

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Standing up or giving up? Moral foundations mediate political differences in evaluations of BLACK LIVES MATTER and other protests

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## Abstract

Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests challenge the existing social order whereas other protests do not (e.g., gun-rights protests). Some protests even reinforce it (e.g., Blue Lives Matter protests). Protests challenging the social order align with “individualizing” moral foundations (e.g., fairness, harm/care) but undermine “binding” moral foundations (e.g., loyalty, authority), which may partially explain political differences in approval of protesting. Four studies examined whether moral foundation endorsement mediated the effect of political orientation on protest evaluations. In Study 1, liberals rated BLM protests and general protesting as more moral than conservatives, partially due to increased individualizing and decreased binding endorsement. Studies 2–4 replicated this pattern for BLM and general protesting, but these effects disappeared for gun-rights protests and largely reversed for Blue Lives Matter protests, which uphold the status quo. These results suggest that protest evaluations partially reflect the moral values prioritized by different political groups.

## KEYWORDS

collective action, moral foundations, morality, political orientation, protesting

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

*I have to stand up for people that are oppressed. ... If they take football away, my endorsements from me, I know that I stood up for what is right.*

Colin Kaepernick (27 August 2016)

*Football players who take a knee... are giving up during a song that says America will endure.*

Brad Todd, Fox News (25 May 2018)

America was founded upon unequal relations between White and Black people, with a long history of policies that continue this legacy (see, e.g., Steele, 1990). Some protests challenge such historic inequity, such as Black Lives Matter protests by Colin Kaepernick and others that highlight police brutality against Black people. Some protests are largely silent regarding the status quo, such as gun-rights protests focused on individual liberty. Still, other protests reinforce existing power structures in society, such as Blue Lives Matter protests supporting police.

Liberals tend to endorse protests that challenge the status quo, such as Black Lives Matter (e.g., Linskey, 2020), whereas conservatives tend to endorse protests that reinforce the status quo like Blue Lives Matter (e.g., Bacon, 2020). We propose that such political differences may

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partially reflect different moral values prioritized by liberals and conservatives. For example, Colin Kaepernick argued that kneeling for BLM during the national anthem opposes harm and injustice. Others, such as Brad Todd, claimed that such BLM protests indicate disloyalty to America and disrespect to authority figures—a different evaluation of the same act through the lens of different moral concerns. Hence, moral foundation endorsement may partially mediate political differences in protest evaluation.

## 1.1 | Moral foundations theory

Moral foundations theory (MFT) suggests that moral evaluations arise in part due to affect-laden moral intuitions that reflect biological responses to ancient evolutionary pressures, shaped through socialization from growing up in a specific cultural context (Graham et al., 2009, 2012). Social beings face evolutionary pressure to uphold systems of cooperation that can be disrupted when people harm or mistreat others, show disloyalty, or disrupt the social structure (Gintis et al., 2003; Krebs, 2008). Accordingly, people appear sensitive to moral violations in domains of evolutionary importance, including harm/care/harm (protecting others), fairness/cheating (being just according to law), loyalty/betrayal (being loyal to a country), authority/subversion (yielding to an authority), and purity/degradation (revulsion at disgusting things).<sup>1</sup> Cultural context influences the importance of each factor, leading to cultural differences in the moral concerns that people prioritize (e.g., Haidt et al., 1993; Shweder et al., 1993). For example, small, tight-knit communities tend to enhance concerns about loyalty and respect for authority in line with conservative beliefs, whereas large, diverse, urban communities tend to enhance concerns such as openness to people from other backgrounds in line with liberal beliefs (e.g., Haidt, 2012; Morgan et al., 2018).

Consistent with this argument, liberals tend to prioritize the *individualizing foundations* of harm/care and fairness, focused on reductions in violence and social justice concerns, whereas conservatives tend to prioritize the *binding foundations* of authority, loyalty, and purity, focused on reinforcing and protecting existing social order and traditional mores against change.<sup>2</sup> Conservatives also endorse harm/care and fairness, albeit not as strongly as do liberals, hence we speak of prioritizing foundations (e.g., Graham et al., 2009, 2012). Such political differences in moral foundation endorsement partially reflect differences in cognitive processing (e.g., Pennycook et al., 2014; Reynolds et al., 2020) and predict many important outcomes, such as charity donations (Nilsson et al., 2016) and willingness to sacrifice for the environment (Dickinson et al., 2016), but most important for present purposes, such political differences in moral foundation endorsement should predict moral endorsement of protests that support or undermine the status quo.

Such arguments align with various theoretical perspectives on the psychology of political differences. For example, conservatives tend

to score higher than liberals on *social dominance orientation*, the tendency to endorse the legitimacy of hierarchies of traditionally powerful groups to dominate less powerful groups (Pratto et al., 1994), on *right-wing authoritarianism*, a tendency toward submission to authoritarian leaders and hostility toward low-status outgroups (Altemeyer, 1981; Jost et al., 2003; cf. Costello et al., 2021), especially under threat (Feldman & Stenner, 1997), and on *system justification*, the tendency to justify the existing status quo (Jost, 2019). Each of these theories suggests that political conservatism should predict reduced support for protests that challenge the status quo (i.e., increased power for low-status groups, Teixeira et al., 2020) but increased support for protests that reinforce the status quo (i.e., increased power for high-status groups, e.g., Osborne et al., 2019).

Some theorists therefore argue that moral foundation endorsement reflects motivated reasoning to reinforce the dominant political structure (Strupp-Levitsky et al., 2020), driven by differences in authoritarianism and social-dominance orientation (Kugler et al., 2014); other theorists argue that moral foundations simply reflect concerns about harm toward different targets, such as concern for BLM protesters versus concern for police officers (Schein & Gray, 2015). Either way, liberals value pushing back against the injustices of the status quo, whereas conservatives tend to value maintaining the status quo out of loyalty and respect for authorities (Stenner, 2009)—at least authorities that they recognize as legitimate (Frimer et al., 2014).

## 1.2 | Protests challenging, reinforcing, or remaining silent on the status quo

Moral foundations theory (among others) suggests that liberals may support protesting in general, and especially protests that explicitly challenge the status quo, such as BLM protests that raise awareness of discrimination and mistreatment of minority groups—championing the individualizing foundations of harm and fairness that liberals prioritize. Conversely, moral foundations theory suggests that conservatives may tend to condemn protests in general, and especially protests that challenge the social order, such as BLM protests, because challenging the status quo raises questions about loyalty and respect for authority, moral concerns that conservatives prioritize.

Certainly, conservatives are willing to protest, and they hold favourable views of some protests. Nonetheless, they may hold unfavourable views of protesting in general, in part due to media coverage of protests. Media coverage often downplays the reasons people protest in favour of portraying protests as violent and disorderly, a phenomenon dubbed *the protest paradigm* (Chan & Lee, 1984). Not all protests equally evoke this paradigm, however: media coverage of protests that challenge the status quo (especially regarding racial issues) tends to be especially negative, and more likely to evoke the protest paradigm, especially in right-wing media (Boyle et al., 2012; Kilgo & Harlow, 2019), whereas protests that reinforce the status quo are treated more positively, and less likely to evoke the protest paradigm, especially in right-leaning media (Weaver & Scacco, 2013). Conversely, protests that uphold the status quo may seem less associated with generic concept of protesting, as these may instead be

<sup>1</sup> Recent work suggests additional foundations, including liberty, but we focus here on the five most commonly considered foundations (Graham et al., 2012).

<sup>2</sup> There are cases where other patterns emerge as well, such as liberals caring about purity (Frimer et al., 2015) and authority (Frimer et al., 2017) but the majority of foundations research supports this general liberal-conservative distinction (e.g., Graham et al., 2011).

framed as “marches” or using other terms less evocative of chaos and disorder.

Hence, although conservatives may view some protests favourably, the thought of generic protests may tend to evoke a focus on chaos and disorder most often associated with (especially right-wing) media portrayal of protests that challenge the status quo and violate binding concerns. Hence, we predicted a similar pattern of findings both for protests that challenge the status quo and protesting in general (as both may evoke the protest paradigm): reduced individualizing and increased binding endorsement should partially mediate the impact of conservative (vs liberal) political orientation on negative moral evaluations of BLM protests and protesting in general.

However, not all protests challenge the status quo. Whereas BLM protests aim to reduce existing power differences between racial groups (Mindock, 2018), gun-rights protests appear relatively silent regarding existing social structures, instead focusing on individual liberty. Accordingly, although liberals and conservatives may disagree over gun-rights protests, the individualizing and binding foundations should explain little variance in such disagreement. Other protests, such as Blue Lives Matter protests, explicitly endorse and reinforce existing social structures by supporting police, who hold power over ordinary citizens. Here, the mediation pattern should largely reverse compared to BLM protests: reduced individualizing and increased binding endorsement should partially mediate the impact of conservative (vs liberal) political orientation on positive moral evaluations of Blue Lives Matter protests.

Consistent with this argument, research suggests that motivated reasoning along political lines plays an important role in decision making (Ditto & Lopez, 1992), including decisions in the moral domain (e.g., Ditto et al., 2009; Uhlmann et al., 2009): people tend to reach moral conclusions that support positions they already hold or reinforce concerns that benefit them indirectly (Haidt, 2001), that align with other people they respect (Chen et al., 1996), and fit with existing worldviews (Chaiken et al., 1996). Likewise, past work demonstrates that worldviews (e.g., egalitarianism) shape perceptions of protest validity depending on whether that protest fits one’s worldview or not (Kahan et al., 2012). Finally, recent work showed that people who prioritized respect for authority over concerns about fairness tended to evaluate protesters as less moral (Monroe et al., 2020). However, this work only examined protests that challenged the status quo. It remains unclear whether such effects disappear for protests silent about the status quo and reverse for protests that support the status quo. Moreover, such work did not clarify whether moral concerns partially mediate the impact of political orientation on evaluations of protests. We therefore conducted four studies to clarify whether the moral foundations mediate the effect of political orientation on protests both challenging and reinforcing the status quo.

### 1.3 | The current work

In each study, we examined participants’ political orientation, moral foundation endorsement, and moral evaluations of both protesting in

general and a specific protest. In Study 1, we examined perceptions of Kaepernick’s BLM kneeling protests during the national anthem before NFL games. Study 2 examined perceptions of protesting against gun rights restrictions. In Study 3, participants evaluated both protests in a counterbalanced order. In Study 4, participants evaluated a single protest ostensibly in favour of either Black Lives Matter or Blue Lives Matter. We examined whether endorsement of the individualizing and binding foundations carried indirect variance from political orientation to evaluations of each specific protest and protesting in general. All data, stimuli, and analyses are available online: [osf.io/7n3rj/](https://osf.io/7n3rj/).

## 2 | STUDY 1

Study 1 examined evaluations of Colin Kaepernick’s BLM protests and protesting in general. We expected that conservatives would evaluate BLM protests and protesting in general more negatively than liberals, and these effects would be partially mediated via reduced individualizing and increased binding endorsement.

### 2.1 | Methods

#### 2.1.1 | Participants

According to GPower (Faul et al., 2007), ~200 participants would provide 80% power to detect  $\sim r = .20$ , the mean effect size in social psychology (Richard et al., 2003). We decided a priori to recruit >200 undergraduates from a large university in the Southeastern United States for partial course credit. We obtained 254 participants but decided a priori to exclude all participants ( $n = 35$ ) failing either of two catch questions included in the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ), leaving 219 (24 male, 194 female, one bigender who was excluded from gender analysis,  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.77$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ). According to the Monte Carlo Power Analysis Tool for mediation developed by Schoemann and colleagues (2017), this sample size provided at least 81% power to detect indirect effects found in this study.

For ethnicity, 74.8% identified as Caucasian, 20.1% Hispanic or Latino/a, 5.9% identified as Asian, 5.9% as Black or African-American, 1.8% as Other. For education, coded 1–5, no participants reported less than high school, 58 participants reported graduating high school, 151 reported some college, eight a bachelor’s degree, and two a graduate or professional degree. We measured political orientation from *extremely liberal* (1) to *extremely conservative* (7), plus an additional option *other/libertarian*, excluded from analysis ( $n = 31$ ). The average was near the midpoint,  $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ .

#### 2.1.2 | Procedure

Participants completed all measures online. First, participants read a real media article from PolitiFact (see stimulus materials file) describing Kaepernick’s BLM kneeling protest during the national anthem before NFL games (Jacobson, 2017). Then, participants responded to

eight questions about their moral evaluations of kneeling protests specifically (e.g., *How morally acceptable is it for a person to kneel during the national anthem?*) on scales from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*),  $\alpha = .93$ , and two items assessing evaluations of protesting in general: *How morally acceptable is it for someone to protest in general?* and *How morally unacceptable is it for someone to protest in general?* (reverse coded) on scales from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*),  $\alpha = 1.00$  (see stimulus materials file).<sup>3</sup>

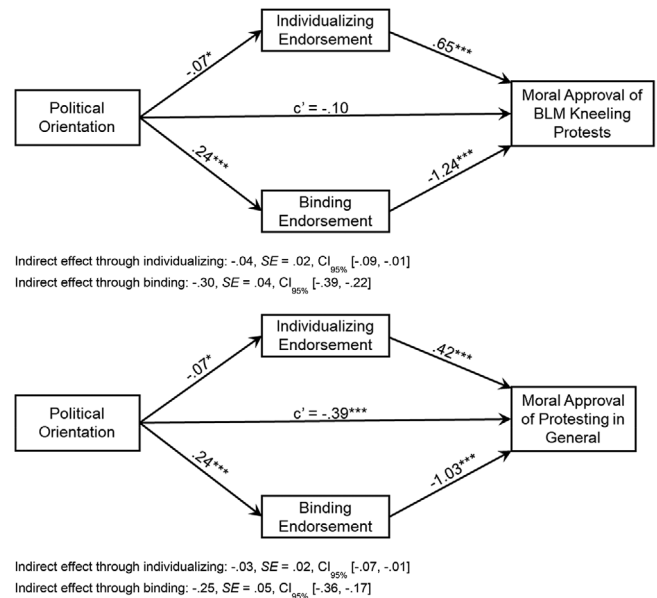
Next, participants completed the 32-item Moral Foundation Questionnaire (MFQ, Graham et al., 2011). Sixteen questions asked about the moral relevance of statements pertaining to five foundations on scales from 0 (*not very relevant*) to 5 (*extremely relevant*). For example, “whether or not someone suffered emotionally” taps individualizing, and “whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group” taps binding. Sixteen questions asked how much participants agree with statements regarding each foundation on scales from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). For example, “compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue” taps individualizing; “chastity is an important and valuable virtue” taps binding. Following common practice (e.g., Graham et al., 2012), we combined harm and fairness into a measure of the individualizing endorsement ( $\alpha = .82$ ) and loyalty, authority, and purity into binding endorsement ( $\alpha = .87$ ). We also examined results for each foundation individually ( $\alpha$  for harm: .67, for fairness .57, for loyalty .70, for authority .67, for purity .72), but as these results largely paralleled the main results and suffer from multicollinearity concerns, we relegated them to a supplement. Finally, participants reported age, gender, education, ethnicity, and political orientation on a scale from 1 *extremely liberal* to 7 *extremely conservative*, with 8 as *other/libertarian*. We present descriptive variables for all measures in all studies in Table 1. All participants gave their informed consent prior to participation in all studies.

## 2.2 | Results

### 2.2.1 | Correlational analysis

First, we examined correlations (see Tables 1 and 2). Consistent with past work, the political orientation correlations showed that liberals scored higher on individualizing than conservatives, whereas conservatives scored higher on binding than liberals (e.g., Graham et al., 2012). Furthermore, these correlations showed that liberals evaluated Kaepernick’s BLM protest and protesting in general more positively than did conservatives, and these protest measures were highly correlated. Protest evaluations were not correlated with age, education, or

<sup>3</sup> We conducted an exploratory principle component analysis with an oblimin rotation on all moral foundation items, together with all the items in the DV. The results suggested nine factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, with most DV items loading on a single factor different from any moral foundation item. However, a few items (e.g., *the national anthem should be respected*) loaded on the same factor as MFQ loyalty. We therefore computed a short version for the DV consisting only of the four items most directly tied to protest perceptions (see supplementary material) and reanalysed all results. All findings were similar to the effects reported here (i.e., same significance level in same direction). We thank Kimberly Quinn and an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.



**FIGURE 1** Political orientation predicting moral approval of BLM kneeling protests and protesting in general mediated through the binding and individualizing moral foundations simultaneously, Study 1

gender. Examining each foundation separately, the individualizing pattern replicated for fairness but not harm; the binding pattern held for loyalty, authority, and purity (see Table S1 in the supplementary material). These findings held in analyses regressing kneeling protest evaluations on the individualizing and binding foundations, and simultaneously controlling for age, gender, education, and political orientation, and in a regression on evaluations of protesting in general (see Table S2 in the supplementary material).

### 2.2.2 | Mediation

We employed Model 4 in the PROCESS Macro for SPSS with 10,000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2012) to examine whether the individualizing and binding foundations carried significant indirect variance between political orientation and moral evaluations of kneeling protests, controlling for age, gender, and education (see Figure 1). The indirect effect was significant through both reduced individualizing,  $B = -.04$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.09, -.01]$ , and increased binding endorsement,  $B = -.30$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.39, -.22]$ ; although the indirect effect via binding was larger than via individualizing,  $B = .26$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.16, .37]$ . Next, we examined moral evaluations of protesting in general. Again, the indirect effect was significant via reduced individualizing,  $B = -.03$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.07, -.01]$ , and increased binding endorsement,  $B = -.25$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.36, -.17]$ , and the effect via binding was larger,  $B = .22$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.13, .33]$ . We also examined mediation via all five foundations simultaneously (see Figures S1 and S2 in the supplementary material). Despite multicollinearity concerns, this analysis revealed patterns similar to, albeit weaker than, the main analysis: loyalty, authority, and purity each carried significant indirect variance

**TABLE 1** Means and standard deviations for all variables, all studies

Variable	Study 1		Study 2		Study 3		Study 4	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Political orientation	3.52	1.61	4.19	1.79	3.43	1.86	3.76	1.99
Individualizing	4.67	.66	4.72	.62	4.54	.79	4.68	.74
Binding	3.84	.74	3.94	.72	3.46	1.12	3.88	1.03
Harm	4.75	.77	4.69	.77	4.54	.90	4.69	.81
Fairness	4.58	.67	4.74	.65	4.54	.86	4.68	.77
Loyalty	3.84	.85	3.82	.89	3.35	1.14	3.76	1.09
Authority	4.01	.82	4.17	.79	3.69	1.10	4.01	1.03
Purity	3.68	.96	3.85	.93	3.34	1.44	3.88	1.27
Moral evaluations of kneeling protests	4.82	1.42	-	-	4.23	1.64	-	-
Moral evaluations of gun-rights protests	-	-	4.24	.96	4.74	1.01	-	-
Moral evaluations of specific protests	-	-	-	-	-	-	5.11	1.48
Moral evaluations of protesting in general	3.93	1.54	4.12	.71	-	-	5.50	1.36
Moral evaluations of protests in general after reading kneeling article	-	-	-	-	4.97	1.19	-	-
Moral evaluations of protests in general after reading gun rights article	-	-	-	-	4.41	1.01	-	-
Perceived protest effectiveness	-	-	4.32	1.44	-	-	-	-
America fair	-	-	-	-	-	-	3.92	.90
Age	19.69	1.38	19.11	6.89	36.26	11.78	37.01	11.89
Gender	1.90	.32	1.73	.45	1.40	.50	1.45	.50
Education	2.78	.53	2.50	.57	3.54	.87	3.81	.79

**TABLE 2** Correlations between all variables, Study 1

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Binding foundation endorsement	-						
2. Individualizing foundation endorsement	.19**	-					
3. Moral approval of BLM protests	-.59***	.13**	-				
4. Moral approval of protests in general	-.31***	.15**	.77***	-			
5. Political orientation (1=lib, 7=cons)	.52***	-.25**	-.49***	-.19**	-		
6. Age	-.08	-.01	-.13	-.03	-.06	-	
7. Gender	.05	.25***	-.06	-.08	-.03	.00	-
8. Education	-.03	.01	-.01	-.06	.04	.43***	.08

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

to BLM protest evaluations but only loyalty carried significant indirect variance to general protest evaluations.

## 2.3 | Discussion

These results are consistent with mediation: they suggest that conservatives evaluated Kaepernick's BLM protest and protesting in general more negatively than did liberals, partly because they prioritized different moral concerns. Liberals prioritized the individualizing foundations of harm and fairness, whereas conservatives prioritized the binding

foundations of loyalty, authority and purity, and foundation endorsement carried significant indirect variance to evaluations of general and specific protests, although this effect was larger for binding than individualizing.

These results are consistent with our argument that liberals value protests that challenge the status quo in part due to individualizing concerns such as harm and fairness, whereas conservatives abhor protests that challenge the status quo in part due to binding concerns such as loyalty and authority. If so, then a protest that is silent on the status quo, rather than challenging it, should show a different pattern. In Study 2, we examined evaluations of gun-rights protests,

as well as protesting in general in this context. Whereas liberals and conservatives may evaluate such protests differently, as gun rights appeal more to conservatives than to liberals (Beckett, 2018), this disagreement should not be mediated via individualizing and binding endorsement, as gun-rights protests do not clearly challenge the status quo.

### 3 | STUDY 2

Study 2 was similar to Study 1, except that participants read about a gun rights instead of BLM protest. We anticipated a significant direct effect of political orientation, but weaker or nonsignificant mediation via moral foundation endorsement.

#### 3.1 | Methods

##### 3.1.1 | Participants

GPower indicated that ~200 participants would provide ~80% power to detect  $r = .20$ . We oversampled, recruiting 259 undergraduates from a large Southeastern university for partial course credit. We excluded 38 participants for failing the MFQ check items, leaving a final sample of 221 (60 males, 161 females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.11$ ,  $SD = 6.89$ ). Although our sample size was comparable to Study 1, the indirect effects for Gun Rights protests obtained were much smaller than for BLM protests in Study 1, so the Monte Carlo tool indicated that we had low power to detect such effects (26% for individualizing and 11% for binding). However, we still had >78% power to detect effects for general protesting as the effect size was comparable to Study 1.

For ethnicity, 64.3% identified as Caucasian, 21.7% Hispanic or Latino/a, 7.7% identified as Asian, 17.6% as Black or African-American, 0.5% as Aboriginal, and 2.3% as Other. For education, 112 participants reported graduating from high school, 101 reported some college education, and six had bachelor degrees. Again, the mean for political orientation was near the midpoint,  $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 1.50$  and we excluded *other/libertarian* from analyses ( $n = 16$ ).

##### 3.1.2 | Procedure

The procedure was similar to Study 1 except that participants read an article from the *Chicago Tribune* regarding a gun-rights protest (Chase, 2018, see stimulus materials file) and responded to questions regarding moral evaluations of gun-rights protests (e.g., *how much is defending the right bear arms a moral duty?*) on scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*)  $\alpha = .91$ , see stimulus materials).<sup>4</sup> Participants also evaluated protesting in general,  $\alpha = .81$ , an

item assessing gun-rights protest effectiveness, and an item assessing general protest effectiveness (e.g., *how effective is protesting in general for evoking change in society?*) on scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Next, participants completed the MFQ as in Study 1 (individualizing  $\alpha = .74$ , binding  $\alpha = .83$ , harm  $\alpha = .64$ , fairness,  $\alpha = .61$ , loyalty,  $\alpha = .68$ , authority,  $\alpha = .62$ , purity,  $\alpha = .69$ ). Finally, participants reported age, gender, education, ethnicity, and political orientation.

#### 3.2 | Results

##### 3.2.1 | Correlational analysis

We examined raw correlations between all variables (see Table 3). Again, the correlations with political orientation showed that liberals scored higher on individualizing and conservatives higher on binding. This analysis also showed that conservatives evaluated gun-rights protests more favourably than did liberals, but this effect flipped for protesting in general. Unlike Study 1, evaluations of specific and general protests were uncorrelated. Binding endorsement correlated with evaluations of gun-rights protests but not protesting in general; individualizing endorsement correlated negatively with evaluations of gun-rights protests but positively with protesting in general. When examining each foundation individually, the individualizing pattern held for both harm and fairness; the binding pattern held for loyalty, partially held for authority, but did not hold for purity (see Table S3).

The findings largely held when regressing gun-rights protest evaluations on the individualizing and binding foundations simultaneously, controlling for age, gender, education, and political orientation, and a similar regression on general protest evaluations (see Table S4 in the supplementary material). Men approved more of gun-rights protests, and younger people approved of general protests more. Regressions revealed no significant unique effect of moral foundation endorsement on gun-rights protest evaluations, but they predicted general protest evaluations similar to Study 1 (see Table S4).

##### 3.2.2 | Mediation

Next, we examined whether the individualizing and binding foundations carried significant indirect variance (i.e., mediated) between political orientation and evaluations of gun-rights protests, controlling for age, gender, and education, using PROCESS Model 4 (see Figure 2). There was a small indirect effect via the individualizing foundations,

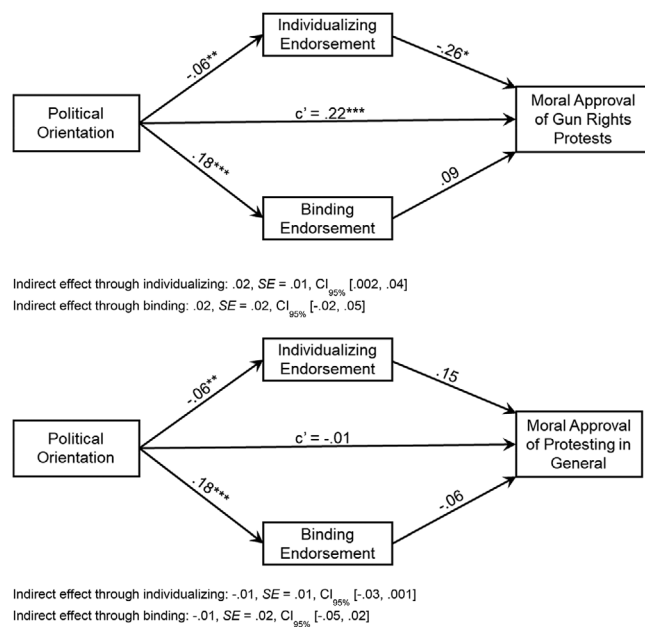
on a single factor without substantial loadings from any moral foundation item. However, a few items (e.g., *the right to own guns should be respected*) loaded on the same factor as items from MFQ loyalty. We therefore computed a short version for the DV, which consisted only of the four items most directly tied to protest perceptions (see supplementary material) and conducted a re-analysis of all results. All findings were very similar to the effects reported here (i.e., all effects of the same significance level in the same direction), except that the correlations between gun protest approval and the individualizing and binding foundations were no longer significant.

<sup>4</sup> We conducted an exploratory principle components analysis with an oblimin rotation on all moral foundation items, together with all the items in the dependent variable (DV). The results suggested 11 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, with most DV items loading together

**TABLE 3** Correlations between all variables, study 2

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Binding foundation endorsement	-							
2. Individualizing foundation endorsement	.28***	-						
3. Moral approval of gun rights protests	.20**	-.26**	-					
4. Moral approval of protests in general	-.12	.23**	-.03	-				
5. Protest effectiveness	-.13	.12	-.06	.20**	-			
6. Political orientation (1=lib, 7=cons)	.48***	-.28***	.57***	-.14**	-.14*	-		
7. Age	-.05	-.25***	-.09	-.23**	-.06	-.14	-	
8. Gender	.10	.44***	-.23**	-.06	.10	-.12	-.14*	-
9. Education	-.09	-.02	-.11	-.04	-.08	-.21**	.04	-.09

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**FIGURE 2** Political orientation predicting moral approval of gun-rights protests and protesting in general mediated through the binding and individualizing moral foundations simultaneously, Study 2

$B = .02$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.002, .04]$ , but no effect via binding foundations,  $B = .02$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.02, .05]$ , and these effects were not different from one another,  $B = -.00$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.03, .03]$ . As expected, the direct effect of political orientation remained significant:  $B = .22$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.14, .29]$ . Analyses examining all five foundations individually did not find any significant indirect effects (see Figure S3).

We conducted a similar analysis on general protest evaluation. The results showed no significant indirect effects via either reduced individualizing,  $B = -.01$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.03, -.02]$ , or increased binding endorsement,  $B = -.01$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.05, .01]$ , and these effects were not different from one another,  $B = .01$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.03, .03]$ . Nor was the direct effect significant,  $B = -.01$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.08, .05]$ . Analyses examining all five foundations individually did not find any significant indirect effects (see Figure S4).

### 3.3 | Discussion

The results of Study 2 largely corroborated predictions. We obtained only weak and inconsistent evidence of mediation via the individualizing foundation and none for the binding foundations on evaluations of gun-rights protests. We found no evidence of mediation on evaluations of protesting in general in this context. However, there remained a significant direct effect of political orientation on gun-rights protest evaluations. Hence, unlike Study 1, where protests challenge the status quo, political differences in perceptions of gun-rights protests do not seem to reflect individualizing or binding moral concerns. Instead, political differences may reflect other moral values, such as liberty, not measured here. However, it remains possible that we simply lacked statistical power to find robust evidence of mediation given how small a mediation effect for Gun Rights protests must be given these data. We therefore ran a third study where participants evaluated both Kaepernick's BLM protest and the gun rights protest in a counterbalanced order.

## 4 | STUDY 3

We anticipated replicating both Studies 1 and 2 in the same sample, counterbalancing the order in which participants evaluated each article. We expected that moral foundation endorsement should carry significant indirect variance from political orientation to evaluations of the BLM but not gun-rights protests, and to protesting in general after BLM but not gun-rights protests (as the article presentation may shift perceptions of the content of overall protests). We also examined whether presentation order impacted evaluations, as people compare protests to one another.

### 4.1 | Methods

#### 4.1.1 | Participants

If evaluations of each protest in the study correlate with each other  $r = .50$ , 200 people would provide  $\sim 80\%$  power to detect a

difference of Cohen's  $d = .2$  between them. We oversampled, recruiting 432 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk for \$0.75. We excluded 27 people failing an attention check and 91 participants for failing the MFQ checks, leaving a final sample of 314 (174 males, 140 females,  $M_{age} = 37.28$ ,  $SD = 11.63$ ). This time, the Monte Carlo power analysis indicated adequate power of >82% to detect all indirect effects, including those for Gun Rights protests.

For ethnicity, 84.2% identified as Caucasian, 6.7% as Hispanic or Latino/a, 6.4% as Asian, 8.3% as Black or African-American, 0.6% as Aboriginal, and 1.0% as Other. For education, one reported some high school, 43 completed high school, 110 some college, 122 completed a bachelor's degree, and 38 completed a doctorate or professional degree. The mean for political orientation was again near the midpoint,  $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ . As before, we excluded four people who identified as *other/libertarian* from analyses.

#### 4.1.2 | Procedure

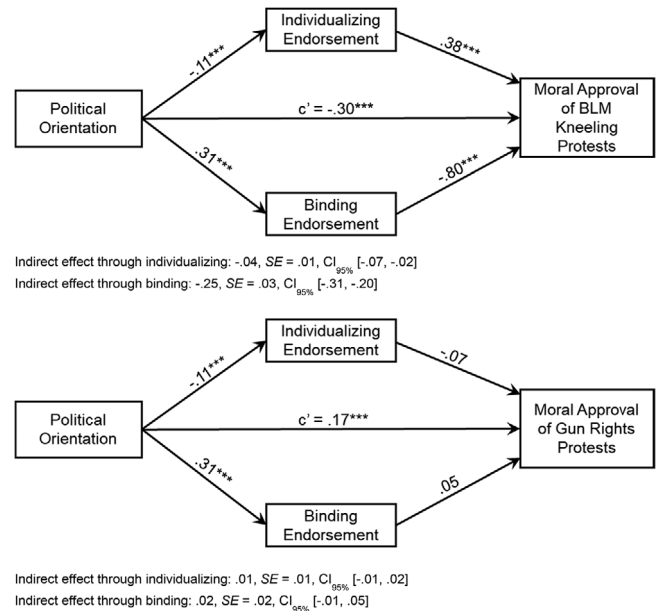
We presented participants with the materials and measures from Studies 1 and 2 in a counterbalanced order. As before, participants reported moral evaluations of gun control protests,  $\alpha = .58$ , and kneeling protests,  $\alpha = .92$  (see supplemental materials). Participants evaluated protesting in general after the gun rights,  $\alpha = .46$ , and BLM article,  $\alpha = .80$ . We also assessed the perceived protest effectiveness after the gun rights,  $\alpha = .08$ , and BLM article,  $\alpha = .80$ . Finally, participants completed the MFQ and demographics (individualizing  $\alpha = .81$ , binding  $\alpha = .93$ , harm  $\alpha = .71$ , fairness,  $\alpha = .69$ , loyalty,  $\alpha = .81$ , authority,  $\alpha = .80$ , purity,  $\alpha = .90$ ).<sup>5</sup>

## 4.2 | Results

### 4.2.1 | Correlational analysis

First, we examined correlations (see Table 4). Again, the correlations with political orientation showed that liberals scored higher on individualizing and conservatives higher on binding, and liberals evaluated BLM protests and protesting in general more positively than did conservatives, whereas conservatives evaluated gun-rights protests more positively than did liberals. Binding endorsement correlated negatively with moral approval of both gun rights and BLM protests, as well as negatively with moral approval of protests in general and protest effectiveness after reading the BLM article. Individualizing foundation endorsement correlated positively with BLM protest approval,

<sup>5</sup> As in Studies 1 and 2, we conducted an exploratory principle components analysis with an oblimin rotation on all moral foundation items, together with all the items in the DV. The results suggested twelve factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, with some DV items loading on the same factor as MFQ authority items (e.g., *a person should stand for the national anthem*). We therefore computed a short version for each two protest-perception DVs as in Studies 1 and 2. All findings were very similar to the effects reported here (i.e., all effects of the same significance level in the same direction), except that moral approval of kneeling and gun-rights protests were now positively correlated  $r = .13$ , gun protest evaluations no longer correlated with the binding or individualizing foundations, and in mediation analyses the indirect effect from political orientation to pro-gun protest evaluations was no longer significant.



**FIGURE 3** Political orientation predicting moral approval of BLM kneeling protests and gun-rights protests mediated through the binding and individualizing moral foundations simultaneously, Study 3

approval of protests in general, and protest effectiveness after reading the BLM article, but correlated negatively with approval of gun-rights protests. Similar patterns emerged when examining each foundation individually (see Table S5 in the supplementary material), and similar, although slightly weaker patterns, emerged in regressions controlling for age, gender, political orientation, and education (see Tables S6a, S6b, S7a, and S7b in the supplementary material).<sup>6</sup>

### 4.2.2 | Mediation

Next, we conducted a conditional indirect effect analysis to determine whether individualizing, and binding endorsement would carry significant variance between political orientation and moral approval of each specific protest, as well as protesting in general after each protest, depending on order condition, via PROCESS Model 15 with 10,000 bootstrap samples. We present the key findings in the text and expanded conditional indirect effects in Table S8. For ease of interpretation, we also present simplified mediation results collapsing across conditions in Figure 3 and Figure 4.

### 4.2.3 | Evaluations of BLM protest

Order of presentation did not have a significant effect on BLM evaluations,  $B = .03$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.09, .15]$ ; nor did order interact with

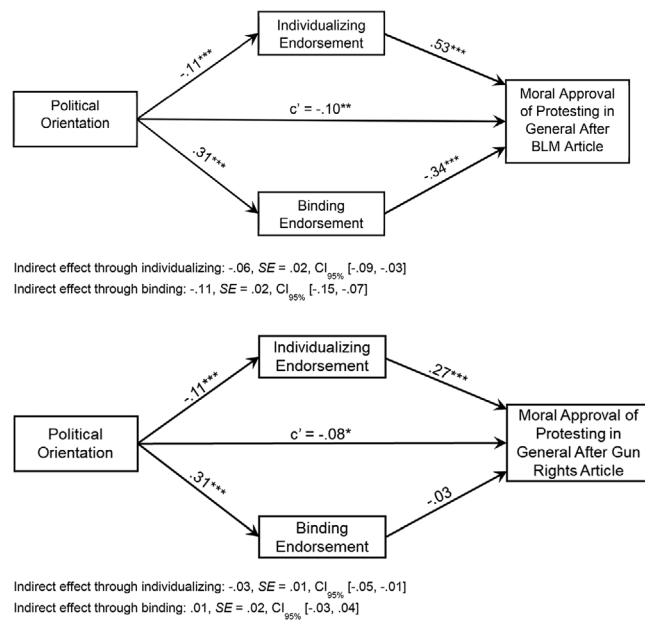
<sup>6</sup> These regressions also revealed that the predictive effect of the binding foundations on evaluations of BLM and protesting in general were higher when participants considered BLM protests before gun-rights protests, and overall evaluations of the gun-rights protests were higher when participants evaluated them first rather than second, but these effects were not theoretically important; none of the three-way interactions involving order were significant.



**TABLE 4** Correlations between all variables, study 3

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Binding foundation endorsement	-										
2. Individualizing foundation endorsement	-.04	-									
3. Moral approval of gun rights protests	-.14**	-.23***	-								
4. Moral approval of BLM protests	-.74***	.19**	-.16**	-							
5. Moral approval of protests in general after gun rights	-.06	.23***	.14*	.13*	-						
6. Moral approval of protests in general after BLM article	-.41***	.37***	-.09	.61***	.36***	-					
7. Effectiveness of protesting after gun rights article	.07	.05	.14*	-.09	.59***	.27***	-				
8. Effectiveness of protesting after kneeling	-.28***	.29***	-.11	.50***	.39***	.82***	.36***	-			
9. Political orientation (1=lib, 7=cons)	.53***	-.25***	.22**	-.59***	-.19**	-.41***	.05	-.38***	-		
10. Age	-.05	-.14*	-.02	-.17**	-.07	-.07	-.05	-.14**	-.14**	-	
11. Gender	-.02	.10	-.12*	-.06	.05	-.02	.04	.00	-.08	-.13*	-
12. Education	-.06	.03	-.20***	.02	.02	.01	-.04	-.01	-.06	.08	.09

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



**FIGURE 4** Political orientation predicting moral approval of protesting in general after participants read about BLM kneeling protests and gun-rights protests mediated through the binding and individualizing moral foundations simultaneously, Study 3

political orientation,  $B = .07$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.01, .16]$ , as the direct effect of political orientation remained significant whether participants read the BLM article first,  $B = -.38$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.48, -.27]$ , or second,  $B = -.23$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.36, -.11]$ . Order did not interact with individualizing endorsement,  $B = .15$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.02, .31]$ ; indirect effects remained significant whether participants encountered the BLM article first,  $B = -.02$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.06, .01]$ , or second,  $B = -.05$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.09, -.02]$ , and the index of moderated mediation was not significant,  $B = -.03$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.08, .01]$ . However, order interacted with binding endorsement,  $B = .27$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,

$CI_{95\%} [.14, .40]$ , indicating a stronger negative indirect effect via binding when participants encountered the BLM article first,  $B = -1.09$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-1.26, -.91]$ , than when they encountered it second,  $B = -0.55$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.73, -.36]$ , with a significant index of moderated mediation,  $B = .17$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.09, .26]$ , although the effect remained significant in both cases. This pattern is consistent with the possibility that binding moral concerns more powerfully influenced negative evaluations of BLM kneeling protests when presented in isolation, rather than in comparison to gun-rights protests. An analysis examining all five foundations individually revealed significant conditional indirect effects via fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity (see Table S8).

#### 4.2.4 | Evaluations of gun-rights protest

Order of presentation had a significant effect on gun-rights protest evaluations,  $B = .35$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.27, .42]$  with higher scores when people encountered the gun-rights protest first rather than second (see also Figure S7). Order did not interact with political orientation,  $B = .04$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.02, .09]$ . The direct effect of political orientation remained significant whether participants read the gun rights article first,  $B = .23$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.15, .31]$ , or second,  $B = .16$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.09, .23]$ . Order did not interact with individualizing endorsement,  $B = .04$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.07, .15]$ ; there was no significant mediation whether participants encountered the gun rights article first,  $B = .001$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.01, .02]$ , or second,  $B = .01$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.01, .03]$ ; index of moderated mediation,  $B = -.01$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.03, .02]$ . Order did not interact with binding endorsement,  $B = .01$ ,  $SE = .14$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.08, .09]$ , and there was no significant indirect effect whether participants encountered the gun rights article first,  $B = .01$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.03, .06]$ , or second,  $B = .01$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.02, .05]$ ; index of moderated mediation,  $B = .003$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.05, .06]$ . Likewise, an analysis on each foundation individually found no evidence

for mediation, but direct effects remained significant in both order conditions.

#### 4.2.5 | Evaluations of general protests after BLM protest

Order of presentation did not have a significant effect,  $B = -.06$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.18, .05]$ ; nor did order interact with political orientation,  $B = .04$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.03, .12]$ . However, the direct effect of political orientation was only significant when participants read the BLM article first,  $B = -.15$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.25, -.05]$ , not second,  $B = -.06$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.17, .05]$ . Order did not interact with individualizing endorsement,  $B = .06$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.10, .21]$  and there remained a significant indirect individualizing effect whether participants encountered the BLM article first,  $B = -.05$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.09, -.02]$ , or second,  $B = -.06$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.11, -.03]$ ; index of moderated mediation,  $B = -.01$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.05, .03]$ . Order did not interact with binding endorsement,  $B = .11$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.01, .23]$ , as there was a significant indirect effect via the binding foundations whether participants encountered the BLM article first,  $B = -.14$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.20, -.10]$ , or second,  $B = -.07$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.14, -.02]$ ; index of moderated mediation,  $B = .07$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.01, .15]$ . These results are consistent with the argument that political orientation predicted more negative evaluations of protesting in general following BLM protests via both individualizing and binding endorsement, regardless of protest order. However, an analysis examining each foundation individually revealed weaker effects; only loyalty remained a significant unique mediator in the BLM first condition (see Table S8).

#### 4.2.6 | Evaluations of general protests after gun-rights protest

Order of presentation had a significant effect,  $B = .49$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.40, .59]$ , with higher scores when people encountered the gun-rights protest first rather than second (see also Figure S7). Order did not interact with political orientation,  $B = .02$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.05, .08]$ , and the direct effect of political orientation was not significant whether participants read the gun rights article first,  $B = -.03$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.13, .06]$ , or second,  $B = -.07$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.16, .01]$ . Order interacted with individualizing endorsement,  $B = .13$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.001, .27]$ , but this was a small and inconsistent effect: the indirect effect was significant when participants encountered the gun rights article first,  $B = -.05$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.08, -.02]$ , but not second,  $B = -.02$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.04, .005]$ , although the index of moderated mediation was not significant,  $B = -.03$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.07, .004]$ .

There was a clearer order interaction for binding endorsement,  $B = -.16$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.26, -.06]$ . There was no significant indirect effect when participants encountered the gun rights article first,  $B = -.05$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.10, .003]$  but there was when they encountered it second,  $B = .05$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.02, .09]$ ; index of moderated

mediation,  $B = -.10$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.18, -.04]$ . However, an analysis of all five foundations individually did not reveal any significant mediation effects in either order condition. Hence, there was slight evidence for mediation via the individualizing foundations when participants encountered the gun rights article first and via the binding foundations when they encountered it second, but such effects were weak and inconsistent, so they should be interpreted cautiously.

### 4.3 | Discussion

Overall, these results were largely consistent with Studies 1 and 2. Political orientation (i.e., conservatism vs liberalism) was associated with increased binding and decreased individualizing scores, increased approval of gun-rights protests and decreased approval of kneeling protests, decreased approval of protesting in general, and decreased perceptions of kneeling but not gun-rights protest effectiveness. Mediation analyses suggested that, consistent with Study 1, both individualizing and binding concerns partially mediated the effect of political orientation on evaluations of BLM protests and protesting in general after BLM protests. In other words, liberals may have viewed such protests more positively than did conservatives in part due to increased individualizing and reduced binding concerns. Again, this effect was larger via binding than individualizing endorsement. However, consistent with Study 2, there was little reliable evidence of mediation via the individualizing and binding foundations when participants considered gun-rights protests or protesting in general in this context. A few effects differed in strength depending on the order of presentation but these differences were small and inconsistent, so evidence for moderation of conditional indirect effects by order remains modest.

That said, order mattered for evaluations of the gun-rights protests: overall, participants evaluated gun-rights protests more positively in isolation than in comparison with the BLM protests. We replicated this pattern for protesting in general in the gun-rights protest context. Conversely, evaluations of BLM protests remained similar across the order condition, as did evaluations of protesting in general after BLM protests. This pattern suggests that when people considered each protest in isolation (first article), they evaluated them similarly, but when people considered each protest in comparison with one another (second article), they evaluated gun rights protests less positively than BLM protests. Likewise, the indirect effect on BLM evaluations via binding (but not individualizing) was stronger when participants evaluated the BLM protest by itself, rather than in comparison with the gun-rights protest. Perhaps binding foundation concerns that BLM protests challenge are partially assuaged when people first encounter gun-rights protests, reminding participants high in binding that not all protests challenge the status quo. Order did not impact the direct or indirect evaluations of gun-rights protests.

For general protest evaluations after BLM protests, order interacted with the individualizing and binding foundations, but these effects remained small, and the indexes of moderated mediation were not significant, suggesting that order was not an important factor for mediation. Instead, order had a substantial direct impact on

evaluations of protesting overall after the gun-rights protest, such that participants evaluated the gun-rights protest more positively in isolation than in comparison with BLM protests. Order also interacted with the foundations, but the moderated mediation indexes were not significant, so we interpret such differences with caution.

Together, Studies 1–3 are consistent with the possibility that the effect of political orientation on moral evaluations of protests depends on whether such protests challenge the status quo, as in BLM protests, or do not, as in gun-rights protests. Hence, political differences in protest evaluations may partially reflect different moral values prioritized by liberals and conservatives. However, we have only thus far examined protests that challenge or are silent about the status quo. Next, we examined whether the mediation pattern for BLM protests would flip for a protest explicitly supporting the status quo: Blue Lives Matter.

## 5 | STUDY 4

A wave of Black Lives Matter protests followed the police killing of George Floyd, prompting counter protests to support police; these were called Blue Lives Matter protests (McLaughlin, 2020). As argued above, BLM protests challenge authorities in police and government to overturn the status quo racial hierarchy in America. In this context, support for the police instead reinforces the existing status quo power structures. For the BLM protest and protesting in general, we expected to replicate the patterns in Studies 1 and 3: liberals should evaluate them higher than conservatives partially via individualizing and reduced binding concerns.

However, we predicted the opposite mediation pattern for Blue Lives Matter protests. Unlike gun-rights protests, which are largely silent on the status quo, Blue Lives Matter protests endorse the status quo and hence uphold binding values such as loyalty and respect for authority, which conservatives prioritize. To test this hypothesis, participants read one of two versions of an ostensible news article (see the supplementary material). Each version contained identical text and an aerial protest photo, but we manipulated whether the protest ostensibly favoured Black Lives Matter or Blue Lives Matter. We conducted a moderated mediation analysis on evaluations of both the specific protest in question and protesting in general, depending on the protest condition.

## 5.1 | Methods

### 5.1.1 | Participants

Again, GPower suggested that ~200 participants would provide ~80% power to detect correlations of  $r = .2$ . We oversampled, recruiting 312 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk for \$0.50. We excluded 86 people for failing attention checks, leaving a final sample of 226 (116 males, 108 females, two unreported,  $M_{\text{age}} = 38.05$ ,  $SD = 12.46$ ).

The Monte Carlo simulation indicated this sample provided adequate power  $> 84\%$  to detect all indirect effects in the study except for the very small indirect effect of individualizing on Blue Lives Matter protests, which had only 6% power.

In terms of ethnicity, 72.1% identified as Caucasian, 5.3% Hispanic or Latino/a, 14.6% identified as Asian, 10.6% as Black or African-American, 0.4% as Aboriginal, and 0.9% as Other. In terms of education, 12 reported graduating high school, 62 reported some college, 111 a bachelor's degree, 40 reported a doctorate or professional degree, and one was unreported. The mean for political orientation was again near the midpoint,  $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 1.91$ . We also excluded three people who identified as *other/libertarian* from analyses involving political orientation.

### 5.1.2 | Procedure

First, participants responded to questions regarding the perception of existing fairness in America (e.g., *people should be content with what they have even if they get less than others*) on scales from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*),  $\alpha = .84$ . Then, participants completed the MFQ (individualizing  $\alpha = .84$ , binding  $\alpha = .93$ , harm  $\alpha = .73$ , fairness,  $\alpha = .69$ , loyalty,  $\alpha = .80$ , authority,  $\alpha = .81$ , purity,  $\alpha = .88$ ). Afterwards, participants read one version of the article and reported moral approval of this specific protest (e.g., *how morally acceptable is the particular protest described in the article?*  $\alpha = .81$ ) and protesting in general (e.g., *how morally acceptable is it for someone to protest in general?*  $\alpha = .83$ ). See the supplementary material for the full version).

## 5.2 | Results

### 5.2.1 | Correlational analysis

First, we conducted a correlational analysis (see Table 5). Replicating Studies 1–3, political orientation correlated negatively with individualizing and positively with binding foundations, negatively with Black Lives Matter protests and protesting in general, and positively with Blue Lives Matter protests and American fairness. People higher in binding endorsement approved less of Black Lives Matter protests and protesting in general but approved more of the Blue Lives Matter protests and reported that America was fairer overall. People high in individualizing endorsements approved more of Black Lives Matter protests and protesting in general, but viewed America as less fair. There was no significant correlation between individualizing endorsement and evaluations of Blue Lives Matter protests. Similar patterns emerged when the correlations with each foundation were examined individually (see Table S9 in the supplementary material), and in regressions controlling for age, gender, political orientation, and education, although the regressions for protesting in general revealed only main effects for individualizing and binding, rather than interactions (see Tables S10 and S11 in the supplementary material).

**TABLE 5** Correlations between all variables, study 4

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Binding foundation endorsement	–								
2. Individualizing foundation endorsement	.01	–							
3. Moral approval of Black Lives Matter protest ( $n = 107$ )	–.30***	.53***	–						
4. Moral approval of Blue Lives Matter protest ( $n = 119$ )	.52***	–.02	–	–					
5. Moral approval of protests in general	–.28***	.44***	.85***	.08	–				
6. Perceptions of fairness in America	.65***	–.39***	–.51***	.46***	–.44**	–			
7. Political orientation (1=lib, 7=cons)	.43***	–.28***	–.23*	.43***	–.18**	.59***	–		
8. Age	.04	–.06	–.01	.15	–.02	.23**	.26***	–	
9. Gender	–.11	.23***	.40***	.07	.21**	–.17**	–.11	–.06	–
10. Education	.12	.03	.05	.12	–.01	.06	.04	.14**	–.10

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## 5.2.2 | Mediation

Next, we conducted the key mediation analysis to examine conditional indirect effects between political orientation and moral approval of the specific protests that participants read about using Model 15 in PRO-CESS (Hayes, 2012). As before, we included age, gender, and education as covariates, but the results did not depend on including these factors.

## 5.2.3 | Evaluations of specific protests

As predicted, we obtained evidence of significant moderated mediation for both the binding:  $b = -.24$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.36, -.14]$  and individualizing foundations,  $b = -.08$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.15, -.03]$ , indicating that the strength of mediation for each varied across protest condition. In the Black Lives Matter condition, the conditional indirect effect via individualizing was positive and significant,  $b = .94$ ,  $SE = .18$ ,  $t = 5.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.60, 1.29]$ , whereas this effect was not significant in the Blue Lives Matter condition,  $b = .09$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $t = .56$ ,  $p = .576$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.22, .40]$ . In the Black Lives Matter condition, the conditional indirect effect via binding was significant and negative,  $b = -.044$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $t = -3.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.68, -.19]$ , whereas in the Blue Lives Matter condition it was significant and positive,  $b = .63$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $t = 5.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.40, .87]$ .

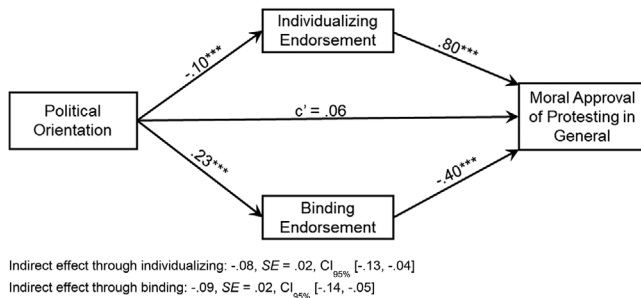
There was a main effect of condition,  $b = .50$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $t = 6.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.35, .66]$ , indicating greater overall approval of Black Lives Matter than Blue Lives Matter protests, controlling for other predictors. Political orientation predicted lower individualizing and higher binding endorsement, which carried significant indirect variance to moral evaluations of the particular protest—but the direction of this effect flipped across protest condition. Although the interaction between political orientation and protest condition was not significant,  $b = -.07$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = -1.59$ ,  $p = .114$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.17, .02]$ , the interaction between individualizing and condition was significant and positive,  $b = 0.43$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $t = 3.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.20, .66]$ , whereas the interaction between binding and condition was significant and negative,  $b = -0.53$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $t = -6.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.71, -.36]$ . The

direct effect of political orientation was not significant in the Black Lives Matter protest condition,  $b = 0.04$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $t = 0.59$ ,  $p = .556$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.10, .18]$  but it was significant in the Blue Lives Matter condition,  $b = 0.19$ ,  $SE = .19$ ,  $t = 2.96$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.06, .32]$ . These findings held while controlling for age,  $b = 0.01$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $t = 1.66$ ,  $p = .098$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.01, .02]$ , gender,  $b = 0.38$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $t = 2.29$ ,  $p = .023$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [.05, .70]$ , and education,  $b = 0.05$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $t = 0.46$ ,  $p = .644$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.15, .25]$ . Similar patterns emerged for mediation analyses replacing individualizing and binding with all five foundations as individual mediators, with harm carrying unique indirect variance in the Black Lives Matter condition, and authority carrying unique indirect variance in the Blue Lives Matter condition (see Tables S12 and S13 in the supplementary material).

## 5.2.4 | Evaluations of protesting in general

Unlike evaluations of specific protests, evaluations of protesting in general did not reveal significant moderated mediation for either the binding,  $b = -.06$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.13, .01]$ , or individualizing foundations,  $b = .01$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.04, .05]$ , demonstrating that mediation patterns for this variable did not differ depending on the specific protest that participants encountered. Nor were there any significant interactions between political orientation, individualizing, or binding with condition; every  $p > .130$ .

We therefore collapsed the results across conditions to examine overall mediation via Process Model 4 (see Figures 4 and 5). This analysis revealed that the indirect effect of political orientation on protesting in general was significant via both individualizing foundation endorsement,  $B = -.08$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.13, -.04]$  and binding foundation endorsement,  $B = -.09$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.14, -.05]$ , and the contrast between these two effects was not significant,  $B = .01$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-.05, .08]$ . These findings indicate that people who reported a more conservative (vs liberal) orientation scored lower on individualizing and higher on binding foundation endorsement, which, respectively, predicted higher and lowered endorsement of protesting in general. Similar patterns emerged for mediations examining all five



**FIGURE 5** Political orientation predicting moral approval of protesting in general across both conditions through the binding and individualizing moral foundations simultaneously, Study 4

foundations simultaneously, with harm carrying unique indirect variance in the Black Lives Matter condition, and loyalty carrying unique indirect variance in the Blue Lives Matter condition (see Tables S12 and S13 in the supplementary material).

### 5.3 | Discussion

These results replicated and clarified the previous studies using more tightly controlled stimuli. People who endorsed political conservatism (vs liberalism) scored higher on the binding foundations and lower on the individualizing foundations, evaluated Black Lives Matter protests as less moral and Blue Lives Matter protests as more moral, evaluated protesting in general as less moral, and rated America fairer overall. As predicted, endorsement of the binding and individualizing foundations carried significant indirect variance between political orientation and moral evaluations of Black and Blue Lives Matter protests—but the direction of this effect flipped, with individualizing mediating higher approval of Black than Blue Lives Matter protests, whereas binding mediated higher approval of Blue than Black Lives Matter protests.

Conversely, moral evaluations of protesting in general did not shift across condition; instead, the individualizing foundations mediated significantly increased evaluations, and binding foundations mediated significantly decreased moral evaluations of protesting overall. These results clarify that people who were conservative leaning disapproved of Black Lives Matter protests disrupting the status quo, as well as protesting in general, but approved of Blue Lives Matter protests upholding the status quo, in part due to endorsement of the binding moral foundations, whereas people who were liberal leaning approved of Black Lives Matter protests disrupting the status quo, as well as protesting in general, but disapproved of Blue Lives Matter protests upholding the status quo, in part due to endorsement of the individualizing moral foundations. Hence, liberals and conservatives appear to disagree over the moral value of protests that disrupt the status quo versus uphold it, in part due to endorsing different moral values.

## 6 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Together, the four studies suggest that liberals responded more favourably than conservatives to protests that challenged the status

quo of power in America—namely, Colin Kaepernick's kneeling protests before NFL games, Black Lives Matter protests, and protesting in general (in the context of BLM protests). Mediation analyses were consistent with the argument that such liberal-conservative differences appear driven partly by the increased endorsement of the individualizing and reduced endorsement of the binding moral foundations (some studies suggest this effect is larger through binding rather than individualizing, although others found similar effect sizes). Conversely, conservatives responded more favourably than liberals to protests that reinforce the status quo of power in America—namely Blue Lives Matter protests—an effect mediated through increased endorsement of the binding and reduced endorsement of the individualizing moral foundations.

Furthermore, conservatives responded more favourably than liberals to protests that were silent regarding the status quo of power in America—gun-rights protests—but such differences were largely unrelated to moral foundation endorsement, with only weak and inconsistent evidence for mediation via the individualizing foundations. We therefore suggest that the different moral values that liberals and conservatives prioritize may partly influence their reactions to protests that challenge or uphold the status quo, but not protests that are silent regarding the status quo. In other words, protests that are silent on the status quo may reflect political but not moral disagreement, at least regarding individualizing and binding concerns.

Intriguingly, we found a similar pattern of perceptions for protests that challenge the status quo and protesting in general, whereas patterns flipped only for protests that support the status quo. One reason for this pattern may reflect subjective perceptions of the meaning of generic protest. Generic protests may tend to evoke perceptions of challenging the status quo due in part due to the protest effect in the media, where protests that challenge the status quo tend to be described as protests more often, with a focus on violence and chaos, whereas protests that support the status quo are less likely to evoke the protest effect (especially in right-wing media), and so may seem less associated with typical protests, perhaps being labelled as “marches” instead (Boyle et al., 2012; Kilgo & Harlow, 2019; Weaver & Scacco, 2013).

These findings are consistent with other research on moral foundations showing that liberals tended to endorse the individualizing foundations, whereas conservatives tended to endorse the binding foundations (e.g., Graham et al., 2009, 2012). Moreover, these findings partially align with those of Monroe et al. (2020), who found that a preference for the authority versus fairness foundations predicted negative evaluations of protesting in general, and Kaepernick's protests in particular. Monroe and colleagues concluded that valuing authority over fairness predicted evaluations of all forms of protest, but they only assessed protests that challenge the status quo. Our findings match Monroe and colleagues for protests that challenge the status quo. However, our findings regarding gun rights and Blue Lives Matter protests are not consistent with this view, as concerns about fairness and authority did not consistently predict evaluations of gun-rights protests, and positively predicted evaluations of Blue Lives Matter protests. Moreover, our findings suggest that concerns about authority over fairness may be attenuated or even reversed for protests that

support the status quo. Thus, the impact of moral foundation endorsement on protests depends on whether protests challenge, support, or remain silent regarding the status quo. That said, these factors may be further moderated by whether conservatives view authorities as legitimate: conservatives primarily favour obedience to conservative rather than liberal authorities (Frimer et al., 2014). It may be that willingness to protest vaccine policies may in part reflect perceptions of authority as illegitimate.

These findings align with research showing that people who lean conservative tend to score higher on Right-Wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation (Jost et al., 2003), and system justification (Jost, 2019)—constructs related to intolerance and hostility toward low-status groups and protection of high status groups (Altemeyer, 1981; Pratto et al., 1994). For example, both of these constructs predicted identification with (powerful, high status) governments and anger at (low-power, low-status) citizen protestors in foreign countries, and reduced intention to engage in collective action on behalf of such protestors (Saeri et al., 2015). The current work suggests the predictive effects of these constructs might be partially mediated via increased binding or reduced individualizing endorsement, consistent with arguments that moral foundations reflect motivated cognition (Kugler et al., 2014; Strupp-Levitsky et al., 2020). The current findings also suggest the predictive patterns in Saeri and colleagues may flip if those protesting reflect a powerful dominant group (e.g., wealthy business owners). Likewise, Osborne et al. (2019) found that system justification predicted reduced support for protests that challenge the status quo, but increased support for protests that reinforced the status quo, mediated via perceptions of justice, anger, and dissatisfaction with the system. The current work suggests that such patterns may be stronger among people high in the binding and low in the individualizing foundations. Future work should investigate these possibilities.

## 6.1 | Implications

These results provide insight into political disagreement over contentious protests. They suggest that the influence of political orientation on protest evaluation depends on whether such protests challenge or reinforce the status quo. People who are more conservative tend to value traditional elements of morality that bind people tightly together into unified communities: loyalty to the ingroup, respect for authority figures, and concerns about purity (e.g., Graham et al., 2009, 2012). As a result, they may be particularly upset when a given protest appears to threaten or challenge traditional ways of life by overturning the status quo of power relations. Colin Kaepernick and BLM protests draw attention to racial injustices, including police use of disproportionate force against communities of colour, which question the validity of the status quo in America—for example, questioning whether police and government authorities have the best interests of everyone in mind. Such protests, by challenging the status quo, clash with binding foundation concerns related to loyalty and authority and threaten motivated reasoning to view existing social structures as fair and legitimate (Strupp-Levitsky et al., 2020). As Fox News Commentator Brad

Todd said, Kaepernick is “giving up” during a song saying, “America will endure,” highlighting the perceived threat to traditional values. Conversely, protests that reinforce the social order, such as Blue Lives Matter, celebrate police who hold power in the existing social system, upholding binding moral concerns. Hence, a desire to uphold traditional moral values may partly explain political differences in evaluations of protests that support or challenge the status quo.

Moreover, political differences in protest evaluations appear to partially reflect different prioritization of the individualizing foundations concerning harm and justice—Kaepernick and BLM protests not only challenge traditional social order, but also highlight the unfairness and harm of dealing with a racially biased and aggressive police force under the traditional order. Accordingly, people who care more about such individualizing moral concerns, who tend to lean liberal, approved more of such protests challenging the status quo. In other words, Kaepernick’s and BLM’s message that people of colour have often been mistreated and harmed unjustly by police and other authorities in America appears to resonate more with people who care about such moral concerns. Notably, the individualizing foundations did not mediate significant variance between political orientation and evaluations of the Blue Lives Matter protests, as these protests may not emphasize harm or justice concerns, instead focusing on loyalty and respect for authority.

Moreover, the endorsement of moral foundations did not strongly mediate the influence of political orientation on evaluations of gun-rights protests, which are largely silent regarding the existing social order.<sup>7</sup> Instead, there remained a direct effect of political orientation on such protests along partisan lines. Such a pattern might reflect the fact that people who score highly for the individualizing foundations may have mixed feelings about gun-rights protests because such protests promote access to harmful weaponry, and yet also pertain to issues of fairness in terms of access to such weapons. Likewise, people who score highly for binding foundations may have mixed feelings about gun-rights protests because gun ownership may seem patriotic, but at the same time, protesting may seem disrespectful to authority figures. The net effect of these mixed considerations may therefore have wiped out systematic variance from political orientation to moral approval of gun-rights protests, or protesting in general after considering gun-rights protests, which pertain to a mixture of moral values but do not clearly challenge or reinforce the status quo.

If so, then future work highlighting how gun-rights protests align with or challenge individualizing or binding concerns may find significant effects. Alternatively, moral evaluations of gun-rights protests may have little to do with individualizing or binding concerns, and may instead reflect concerns about a sixth foundation, unmeasured here: *liberty*, the belief that people should be unfettered by society to make their own choices. Insofar as gun ownership empowers individuals, it may seem to increase personal liberty, and hence this foundation endorsement may predict moral evaluations of such protests.<sup>8</sup> Future

<sup>7</sup> There was modest and inconsistent evidence for an indirect effect via increased approval of such protests or protesting in general via increased individualizing endorsement but that pattern was inconsistent across Studies 2 and 3.

<sup>8</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

work might profitably investigate this possibility by including a measure of liberty foundation endorsement.

Study 3 revealed an effect of the order in which participants encountered the BLM kneeling or gun-rights protest article. Evaluations of the BLM protest remained uniformly high regardless of presentation order, whereas evaluations of the gun-rights protest were higher when encountered in isolation (first), rather than in direct comparison with the BLM protest (second). Conversely, the binding foundations more strongly predicted condemnation of BLM protests encountered in isolation (first), rather than in direct comparison to the gun-rights protest (second), and more strongly predicted approval of gun-rights protests encountered in isolation (first), rather than in direct comparison to the gun-rights protest (second). These effects suggest that presenting participants with a single protest in isolation engenders evaluations of the moral value of that protest itself, and whether such protests challenge the traditional status quo. However, when participants encountered a protest article second, they might have compared them and considered them as two examples of a broad category of protests, some of which challenge the status quo and some that do not. Such considerations appeared to have two impacts: people continued to evaluate BLM protests positively in comparison with gun-rights protests, suggesting perceived importance of such protests, whereas overall evaluations of gun-rights protests decreased when compared to BLM protests, suggesting that participants may have viewed gun-rights protests under a Republican administration as less moral than BLM protests under the same administration. Second, encountering BLM protests in isolation may have highlighted the perceived challenge to the status quo that protesting can elicit, leading to low evaluations among people high in binding concerns. This effect diminished when considering both BLM and gun-rights protests, suggesting that people concerned about the binding foundations may have taken solace in the fact that some protests align with conservative interests—in other words, they may have felt that some protests do not threaten the social order, and therefore protesting in general may have seemed less threatening.

## 6.2 | Limitations

Like all research, the current work suffers from limitations. First, we examined only a few of the many reasons people protest. We selected these because of their importance in American culture and substantial political differences in opinions. We extrapolate from these specific examples to interpret our findings as protest challenging, reinforcing, or remaining silent on the status quo. This suggests that other protests challenging the status quo—such as Occupy Wall Street, or Gay Rights marches—should elicit higher approval from liberals than conservatives via both increased individualizing and reduced binding endorsement. Conversely, other protests reinforcing the status quo—such as the Unite the Right Rally Charlottesville—should elicit higher approval from conservatives than liberals via both reduced individualizing and increased binding endorsement. Finally, protests

that remain largely silent on the status quo, instead emphasizing liberty and personal freedom—such as 2020 antimask protests or the 2016 occupation of federal land in Oregon—may not show significant mediation via either the individualizing or binding foundations (though perhaps liberty instead). Future work should test these possibilities.

The current work also suffers from sample limitations. Although we replicated findings across college students and Mturk, both of these samples may be skewed towards liberals, and miss especially strong conservatives, who are less likely to attend college or use computers (Levay et al., 2016). Some papers suggest that conservatives and liberals differ in cognitive processing (Jost et al., 2003) but others suggest similarity in representative samples (Chirumbolo et al., 2004; Reynolds et al., 2020). Hence, effects might look different in a representative sample of conservatives. Likewise, we sampled only Americans; different patterns may emerge in different countries. However, moral foundations demonstrate considerable consistency across cultures, so the burden of proof may be on sceptics who expect cultural differences (e.g., Yilmaz et al., 2016).

Another limitation is the focus on individual difference measures. Although we manipulated the protest topic in Study 4 and order of presentation in Study 3, we did not systematically manipulate moral foundation endorsement or protests features theorized to challenge or reinforce the status quo (e.g., Day et al., 2014). Hence, we cannot make causal claims. Moreover, significant indirect effects do not prove that mediation occurred; they simply provide evidence consistent with our theoretical argument (Fiedler et al., 2011). These results are potentially consistent with other interpretations as well, such as moral foundation endorsement influencing political orientation to predict protest evaluations. Future work should manipulate such variables directly.

Finally, we assessed political orientation using a single-item measure. However, theorists sometimes distinguish between two facets of conservatism that are moderately related (e.g., Saribay & Yilmaz, 2017). Social conservatism focuses primarily on contentious policy issues such as abortion, gun rights, and gay rights, whereas economic conservatism focuses primarily on financial considerations such as spending reductions, tax reductions, and corporate regulations. Moral evaluations primarily reflect social but not economic conservatism (e.g., Chan, 2019). Hence, people high in economic conservatism may demonstrate a different pattern of results.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

The current work clarifies why people disagree over protests that challenge the social order, such as Colin Kaepernick's kneeling protests before NFL games, or those that reinforce it, such as Blue Lives Matter protests. We suggest that the moral concerns that liberals and conservatives prioritize colour their perception of such protests. Kaepernick's and BLM's protests challenge the status quo, threatening concerns about loyalty and authority in favour of concerns about

fairness and harm, threatening the binding foundations but upholding the individualizing foundations. Conversely, protests that reinforce the status quo, such as Blue Lives Matter, allay concerns about loyalty and authority without necessarily directly undermining concerns about fairness and harm. Accordingly, people who prioritize concerns about authority and loyalty, who lean conservative, disapprove of protests challenging the social order and approve of protests reinforcing it, whereas people who prioritize concerns about harm and fairness may approve of protests challenging the social order without necessarily disapproving of protests reinforcing it. Thus, moral disagreement over contentious protests may partially reflect the moral values that liberals and conservatives prioritize.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors do not have any financial or relationship interests that would influence their motivation for publishing this work.

### ETHICS STATEMENT

We followed American Psychological Association ethical guidelines. All studies were approved by the Florida State University ethics board under Numbers 2017.22741, 2018.23949, and STUDY00001436.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data, stimuli, and analyses are available online: [osf.io/7n3rj/](https://osf.io/7n3rj/).

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of the article at the publisher's website.

**How to cite this article:** Richardson, I., & Conway, P. (2022). Standing up or giving up? Moral foundations mediate political differences in evaluations of BLACK LIVES MATTER and other protests. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 52, 553–569. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2837>