

Yes, the police have high approval ratings. But Americans support police reform, too.

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For decades, the police have enjoyed deep support and trust from the American people. Per Gallup, most Americans have said they have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in police every year for more than 25 years. Law enforcement officers are constantly lionized in entertainment. And most Americans who have interacted with the police in the past five years say they had a “satisfactory” experience.

But on May 25, the Minneapolis police betrayed that trust by killing George Floyd. This is hardly the first time that violent actions by police officers has convulsed the country, and it’s too early to say exactly how Floyd’s death — or police conduct during the ensuing protests — will change the relationship between law enforcement and the public. But reformers should be cautiously optimistic: Underneath those persistently high approval numbers, there may be real appetite for change.

Americans venerate the police, but that doesn’t make them blind to law enforcement’s problems and failures. According to a Yahoo News/YouGov survey conducted during the early days of the protests (May 29-30), 61 percent of American adults believe that race was a major factor in George Floyd’s death. Even among Republicans, who might agree with President Trump’s harsh “law and order” approach to policing, a solid 39 percent say race played a major role in Floyd’s killing.

In a 2017 Pew Research survey, 60 percent of Americans said that the “deaths of blacks during encounters with the police in recent years” were signs of a broader problem rather than isolated incidents. Two-thirds of Americans — including 63 percent of whites — now say that in general, African Americans are treated less fairly than whites in dealing with the police. And, according to a Monmouth poll conducted between May 29 and June 1, 57 percent of Americans said that, in a dangerous situation, the police are more likely to use excessive force against an African American culprit than a white culprit. In 2014, that number was 33 percent.

These attitudes aren't just empty expressions of sympathy — Americans have wanted laws to change for some time. According to a 2016 study by the Libertarian Cato Institute, 79 percent of Americans support outside investigations of police misconduct and 89 percent support the use of body cameras to document interactions between police and civilians. Eighty-four percent oppose civil asset forfeiture, the egregious practice of seizing “money or property that is suspected to have been involved in a drug crime before the person is convicted.”

And so far the protests haven't turned Americans away from their support for police reform. Per the mid-protest Yahoo/YouGov survey almost 9 in 10 Americans support outfitting all police officers with body cameras, 8 in 10 want early warning systems that identify problematic officers and two-thirds think neck restraints should be banned.

This rendition of the poem ‘Black 101’ memorializes the innocent lives poet Frank X Walker says are terrorized by white rage, including jogger Ahmaud Arbery. (Frank X Walker, Joy Sharon Yi, Kate Woodsome/The Washington Post)

Despite broad public support, crafting and passing federal legislation to address police misconduct will still likely be a tough tightrope walk. If reformers get tagged as “anti-police” or pursue the most dramatic policy proposals, they may meet public resistance: The mid-protest Monmouth poll found 71 percent of respondents are at least somewhat satisfied with the job performance of their local police department. General confidence in the police barely budged after the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. And while the public is becoming increasingly aware of discrimination by police, most people don't support the most blunt measures: the Yahoo/YouGov survey showed that two-thirds of Americans oppose cutting police department funding.

Timing will be key as well — activists either need to find a way to make their ideas palatable to Trump, who will have the veto pen at least until January 2021, and possibly later, or find a way to maintain momentum until he's out of office. In the meantime, reformers can use these strong numbers to put pressure on state legislators or to make the case for reformist candidates in local elections for sheriff, prosecutor and other law enforcement positions.

These reforms won't be passed tomorrow. But these changes aren't out of reach. Americans understand, on a gut level, that law enforcement has a race problem and that new restrictions are needed. They just need political leaders who are willing and able to make it happen.