

## The #BlackLivesMatter Movement and Black Public Opinion

### *A New Populist Divide in the Black Community?*

Alvin B. Tillery, Jr.

#### INTRODUCTION

On July 13, 2013, Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi posted the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter, to protest the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the Florida murder trial of an unarmed African American teenager named Trayvon Martin.<sup>1</sup> In the nine years since, the hashtag has now become the internationally known slogan of a robust movement which calls for police reform and racial justice in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Further, since the summer of 2014, there have been two sustained waves of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests within the United States, while the BLM movement has grown into a diverse network of grassroots organizations representing more than thirty American cities and four countries.<sup>3</sup> BLM protests have garnered considerable attention from the media and registered in the national consciousness on public opinion surveys.<sup>4</sup>

As is often the case when new movements emerge, the origins, tactics, impact, and future trajectory of the BLM movement have become the subjects of intense academic scrutiny.<sup>5</sup> Thus far, three points of consensus have emerged within this

<sup>1</sup> Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement”; Hockin and Brunson, “The Revolution Might Not Be Televised.”

<sup>2</sup> Bonilla and Rosa, “#Ferguson”; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark, “Beyond the Hashtags”; Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*; Jackson and Welles, “#Ferguson is Everywhere.”

<sup>3</sup> Ransby, “The Class Politics of Black Lives Matter”; Rickford, “Black Lives Matter.”

<sup>4</sup> Horowitz and Livingston, “How Americans View the Black Lives Matter Movement”; Neal, “Views of Racism.”

<sup>5</sup> Gusfield, “The Reflexivity of Social Movements”; Zald, “Looking backward to Look Forward”; Harris, “The Next Civil Rights Movement”; LeBron, *Making of Black Lives Matter*; Lindsey, “Post-Ferguson”; Ransby, “The Class Politics of Black Lives Matter”; Rickford, “Black Lives Matter”; Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*; Tillery, “What Kind of Movement is Black Lives Matter?”

nascent scholarly literature on the movement. The first point is that BLM activists are intentionally rejecting the centralized leadership model which characterized the African American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Second, BLM activists tend to utilize movement frames based on gender, LGBTQ, and racial identities to describe both the problems they are combatting, and the solutions they are proposing through contentious politics.<sup>6</sup> Finally, there is general agreement that BLM activists see intrinsic value in the disruptive repertoires of contention that they utilize to better draw attention to their causes.<sup>7</sup>

Together, these points of consensus suggest that the BLM movement closely resembles the “new social movements” which have emerged in Europe and the United States since the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Harris, for example, has argued that “the spontaneity and the intensity of the Black Lives Matter movement is more akin to other recent movements – Occupy Wall Street and the explosive protests in Egypt and Brazil – than 1960s [African American] activism.”<sup>9</sup> Rickford even goes as far as to say that the Occupy Wall Street protests were a precursor to the BLM movement.<sup>10</sup>

The rise of the BLM movement has been read by many esteemed scholars of African American politics as a populist reaction to a political crisis which has ensued in the African American community since the demise of the Black Power movement in the 1970s. This viewpoint is grounded in the belief that the incorporation of African American elites into the neoliberal power structure during the 1980s amplified the worst variants of “respectability politics” and rent-seeking behaviors that further disadvantaged the majority of African Americans.<sup>11</sup> Harris has described the relationship between elite incorporation and the amplification of respectability politics as follows:

Today’s politics of respectability ... commands blacks left behind in the post-civil rights America to “lift up thyself.” Moreover, the ideology of respectability, like most other strategies for black progress articulated within spaces where blacks discussed the best courses of action for black freedom, once lurked for the most part beneath the gaze of white America. But now that black elites are part of the mainstream elite in media, entertainment, politics, and the academy, respectability talk operates within the official sphere, shaping the opinions, debates, and policy perspectives on what should – and should not – be done on the behalf of the black poor.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Harris, “The Next Civil Rights Movement,” 37–39; Lindsey, “Post-Ferguson”; Rickford, “Black Lives Matter,” 36–37; Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, 153–91.

<sup>7</sup> Rickford, “Black Lives Matter,” 36; Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*.

<sup>8</sup> Clark, “White Folks’ Work”; Harris, “The Next Civil Rights Movement”; Rickford, “Black Lives Matter”; Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*; Tillery, “What Kind of Movement is Black Lives Matter?”

<sup>9</sup> Harris, “The Next Civil Rights Movement,” p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> Rickford, “Black Lives Matter.”

<sup>11</sup> Harris, “The Next Civil Rights Movement”; Ransby, “The Class Politics of Black Lives Matter”; Rickford, “Black Lives Matter”; Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*.

<sup>12</sup> Harris, “The Next Civil Rights Movement,” 33.

The fact that many leading BLM activists have disavowed these tenants – just as we find in new social movements – has moved some scholars to argue that the most marginalized segments of the African American community are rising up to promote new and more inclusive fictions of peoplehood. For example, Ransby describes the “lead organizers of the Movement for Black Lives” as focused on the most marginalized people within the African American community.<sup>13</sup> Harris points out that the core activists of the BLM movement do not see traditional African American elites “as the gatekeepers of the movement’s ideals or leaders who must broker the interests of black communities with the state or society.”<sup>14</sup>

Taylor shares the appraisal of the behavior and attitudes of the core activists proffered by Harris and Ransby in their writings on the movement. Moreover, writing from a neo-Marxist perspective, she locates the rise of the BLM movement in a broader class conflict between the lower- and middle-class segments of the African American community. Taylor argues that this class conflict began under the Clinton administration, when “Black elected officials lined up to sign off on [a crime bill] that was literally intended to kill Black people.” In Taylor’s view, African American political elites were largely driven by their desires to reproduce respectability narratives about the African American community, in order to maximize their own power within the Democratic Party.<sup>15</sup>

In Taylor’s analysis, the rise of an elitist African American politics under the Clinton administration should merely be considered the fuse of the BLM movement. The match that sparked the thousands of mass protests that we have seen across the United States since 2014, is the disappointment that downtrodden African Americans have experienced with both the further deterioration of their neighborhoods during the Great Recession and former President Barack Obama’s conservative rhetoric about these conditions. Taylor describes the impact of these dynamics as follows:

Over the course of his first term, Obama paid no special attention to the mounting issues involving law enforcement and imprisonment, even as Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* described the horrors that mass incarceration and corruption throughout the legal system had inflicted on Black families. None of this began with Obama, but it would be naïve to think that African Americans were not considering the destructive impact of policing and incarceration when they turned out in droves to elect him. His unwillingness to address the effects of structural inequality eroded younger African Americans’ confidence in the transformative capacity of his presidency.<sup>16</sup>

Taylor continues by describing the role the Occupy Movement played, as an ideological counterpoint to the Obama administration in some African American communities: “[N]ot only did Occupy popularize economic and class inequality in the United States by demonstrating against corporate

<sup>13</sup> Ransby, “The Class Politics of Black Lives Matter.”

<sup>14</sup> Harris, “The Next Civil Rights Movement,” 37.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, 80–83, 100, 101–103.

<sup>16</sup> Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, 143.

greed, fraud, and corruption throughout the finance industry, it also helped to make connections between those issues and racism.” Taylor further argues, “The public discussion over economic inequality, rendered incoherent both Democratic and Republican politicians’ insistence on locating Black poverty in Black culture.” Throughout the remainder of her book, Taylor goes on to chronicle how the spirit of the Occupy Movement emboldened young, urban African Americans in cities like Ferguson and Baltimore to engage in populist activism which challenged both the white power structures and “Black faces in high places” within those cities.<sup>17</sup>

While Harris, Ransby, and Taylor argue forcefully that the African American community would benefit from the kind of populism that is found in the BLM movement, the fact of the matter is, there has yet to be any empirical evidence to substantiate these claims. This chapter examines the extent to which we can confirm the populist interpretation of the BLM movement through an analysis of African American public opinion. In short, the chapter asks the questions: Do the most marginalized members of the African American community see the BLM movement more positively than do their middle- and upper-class counterparts?

This chapter will proceed as follows. The following section presents a discussion of the theoretical context for our study. It describes both the evolution of ideas about elitism in African American politics over the past three decades within the literature on race and representation. This section also presents alternative explanations to this theory and presents the research hypotheses examined in this chapter. The next section describes the survey questions, mode of data collection, and the descriptive findings of the Qualtrics Panels survey commissioned for this study. The fourth section presents the main findings from statistical analyses of this data. The final section concludes by summarizing the implications of our findings on our wider understanding of contemporary Black politics.

#### THEORETICAL CONTEXTS AND HYPOTHESES

Populism is one of the most contested terms in social research.<sup>18</sup> As Mudde and Kaltwasser have argued, the confusion over what populism means, “stems from the fact that populism is a label seldom claimed by people or organizations themselves.” They continue, “[populism] is ascribed to others, most often as a distinctly negative label.”<sup>19</sup> This negative connotation to populism stems largely from the fact that the term was co-opted by radical right-wing parties that began to emerge in Western Europe in the late 1980s.<sup>20</sup> These parties railed against Europe’s political, economic, and social elites for their embrace of free-trade

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, 75–107, 146.

<sup>18</sup> Ionescu and Gellner, *Populism*.

<sup>19</sup> Mudde and Kaltwasser, “Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective,” 2.

<sup>20</sup> Ignazi, “The Silent Counter-Revolution”; Kitschelt and McGann, *Radical Right in Europe*; Betz and Johnson, “Against the Current.”

and pro-immigration policies.<sup>21</sup> The parties also shared commitments to the ideologies of nativism and authoritarianism, and they developed propaganda that framed their vision for European societies as the “voice of the people.”<sup>22</sup>

Over the past decade, social scientists and sociologists have begun to think more broadly about the concept of populism. Indeed, Mudde and Kaltwasser have argued that an “ideational approach” to populism has emerged within recent studies of Western Europe.<sup>23</sup> The consensus among the practitioners of this approach holds that all populist movements “involve some kind of exaltation and mass appeal to ‘the people’ and all are in one sense or another anti-elitist.”<sup>24</sup> Building on this consensus, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2018) write:

[P]opulism always involves a critique of the establishment and the adulation of the common people. Hence, we define populism as a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus the corrupt elite, only which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volante generale* (general will) of the people.<sup>25</sup>

Due to its association with xenophobia in Western Europe, scholars of African American politics and social movements have not widely deployed the concept of populism. Indeed, even the more recent studies of the BLM movement have rarely used the term. Despite this, the view that politics in the African American community is now a conflict between a corrupt establishment and a pure people permeates many studies of the BLM movement. Both Taylor’s argument about class conflict as the fount of the BLM movement and Harris and Rickford’s arguments about respectability politics are operating in the same register. Moreover, a cursory review of the literature on representation within African American politics reveals that an establishment versus the people theme has been growing in significance since the 1980s.<sup>26</sup>

Smith makes one of the strongest expositions of this argument in his book *We Have No Leaders: African Americans and the Post-Civil Rights Era*. He holds that the Congressional Black Caucus’ decision in the 1980s to focus on obtaining full integration within the Democratic Party’s power structure over more communal forms of politics, was the beginning of a rift between these elected leaders and a burgeoning African American underclass forming in America’s postindustrial cities during the same period. Smith writes:

In the post-civil rights era, virtually all of the talent and resources of the leadership of black America has been devoted to integration or incorporation into the institutions of the American society and polity. Meanwhile the core community that they would

<sup>21</sup> Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*.

<sup>22</sup> Mudde and Kaltwasser, “Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective,” 5.

<sup>23</sup> Mudde and Kaltwasser, “Populism,” 150.

<sup>24</sup> Canovan, *Populism*, 294.

<sup>25</sup> Mudde and Kaltwasser, “Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective,” 6.

<sup>26</sup> Marable, “Beyond Racial Identity Politics”; Smith, *We Have No Leaders*; Wilson, *Declining Significance of Race*; Wilson, *Truly Disadvantaged*.

purport to lead has become increasingly segregated and isolated, and its society, economy, culture, and institutions of internal uplift and governance have decayed. There is a systematic or structural logic to these processes, one that was probably inevitable and is perhaps irreversible .... This predictable bifurcation of black leadership and community has been made worse by ongoing challenges in the economy and culture of the larger society that matured at roughly the same time as the civil rights revolution.<sup>27</sup>

The concern that there is now a bifurcation between the goals pursued by African American leaders and specifically lower-class, rank-and-file African Americans, has also been a core theme within the quantitative studies of the roll-call votes of African American legislators that began to emerge in the 1990s. Swain highlighted this as an area of divergence, when she found that the roll-call votes of the median white and African American legislators within the Democratic Party's caucus in the House of Representatives began to converge in the 1980s. For Swain, who is an avowed conservative political scholar, this finding meant that African American legislators were not representing the interests of their lower-class constituents any differently than white Democrats, and therefore, racially conscious public policies designed to boost the number of African Americans serving in the US Congress were unnecessary.<sup>28</sup>

A second wave of literature on the roll-call behavior of African American legislators provides a strong counterargument to the charges of bifurcation within the African American community. This literature identified several ways in which African American legislators provide distinctive representation and unique benefits to their African American constituents. Katherine Tate's analyses of the 103rd and 104th Congresses, for example, found that "Black Democrats' voting behavior as measured by Poole and Rosenthal [was] significantly more consistent with the liberal Democratic party agenda than that of white and other minority Democratic legislators."<sup>29</sup> In other words, despite voting with their party on most roll-call votes, African American legislators have demonstrated a persistent willingness to promote and defend more liberal policies on the floor of the House of Representatives. Moreover, several studies have shown that African American legislators are far more likely than their white counterparts to introduce and champion bills advancing the interests of African Americans in the House's committees and on the floor.<sup>30</sup>

But the fact that African American legislators as a group, have demonstrated a higher level of commitment to representing the interests of African Americans, does not mean that there is unanimity within the Congressional

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *We Have No Leaders*, 278.

<sup>28</sup> Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests*.

<sup>29</sup> Tate, *Black Faces in the Mirror*, 85.

<sup>30</sup> Canon, *Race, Redistricting, and Representation*; Gamble, *Black Political Representation*; Grose, *Congress in Black and White*; Minta, *Oversight: Representing Black and Latino Interests in Congress*; Minta and Sinclair-Chapman, *Diversity in Political Institutions*; Tate, *Black Faces in the Mirror*; Tillery, "Foreign Policy Activism and Power in the House of Representatives"; Whitby, *The Color of Representation*.

Black Caucus on every policy matter. On the contrary, a broad consensus is found in recent studies of the Caucus that the expansion and institutionalization of the group has led to greater fragmentation on policy matters.<sup>31</sup> Our conclusion holds that these varying studies and arguments demonstrate that even though “incorporation in the system has made Black legislative leaders less radical and more pragmatic,” African American legislators do continue to see value in providing representation to their constituents on racial issues.<sup>32</sup>

Of course, it is important to note at this juncture, that the bifurcated class thesis is predicated on the behavior of the people and not their leaders. It is this segment of the equation where public opinion has the potential to shed light on the validity of the argument that African American communities are rising up against the middle- and upper-class elites who dominate policymaking in their communities. Once more, the literature on African American legislators is instructive. Public opinion surveys tell us that African American legislators remain very popular with their African American constituents.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the same literature shows that African American legislators have a slightly higher reelection rate – more than 92 percent – than the model Democratic member of the House of Representatives.<sup>34</sup>

It is also the case that four decades of public opinion research in the fields of political science and sociology have not produced much evidence of stable class, gender, and generational divides within the African American community on racial issues.<sup>35</sup> On the contrary, the consensus view which has emerged since the 1990s is that group consciousness binds African Americans together across social divides when it comes to racial issues.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Dawson’s conceptualization of African American public opinion on racial issues as being determined by a “black utility heuristic” predicated on a strong sense of “linked fate” which cuts across class lines, is one of the main axioms of African American politics.<sup>37</sup>

In light of the reelection rates of African American public officials and trends in public opinion studies of African Americans, the populism that Harris, Rickford, and Taylor see as generative of the BLM movement would be a sudden shock to the normal ecosystem of African American politics. Given the viral nature of the BLM protests that swept across the United States in 2014,

<sup>31</sup> Bosisis, *Congressional Black Caucus*; Singh, *Congressional Black Caucus*; Tate, *Black Faces in the Mirror*; Tate, *Concordance*; Tillery, *Between Homeland and Motherland*.

<sup>32</sup> Tate, *Concordance*, 4–5.

<sup>33</sup> Tate, *Black Faces in the Mirror*.

<sup>34</sup> Tate, *Concordance*.

<sup>35</sup> Huckfeld and Kohfeld, *Race and the Decline of Class*; Parent and Steckler, “Political Implications of Economic Stratification in the Black Community”; Welch and Combs, “Intra-racial Differences in Attitudes of Blacks”; Dawson, *Behind the Mule*.

<sup>36</sup> Gilliam, “Black America”; Dawson, *Behind the Mule*; Tate, *From Protest to Politics*.

<sup>37</sup> Dawson, *Behind the Mule*, 57–63; Gay, Hochschild, and White, “Americans’ Belief in Linked Fate”; Hajnal, “Black Class Exceptionalism”; McClain and Stewart, *Can We All Get Along?*

this is certainly a plausible argument. It is also true that several public opinion studies have found that neighborhood contexts and other life experiences can shift the value that African Americans attach to having a linked fate with other members of their racial group.<sup>38</sup> Thus, it is possible that the lived experiences of marginalized African Americans in places like Ferguson and Baltimore have so diverged from those of their middle- and upper-income counterparts in the African American community that they may no longer view establishment leaders as representing their interests or believe that the American political system can address their grievances.

This chapter tests the populism argument through a public opinion survey to determine if African American attitudes about the BLM movement are indeed segmented by social status – with those occupying more marginal subject positions having more positive evaluations of the movement. There are two research hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* African Americans with lower incomes are more likely to see the BLM movement as effective in promoting the collective interests of the Black community.

*Hypothesis 2:* African Americans with lower levels of educational attainment are more likely to see the BLM movement as effective at promoting the collective interests of the Black community.

Again, the markers of the elevated socioeconomic status have rarely proven to be significant predictors of African American public opinion on questions related to racial issues. Moreover, where differences have emerged, it has typically been better educated and more affluent African Americans who have demonstrated stronger commitments to group consciousness and held more nationalist viewpoints about the Black community's development.<sup>39</sup> In light of this theoretical context, finding a socioeconomic divide between African Americans on how they see the BLM movement would challenge one of the dominant paradigms in the study of Black public opinion.

## DATA

The data examined in this study is from an original internet survey conducted between September 22, 2017, and October 3, 2017. The Center for the Study of Diversity and Democracy (CSDD) at Northwestern University commissioned the survey from the research firm Qualtrics Panels. Qualtrics Panels recruited 815 subjects to take the twenty-five-item questionnaire using a census-matched recruitment strategy in thirty-nine states and Washington, DC, to maximize verisimilitude to a national probability sample. A recent

<sup>38</sup> Tate, *From Protest to Politics*; Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream*; Gay, *Putting Race in Context*; Hajnal, "Black Class Exceptionalism."

<sup>39</sup> Brown and Shaw, "Separate Nations"; Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream*.



meta-analysis conducted by Ansolabehere and Schaffner has demonstrated that this mode of data collection produces results that are as reliable as telephone and mail surveys.<sup>40</sup>

The survey collected information about the respondents' age, gender identity, Latino identity, level of educational attainment, and household income, in order to build a demographic profile of the sample. The census-matched recruitment strategy produced a sample that looks very similar to the national African American population across all demographic measures. Indeed, the only difference between the sample and national trends worth noting is that the poll skews slightly more male than the general African American population. While men comprise of 48 percent of the overall African American population, they are 50 percent of the respondents to the CSDD's poll conducted for this study.<sup>41</sup>

The survey also asked respondents about their politics and racial orientations in society. First, the CSDD survey asked the respondents to place their political ideologies on a standard five-point political scale of conservative, slightly conservative, moderate, slightly liberal, liberal. Next, the survey asked the respondents to rate how important being Black was to their sense of themselves on a five-point scale from "Not at all important" to "Extremely important." Finally, the survey asked the respondents to describe how important it was for them to see their fate as a Black person as linked to the fates of other African Americans on that same five-point scale from "Not at all important" to "Extremely important."

The question on the CSDD survey designed to glean the respondents' attitudes about the BLM movement focused on their individual beliefs about the movement's effectiveness: In general, to what extent do you believe the BLM movement is effective? The question utilized a five-point scale – ranging from "Not effective at all" to "Extremely effective" – for the response categories. Previous research has found that the BLM movement is very popular in the African American community when surveys ask about "support" for the movement.<sup>42</sup> The CSDD survey asked about effectiveness in order to get respondents to think more deeply about how they view the overall impact of the movement.

## FINDINGS

Before turning to the results of the regression analyses to understand how public opinion in support of the BLM movement is segmented, it is useful to consider some of the general findings from the CSDD survey. The first noteworthy

<sup>40</sup> Ansolabehere and Schaffner, "Does Survey Mode Still Matter?"

<sup>41</sup> Rastogi et al., *The Black Population*.

<sup>42</sup> Bunyasi and Smith, "Do All Black Lives Matter Equally to Black People?"; Horowitz and Livingston, "How Americans View the Black Lives Matter Movement."

TABLE 11.1 OLS Regression models of evaluations of BLM movements' effectiveness

Variable	Model 1 Regression Coefficients	Model 2 Regression Coefficients
Age	-.067** (.028)	-.058** (.025)
Education	-.103*** (.022)	-.052*** (.021)
Gender	-.120 (.088)	-.154** (.080)
Hispanic Heritage	.378*** (.170)	.312 (.157)
Income	-.166*** (.032)	-.128*** (.030)
Black Consciousness	X	.135*** (.039)
Liberalism	X	.035 (.031)
Linked Fate	X	.284*** (.034)
Constant	4.06*** (.246)	2.87*** (.286)
R <sup>2</sup>	.04	.20

Data Source: CSDD BLM Survey (2017)

\* =  $p \leq .10$ ; \*\* =  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*\* =  $p \leq .01$ .

Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

result is that a majority of the respondents – 59 percent – had never participated in one of the first wave BLM movement protests that took place between 2014 and 2016. The respondents also reported relatively low-participation rates in other activities supporting BLM, such as posting on social media, attending meetings, or fundraising. But in spite of these low-participation rates, the respondents overwhelmingly deemed the BLM movement to be effective at promoting the interests of the Black community. Overall, 81 percent of the 815 respondents rated the BLM movement as at least “moderately effective.” These findings suggest that, in general, the African American community has a high approval of the performance of the BLM movement. The main question guiding our study is: How segmented is this belief in the movement’s effectiveness by socioeconomic status, as measured by income and educational attainment?

Table 11.1 reports the results of two OLS regressions of respondents’ views of the effectiveness of the BLM movement. Column 1 reports a model of the respondents’ attitudes toward the BLM movement based on demographic

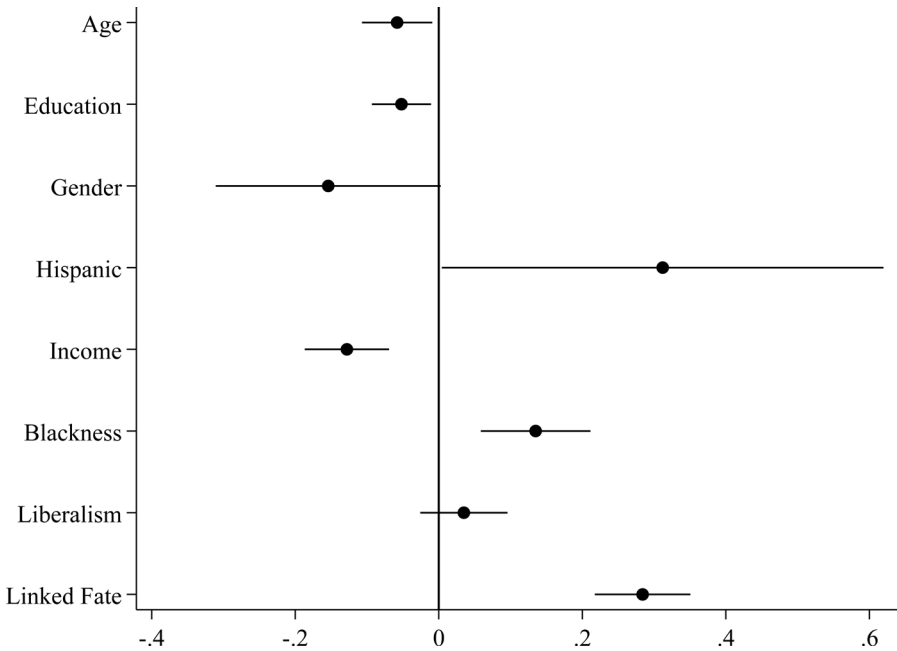


FIGURE 11.1 Plot of OLS regression coefficients from Model 2 with 95% confidence intervals

characteristics. The results of the model provide evidence that supports confirmation that (H1) lower income African Americans are more likely to see BLM as effective than higher income African Americans. (H2) African Americans with lower levels of educational attainment are also more likely to see the BLM movement as effective than those with higher levels of educational attainment.

For every position moved up in the six-category income scale, there is a  $-.166$  decline in the view that BLM is an effective movement. Similarly, a one unit move up the seven-category, ordinal scale for educational attainment results in a  $-.103$  decline in the view that BLM is effective. Both of these results are statistically significant at the  $.01$  level.

Table 11.1 also reports the results of a second model which includes ideological covariates. As the table illustrates, Model 2 also provides confirmation of H1 and H2. Indeed, the coefficients for both income ( $-.127$ ) and educational attainment ( $-.048$ ) remain negative predictors of attitudes about the effectiveness of BLM in this fuller model. Moreover, the coefficients of both variables remain significant at the  $.01$  level. Finally, as we would expect, heightened levels of both group consciousness and linked fate with other African Americans are positive predictors of the belief that the BLM movement is effective. Figure 11.1 presents a more intuitive graphical representation of the impact of the regression coefficients on the respondents' beliefs that the BLM movement has been effective.

The results of these regressions suggest that public opinion on the BLM movement is segmented by socioeconomic status within the African American community. This is a very unusual dynamic in African American public opinion. Indeed, as stated above, four decades of research on African American public opinion have failed to turn up stable divides over partisanship, policies, or social movements that track with demographic factors. Public opinion scholars will need to explore this dynamic more to determine the extent to which this is a secular trend or a trend that manifests itself only on public opinions about the BLM movement.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined African American public opinion about the BLM movement. As stated above, both the core activists who lead the movement and the main academic analysts who study it have proclaimed that the BLM movement has initiated a new phase of populist politics within African American communities. The mantra has become that the BLM movement is “centering the most marginal” voices in the African American community with their activism.<sup>43</sup> This chapter pursued the question: Can we see echoes of this populist approach in African American public opinion about the BLM movement? In other words, do we see that the groups that the BLM activists highlight in their communications express greater belief in the movement’s effectiveness than other African Americans?

The chapter tested two hypotheses to determine if there is evidence of segmentation along the lines of income and educational attainment. While the overall results showed that the vast majority of the 815 respondents to the survey believe the BLM movement is effective, there are differences in the sample population which confirm the two research hypotheses. African Americans with lower incomes and lower educational attainment were more likely to see the movement as effective than their counterparts with higher socioeconomic status. These findings suggest the populist messaging deployed by the core activists of the BLM movement is having a differential impact within the African American community.

The results are important not just because they shed light on the populist dynamics of the BLM movement. On the contrary, these findings also raise questions about the long-established axiom that middle-class African Americans are likely to be the vanguard of antiracist activism in the United States.<sup>44</sup> They also suggest the bonds of linked fate to downtrodden African Americans that Dawson demonstrated as the primary drivers of the political attitudes of middle-class African Americans in the 1980s and 1990s, may be loosening in response to the populist messaging generated by the BLM movement. If these dynamics hold over time, and are shown in subsequent

<sup>43</sup> Garza “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement.”

<sup>44</sup> Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream*.

studies, they have the potential to fundamentally reorient our understandings of African American politics over the long term.

At the same time, it is important to read these results within the context of the dynamics of the first wave of BLM activism. As stated above, there have now been two sustained waves of protests for police reform under the banner of #BlackLivesMatter since 2013. While the first wave consisted largely of Black participants and their allies among young, urbane whites living in cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, the second wave of protests in the wake of the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd drew participants from every walk of American life. Moreover, by some accounts, the second wave of BLM protests was the largest sustained protest in the history of the United States.<sup>45</sup>

Obviously, it is impossible to say how the shift in the dynamics of the movement will impact the class divide in public opinion that we have observed in the Black community over the BLM movement. My hunch is that an increase in participation among other ethnic and racial groups will likely normalize participation in the movement for African Americans with higher levels of socioeconomic status. I would urge social movement researchers to explore this line of questioning in subsequent public opinion studies. If this hypothesis were confirmed, it would suggest that there is indeed the potential for a progressive, multiracial, and socioeconomically diverse populist movement for police reform in America.

## APPENDIX

### Description of independent variables and coding:

The coding schemes for the independent and dependent variables utilized in the regression analyses are listed below. The variables are listed in alphabetical order.

- 1) Age: This variable is constructed from an ordinal scale with eight categories – 18–24; 25–34; 35–44; 45–54; 55–64; 65–74; 75–84; 85 or older.
- 2) Black consciousness: This variable is constructed from an ordinal scale with five categories – not at all important; slightly important; moderately important; very important; extremely important.
- 3) Education: This variable is constructed from an ordinal scale with seven categories – less than high-school degree; high-school graduate (or GED); some college but no degree; associate degree in college (two-year); bachelor's degree in college (four-year); master's degree; terminal degree (PhD, EdD, JD, MD).
- 4) Gender: This is a dummy variable; coded 0 for male and 1 for female.
- 5) Income: This variable is constructed from an ordinal scale with six categories for annual earnings – less than \$20,000; \$20,000–\$29,999; \$30,000–\$49,999; \$50,000–\$74,999; \$75,000–\$99,999; \$100,000 or more.

<sup>45</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, “Health Tracking Poll.”

- 6) Latino identity: This is a dummy variable; coded 0 for no Latino identity and 1 for persons with Latino identity.
- 7) Liberalism: This variable is constructed from an ordinal scale with five categories – conservative; slightly conservative; moderate, middle of the road; slightly liberal; liberal.
- 8) Linked fate: This variable is constructed from an ordinal scale with five categories – none at all; a little; a moderate amount; a lot; a great deal.