

Research Statement | Daniel J. Simmons

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My research investigates the effects of interactions between citizens and governments in the U.S. in areas of public opinion, citizen political behavior, and public policy. Perhaps the most salient example of citizen-government interactions is between the public and the police. My primary research uses survey experiments to examine the political effects police shootings. In addition to discussing my primary research below, I briefly summarize other areas of research in which I have published peer-reviewed articles or am currently developing with colleagues. I enjoy collaborating with co-authors, in large part because my experience has confirmed the best research occurs when multiple scholars are engaged in every step of the project, allowing for differing perspectives to inform and guide the design, analysis, and drafting of the work. Going forward, I will continue seeking out collaborative partners to conduct research, using my expertise in experimental methods to inform research designs in addressing major questions around political behavior and public opinion.

Policing and Politics

Controversies over police tactics and policies in the United States have increasingly been highlighted as major news headlines over the last decade. Scholars have raced to examine these controversies and determine if the claims from activists and the media about police misconduct were justified. Many, if not most, of these studies have focused on accusations of racial bias on the part of police officers. Less work has been completed examining the broader political effects of policing incidents. My primary research contributes to this growing field, helping to bring a political science focus on questions previously hinted at by sociology and criminology. My research is conducted primarily through survey experiments seeking to explore how different cues or actions can impact public reactions and public behavior.

My co-authored research published in the *Journal of Politics* uses a framing experiment to examine how a police shooting affects voter preferences for candidates in local elections who are endorsed by the local police union. Respondents are presented with a vignette that provides information about the shooting that led to the death of Stephon Clark in Sacramento, California in March 2018. The vignettes present information about the shooting, as well as additional information about reforms the Sacramento Police Department has agreed to make, or about another high-profile officer-involved shooting in July 2016 in Sacramento. Additionally, respondents are asked to indicate their preference for candidates in elections for the local city council, district attorney, and county sheriff. Treatment groups receive true information indicating the candidates who have been endorsed by the local police union. The findings show police-endorsed candidates for district attorney or county sheriff are significantly more likely to be supported by the voters, with one exception. Black voters are significantly less likely to support police-endorsed candidates.

Another study published in *Political Research Quarterly* uses a survey experiment to examine how group endorsements impact public opinions about proposed legislative proposals to reform policing in California following George Floyd's killing. Respondents are asked their

opinion about a series of proposals, with different groups of respondents receiving no additional information, a statement indicating the position of the California Legislative Black Caucus on the reform, a statement indicating the position of the California Police Chiefs Association, or statements about the position of both groups. The analysis shows generally broad support for the reforms, but polarized partisan opinions among respondents in the three treatment groups. Yet, among partisan respondents who express a high level of support for Black Lives Matter, the treatment information has no polarizing effect; support for the reforms is high among these respondents regardless. In short, while partisan polarization can be triggered among the public on this issue, its impact can be muted based on the personal views of Black Lives Matter among the general public.

I continue to engage in research on topics regarding policing and politics. One such project uses a survey experiment to examine how different policies proposing funding reallocations are received by the public. Essentially, how does the public view policies that “defund the police” when that wording is not used to describe the policies? The paper is currently in the analysis and drafting stage. This past summer, I also worked with one of my undergraduate students on a project examining the connection between police budgets and policing outcomes, such as crime rates, arrest rates, and police shootings. We collected data for the last 10 years from nearly every municipality in Vermont on police spending and policing outcomes in order to identify what relationship exists. While the analysis is ongoing, our preliminary results suggest the absence of a relationship. We suggest this is an instance where null results are actually very informative. Specifically, we suggest a Goldilocks zone exists for police spending and any policing impact. Above a high ceiling, spending will positively impact policing outcomes; but the trade-off is living in a literal police state or something close to it. Similarly, below a low floor, spending will negatively impact policing outcomes; the trade-off here being general chaos and anarchy as there is no organization sufficiently capable of maintaining societal order. Because municipal budgets vary between this high ceiling and low floor, the relationship ends up being non-existent.

Other Research

I also employ experimental methods to examine other public opinion questions. A co-author and I recently published a study in *Social Science Quarterly* examining how public foreign policy preferences regarding a humanitarian crisis in or security threat from another country are affected by that country’s religious identity. We find Americans are significantly less likely to support costly foreign policy actions to intervene on behalf of Muslim victims, and more likely to support costly actions to confront a potential threat from an Islamic country. Additionally, I have papers with various groups of co-authors examining the impact of COVID-19 vaccination incentive programs on vaccination uptake and public opinion towards public health practices generally. One such paper has been offered a revise and resubmit, while another was recently accepted at *PLOS ONE*. Another project is currently in the data gathering stage using an experiment to examine how group endorsement cues can impact public opinion regarding policies intended to promote democratization.