on January 6 and during the 2020 racial protests following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. These efforts shifted perceptions of BLM among White Americans, with 40% describing the protests as "dangerous" and 38% as "divisive," compared with fewer who saw them as "empowering" or "inclusive" (Horowitz, Hurst, & Braga, 2023).

Despite these limitations, our findings suggest that there is a growing politically polarized media environment in the United States and acceptance of radical protest tactics when the protest groups align with an individual's political ideology.

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Appendix A. Survey Demographics.

Gender	% U.S. Internet Population*	% Survey demographics (N = 1,003)
Male	49	47.6
Female	51	51.6
Race and Ethnicity		
Hispanic	15	16.5
White	70	70.3
Black or African-American	13	14.0
Asian or Asian-American	5	5.3
Other	12	10.5
Age		
18–29	24	21.7
30–49	36	36.4
50–64	25	25.8
65+	15	16.1
Income		
less than $30K	31	30.1
$30K to $49,999	18	18.2
$50K to $74,999	14	14.2
$75K and up	37	37.5
Education		
High school graduate or less	34	34.5
Some college / Associate degree	33	33.2
College graduate or more	33	32.3

*Based on data reported by the Pew Research Center in 2019. Values in percentage.