Do politics trump race in determining America's youths' perceptions of law enforcement?

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Do politics Trump race in determining America's youths' perceptions of law enforcement?

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Controversial encounters between racial minorities and law enforcement have led to increased public discourse surrounding race and law enforcement in the United States. A "racial gap" in perceptions of law enforcement exists and appears to be growing. Researchers have not adequately examined how political preference may contribute to diverging views of law enforcement.
Method: Using data drawn from the Monitoring the Future study, the current study examines how race and political preference might jointly influence the way youth (12th graders) viewed law enforcement from 2005 to 2016.
Results: In all years, White Democrats reported worse perceptions of law enforcement than did White Republicans, yet the gap in perceptions has been growing in recent years. In contrast, Democratic and Republican Latinx youth reported similar perceptions of law enforcement until 2012, at which point Democratic Latinx youth began reporting worse perceptions than Republican Latinx youth. Finally, there were no discernable differences in Black youths' perceptions of law enforcement by political party across the years.
Conclusions: These findings suggest that while there is a racial gradient in how young adults perceive law enforcement, political orientation contributes to heterogeneity in youths' perceptions of law enforcement.

1. Introduction

In response to numerous controversial incidents involving law enforcement and civilians in cities across the United States, law enforcement has become increasingly scrutinized by policy makers, the media, and community stakeholders (Mac Donald, 2016; Moule Jr, Fox, & Parry, 2018; Rivera & Ward, 2017; Weitzer, 2015; Wolfe & Nix, 2016). Given these recent events and the historically contentious relationship between law enforcement and both Black/African American (henceforth Black) and Hispanic/Latinx (henceforth Latinx) communities, it is no surprise that Black and Latinx individuals tend to perceive law enforcement more negatively than do White individuals (see Peck, 2015; Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). Critically, the race gap in perceptions of law enforcement appears to be widening (Gallup, 2017), such that while Black and Latinx individuals' perceptions of law enforcement have decreased in recent years, White individuals' perceptions have improved.

Despite the growing literature devoted to understanding perceptions of law enforcement (see Silver & Pickett, 2015; Trinkner & Tyler, 2016; Weitzer, 2017), researchers largely rely on a few demographic factors to evaluate police-community relationships. This restricted approach overlooks salient ideological factors embedded within race (see Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011, 2015) and does not adequately explain potentially divergent trends within racial groups that reflect meaningful differences in how some individuals view law enforcement. For instance, existing work does not address why White individuals' perceptions of law enforcement may be improving, nor has it identified if this trend does not apply to certain sub-groups of White individuals.

In this study, we consider how political preference contributes to racial differences in perceptions of law enforcement. The modern sociopolitical climate around policing has become increasingly polarized in the United States (Weitzer, 2017), such that the two major political parties, Democrats and Republicans, differ considerably in their evaluations of law enforcement (e.g., Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013; Haidt & Hetherington, 2012). Compared to Democrats, Republicans tend to perceive police more positively (e.g., Cao, Stack, & Sun, 1998; Pickett, 2018; Zamble & Annesley, 1987), to believe that police treat people fairly (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011), and to believe that use of force against black Americans is proportional to their violent

crime rate (French, 2015; see also Obasogie & Newman, 2016). In contrast, Democrats tend to take a more "pro-reform" position that is focused on addressing injustices and improving police accountability.

It is also known that political preference varies by race. Pew Research Center (2018) estimates that White voters predominantly lean Republican (51%), compared to 43% that identify as Democrat. In contrast, Black voters overwhelmingly lean Democratic (84%) and only 8% identify as Republican. Similarly, the majority of Latinx voters identify as Democratic (63%), while 28% identify as Republican. Provided the large percentage of White people who lean Republican, it is likely that White individuals' improving perceptions of law enforcement may be largely driven by Republican White individuals and perceptions would diverge for White youth who lean Democratic. However, considering negative police-citizen encounters have predominantly impacted racial/ethnic minorities, it would be expected that race would trump the explanatory power of political ideology in explaining the increasingly negative perceptions of law enforcement observed among Black and Latinx individuals. This study is the first to examine whether race and political preference jointly affect perceptions of law enforcement among national samples of young adults of voting age spanning over a decade.

1.1. Race and law enforcement

A growing literature focuses on understanding the American public's perceptions of police (see Silver & Pickett, 2015; Weitzer, 2017). This literature is often grounded in Weber's (1978) and Tyler's (1990) observations that procedurally-just treatment should improve individuals' perceptions of the system and cause them to feel obligated to follow its rules (Tyler, 1990, Tyler, 2003; see also Jackson & Gau, 2015). Concentrating on a different aspect of law enforcement, an instrumental approach suggests that an important component of perceptions of law enforcement extends to how the public perceives its performance. Specifically, if the public believes that law enforcement is effective, they have more confidence and trust in law enforcement (see Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011). Indeed, for decades, research has suggested that public trust and confidence in law enforcement is important for police effectiveness (Decker, 1981), particularly considering that a lack of confidence reduces citizens willingness to cooperate with officers.

A variety of demographic factors have been used to explain variation in perceptions of law enforcement, with race emerging as one of the most consistent and robust predictors (see Decker, 1981). It is well-established that Black and Latinx individuals express lower levels of support for the police and worse perceptions of their efficacy (Brown & Reed Benedict, 2002; Brunson, 2007; Cullen et al., 1996; De Angelis & Wolf, 2016; Weitzer, 2017). A variety of theories explain why they report more negative perceptions. According to the group-position hypothesis (Blumer, 1958; Lockwood, Doyle, & Comiskey, 2018; Turk, 1969), racial/ethnic minority groups' negative views of law enforcement may derive from their belief that they hold an unfavorable group position. The dominant group in society (i.e., Whites) tends to possess a stronger affiliation with and affinity towards law enforcement and tends to view criticism of police as threats to their dominant status. Derived from the group-position hypothesis, Hagan, Shedd, and Payne (2005) enumerated their comparative conflict perspective of racial and ethnic differences in perceptions of criminal injustice. Hagan et al. (2005) write that, "A comparative conflict theory emphasizes that in the aggregate, African American youth are at heightened comparative risk of justice system surveillance, apprehension, and mistreatment relative to Latino Americans, who in turn are at greater risk than whites" (pg 399). The authors do, indeed, demonstrate that these differential risks likely lead to a racial gradient in perceptions of criminal injustice.

Extant research does support the group-position hypothesis and the comparative conflict perspective. Compared to Whites, Black and Latinx individuals are more likely to report that someone in their household had been stopped by law enforcement solely because of their race, treated unfairly by law enforcement in their neighborhood or city, and verbally or physically abused by an officer in the respondent's city (see Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). Black individuals are particularly likely to experience racial bias by the police and to have friends and family who have been treated unfairly by authorities (BYP, 2016; Matsueda & Drakulich, 2009).

James Unnever and Shaun Gabbidon also put forth a compelling theory that may explain why Black individuals in the United States report particularly poor perceptions of law enforcement and the justice system. The central premise of their theory is that Blacks in America have a shared worldview informed by their experiences of oppression and discrimination that stem from a racially-stratified society (Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011; Unnever & Gabbidon, 2015). Unnever (2008) demonstrated that this common worldview frames Black individuals' perceptions of the American criminal justice system and its agents, such that Blacks view them as unjust and racially biased. Further, Unnever and Gabbidon (2011) found that this belief is nearly universally embraced by Black individuals within the United States. In support of the notion that Black individuals in the United States represent a unique group, Unnever and Gabbidon (2015) showed that Black individuals born in the U.S. often do embrace similar opinions on issues that are related to race and criminal justice that are largely separable from foreign-born Black individuals.

Although Latinx individuals may have less strained relationships with law enforcement than Blacks, Latinx individuals view their interactions with law enforcement much differently than Whites. As reviewed by Weitzer (2017), recent polling studies find that Blacks and Latinx are more likely to believe that police treat Black and Whites individuals unequally (Washington Post, 2014), societal race relations cause unjust police treatment of minorities (AP/NORC, 2015), that law enforcement killings of Blacks is a serious problem (Washington Post, 2014), that law enforcement does a poor job holding officers accountable for misconduct (Pew Research Center, 2014), and that media coverage of law enforcement is biased in favor of officers (YouGov, 2016).

1.2. Politics and law enforcement

While substantial research has been devoted to race and perceptions of law enforcement, emerging literatures demonstrate that other factors also inform individuals' perceptions. Mahozay and Factor (2017) argue that perceptions of law enforcement are shaped by people's worldviews, or a set of broad, normative values that guide how individuals perceive, interact with, and interpret the world. Their model suggests that one's values may shape the way one views law enforcement. One promising factor is political party preference, an important form of social identity that helps individuals define "who" they are and how to interpret the world (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). The sense of allegiance to a political party inculcates positive evaluations of the party's positions, while also often instilling correspondingly hostile evaluations of outgroup parties' positions (Ditto et al., 2018). In recent years, the two major parties and their electorates have become more ideologically distinct from one another and more internally homogeneous (Druckman et al., 2013; Haidt & Hetherington, 2012; Iyengar et al., 2012; McCarty, Poole, Rosenthal, 2006; *c.f.*, Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). Unfortunately, as social identity theorists would predict, research suggests that such polarization not only intensifies the impact of party opinions, but also decreases the impact of substantive information on opinion-forming on a variety of topics (Druckman et al., 2013).

Although a full-scale accounting of politics and law enforcement in the history of the United States is beyond the scope of this paper, there are clear, historical differences between Republicans and Conservatives (hence Republicans) on the one hand, and Democrats and Liberals (hence Democrats) on the other when it comes to law enforcement and criminal justice (Hill & Marion, 2018; Oliver, 2003). Primarily,

Republicans have typically been the "tough on crime" and "law and order" party. For instance, Republicans are more likely to support capital punishment for offenders (Borg, 1997; Grasmick & McGill, 1994; Johnson, 2009; Moon, Wright, Cullen, & Pealer, 2000; Unnever & Cullen, 2005) and perceive the criminal justice system more positively (Kort-Butler & Habecker, 2018).

Specific to policing, Republicans perceive police more positively (e.g., Cao et al., 1998; Pickett, Nix, & Roche, 2018; Zamble & Annesley, 1987), believe the police are more just (Matsueda & Drakulich, 2009), are more supportive of police militarization (Moule Jr et al., 2018), are more supportive of police use of force (Donovan & Klahm, 2015; Silver & Pickett, 2015), approve racial/ethnic profiling in preventing crime (Gabbidon, Penn, Jordan, & Higgins, 2009; Johnson et al., 2011), and believe that police treat all people fairly (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011). Further, the way Republicans interpret events surrounding negative law enforcement and Black civilian interactions tends to differ from Democrats (French, 2015; see also Obasogie & Newman, 2016). For instance, Republicans tend to perceive ensuing protests as disorderly, violent, and unlawful (Campbell, 2015; Diamond, 2016; Stranahan, 2016), are more likely to believe that there is a "war on cops" (Chiaramonte, 2015), and are more likely to oppose social movements campaigning against racial injustice and inequality (Updegrove, Cooper, Orrick, & Piquero, 2018).

Democrats, on the other hand, tend to be the "pro-reform party." Specifically, they tend to believe more in a due-process model that monitors the actions of formal agents of control (Hagan, 2010; Scheingold, 1984). Indeed, Democrats tend to interpret events involving law enforcement and individuals of color quite differently than do Republicans. Studies show that in the Trayvon Martin shooting, Democrats were more likely to believe that race played a factor in the shooting, and they were more likely to think that George Zimmerman would have been arrested if he had shot a White person (Gabbidon & Jordan, 2013; Wright & Unah, 2017). In summary, Democrats and Republicans tend to espouse opposite views of law enforcement.

Given the differences in the racial makeup of Democrats and Republicans, these opposing views are inherently embedded within interracial differences in experiences and views of law enforcement. In contrast to a group-position or minority-threat model, it may not be the case that *all* White individuals, who occupy the dominant racial/ethnic group, are supportive of efforts to maintain the status quo, view police as allies, and perceive their group interests as being threatened when police are criticized (e.g., Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). Additionally, *all* minority individuals may not believe that police racial bias and targeting of minority communities is problematic; however, given the concentration of negative police-citizen encounters within minority communities, it would be expected that at the very least, the gap in the perceptions of law enforcement across party lines would be smaller. Consequently, this perspective introduces a more nuanced depiction for understanding how race likely interacts with political preference to explain perceptions of law enforcement in contemporary society.

1.3. Youth and law enforcement

An additional key layer to the understanding of police perceptions is the application of a developmental lens that acknowledges both the disproportionate contact with police during adolescence and young adulthood and the developmental components of perceptions of law enforcement. Sociopolitical development theory (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003) contends that socialization throughout adolescence is crucial for the development of civic attitudes and perceptions. Indeed, developmental theories concur that adolescence is a critical period for civic development, largely due to the onset of abstract thinking, perspective-taking, and moral identity development (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1999; Piaget, 1964). With these advancing cognitive skills, adolescents begin to be able to better question how societies and institutions function or dysfunction (Cohn & White, 1990;

Levine & Tapp, 1977) and consider the injustices that occur therein (Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Sherrod, 2003). Consequently, adolescence is a critical period for developing ideological stances that linger into adulthood (Chan, Ou, & Reynolds, 2014; Eckstein, Noack, & Gniewosz, 2012; Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007; Mitra & Serriere, 2012).

It is widely recognized that perceptions of law enforcement and criminal justice authorities are more fragile during adolescence than during adulthood (Flexon, Lurigio, & Greenleaf, 2009; Hurst & Frank, 2000; Nivette, Eisner, Malti, & Ribeaud, 2015; Sargeant & Bond, 2015; Sindall, McCarthy, & Brunton-Smith, 2017; Wu, Lake, & Cao, 2015). Yet, when compared with adults, young people's attitudes towards law enforcement tend to be more negative (Hurst & Frank, 2000), with the levels of negativity increasing during the latter teenage years. However, adolescence is not just a time of developing perceptions of law enforcement. The period is critically important for developing political preference. As reviewed by Erikson and Tedin (2011), "First, political attitudes are malleable through the impressionable years. Second, after the impressionable years, political orientations harden considerably" (p. 155). This reinforces the potential for political preference to serve as an important lens through which adolescents and young adults come to perceive law enforcement.

1.4. Present study

The recent series of deaths of primarily racial/ethnic minority individuals during encounters with law enforcement have increased public discourse at the intersection of race, politics, and law enforcement in America (see Drakulich, Hagan, Johnson, & Wozniak, 2017). Recent evidence suggests that the "race gap" in opinions of law enforcement across the country is widening (Gallup, 2017). However, portraying the diverging trends as a simple "race gap" is potentially misleading because it fails to recognize the larger socio-political climate around law enforcement that has become increasingly polarized and impassioned (Weitzer, 2017). While other studies have examined various types of criminal justice attitudes, the vast majority have been limited by cross-sectional designs and have not taken into consideration historical trends (see Pickett, 2018). The present study contributes to the literature by exploring how perceptions of law enforcement differ between racial/ethnic group and political party preference over time. Previous studies have largely overlooked the recent trends in White individuals' perceptions, particularly as it relates to the role of political orientation. We hypothesize that the overall improvement in White individuals' perceptions of law enforcement may in part be explained by the fact that the majority of White individuals tend to lean Republican. Specifically, considering Republicans tend to espouse more pro-police views, we expect that White Republicans' perceptions of law enforcement may be increasing in recent years. In contrast, considering Democrats tend to espouse more pro-reform views, we expect that White Democrats' perceptions of law enforcement will have declined in recent years.

Considering Bottoms and Tankebe's (2012) dialogic conception and the abundance of research demonstrating youth of color personally and vicariously experience disproportionately more negative encounters with law enforcement, we expect that political party preference may not be as salient among Black and Latinx youth. Based on research indicating that unjust and ineffective law enforcement practices disproportionately affect Black individuals, we expect that political orientation will not be associated with Black youths' perceptions of law enforcement. That is, consistent with Unnever and Gabbidon's theorizing (Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011; Unnever & Gabbidon, 2015), although political orientation is an important part of individuals' social identities, in the context of law enforcement in modern America, being Black is likely more consequential than political orientation for affecting how one views law enforcement. Similarly, considering Latinx youth face more intense criminalization and policing than Whites (Hagan et al., 2005; Sickmund, Sladky, Kang, & Puzzanchera, 2015),

Table 1
Sample sizes by year.

	2005 (N = 1116)	2006 (N = 913)	2007 (N = 908)	2008 (N = 940)	2009 (N = 868)	2010 (N = 832)	2011 (N = 739)	2012 (N = 776)	2013 (N = 726)	2014 (N = 603)	2015 (N = 695)	2016 (N = 739)	Total (N = 9855)
Race													
White	908	721	698	687	634	599	532	573	529	448	506	531	7366
Black	107	107	113	131	100	123	126	93	86	74	93	98	1251
Latinx	101	85	97	122	134	110	81	110	111	81	96	110	1238
Perceptions of law enforcement	$M = 3.35$ (1.03)	$M = 3.22$ (1.05)	$M = 3.28$ (1.02)	$M = 3.15$ (1.08)	$M = 3.27$ (1.03)	$M = 3.20$ (1.07)	$M = 3.32$ (1.05)	$M = 3.18$ (1.08)	$M = 3.26$ (1.08)	$M = 3.23$ (1.03)	$M = 2.95$ (1.21)	$M = 3.12$ (1.19)	$M = 3.21$ (1.08)

often report justice perceptions somewhere between White and Black individuals (see Fine & Cauffman, 2015; Peck, 2015; Weitzer & Tuch, 2006), yet exhibit more diversity in political preference (Pew Research Center, 2018), we hypothesize that the effect of political orientation on perceptions of law enforcement will be somewhat smaller for Latinx youth than for White youth.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

Data were obtained from the Monitoring the Future study (MTF; Bachman, Johnston, O'Malley, Schulenberg, & Miech, 2015) that conducts annual, cross-sectional, self-reported surveys of 12th grade students in the 48 continuous U.S. states. The student response rates were high (e.g., range = 79–85%, M = 82.1%). This analysis included 11 waves of cross-sectional, annual data spanning 2005 through 2016 (N_{total} = 9855; White N = 7366; Black N = 1251; Latinx N = 1238, Table 1). MTF employs a multi-stage random sampling design with replacement. For instance, 25,200 youth were sampled in 2016. However by design, multiple questionnaires were distributed randomly to six subsamples of these youth to increase variable coverage without burdening respondents with the requirement of answering all questions. Consequently, in 2016, the sample size that received the questionnaire (Form 3) that included the study variables was 2109. A large percentage of cases (34%) were missing data on the race/ethnicity variable because MTF automatically recodes race/ethnicity data as missing if the youth self-identified as another race or multiracial. In general, youth who did not have complete study data on all variables reported worse perceptions of law enforcement than those who had complete data (e.g., 2005: $t(2167) = -4.05$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.17$, $g = -0.17$; 2009: $t(1910) = -3.15$, $p = .002$, $d = -0.15$, $g = -0.15$; 2016: $t(1721) = -2.46$, $p = .014$, $d = -0.12$, $g = -0.12$). More detailed methodology on informed consent procedures and institutional review board approval for this publicly-available dataset is provided in other publications (see Johnston et al., 2016) and on the study's website (https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR36798.v1).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Demographics

Youth self-identified their race/ethnicity into White, Hispanic/Latinx, or Black/African American (Table 1). Youth also self-reported the highest level of schooling their mother and father completed on a 6-point scale ranging from "completed grade school or less" to "graduate or professional school after college." Parental education was coded as the highest level of education achieved for either parent (M = 4.54, SD = 1.22). MTF coded the youth's region of the country using census categories (northeast = 19.65%; north central = 27.12%; south = 33.26%; west = 19.96%).

2.2.2. Perceptions of law enforcement

Youth were asked to self-report, "How good or bad a job is being done for the country as a whole by the police and other law enforcement agencies?" Responses were on a 5-point Likert ranging from *very poor* to *very good* (Table 1).

2.2.3. Political preference

Youth were asked in each cohort were asked to self-report, "How would you describe your political preference?" Responses were on the following scale: 1 = Strongly Republican; 2 = Mildly Republican; 3 = Mildly Democrat; 4 = Strongly Democrat; 5 = Independent; 6 = No preference; 7 = Other; 8 = Don't know, haven't decided. Following previous work (see Hasson, Tamir, Brahms, Cohrs, & Halperin, 2018; Wojcik, Hovasapian, Graham, Motyl, & Ditto, 2015), the data were recoded as a dichotomous indicator of republican
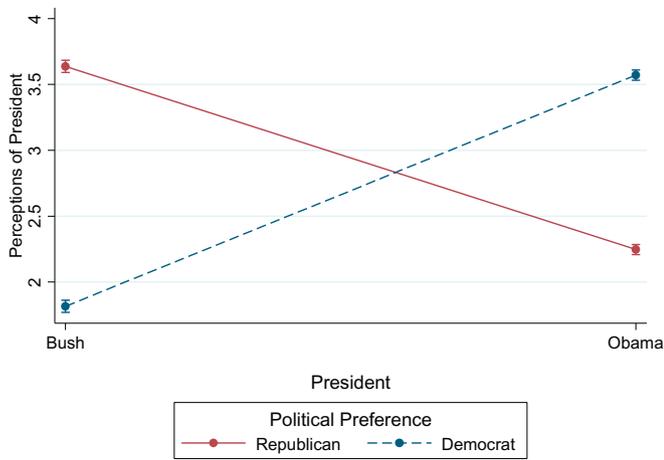
Fig. 1. Interaction between political preference and president.
Note: Predicted values with 95% confidence intervals.

(50.11%; coded 0; collapsing strongly republican and mildly republican) versus democrat (coded 1; 49.89%; collapsing strongly democrat and mildly democrat). For internal robustness and sensitivity, analyses were repeated with the data recoded in a variety of ways (e.g., continuous scale ranging from strongly republican, mildly republican, independent/no preference/other/don't know, mildly democrat, and strongly democrat; categorically as republicans, democrats, versus others). Considering the results were largely consistent across various coding schemes, for ease of interpretation, we maintained the Republican versus Democrat dichotomous code.

To ensure the validity of youths' self-identified political preferences, we examined the association between youths' political preferences and perceptions of the President of the United States at the time. Youth were asked to rate on a 5 point Likert ranging from *Very Poor* to *Very Good* "How good or bad a job is being done for the country as a whole by the President and his administration" ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.23$). Perceptions of the President and his administration were regressed on parental education, region, race, political preference, a dichotomous indicator of

who was in office (0 = George W. Bush; 1 = Barack Obama), and the interaction between political preference and president. The interaction was significant ($b = 3.15$, $SE = 04$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 3.06, 3.23), indicating that Republican youth reported more positive perceptions of the Bush administration than did Democratic youth, and Democratic youth perceived the Obama administration more positively than did Republican youth (Fig. 1). The three-way interaction between political preference, president, and race was also significant ($F(11, 9996) = 563.07$, $p < .001$). The slopes indicated that as compared to White youth, the effect of being a Democrat (versus Republican) on perceptions of the Obama administration were smaller for both Black ($dx/dx = -1.38$, $SE = 0.20$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = -1.78, -0.99) and Latinx ($dy/dx = -1.22$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = -1.51, -0.93). For all races, those who identified as Republican reported worse perceptions of the Obama administration than of the Bush administration, though the effect was particularly magnified among White youth (Fig. 2). These findings suggest that across races, self-rated political preferences were associated with self-rated perceptions of the president in the expected direction, such that Republicans rated the Bush administration more positively than did Democrats, and Democrats rated the Obama administration more positively than did Republicans.

2.3. Analytic plan

First, descriptive analyses were run, followed by a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models using the Huber/White sandwich estimator for robustness. Robust variances are designed to provide accurate assessments even if the model is partially misspecified (Huber, 1967; White, 1980). The first model regressed perceptions of law enforcement on parental education, region (with northeast as the comparison), year (centered on 2005, such that 2005 = 0, 2006 = 1, and so on), political preference (with Republican as the comparison), and race (with Black as the comparison). To evaluate where there were nonlinear patterns to of perceptions of law enforcement that might be driven by volatility in police-community relationships, the second model tested the squared form of time (time^2). The third model included the interaction between political preference and time. The fourth model tested
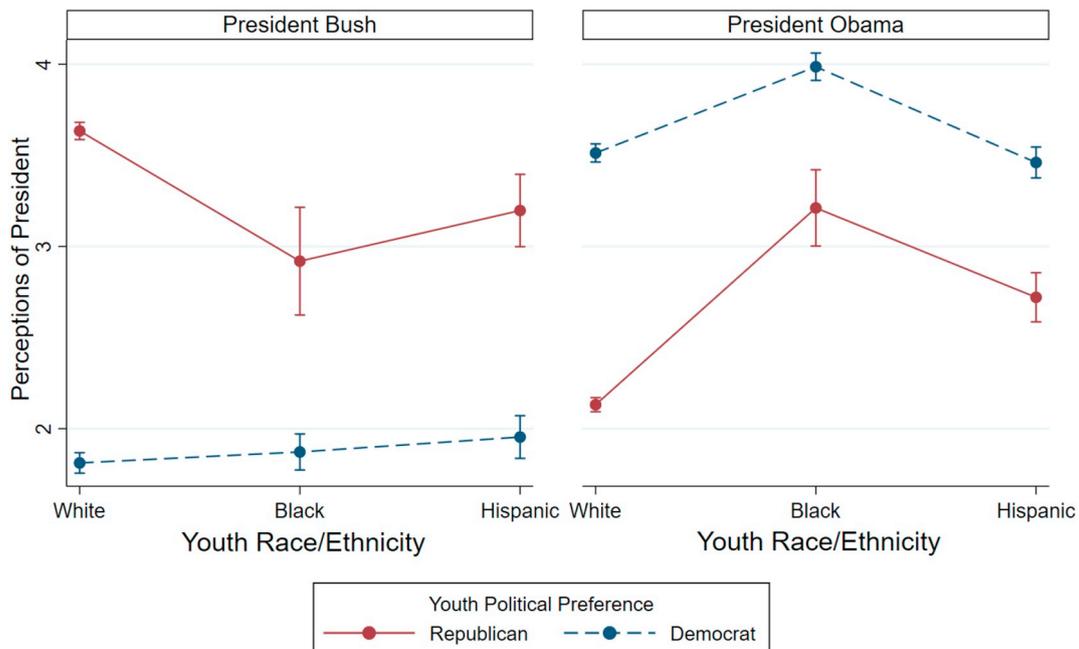

Fig. 2. Three-way interaction between political preference, president, and youth race/ethnicity.
Note: Predicted values with 95% confidence intervals.

Table 2
Regression results of perceptions of law enforcement.

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	Coef.	95% CI	SE	Coef.	95% CI	SE	Coef.	95% CI	SE
Parental education	0.02*	0.01, 0.04	< 0.01	0.02*	0.01, 0.04	< 0.01	0.02*	0.01, 0.04	0.01
Region[A]									
North central	−0.09**	−0.15, −0.03	0.03	−0.09**	−0.15, −0.03	0.03	−0.08**	−0.14, −0.02	0.03
South	−0.08**	−0.15, −0.03	0.03	−0.08**	−0.14, −0.02	0.03	−0.08*	−0.14, −0.02	03
West	−0.05	−0.11, 0.02	0.03	−0.05	−0.11, 0.02	0.03	−0.04	−0.10, 0.03	0.03
Democrat[B]	−0.35***	−0.39, −0.30	0.02	−0.35***	−0.39, −0.30	0.02	−0.42***	−0.52, −0.33	0.05
Race[C]									
White	0.33***	0.25, 0.40	0.04	0.33***	0.25, 0.40	0.04	0.33***	0.26, 0.40	04
Latinx	0.19***	0.10, 0.28	0.05	0.19***	0.10, 0.28	0.05	0.19***	0.10, 0.29	0.05
Year	−0.02***	−0.02, −0.01	< 0.01	0.01	−0.02, 0.03	0.01	−0.05**	−0.08, −0.02	0.02
Year^2				−0.01*	−0.01, 0.03	0.01	0.01**	< 0.01, 0.01	< 0.01
Democrat[B] x Year							0.10***	0.06, 0.14	0.02
Democrat[B] x Year^2							−0.01***	−0.02, −0.01	< 0.01

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
[A] Compared to Northeast.
[B] Compared to Republican.
[C] Compared to Black.

the interaction between political preference and race. Finally, the fifth model included the three-way interaction between political preference, race, and year^2.

3. Results

The results of the first regression model indicated that youth whose parents had higher education perceive law enforcement more positively (Table 2). Compared to youth in the northeast, youth in the south and in the north-central reported more negative perceptions of law enforcement. Further, over the years, perceptions of law enforcement generally declined. Finally, White youth reported more positive perceptions of law enforcement than did Latinx youth, and Latinx youth in turn reported more positive perceptions than did Black youth. In model 2, the squared form of time was included. The results indicated that in the overall sample, the functional form of time was squared, suggesting that perceptions of law enforcement were declining at a faster rate over time. In model 3, the interaction between political preference and time^2 was included. The results indicated that the interaction was significant (see Fig. 3). For Republican youth, perceptions of law enforcement declined until 2012, at which point they began increasing. For Democratic youth, the opposite trend was uncovered. Among Democratic
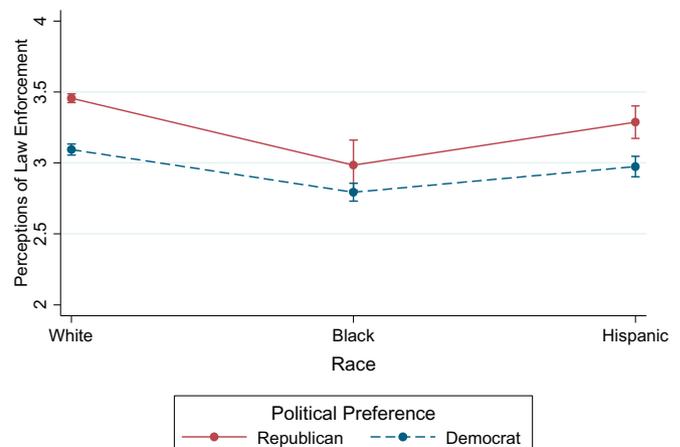
youth, perceptions of law enforcement improved until 2009, at which point they began decreasing.

The fourth model included the interaction between political preference and race. The results indicated that the interaction was significant ($F(5, 9843) = 94.91$, $p < .001$). The results of average marginal effects analyses indicated that as compared with Black youth ($dy/dx = −0.19$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% $CI = −0.41$, 0.03, $p = .082$), the marginal effect of being a Democrat versus being a Republican was 1.63 times larger for Latinx youth ($dy/dx = −0.31$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% $CI = −0.45$, $−0.18$, $p < .001$) and 1.90 times larger for White youth ($dy/dx = −0.36$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% $CI = −0.41$, $−0.31$, $p < .001$). These findings indicate two things. First, the effect of being a Democrat versus a Republican is significant among White and Latinx youth but not Black youth. Second, it indicates that compared with Black youth, the effect of political preference on perceptions of law enforcement is 1.63 times larger for Latinx youth and 1.90 times larger for White youth. The predicted perceptions with 95% confidence intervals are plotted in Fig. 4.

The fifth model included the interaction between political preference, race, and year^2. The results indicated that the interaction term was significant ($F(17, 9833) = 33.27$, $p < .001$). We begin with White youth. As depicted by the 95% confidence intervals in Fig. 5, in all
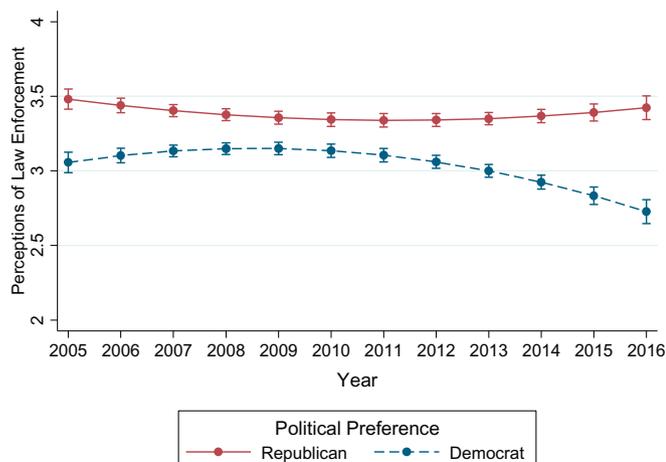
Fig. 3. Predicted perceptions of law enforcement by political preference and year, with 95% confidence intervals.

Fig. 4. Predicted perceptions of law enforcement by race and political preference, with 95% confidence intervals.
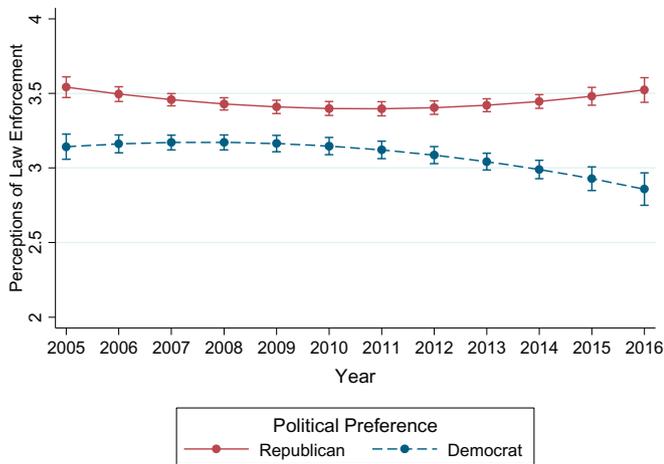
Fig. 5. Predicted white youths' perceptions of law enforcement by political preference and year, with 95% confidence intervals.
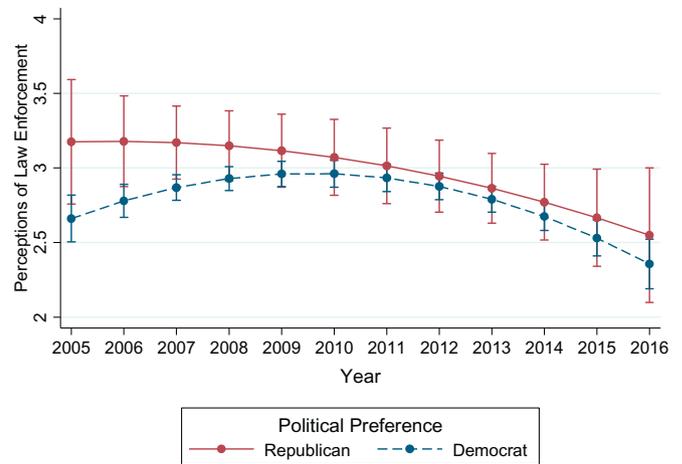

Fig. 7. Predicted Black youths' perceptions of law enforcement by political preference and year, with 95% confidence intervals.
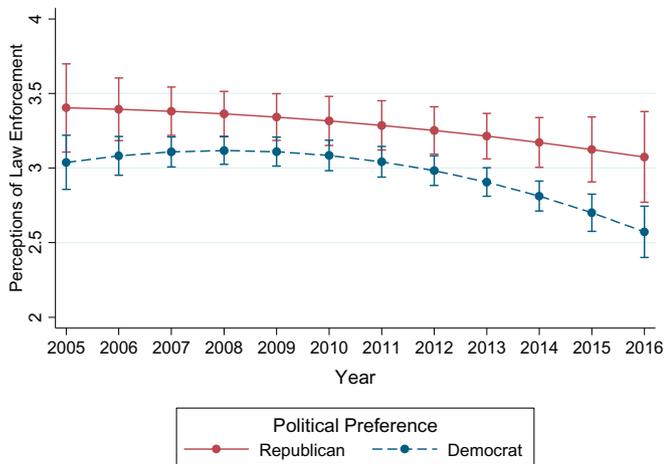

Fig. 6. Predicted Latinx youths' perceptions of law enforcement by political preference and year, with 95% confidence intervals.

Democrats and Republicans was not significant ($dy/dx = -0.21$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .052$, 95% $CI = -0.43$, 0.01). The results indicate that mean levels and rates of change in Black youths' perceptions of law enforcement did not vary by political preference. As a final test, we compared the slopes between Black youth and both White and Latinx youth within each political group. The quadratic slope for Black Republican youth was significantly different than that of White Republicans ($dy/dx = 0.46$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = 0.25$, 0.66) and Latinx Republicans ($dy/dx = 0.29$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = .016$, 95% $CI = 0.05$, 0.53). Similarly, the quadratic slope for Black Democratic youth was significantly different than that of White Democrats ($dy/dx = 0.31$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = 0.23$, 0.39) and Latinx Democrats ($dy/dx = 0.20$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = 0.10$, 0.30).

4. Discussion

The public's perception of law enforcement is integral to the capacity of police to combat crime and encourage citizens' cooperation with law enforcement (Decker, 1981). Recent and historical discord between law enforcement and the public, which has occurred most often in minority communities, have led some to believe that police are experiencing a crisis of legitimacy in the United States (Tyler, Goff, & MacCoun, 2015). Given the disproportionate contact with police in minority communities and the heightened media attention on contentious police–citizen interactions, researchers have primarily focused on understanding how race is related to perceptions of law enforcement.

Racial differences in perceptions of law enforcement can certainly be explained using the group-position and minority-threat frameworks (e.g., Blalock, 1967; Blumer, 1958). White individuals, who occupy a dominant position in modern American society, tend to possess a stronger affiliation with and affinity towards the "thin blue line." Studies suggest that White individuals in the United States tend to view criticism of police, which they view as lobbied mostly by the minority, as threats to their hegemonic, dominant status. At first glance, the results of this study do suggest that as compared with other racial/ethnic groups, White youth viewed the police most positively, even in the face of increased public scrutiny of police in recent years. This finding would resonate quite well, then, with the group-position and minority-threat perspectives.

Still, the group-position and minority-threat perspectives suggest that these divisions by race are not characteristic of all individuals in each racial group (e.g., Blalock, 1967; Blumer, 1958). Indeed, as Weitzer and Tuch (2006) suggested, an exclusive focus on race ignores other critical factors that may interact with or help explain observed

years, White Democrats report worse perceptions of law enforcement than do White Republicans. Further, there are diverging trends over time; the difference in quadratic slopes between White Democrats and Republicans is significant ($dy/dx = -0.36$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = -0.41$, -0.31). For Latinx youth, a divergence in perceptions of law enforcement by youths' political preference appears to be emerging in recent years. Specifically, as depicted by the 95% confidence intervals in Fig. 6, beginning in 2012, Democratic Latinx youth report comparatively worse perceptions of law enforcement than do Republican Latinx youth. Similar to White youth, there appear to be diverging trends over time; the difference in quadratic slopes between Latinx Democrats and Republicans is significant ($dy/dx = -0.31$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = -0.45$, -0.17).

Finally, recall that White Democrats consistently report significantly worse perceptions of law enforcement from 2005 through 2016 as compared to White Republicans, and Latinx Democrats report significantly worse perceptions of law enforcement from 2012 through 2016 as compared to Latinx Republicans. In comparison, as depicted by the overlapping 95% confidence intervals in Fig. 7, Black youths' perceptions of law enforcement do not vary by political preference in any year. That is, in every year from 2005 through 2016, there were no discernable differences in Black youths' perceptions of law enforcement by political party. Similarly, whereas the difference in quadratic slopes between Democrats and Republicans was significant among both White and Latinx youth, the difference in quadratic slopes between Black

racial differences in perceptions of police. In this study, we focused on youths' political preference because it offers a framework to further contextualize racial differences and represents an extremely timely lens given the deep polarization of the political system in the United States. Even casual observers of American society recognize the deep polarization of beliefs between Republican and Democrat surrounding how to address policing in this country. By integrating the lens of political preference to a consideration of perceptions of law enforcement, the current study provided a more nuanced understanding for how inter-racial differences in perceptions of law enforcement emerge.

This study extends the group-position model by considering the role of political ideology (e.g., Blumer, 1958; Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). The current study demonstrates that at the intersection of race and political ideology, there exist distinct patterns of perceptions of law enforcement such that political preference may influence certain individuals' perceptions more strongly than race. The data indicated quite clearly that among White youth, this appears to be true. White youth who identified as Republican consistently reported more positive perceptions of law enforcement than do White youth who identify as Democratic. Further, the differences between the two political groups appears to have grown in recent years, likely reflecting a distinct and growing gap in rhetoric surrounding law enforcement. Altogether, the findings suggest that the anchoring influence of political preference seems to matter most for White youth.

Although we anticipated observing divergence in perceptions of law enforcement across Republicans and Democrats for White youth, it was less clear whether similar trends would emerge among minority youth. In fact, considering youth of color tend to be over-policed and the vast majority of the recent unjust and fatal interactions between law enforcement and the community tend to involve individuals of color, it was plausible that political preference would have a *weaker* influence on the views of youth of color. Indeed, this would resonate quite well with Unnever and Gabbidon's (2011) contention that one of the galvanizing attitudes shared by Black or African-Americans in the United States is their fundamental distrust of the criminal justice system. The data suggest that Black youth held worse perceptions of law enforcement than did Latinx or White youth. Yet in contrast to White youth, there was virtually no divergence by political preference in Black youths' perceptions of law enforcement. In fact, the data suggest that for all Black youth, perceptions of law enforcement have declined in recent years regardless of their political affiliation.

Black youth who identify as Republican, then, occupy opposing roles. Black Republican youth belong to a broader Republican party that tends to espouse beliefs that there is a "war on cops" and the protests following these unjust events are disorderly, violent, and unlawful (Campbell, 2015; Chiaramonte, 2015; Diamond, 2016; Stranahan, 2016; Updegrove et al., 2018). Yet, as the media increasingly focuses on unjust and fatal interactions between law enforcement and youth of color, these youth are reminded time and again of yet another unjust interaction of a youth with whom they may identify. Given the prevalence of negative and often lethal interactions between Black individuals and police, it is unsurprising that Black youth report virtually no difference in perceptions of law enforcement across political party affiliation, suggesting that the everyday experience of Black youth likely generates a broader negative view of police (Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011).

Among Latinx youth, there was a small but significant difference in the effect of identifying as a Republican or Democrat on perceptions of law enforcement. Nonetheless, among Latinx youth of both political parties, perceptions were still worse than White youth. However, we caution against drawing broad conclusions about this group of youth considering the complex heterogeneity within the category of Hispanic/Latinx. Namely, such individuals are from a variety of countries and cultural backgrounds (i.e., Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, etc.) and have unique immigration, acculturation, and law enforcement experiences. Further, prior work suggests that individuals of Mexican, Puerto-Rican,

and Central American-origin tend to identify Democratic, whereas individuals of Cuban-origin identify as Republican (e.g., Alvarez & Bedolla, 2003). In the MTF data, approximately 26.45% of Latinx youth identified as Republican and 73.55% identified as Democrat. Although these statistics are remarkably similar to those from the Pew Research Center (2018), they preclude examination of subgroups of Latinx youth. Therefore, we find it important to note that the broad categorization of Latinx as a minority group might not necessarily translate towards an entirely cohesive view of law enforcement and suggest that a consideration of the breakdown of country of origin, acculturation, and documentation status may help further explain within-group differences in Latinx experiences and perceptions of law enforcement. In light of these limitations, it is important to still note that the data suggest that among both Democratic and Republican Latinx youth, perceptions of law enforcement have been declining in recent years. Thus, for Latinx youth, who are comparatively more visible to biased and potentially oppressive acts of law enforcement than are White youth, political ideology does not seem to outweigh the effect of race in shaping perceptions of law enforcement.

There are several strengths of the current study. The data used to evaluate the roles of race and political preference in explaining trends in perceptions of law enforcement represent a contemporary sample of youth during a time when there has been substantial volatility in police-community relationships. Relatedly, the data offer an opportunity to examine Latinx views on law enforcement, which is a relatively understudied group in the legitimacy of policing literature (e.g., Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). As one of the most rapidly growing segments of the population, understanding how Latinx youth and young adults view policing generally can help inform our knowledge of police legitimacy beyond Black-White differences. Further, considering youths' political leanings and perceptions of law enforcement begin to solidify during adolescence and the youth are reaching the voting age, the developmental timing of this study provides a unique and fortuitous window.

Despite these strengths, the study is limited by the fact that the sample sizes within each race-political preference cell are relatively small. This is particularly the case for Blacks who identify as Republicans, though percentages in this sample are similar to those found in other studies. For instance, Pew Research Center (2018) finds that only 8% of Black voters identify as Republican. In this sample, 12.22% of Black youth identified as Republican.

A second limitation is that we were unable to account for whether respondents had experienced police contact themselves or have had vicarious experiences of police contact through their friendship networks, which has been shown to be an important factor in explaining perceptions of law enforcement (e.g., Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). Relatedly, Pickett (2016) recently found that perceived Latino threat was associated with support for expanding police powers, though less so than the respondents' race. Pickett (2016) also found that perceived Latino threat was associated with support for police profiling, though less so than political ideology. The results of his study, which was grounded in the minority group threat theory (see Blalock, 1967), suggest that how much individuals perceive racial and ethnic minorities as a threat may affect their support for police powers. As a result, it would be useful for future studies to take into consideration perceived threat from racial and ethnic minorities.

Lastly, we were unable to identify how much youth immerse themselves in news and social media coverage of police–citizen interactions. Increased coverage of unjust and often fatal interactions between individuals of color and law enforcement may partially explain shifting perceptions of law enforcement in recent years. Given that most individuals do not have contact with police and likely gain their understanding of policing through news and popular media depictions (Surette, 2015), it is unsurprising that research is focusing increasingly on the role of news media consumption and awareness in shaping public attitudes about police (Intravia, Wolff, & Piquero, 2018; Graziano, 2018). Further, research in the area of political beliefs

supports the contention that, despite the diversity of perspectives available, individuals gravitate to news conforming with their existing political ideologies (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016; Iyengar & Hahn 2009), which in turn can further intensify the polarization of those beliefs (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Roche et al., 2016; Tewksbury & Riles, 2015). The siloed and polarized nature of our existing news structure and youths' reliance on social media and alternative news platforms suggests that news consumption should be an area of focus for future research (Rosenstiel, Mitchell, Purcell, & Rainie, 2011).

In line with expectations of the group-position hypothesis (Blumer, 1958; Lockwood et al., 2018; Turk, 1969) and comparative conflict perspective of racial and ethnic differences (Hagan et al., 2005), prior research demonstrates a deep racial divide in the approval and perceived legitimacy of law enforcement in America. This raises the question of whether the unique experience of race entirely explains the stark differences in perceptions of law enforcement, or whether an individual's political ideology may help explain how perceptions of law enforcement are formed during adolescence and early adulthood. The current study demonstrates that political preference reflects complexity in the relationship between perceptions of law enforcement and race among White individuals. However, among youth of color who are most impacted by unjust policing practices, the corresponding totality itself of being a youth of color in modern America appears to be a more powerful driver of perceptions of law enforcement. The results of this study suggest that as Unnever and Gabbidon posited (Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011; Unnever & Gabbidon, 2015), minority youth—particularly Black youth—report virtually no difference in perceptions of law enforcement across political party affiliation. For minority youth, it is likely that the lived experiences associated with their race have generated systematically negative views of police that, for them, transcends politics.

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