



# Visualizing How Race, Support for Black Lives Matter, and Gun Ownership Shape Views of the U.S. Capitol Insurrection of January 6, 2021

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## Abstract

Protest movements linked to racial inequality in policing and antigovernment sentiment have roiled the United States in recent years. In this visualization, the authors examine how race, support for Black Lives Matter (BLM), and gun ownership predict views about the political uprising of January 6, 2021, at the U.S. Capitol. On the basis of a 2021 survey from a long-term longitudinal study, the authors show that views of the Capitol insurrection do not vary by race, contrary to expectations. However, there is a positive association between support for BLM and views of January 6 participants as “extremists,” especially among Whites, independent of age, sex, respondent’s education, parental education, and childhood neighborhood poverty. Race and gun ownership also interact, with White gun owners an outlier in viewing the insurrection more favorably. Black gun owners, on the contrary, viewed it most negatively.

## Keywords

race, Black Lives Matter, Capitol insurrection, guns

In the wake of the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, U.S. Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer declared, “Those who performed these reprehensible acts cannot be called protesters; no, these were rioters and insurrectionists, goons and thugs, domestic terrorists” (U.S. House of Representatives 2021). Even Republican senator Lindsay Graham of South Carolina, a long-time Donald Trump loyalist, proclaimed the invaders of Congress to be “terrorists, not protesters.” Support for the January 6 uprising has also been linked in both media and scholarly outlets to White supremacy, antigovernment sentiment, and a passion for guns and the Second Amendment (Morabia 2021).

Although support for the events of January 6 may constitute a racial “dog whistle,” how views of January 6 and Black Lives Matter (BLM) specifically relate to each other and to race itself is unclear. Complicating an understanding of who supported the insurrection is the role of gun ownership, a polarizing aspect of American life that has been cited as an increasing form of a dog whistle (Schutten et al. 2021).

In Figure 1, we visualize these relationships using survey data collected from May to October 2021. Our sample comes from a follow-up of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN+), a longitudinal study of

multiple birth cohorts of Chicago residents that began in the mid-1990s and was designed to examine the social context of human development over multiple waves of study. Respondents were followed wherever they moved in the United States, with about half still residents of Chicago and the vast majority living in Illinois in 2021 (for more details on the PHDCN+, see Sampson, Kirk, and Bucci 2022).

Given common discourse, it is perhaps surprising how minimally views toward the Capitol insurrection vary by race (Figure 1A). The clear majority (more than 70 percent) view participants of the insurrection as extremists. If anything, there is slightly more support among Blacks than Whites for viewing January 6 participants as “patriots.” However, the main story is the sheer lack of racial differences overall.

Figure 1B, by comparison, shows that racial attitudes about BLM play a significant role, independent of race and

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**Figure 1.** Views on the Capitol insurrection, by race, support for BLM, and gun ownership.

Note: Visualization results are based on a fifth survey wave of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN+) carried out by NORC at the University of Chicago in 2021 ( $n = 682$ ). The sample includes four cohorts of individuals, born in approximately 1981, 1984, 1987, and

(continued)

**Figure 1. (continued)**

1995, who were representative of children growing up in Chicago in the mid-1990s, the baseline of the study at wave 1. All outcomes are based on the survey question “What label do you think best characterizes the people who participated in the events at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, to contest the results of the presidential election?” In panel A, we report all answer options, which include “extremist,” “protester,” and “patriot.” Panel A presents the prevalence of each response on the basis of multiply imputed (10 data sets) and survey-adjusted means for Whites ( $n = 143$ ), Blacks ( $n = 220$ ), and Hispanics ( $n = 288$ ). Results for respondents who identify as any other race ( $n = 31$ ) were dropped from the analysis. Panels B and C present predicted probabilities on the basis of logistic regression models that predict a collapsed outcome (extremist = 1, patriot or protester = 0), controlling for age, sex, current education of the respondent, growing up in neighborhood poverty, and parental education. Error bars are based on survey-adjusted 95 percent confidence intervals. All data are weighted to reflect the original sampling stratification and attrition due to follow-up. For further information on the models estimated to create the figure and further explanation of the study design, data, variables, and data availability, see the online supplemental information and Sampson et al. (2022).

additional covariates. Overall, supporters of BLM are approximately 1.5 times more likely to view the individuals who stormed the Capitol as extremists than are nonsupporters of BLM. This pattern persists across all racial groups.

When looking within race, however, these differences are largest for Whites and Hispanics; White and Hispanic supporters of BLM are significantly more likely ( $p < .01$ ) to view insurrection participants as extremists relative to nonsupporters within their own racial group. Among Blacks, there is no significant difference by BLM support or nonsupport. There is some variation between race among nonsupporters of BLM, but these differences are not significant. The similarity of attitudes toward the insurrection by race in Figure 1A is thus driven mainly by the lack of differentiation by race among BLM supporters, who constitute more than 70 percent of the sample.

Figure 1C shows that despite sentiment that support for the insurrection is positively correlated with gun ownership, this pattern persists only for White respondents in our sample. White gun owners are significantly less likely to view January 6 participants as extremists compared with Whites who do not own guns ( $p < .01$ ). This finding contrasts with the idea of White gun owners as “citizen protectors” and that access to guns has effectively “deputized whites as legitimate carriers of law and order” (Carlson 2020:14). These “carriers of law and order” are the least likely to consider the events of January 6 as an extremist attempt to overthrow the government.

For Black respondents, the pattern is reversed, with gun owners significantly more likely to view the January 6 participants as extremists than non-gun owners ( $p < .05$ ). This finding stands in contrast to images of Black gun ownership from the civil rights era, in which the Black Panthers armed themselves in opposition to the government, specifically for self-protection against state-sponsored violence. For Hispanic respondents, there is virtually no difference in views of the insurrection by gun ownership.

Future research should examine additional predictors of support for BLM and the Capitol insurrection. Social movements surrounding these issues have been some of the most polarizing in recent history, although as we have shown, not in the simple ways often portrayed. Additional research is needed to explore how early life factors, including other family and neighborhood conditions, contribute to the development of these views through their impact on legal


cynicism, contact with the police, and exposure to different racial groups.

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**Supplemental Material**

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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