

Did protests change Americans' views of race and policing? Yes, but it's complicated.

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In the aftermath of George Floyd's death and the subsequent protests, the public leaped left on police reform and racial issues: Support for Black Lives Matter surged, Americans increasingly supported police reform measures and a majority said law enforcement has a racial discrimination problem. But even as the apathetic got activated, a question remained: Would their new opinions stick? Or would Americans move on when the news cycle shifted, forgoing their new commitments to reform and racial justice?

A month ago, there wasn't enough data and not enough time had passed to answer this question. But more than two months after Floyd's death, a clearer picture is forming. The protests moved the public toward police reform and more liberal racial attitudes in a substantive way — but this set of issues is not immune to the forces of polarization or backlash.

The good news for the people who have worked for years against racism and white supremacy: Even though the news cycle has moved on, some have retained their newfound dedication to measures intended to advance racial justice. According to a Post-ABC News poll, 69 percent of Americans believe African Americans and whites do not receive equal treatment in the criminal justice system, an all-time high for the survey.

Moreover, Black Lives Matter has managed to retain many of its new supporters: The percentage of Americans who support the group jumped from 46 percent to 53 percent in the early days of the protest, but has now leveled off at roughly 50 percent. Opposition to Black Lives Matter has also increased, but that shift seems to be fueled by undecided Americans getting off the fence rather than from an erosion of support.

That desire for racial justice is translating into a concrete demand for police reform. Both the libertarian Cato Institute and the nonpartisan Pew Research Center recently found that roughly two-thirds of Americans want to end "qualified immunity," a complex legal doctrine that sometimes prevents citizens from suing police officers who violate their civil rights. The Pew

survey, taken in mid-June, also found broad support for reforms such as creating a federal database to track police misconduct, banning chokeholds and requiring officers to live in the places they police.

While most Americans still respect and trust police officers — 62 percent had a favorable opinion of police officers in Huffington Post-YouGov poll in mid-June — the idea of “defunding” the police is gaining traction but doesn’t yet have majority support. According to The Post’s polling, 40 percent support “reducing funding for police departments and spending that money on social services instead.” Cato also found that 43 percent favor “defunding police departments,” but that likely doesn’t translate into support for full abolition of the police.

But there’s bad news for reformers, too. Polarization seems to be setting in on some questions. There are seeds of backlash hidden in these numbers.

The widening party divide first showed up in numbers from Monmouth University. Researchers asked Americans whether racial and ethnic discrimination was a “big problem” in both early and late June. In early June, at the height of the protests, 54 percent of Republicans said discrimination was a problem — but that figure was down to 40 percent by late June. In the Civiqs tracker, opposition to Black Lives Matter has been steadily rising as the president has feuded with protesters, with three-quarters of Republicans now opposing the movement. And in the latest Post-ABC News poll, only 21 percent of Republicans said the killings of unarmed black people by police were a sign of broader problems in how police treat African Americans, while 55 percent of Republicans said the same of Floyd in an ABC-Ipsos poll in early June.

It’s not hard to explain these changes — while many converts to the cause of racial justice stuck around, some Republicans stopped seeing the protests in the news, listened to President Trump’s spin and either adopted Trump’s stance or returned to their pre-protest positions.

These figures also suggest the possibility of a boomerang effect. Cato found that 55 percent of respondents agree that “if we’re too critical of police, they may be reluctant to do their jobs effectively and crime could go up.”

On balance, the newest wave of poll numbers should be encouraging for police reform advocates. The demonstrations brought some new people into their movement and cemented the issue as a high priority for a major political party — which is more than most protests accomplish. But police reform isn’t yet on an unstoppable path, like marriage equality or marijuana legalization. If Joe Biden wins and tries to enact police reform legislation, he’ll need to formulate his proposal with care — or risk provoking serious backlash from the public.