The Activist’s Dilemma: Extreme Protest Actions Reduce Popular Support for Social Movements

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How do protest actions impact public support for social movements? Here we test the claim that extreme protest actions—protest behaviors perceived to be harmful to others, highly disruptive, or both—typically reduce support for social movements. Across 6 experiments, including 3 that were preregistered, participants indicated less support for social movements that used more extreme protest actions. This result obtained across a variety of movements (e.g., animal rights, anti-Trump, anti-abortion) and extreme protest actions (e.g., blocking highways, vandalizing property). Further, in 5 of 6 studies, negative reactions to extreme protest actions also led participants to support the movement’s central cause less, and these effects were largely independent of individuals’ prior ideology or views on the issue. In all studies we found effects were driven by diminished social identification with the movement. In Studies 4–6, serial mediation analyses detailed a more in-depth model: observers viewed extreme protest actions to be immoral, reducing observers’ emotional connection to the movement and, in turn, reducing identification with and support for the movement. Taken together with prior research showing that extreme protest actions can be effective for applying pressure to institutions and raising awareness of movements, these findings suggest an activist’s dilemma, in which the same protest actions that may offer certain benefits are also likely to undermine popular support for social movements.

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Activists, and the social movements they build, seek to change society, address social problems, and correct injustices in the law, institutions, and social relations. Given the scope of their charge, it should come as little surprise that social movements are more likely to fail than succeed (Piven & Cloward, 1979). Nonetheless, when modern societies do change, social movements very often play a critical role (Gamson, 1975; Mazumder, 2018). Given the important role activism plays in social change, understanding the strategic terrain social movements face—the likely consequences of different strategies and approaches—is critical for understanding, and successfully achieving, social and political change.

To achieve their goals, social movements use a variety of strategies including applying direct pressure to elite decision-makers, raising awareness of issues, influencing formal political processes, and shaping public opinion. Prior research emphasizes the value of public opinion, finding that when movements win greater popular support they grow their membership base and wield more political, cultural, and institutional influence (Burstein, 2003; Burstein & Linton, 2002; Louis, 2009; Simon & Klandermans, 2001). But which protest actions help, and which hinder, activists’ efforts to win popular support?

Here we explore popular reactions to protest behaviors that are perceived to be harmful to others, highly disruptive, or both, a class of behaviors we refer to as extreme protest actions. Examples of extreme protest actions include inflammatory or threatening rhetoric, blocking traffic, damaging property, and physical violence (cf. Goldman & Hogg, 2016). Building on insights from past research (e.g., Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008; Thomas & Louis, 2013; Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008), we propose that these actions typically are perceived by observers as immoral, reducing observers’ identification with and support for social movements, and can even undermine observers’ support for the movement’s cause.

At the same time, past research shows that extreme protest actions typically attract greater media coverage and promote awareness of a movement and its cause, particularly valuable outcomes given that movements face substantial disadvantages in the competition for public attention (Gamson, 1975; Myers &
Caniglia, 2004; Oliver & Myers, 1999; Sobieraj, 2010). Further, some research points to extreme protest actions as an effective means for applying direct pressure on organizations or institutions, compelling them to enact changes in line with the movement’s cause (Biggs & Andrews, 2015). If, as we hypothesize, the same protest actions that prior research finds can be effective for raising awareness and applying institutional pressure are also likely to reduce popular support, it would point to an “activist’s dilemma” challenging movements’ efforts to affect social change. Below we discuss further this class of protest actions and develop our theoretical reasoning for why we expect these behaviors to decrease popular support for social movements. We then juxtapose the hypothesized negative impact of extreme protest actions on public perception with tactical benefits suggested by prior research, highlighting a strategic dilemma faced by activists seeking to affect social change.

Conceptualizing Extreme Protest Actions

Here we examine the effects that protest actions perceived to be harmful to others, highly disruptive, or both have on support for social movements. Common examples of this class of protest actions include destroying property, shutting down highways, and threatening or engaging in physical violence. Note that a critical component of our conceptualization of extreme protest actions is that it is observers’ perceptions of harm and disruption that we hypothesize affects movement identification and support. In other words, the effects of protesters’ actual protest actions on public opinion are strictly mediated by observers’ perceptions of those actions. One consequence of this is that protesters themselves might not view their actions as harmful or highly disruptive, even when observers do. In addition, unreliable or selective media reporting and historical accounts of protests can foster the impression that protests were harmful or highly disruptive even when they were not in the eyes of those present, with the former perceptions being more likely to shape reactions in the general public.

Although in lay discourse the term extreme may be viewed as inherently negative, our conceptualization does not require negative judgment for protest actions to qualify as extreme. While we predict that on average this class of protest actions will lead to negative reactions among observers, negative judgment is not included in our definition of extreme, because that inclusion would render our argument tautological. For example, although observers could perceive a protest group blocking highway traffic to be highly disruptive—and thus extreme, according to our definition—it would be possible for observers to either support or oppose the group using this tactic.

Because our predictions depend on perceived harm and disruption, it is also likely that these perceptions will depend on context. A protest action might be seen as very harmful or disruptive in the contemporary United States, but moderate and unexceptional in the United States in the late 1960s, or Chile in the 1970s, or China in 1911. Similarly, research on the “radical flank effect” (Haines, 2011) suggests that a protest action might seem extreme in one context, reducing support for a movement as a result, but not seem extreme in a context where other activist groups routinely use substantially more extreme tactics. In the studies that follow we use manipulation checks to validate that the actions we intend to be examples of extreme protest actions were in fact perceived as such, because we would not predict these protest actions would erode support for a movement if perception does not align with our definition.

Extremity, Identification, and Movement Support

How does the public respond to extreme protest actions? We argue that extreme protest actions engender negative views of social movements largely because these actions reduce identification with the movement, a major basis of social movement participation and support. The collective action literature emphasizes three primary reasons why individuals support and join social movements: perceived injustice, group efficacy, and shared social identity (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013; Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). A meta-analysis (Van Zomeren et al., 2008) found that, of these three determinants, “social identity processes” were most central to collective action because they lead to mobilization for the cause directly, while also influencing perceptions of injustice and group efficacy (see also Thomas & Louis, 2013; Wright, 2009). For example, research finds that identifying with the activists engaged in a collective action is a stronger predictor of individual mobilization (e.g., attitudinal support, behavioral intentions, and protest attendance) than identifying with a disadvantaged group for which activists may be advocating (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Stürmer & Simon, 2004).

To recruit popular support for their cause, then, social movements are more likely to be effective if they foster feelings of common identity with observers (Klandermans, 2002), and less effective if they impede such feelings. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals separate groups into “we” versus “them,” or ingroups and outgroups, based on levels of identification. Feelings of social identity are linked with individuals’ self-concepts and self-esteem, such that an ingroup’s success positively impacts one’s sense of self. When it comes to social movements, then, the more individuals socially identify with a movement, the more motivated they will be to support that movement and help facilitate its success (Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007; Stürmer & Simon, 2004). By contrast, social movements that create feelings of social distance and separateness in observers will fail to build popular support. Thus, movements that take actions that erode feelings of social identification among observers are likely to lose support, or even be opposed, by observers (see also Stott & Drury, 2000).

Perceived Immorality and Movement Identification

If diminished social identification is likely to erode support for social movements, why do we expect that extreme protest tactics will reduce movement identification in the first place? Here we propose that extreme protest actions reduce observers’ identification with a social movement because observers perceive these protest actions to be immoral. Perceptions of a behavior as immoral depends greatly on how much the behavior violates principles relating to inflicting harm upon others (Gray, Waytz, & Young, 2012; Schein & Gray, 2018). If a behavior is perceived to cause emotional or physical harm, or to impinge significantly on others’ personal freedoms or rights, then observers are likely to perceive the act as immoral (Kohlberg, 1969; Turiel, 1983). Most
observers will view extreme protest actions, such as blocking busy highways, damaging or defacing property, or injuring others as inflicting harm, and thus will judge the behaviors to be immoral.

Perceptions of immorality should in turn lead to strong affective responses felt toward the social movement because perceptions of immorality are closely linked with a host of moral emotional responses (Haidt, 2001, 2003). Most important to the present research are sentiments that lead individuals to feel emotional connection to others, such as feelings of compassion and sympathy. Feelings of emotional connection are fundamental to the development of social identification in that they give rise to feelings of similarity and self-other overlap, and are particularly important for perspective taking and approach-oriented responses toward those in need of support (e.g., Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010; Oveis, Horberg, & Keltner, 2010; Trivers, 1971). Thus, experiencing emotional connection toward members of a social movement should increase social identification with the movement. However, research finds that feelings of emotional connection to others are greatly reduced, even eliminated, when a target individual or group is viewed as immoral (Lerner, 1980; Opotow, 1990; Stellar, Feinberg, & Keltner, 2014). Thus, we expect that because observers will perceive extreme protest actions to be immoral, they will feel low levels of emotional connection with the movement, resulting in observers not identifying with the social movement.

Taken together, the above theorizing leads us to hypothesize that observers of extreme protest actions (compared to observers of moderate protest actions) will feel less support for the protesters and be less willing to join the movement. These effects will be driven by perceptions that extreme protest behaviors are immoral, which will lead observers to feel low levels of emotional connection with the protesters, causing observers to identify less with the movement. Figure 1 presents a diagram summarizing the proposed causal links of our model of how extreme protest actions lead to decreased support for social movements.

In addition, because social movements are strongly associated with the social cause (or causes) they advocate for, the negative effects of extreme protest actions on perceptions of social movements that we hypothesize may also lead to reduced support for the positions the movement supports. For instance, environmental activists physically blocking highway traffic in an effort to draw attention to environmental problems might not only lead to observers supporting the movement less, but also lead observers to care less about environmental protection. It is important, however, to recognize that attitudes and beliefs relating to major social issues, especially those with strong moral underpinnings, are often already well-established and inflexible (Kovacheff, Schwartz, Inbar, & Feinberg, 2018; Krosnick & Petty, 1995; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargs, 2005; cf. Feinberg & Willer, 2013, 2015). Thus, we argue that extreme protest actions can negatively influence observers’ attitudes relating to a movement’s cause, but that when they do, we expect such effects will typically be weaker than the effects of extreme protest actions on movement support.

A Moderating Role of Prior Attitudes and Ideology?

Though we hypothesize extreme protest actions will result in decreased popular support for a social movement, and may even lead to decreased support for the movement’s cause, it is possible that prior attitudes and ideologies could moderate how observers react to extreme protest actions. Indeed, a recent criticism leveled at the collective action literature is that it has insufficiently considered the potential role of individual differences, such as political ideology and system justifying beliefs, in determining what will motivate or deter people from joining a social movement (Jost, Becker, Osborne, & Badaan, 2017; Osborne, Jost, Becker, Badaan, & Sibley, 2019). Strong supporters of a cause, or those for whom the social movement’s political orientation closely align, might not view the protest actions as extreme but instead as a reasonable means to a desired end. For these observers, extreme protest actions might even be seen positively, serving as a rallying cry and resulting in increased support (Kahan, 2013, 2016). This possibility aligns well with persuasion research demonstrating that messages designed to appeal to individuals’ traits or values are often highly persuasive (Feinberg & Willer, 2013, 2015; Hirsh, Kang, & Bodenhausen, 2012). Thus, liberals and conservatives might be more accepting of, perhaps even inspired by, the extreme protest actions used by ideologically similar protesters.

It is also possible that liberals and conservatives might differ in how ingroup-biased their perceptions of extremity are. A number of studies suggest conservatives have stronger epistemic, existential, and relational motives that can lead to motivated perceptions and reasoning in favor of conservative positions (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost & Krockik, 2014; Morisi, Jost, & Singh, 2019; Tullett, Hart, Feinberg, Fettermen, & Gottlieb, 2016). This line of work suggests that conservatives might have less negative views of conservative movements using extreme protest tactics than liberals would show toward liberal movements using the same tactics (Jost & Hunyady, 2018). However, recent research found that acts of incivility by politicians eroded support among observers, including those who viewed the uncivil actor positively prior to the act taking place (Frimer & Skitka, 2018).

![Figure 1](image-url)
Thus, even in the highly partisan political domain, this research found that uncivil behavior by politicians was sufficiently counternormative that it created a relatively uniform aversion among observers. Therefore, an important focus of the present research is to explore whether prior political attitudes and political ideology do or do not moderate observers’ responses to extreme protest actions.

**The Activist’s Dilemma**

At first blush, the negative effects of extreme protest actions on movement support that we hypothesize would seem to imply that social movements should never use these actions. However, past research suggests there can be other strategic reasons for movements to consider these tactics. Among them, extreme protest actions can successfully apply direct social and financial pressure on institutions that have the power to change the status quo (Biggs & Andrews, 2015; Ingram, Yue, & Rao, 2010; King & Soule, 2007; Luders, 2006). Occupying a business might be seen as highly disruptive by the general public, possibly eroding movement support, but nonetheless successfully pressure a business to change its policies.

In addition, extreme protest actions have proven useful in raising awareness about a movement’s cause. Before a social movement can build widespread popular support, it must generate awareness among the general public (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Sobieraj, 2010; Walgrave & Manssens, 2005). Failing to do so may mean the focal issues a movement advocates for go unnoticed or remain minor concerns (Gamson, 2004; Koopmans, 2004). To ensure their grievances are broadcast as widely as possible, movements often seek publicity through media coverage (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012; Sobieraj, 2010), and research finds that media coverage is greater for events that are novel, dramatic, and sensational (Myers & Caniglia, 2004; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001; Wouters, 2013). Not surprisingly, then, many movements engage in extreme protest actions (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Smith, McCarthey, McPhail, & Augustyn, 2001), and this behavior attracts widespread coverage (Amenta, Caren, Olasky, & Stobaugh, 2009; Oliver & Myers, 1999), promoting public awareness of the movement’s central issue.

Taking this into consideration, if our hypotheses about the negative impact of extreme protest actions on garnering popular support are correct, then activists face a challenge: extreme protest actions might benefit the movement in that such behaviors can apply pressure on particular institutions and/or attract attention and media coverage, however, the same actions are likely to also undermine popular support by alienating potential supporters. To the extent these outcomes are important for a movement to achieve its goals, this presents a strategic dilemma we consider in more depth in the General Discussion.

**Extending Previous Research**

Some existing research, mainly from sociology and political science, is consistent with our assertion that extreme protest actions will decrease popular support for social movements. For example, Stephan and Chenoweth (2008) classified resistance campaigns (i.e., nonstate rebellions) occurring around the world from 1900 to 2006 as either violent or nonviolent, finding that the nonviolent resistance campaigns were twice as likely to be successful as violent resistance campaigns. In addition, Wasow (2017) analyzed voting data collected during the Civil Rights Movement from 1960 to 1972, finding that a county’s proximity to violent protest (compared to nonviolent protest) corresponded with lower rates of Whites’ voting for political candidates who supported civil rights, suggesting that nonviolent protests were more effective than violent protests at shifting popular attitudes in favor of the movement. Indeed, Wasow concludes through counterfactual simulations that had there been fewer violent protests, it could have swung the 1968 presidential election in favor of Hubert Humphrey and against Richard Nixon. Complementing this research, recent experimental research manipulated the extent to which a social movement used violent versus nonviolent tactics, finding that participants viewed the group using nonviolent tactics more positively and were more convinced of the illegitimacy of the status quo (Simpson, Willer, & Feinberg, in press; Thomas & Louis, 2014).

This prior research shows in both observational and experimental studies that activists’ use of violence is generally perceived negatively. In our theorizing laid out above we advance a more general account of popular reactions to protest behaviors, proposing a broader category of protest behaviors, including but not limited to acts of violence, that reduce support for social movements. There are a variety of extreme behaviors that are nonviolent in nature (e.g., blocking traffic, vandalism) that past research has not explored but, according to our theorizing, should lead to reduced support. In addition, in the present research we also seek to understand the potential moderating role of existing attitudes and ideologies as well as to explain why extreme protest behaviors elicit negative reactions by exploring the psychological processes driving observers’ reactions to protest behaviors. Understanding potential moderators and underlying mechanisms helps fill important theoretical gaps in the social movements literature and provides novel insights into when and how social movements affect popular support. These insights, in turn, offer practical knowledge for movement actors hoping to influence the general public.

**The Present Research**

We present the results of six experiments exploring the effects of a diverse range of extreme protest actions, and across a wide range of social movements, including movements advocating for progressive and conservative social causes. In all studies, we measured support for the movement by asking how much the protest behaviors influenced observers’ support for the protesters involved and how much the protest behaviors affected observers’ willingness to join the movement at a future event. In addition, in each study, we assessed observers’ support for the movement’s overarching cause, which allowed us to examine the possibility that extreme protest actions might not only negatively influence movement-related attitudes, but also reduce support for the central issues the movement supports.

Further, in all six studies, we tested the mediating role of shared social identity in explaining why extreme protest actions would impair support for the movement, and in Studies 4–6 (all preregistered) we delved deeper into the psychological processes that
explain the negative effects of extreme protest actions on movement support. In these studies, along with examining participants’ feelings of shared social identity with the movement, we assessed participants’ perceptions of the protesters’ behavior as immoral, and the extent to which participants felt emotional connection with the protesters. Doing so allowed us to test our larger process model of how exposure to extreme protest actions impacts observers’ psychology and ultimately results in decreased support for a social movement. Finally, in Studies 2–6, before presenting participants with information about a social movement’s protest behaviors, we measured key individual differences relating to the movement’s cause, including race, political ideology, and preexisting attitudes about the cause. Doing so allowed us to examine the moderating role these individual differences have in determining whether extreme protest actions might mobilize support among some of the population even if it impairs support among most others. Finally, in Study 6, we manipulated both the extremity of the protesters’ behavior and the direction of the protesters’ advocacy (either in support of a liberal or conservative cause), to examine more directly if an asymmetry exists between liberals and conservatives in how they respond to extreme protest actions that align with their political ideology.

Study 1

In Study 1 participants read about a fictional animal rights activist organization called Free the Vulnerable (FTV). The extremity of the movement’s protest behavior was manipulated at three levels: moderate protest, extreme protest, or highly extreme protest conditions. The protesters in the two extreme protest conditions engaged in activities (e.g., breaking into an animal testing facility) modeled after protest activities of real-life social movement activists, with the protesters in the highly extreme protest condition engaging in particularly disruptive and harmful behaviors (e.g., drugging a security guard) compared to the protesters in the extreme protest condition (e.g., sneaking past the security guard). By contrast, in the moderate protest condition, the activists marched peacefully expressing their demands. Including two extreme protest conditions allowed us to explore competing possibilities regarding the extreme protests’ effects on observers’ support for a movement. On the one hand, observers may base their level of support directly on how extreme the protest actions are, and therefore protest extremity would have a linear impact on bystanders’ support. On the other hand, there might be a threshold of extremity beyond which bystanders’ impressions do not get more negative.

After reading their assigned article, participants indicated how much they identified with the movement and reported their support for the movement by indicating how much they supported the protesters, and how willing they were to join the movement. We hypothesized that participants in the two extreme protest conditions would score lower on both of these measures of movement support. In addition, we assessed how much participants supported the movements’ overarching cause (i.e., ending the use of animal testing). However, as described earlier, we were less certain how our experimental manipulation might affect these more general attitudes, and therefore considered it exploratory.

Method

Participants. Three hundred and nine participants (171 men, 138 women) were recruited from the United States via Amazon Mechanical Turk. Without prior research on this hypothesis to use as a guide for selecting the sample size, we chose to collect approximately 100 participants per condition, which we figured would provide sufficient statistical power (i.e., .80) for detecting a small-to-medium effect ($f = .15$ to $.20$). Two hundred and fifty-three participants (82%) reported being White, 23 (7%) reported being Black, eight (3%) reported being Hispanic, 18 (6%) reported being Asian, and seven (2%) reported being “other.” Participant age ranged from 18 to 74 years, with a mean of 35.00 years ($SD = 12.32$).

Procedure. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire and learned that they would read a transcript from a news broadcast and answer questions about it afterward. The transcript described a recent FTV-led protest. In the moderate protest condition, FTV picketed outside a cosmetic company’s building. In the extreme protest condition, FTV activists snuck into the building and freed the animals held inside. In the highly extreme protest condition, the activists drugged the building’s security guard, vandalized the building, and freed the animals held there (see the online supplemental information for full text). In both extreme protest conditions, the activists’ behavior was disruptive and harmful to others, though to a greater extent in the highly extreme protest condition.

After reading their assigned article, participants indicated how extreme they perceived the behavior of members of the social movement to be (“How extreme do you find the protesters’ behavior to be?”) and how much they socially identified with members of the movement (“How similar do you feel to these activists?”), before completing three different measures of support for the movement: support protesters (“How much do you support the activists described in the news report?”), join movement (“How willing or unwilling would you be to join this group as a member?”), and support cause (“Overall, how much do you support FTV’s cause (ending the use of animal testing?)”). Participants responded to each of these items on a 5-point scale (see Supporting Information for details).

1 Because social identification is typically thought of as a combination of feeling similarity and overlapping identity with others, in Studies 3–6 we improve on our operationalization of social identification using a two-item measure that includes both the item used here and a second item asking about felt identification. Importantly in these studies the correlations between the two items are $r = .92$, .91, .94, and .96, suggesting that participants conceptualize the one-item measure used here in a similar way as felt identification.

2 We examine effects for these three dependent measures independently rather than in a composite because we view support for a movement’s activists, intent to join a movement, and support for the movement’s central issue to be conceptually distinct. They also reflect different levels of motivation and effort, and thus could show divergent effects. For example, one might be persuaded to support a movement’s activists or its cause but be unwilling to sacrifice time and effort by attending meetings and/or protest events. In addition, extreme protest actions might negatively influence attitudes about the activists and deter people from joining a movement, but have no impact on attitudes about the movement’s cause, if the latter attitudes are already strongly held. For analyses examining a composite of the three items in all studies, see the online supplemental material.
As described above, we were unsure whether condition extremity would have a linear influence on our dependent measures, or if there would be a threshold effect, such that observers’ reactions to the highly extreme protest condition and the extreme protest condition would have similarly negative reactions. We determined a priori that if the differences between the two extreme protest conditions were not significant, we would collapse them together into a single extreme condition in our analyses.

**Results**

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and results of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) and pairwise tests examining the impact of experimental condition.

**Manipulation check.** As shown in the table, the impact of condition on perceived extremity yielded a significant omnibus effect, such that participants in both the extreme protest and the highly extreme protest conditions viewed the protesters’ behavior as more extreme than did participants in the moderate protest condition. In addition, participants in the highly extreme protest condition viewed the protesters’ behavior as being more extreme than participants in the extreme protest condition. These results suggest that the manipulation successfully affected perceptions of how extreme the protesters’ tactics were.

**Main effects.** Looking at the effects of condition on social identification and each of our three dependent variables, we found nonsignificant differences between the extreme and highly extreme protest conditions. Thus, whereas protesters in the extreme protest condition were viewed as significantly less extreme than those in the highly extreme protest condition, levels of identification and support for the movement and its cause did not differ across these two conditions. This result is in line with research arguing that the perceived inappropriateness of many acts does not occur linearly, but as a step function, where behaviors that cross a given threshold are categorized in a similarly negative manner (Alexander, 2008). With this in mind, we collapsed the extreme and highly extreme protest conditions together and treated them as one condition, the combined extreme protest condition. As shown in Table 1, compared to participants in the moderate protest condition, participants in the combined extreme protest condition identified less with the movement, supported the protesters less, were less likely to join the movement, and were less supportive of the movements overarching cause.

**Mediation.** Bootstrap mediation analyses (5000 resamples) examining whether our experimental condition (moderate protest condition = 0; combined extreme protest condition = 1) affected participants’ scores on the three dependent variables through participants’ feelings of shared social identity indicated that 0 was not in the 95% confidence interval (CI) for each dependent variable, support protesters: CI [-.53, -.01], join movement: CI [.47, .03], support cause: CI [.44, .01]. This result, therefore, suggests that participants in the Combined Extreme Condition were reluctant to support the FTV movement, at least in part, because they felt less social identification with it (see Figure 2 for mediation diagrams).

In all, the results of Study 1 support our hypothesis that extreme protest actions negatively affect popular support for movements. In line with our predictions, participants in the two extreme protest conditions expressed less support for the protesters themselves and also indicated less willingness to join the movement. We also found evidence that the extreme protests led to participants feeling lower levels of support for the movement’s cause—that is, ending the use of animal testing. Further, feeling less social identification with the movement partially mediated each of these effects on movement support.

**Study 2**

In Study 2, participants read an excerpt from a published news article regarding a protest march by the social movement organization Black Lives Matter (BLM) occurring in Minnesota. BLM is a movement started in 2012 “working for the validity of Black life” (Black Lives Matter, 2016). All participants read the same news article (Ross, 2015) except for one small difference; participants assigned to the extreme protest condition read the article in its published form which described BLM protesters chanting rhetorical apparently encouraging violence against police officers. Participants in the moderate protest condition read an edited version in which protesters chanted antiracist slogans based on chants reported in news accounts of other BLM protests. Participants then completed measures of identification with and support for the movement.

In addition, we explored the potential moderating role of prior attitudes and ideology in how observers respond to extreme protest actions. Along these lines, the BLM movement may be uniquely persuasive to African American participants since it fights for African American protection and rights. Thus, African Americans might perceive and respond to extreme protest actions more favorably than non-African Americans. To test this possibility, we oversampled this segment of the American population to test whether participant race might interact with the experimental manipulation in predicting perceptions of the protesters and support for the movement. Relatedly, liberals are typically more sympathetic to the BLM movement and its cause than are conservatives (Easley, 2017; Horowitz & Livingston, 2016), and, as a result, extreme protest actions might impact conservatives more nega-

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3 To help ensure the differences we found across conditions in all six studies were due to differences in perceived extremity, we tested ratings of perceived extremity as a mediator of the relationship between experimental condition and each dependent variable in all studies. Perceived extremity fully mediated the relationship in each analysis, suggesting that the effects we found were due to our manipulation of perceived extremity and likely not other potential differences across conditions. For details see Supplemental Table S2 in the online supplemental material.

4 Illegal behaviors, such as drugging a security guard, may trigger different psychological reactions than other behaviors that are harmful and/or disruptive but (for the most part) legal. It is unlikely, however, that the effects we found in Study 1 were due to the illegality of the behavior since we only included the “drugging” component in the highly extreme protest condition and not in the extreme protest condition, yet we still found significant differences between the moderate protest condition and the extreme protest condition on support protesters and support cause, as well as a marginally significant difference for join movement. We also did not find significant differences between the highly extreme protest condition and the extreme protest condition, further suggesting that there was not something specific to the protesters drugging the security guard that drove the effects (see Table 1).

5 In a pilot study (N = 110), we presented participants with either the extreme or moderate protest conditions from this study and found they perceived the extreme protests to be significantly more harmful, r(108) = 3.45, p = .001, disruptive, r(108) = 4.35, p < .001, and extreme, r(108) = 3.33, p = .001.
tively than liberals. Thus, in Study 2, we also examined whether participants’ political ideology interacted with experimental condition.

Method

Participants. Three hundred and ninety participants (176 male, 214 female) were recruited from the United States on Amazon Mechanical Turk. One hundred and fifty-five participants (40%) reported being White, 203 (52%) reported being Black, nine (2%) reported being Hispanic, 19 (5%) reported being Asian, three (1%) reported being “other,” and one did not indicate an ethnicity. Participant age ranged from 18 to 75 years, with a mean of 35.92 years (SD = 11.78). As in Study 1, we aimed to collect at least 100 participants per condition, but ended up with almost twice that because of the complexities involved in oversampling African American participants.

Procedure. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire, which included a measure of political ideology, asking participants “In general would you consider yourself a liberal or conservative?” to which participants responded using a scale ranging from 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative). The mean score was 3.21 (SD = 1.52). Then participants read a news article about a protest march that BLM members engaged in to protest police violence against Blacks in Minnesota. In the extreme protest condition, participants were presented with the exact wording of an excerpt from an article published online after the event (Ross, 2015; see also “Pigs in a Blanket’ Chant,” 2015) that described protesters chanting “Pigs in a blanket, fry ‘em like bacon,” in reference to police officers, a chant that could be viewed as a call for violence against police officers. Participants in the moderate protest condition read an edited version of the same article in which protesters instead chanted “Black Lives Matter” (see the online supplemental material for full text). We used an actual news article to ensure high external validity. To reduce the risk of experimental confounds and maximize internal validity, we sought to make a very minimal experimental manipulation, systematically varying how extreme the content of protesters’ reported chants were and nothing else. After reading the article, participants answered the same series of questions as those used in Study 1 modified so that they asked about the BLM protest movement (see the online supplemental material).

Results

Manipulation check. An independent means t test indicated that participants in the extreme protest condition viewed the protesters as more extreme, M = 3.60, SD = 1.01, than did participants in the moderate protest condition, M = 3.17, SD = .88, t(388) = 4.44, p < .001, d = .47, suggesting that the manipulation successfully affected perceptions of how extreme the protesters’ tactics were.

Main effects. Independent means t test found that participants in the extreme protest condition indicated significantly less with the movement, M = 2.60, SD = 1.45, than participants in the moderate protest condition, M = 2.94, SD = 1.47, t(387) = 2.33, p = .021, d = .23. Likewise, participants in the extreme protest condition indicated significantly less support for the protesters, M = 2.87, SD = 1.44, than those in the moderate protest condition, M = 3.49, SD = 1.35, t(388) = 4.36, p < .001, d = .44. Further, participants in the extreme protest condition were significantly less willing to join the movement, M = 2.09, SD = 1.32, than participants in the moderate protest condition, M = 2.51, SD = 1.47, t(388) = 2.99, p = .003, d = .30. However, when it came to supporting the movement’s larger cause (i.e., combatting racism and discrimination toward Black people), there was no significant difference between the extreme protest condition, M = 3.53, SD = 1.36, and the moderate protest condition, M = 3.71, SD = 1.35, t(388) = 1.31, p = .192, d = .13.

Mediation. Bootstrap analyses (5,000 resamples) testing the mediating role of shared social identity in explaining the relationship between experimental condition (moderate protest condition = 0; extreme protest condition = 1) and each of the dependent variables found that 0 was not in the 95% CI for neither support protesters [−.42, −.05] nor join movement [−.43, −.05]. These mediation analyses confirm that the decrease in shared social identity that participants in the extreme protest condition felt helped explain why participants in this condition also indicated less support for the movement (see Figure 3). In addition, we found that 0 was not in the 95% CI for support cause [−.40, −.03], though it should be noted that although we found this indirect effect, the main effect of our experimental manipulation did not significantly predict support cause.

Moderation by race. Multiple regression analyses examining the potential moderating role of participant race (African Ameri-
A

Social Identification

Protest Condition
(0 = Moderate, 1 = Combined Extreme)

Support Protesters

b = .32*, SE = .15

b = .82***, SE = .04

b = .42**, SE = .10

b = .68***, SE = .16

B

Social Identification

Protest Condition
(0 = Moderate, 1 = Combined Extreme)

Join Movement

b = .32*, SE = .15

b = .76**, SE = .04

b = .07, SE = .10

(b = .32**, SE = .15)

C

Social Identification

Protest Condition
(0 = Moderate, 1 = Combined Extreme)

Support Cause

b = .32*, SE = .15

b = .70***, SE = .04

b = .17, SE = .12

(b = .40***, SE = .16)

Figure 2. Depiction of the mediating role of social identification in explaining the effect of extreme protest actions on support for the protesters (A), willingness to join the movement (B), and support for the movement’s cause (C). * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

can = 1, not African American = 0) on experimental condition’s (Moderate Protest condition = 0; Extreme Protest condition = 1) influence in predicting how extreme participants viewed the protesters found a main effect of race, \( b = -.52, SE = .13, p < .001 \); African Americans perceived the protesters as less extreme, \( M = 3.08, SD = .91 \), than non-African American participants did, \( M = 3.72, SD = .92 \). However, this effect did not interact with condition, \( b = -.24, SE = .18, p = .185 \). Likewise, when looking at differences in our three dependent variables, we found a main effect of race for each variable, \( b_s > .70, SE_s < .20, ps < .001 \), such that African Americans demonstrated more support than non-African Americans, but we found no interaction between condition and participant race, \( \text{ibis} < .20, SE_s > .25, ps > .461 \). These results suggest that both African Americans and non-African Americans perceived the protesters as more extreme and felt less support for them in the extreme protest condition.7

Moderation by political ideology. Multiple regression analyses examining the moderating role of political ideology (mean centered) on experimental condition’s (moderate protest condition = 0; extreme protest condition = 1) influence in predicting how extreme participants viewed the protesters to be yielded a significant main effect of ideology, \( b = .15, SE = .03, p < .001 \), indicating that more conservative participants viewed the protesters as more extreme. However, there was no significant interaction with condition, \( b = .04, SE = .06, p = .550 \). In addition, when looking at our three dependent variables, we again found main effects of political ideology, \( b_s < -.33, SE_s < .05, ps < .001 \), such that more conservative participants scored lower on support for protesters, join movement, and support cause, but there were no significant interactions between condition and political ideology, \( b_s < -.16, SE_s < .09, ps > .07 \). Thus, as with participant race, these results suggest that participants, regardless of their political ideology, reacted negatively to extreme protests.8

Overall, the results of Study 2 provided further support for our argument that extreme protest actions will lead to less popular support for a movement. Participants in the extreme condition scored significantly lower than participants in the moderate condition in terms of support for the BLM protesters and willingness to join the BLM movement—effects that were partially mediated by feelings of less social identification. Interestingly, we did not find that the experimental manipulation significantly impacted participants’ scores on support cause, perhaps because attitudes relating to racial discrimination were so strongly held that our manipulation had little or no effect. Further, we found that neither participant political ideology nor participant race moderated the effect of condition on the dependent variables. Such null results, therefore, indicate that extreme protest actions negatively affect those already holding favorable attitudes toward the BLM movement in the same way as those initially holding less favorable attitudes.

Study 3

We next tested our hypotheses about the impact of extreme protest behavior by assessing participants’ reactions to videos of social movement activists protesting the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump, once again manipulating the extremity of the protesters’ actions. Along with gauging participants’ level of identification with and support for the movement, we also included a repeated-measures component where participants indicated their support for Trump as a candidate prior to any experimental ma-

**Figure 2.** Depiction of the mediating role of social identification in explaining the effect of extreme protest actions on support for the protesters (A), willingness to join the movement (B), and support for the movement’s cause (C).

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7 Analyzing just African American and White participants in the sample, we find parallel results: a main effect of condition for support protesters and join movement (ps ≤ .013), but a non-significant effect for support cause (p = .266). In addition, we find no significant interactions by race (all ps > .096).

8 The marginally significant effect occurs for join movement (b = .15, SE = .09, p = .077), and simple slope analyses found that the effect of condition on liberals was b = -.73, SE = .19, p = .0001, and conservatives was b = -.26, SE = .19, p = .161, suggesting that liberals were more negatively affected by the extreme protests, demonstrating the larger decrease in movement support due to the extreme protesters (see Supplemental Figure S1 in the online supplemental material). However, it is also possible that the conservative participants’ scores on join movement were already so low that there was little room for them to score much lower (i.e., floor effect).
nipation, and then assessed their levels of support following the manipulation.

In addition, in Study 3, we further explored the possibility that prior attitudes and ideology moderate observers’ reactions to extreme protest actions, examining whether participants’ premanipulation levels of support for Trump, as well as their political ideology, would interact with experimental condition. Prior attitudes and ideology might shape how individuals judge the extreme anti-Trump protests; those already supporting this cause might view these protest behaviors as less extreme and respond to them with increased support for the movement. Although, in Study 2, we did not find evidence of moderation by prior attitudes and ideology, these results may have been due to participants being too unfamiliar with BLM for prior attitudes or ideology to have had an impact. Because presidential elections monopolize popular attention in the United States, it would be unlikely that most participants would be unaware of Donald Trump’s candidacy and the controversial stances he championed. In addition, considering the politically polarized reaction the American public had toward Donald Trump, this particular context provided a well-suited test of the moderating role existing attitudes and ideology might play.

Method

Participants. Three hundred and twenty-five participants (178 male, 146 female, one did not indicate) were recruited from the United States on Amazon Mechanical Turk. Two hundred and fifty-eight participants (79%) reported being White, 16 (5%) reported being Black, 19 (6%) reported being Hispanic, 21 (7%) reported being Asian, eight (3%) reported being “other,” and three did not indicate an ethnicity. Participant age ranged from 18 to 75 years, with a mean of 35.81 years (SD = 11.94). In line with Studies 1–2, we aimed to collect approximately 100 participants per condition.

Procedure. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire, which included the same measure of political ideology as the one used in Study 2 (M = 3.39, SD = 1.72). They also indicated their level of support for each of the five 2016 presidential candidates actively running for the Republican and Democratic nominations at the time of the study (Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, Ted Cruz, Bernie Sanders, and John Kasich) on 5-point scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Participants learned that they would be shown a video clip and asked about their impressions of it. In the control condition, participants watched a 90-s video of men building a deck, which pretesting indicated elicited minimal emotional reaction. In the moderate protest condition, participants watched a video of a news report covering protesters outside of a Trump campaign event holding up signs and chanting at Trump supporters entering the event. Although loud, the protesters did not act in an aggressive or confrontational manner and the reporter in the video described the protests as “heated” but “civil." Participants in the extreme protest condition watched news coverage of anti-Trump protesters gathering in the middle of a busy street, physically blocking carloads of Trump supporters from reaching a Trump campaign event and causing a traffic jam. The reporter covering the event describes the protesters as creating “a potentially dangerous situation” because their “actions are causing motorists to drive into oncoming traffic.”

Participants in the moderate and extreme protest conditions then answered the same series of questions as those administered in Studies 1–2 with slightly altered wording to fit the present study (see the online supplemental material), as well as a second identification item (“How much do you identify with these activists?”) added to create a more reliable social identification composite (α = .96). Finally, participants in all three conditions completed a time-2 measure of support for the five 2016 presidential candidates.

Results

Manipulation check. An independent means t test indicated that participants rated the protesters in the extreme protest condition to be more extreme, M = 3.41, SD = 1.12, than the protesters

9 We did not ask participants in the control condition to indicate their level of support for the social movement or their social identification with the movement because the video they watched did not reference a movement, and thus there was no movement to rate.
in the moderate protest condition, $M = 2.19, SD = 1.15, t(213) = 7.93, p < .001, d = 1.07$.

**Main effects.** $t$ Tests also found participants in the extreme protest condition felt significantly less social identification with the movement, $M = 2.16, SD = 1.33$, than participants in the moderate protest condition, $M = 2.54, SD = 1.29, t(213) = 2.17, p = .031, d = .29$. Further, participants in the extreme protest condition supported the protesters less, $M = 2.06, SD = 1.37$, than participants in the Moderate Protest condition, $M = 2.91, SD = 1.44, t(213) = 4.40, p < .001, d = .60$, indicated that they were less willing to join the movement, $M_{extreme} = 1.66, SD_{extreme} = 1.18, M_{moderate} = 2.07, SD_{moderate} = 1.26, t(213) = 2.44, p = .016, d = .33$, and indicated less support for the movement’s overarching cause, $M_{extreme} = 2.41, SD_{extreme} = 1.42, M_{moderate} = 3.01, SD_{moderate} = 1.46, t(212) = 3.06, p = .003, d = .42$.

**Mediation.** Bootstrap mediation analyses (5,000 resamples; moderate protest condition = 0; extreme protest condition = 1) found that feeling less social identification with the movement helped explain the relationship between exposure to the Extreme protest condition and lower scores on support protesters, 95% CI $[-.66, -.03]$, join movement, 95% CI $[-.49, -.04]$, and support cause, 95% CI $[-.69, -.04]$ (see Figure 4).

**Moderation by prior attitudes.** We used a multiple regression approach to test whether prior attitudes toward Trump’s presidential candidacy (mean centered) moderated the effect of experimental condition (moderate protest condition = 0; extreme protest condition = 1) on perceived extremity of the protests and support for the movement. We found a main effect of prior Trump support on perceived extremity, $b = .31, SE = .05, p < .001$; the more individuals initially supported Trump the more they viewed the protesters as extreme, but there was no interaction with condition, $b = .02, SE = .11, p = .831$. When looking at each of our measures of movement support, we again found significant main effects of prior Trump support, $b < -.20, SEs < .07, ps < .001$, such that the more individuals supported Trump the less they supported the movement, but again there were no significant interactions, $bs < .07, SEs > .12, ps > .595$.

**Moderation by political ideology.** Using a multiple regression approach, looking at the role of political ideology (mean centered), we found a main effect of ideology on perceived extremity, $b = .26, SE = .04, p < .001$, with conservatives finding the protests significantly more extreme, and we found main effects of ideology, $b < -.21, SEs > .04, ps < .001$, in predicting each of our measures of support, indicating that the more liberal participants were, the more they supported the movement and its cause. However, we did not find any interaction effects $bs < .09, SEs > .09, ps > .375$. Altogether, these null interaction results indicate that regardless of preexisting attitudes regarding Trump’s candidacy, or how liberal or conservative individuals were, participants in the extreme protest condition viewed the protesters as more extreme and reported less support for the movement and its cause.

**Within-person effects.** To explore whether support for Trump as a candidate was affected by the experimental manipulation, we conducted a mixed-design ANOVA, entering Trump support at Time 1 and Time 2 as the within-subjects factor, and condition (control, moderate protest, extreme protest) as the between-subjects factor. This analysis yielded a nonsignificant effect of Time, $F(1, 315) = 2.35, p = .127, \eta_{p}^2 = .007$, but a significant Time * Condition interaction, $F(2, 315) = 3.30, p = .038, \eta_{p}^2 = .021$ (see Figure 5), suggesting the change in support for Trump from Time 1 to Time 2 was different due to experimental condition. An examination of the changes in Trump support in each condition showed a nonsignificant change for both control (Time 1 $M = 1.93, SD = 1.29$; Time 2 $M = 1.93, SD = 1.29$) and moderate protest conditions (Time 1 $M = 2.04, SD = 1.46$; Time 2 $M = 2.03, SD = 1.50$), $Fs < .067, ps > .797$, but a significant increase in support in the extreme protest condition (Time 1 $M = 1.76, SD = 1.25$; Time 2 $M = 1.85, SD = 1.31$), $F(1, 108) = 5.80, p = .018, \eta_{p}^2 = .051$. In other words, participants presented with extreme anti-Trump protesters responded by reporting greater support for Trump.
Overall, the results of Study 3 build on the findings of both Studies 1 and 2, showing that extreme protest actions impair popular support for a movement and its cause. We found this decrease in support for all three of our dependent measures. Importantly, via the repeated-measures design of Study 3, we found that protest extremity had a direct impact on participants’ attitudes about Donald Trump’s candidacy, such that those in the extreme protest condition demonstrated increased favorability toward his candidacy in response to viewing protesters engaging in highly disruptive protest behaviors. Further, even though the sample was polarized regarding Trump, we found no evidence that the effect of experimental condition was moderated by prior attitudes about him, or participants’ level of liberalism-conservatism, indicating that extreme protest actions had a negative effect on observers’ attitudes in general.

Study 4

Studies 1–3 demonstrated that extreme protest actions (relative to more moderate protest behaviors) can reduce popular support for a movement. We found that this effect was partially mediated by observers of the extreme protest actions feeling less socially identified with the movement, which fits with past research highlighting social identity as a central predictor of collective action and mobilization (e.g., van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). In Studies 4–6, we explored in more depth the psychological processes through which extreme protest actions reduce individuals’ social identification with a movement. In particular, we hypothesized that extreme protest actions, because they are harmful and/or highly disruptive, will be perceived as immoral. Because perceptions of immorality are closely linked with strong affective responses, we expect perceptions of immorality to reduce observers’ feelings of emotional connection with the social movement, and this diminished emotional connection will lead to lower levels of social identification with, and support for, the social movement. In all, we predict a five-step serial mediation that explains why extreme protest actions ultimately reduce popular support for a social movement (see Figure 1).

In Study 4, we conducted a test of this serial mediation hypothesis. We used the news article transcripts from Study 1 as stimuli, but added additional questions assessing participants’ perceptions that the protesters acted immorally as well as a measure of how much emotional connection participants felt for the protesters. In addition, it is possible that participants in Studies 1–3, when responding to our one-item manipulation check of perceived extremity, interpreted “extreme” differently than how we have defined it. Thus, to ensure participants’ perceptions concur with the dimensions of our definition of extreme protest actions, in Study 4 we elaborated our manipulation check to include items assessing how much participants perceived the protesters’ behavior to be disruptive and harmful.

Method

Preregistration. We preregistered our sampling plan, exclusion criteria, procedure, composites, hypotheses, analyses, and serial mediation models at osf.io/g6tdx.

Participants. In line with our sampling plan, we recruited six hundred and sixty participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk, which we calculated would yield a final N of approximately 600 participants after removing excluded participants. A sample size of 600, we calculated, would provide enough statistical power for us to find a significant serial mediation if one exists at .80 power. We excluded participants based on three predetermined criteria: multiple participation attempts, failed attention checks, and completion time. After excluding participants based on these criteria, 613 participants (287 male, 326 female) remained. Four hundred and ninety-one participants (80%) reported being White, 30 (5%) reported being Black, 38 (6%) reported being Hispanic, 41 (7%) reported being Asian, 13 (2%) reported being “other.” Participant age ranged from 18 to 77 years, with a mean of 38.67 years (SD = 12.91).

Procedure. The procedure for Study 4 was the same as Study 1’s procedure except for the following changes. In Study 4 we collected participants’ political ideology to examine the possibility of this variable moderating the effect of our experimental condition on participants’ support for the movement. Study 4 used only the moderate protest condition and the highly extreme protest condition from Study 1. However, for the sake of simplicity, in Study 4 we label them the moderate protest condition and the extreme protest condition. After participants read their assigned article, they were asked to briefly summarize what the article was about, which was then used as a means for excluding unreliable participants (see above). Further, in addition to indicating how

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10 First, if more than one participant had the same IP address, we only used data from the participant who completed the study first. Second, after reading their assigned transcript (see below in text), participants were instructed to provide a brief summary of what they had read. We had three coders go through each of these summaries and identify participants who showed no evidence of having read and comprehended the transcript. If two or more of the coders flagged a participant, we excluded that participant’s data from analyses. Finally, we excluded any participants who completed the entire study in under two minutes as this would suggest that they did not carefully read the transcript and/or the questionnaires provided.
extreme participants viewed the behavior of the social movement to be, they also indicated the extent to which they viewed the movement’s behavior as disruptive (“How disruptive do you find the protesters’ behavior to be?”) as well as the extent to which they viewed its behavior as harmful (“How harmful do you find the protesters’ behavior to be?”). We chose to include these additional measures to validate that participants’ notions of “extreme protest actions” were in line with our definition. We also included an item assessing perceived immorality of the protesters’ behavior (“How immoral do you find the protesters’ behavior?”) and a two-item measure of emotional connection, which we assessed by asking participants about their feelings of compassion and sympathy for the protesters: “When thinking about the protesters, how much do you feel each of the following emotions?” followed by “compassion” and “sympathy” (α = .94). Finally, as in Study 3, we measured social identification with the movement with a two-item measure that asked about similarity and identification (α = .95). Participants completed all items using a 5-point response scale (see the online supplemental material for more details).

Results

Table 2 provides the means, standard deviations, and correlations for key variables measured in Study 4.

**Manipulation check.** An independent means t-test found that participants in the extreme protest condition perceived the protesters as significantly more extreme, M = 4.11, SD = 1.05, than the participants in the moderate protest condition, M = 2.44, SD = 1.13, t(611) = 18.92, p < .001, d = 1.53. In addition, participants’ perceptions of how extreme they viewed the protesters’ behavior to be was strongly correlated with both how disruptive, r = .78, p < .001, and how harmful, r = .81, p < .001 they perceived the protesters’ behavior to be, thereby providing strong support that participants’ comprehension of “extreme” was in line with our definition. In addition, we created a composite of the disruptive and harmful items (α = .84) and found that participants in the extreme protest condition scored significantly higher on this composite, M = 4.04, SD = .98, than the participants in the moderate protest condition, M = 2.44, SD = .98, t(611) = 20.22, p < .001, d = 1.64.

**Main effects.** In line with our predetermined analysis plan, we next conducted a series of t-tests to examine the effect of our experimental manipulation on each of our proposed mediators and dependent measures. Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, and significance test result for these analyses. In line with our hypotheses, participants in the extreme protest condition perceived the protesters’ behavior to be more immoral, felt less emotional connection with them, identified with them less, supported them less, and were less willing to join the movement. In addition, we also explored the possibility that participants would support the movement’s cause less in the extreme protest condition. Though this was not a preregistered prediction, we found that extreme protest did lead to diminished support for the protester cause, replicating an effect found in Studies 1 and 3, but not Study 2.

**Moderation by political ideology.** Multiple regression analyses examining the moderating role of political ideology (mean centered) on experimental condition (moderate protest condition = 0; extreme protest condition = 1) in predicting perceptions of how extreme participants viewed the protesters to be yielded a strong effect of political ideology, b = .15, SE = .03, p < .001, but there was no significant interaction between experimental condition and political ideology, b = .01, SE = .05, p = .872. Likewise, for the disruptive-harmful composite, there was a main effect of political ideology, b = .13, SE = .02, p < .001, but no interaction, b = .01, SE = .05, p = .830. These null interactions indicate that the effect of experimental condition on perceptions of extremity was the same for liberals and conservatives.

For support protesters we found a main effect of political ideology, b = −.23, SE = .03, p < .001, but there was not a

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Moderate protest condition M (SD)</th>
<th>Extreme protest condition M (SD)</th>
<th>t-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immorality</td>
<td>1.64 (.96)</td>
<td>3.40 (1.33)</td>
<td>18.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional connection</td>
<td>3.45 (1.27)</td>
<td>2.47 (1.35)</td>
<td>9.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social identification</td>
<td>2.77 (1.27)</td>
<td>2.07 (1.16)</td>
<td>7.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support protesters</td>
<td>3.27 (1.32)</td>
<td>2.20 (1.28)</td>
<td>10.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Join movement</td>
<td>3.29 (1.41)</td>
<td>1.66 (1.14)</td>
<td>7.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support cause</td>
<td>3.69 (1.28)</td>
<td>3.39 (1.38)</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All correlations are significant at p < .001.
significant interaction, $b = -.03, SE = .06, p = .655$, and for join movement there was a main effect of political ideology, $b = -.18, SE = .03, p < .001$, but no interaction, $b = .0001, SE = .06, p = .990$. However, for support cause we not only found a main effect of political ideology, $b = -.24, SE = .03, p < .001$, but also a significant interaction, $b = -.15, SE = .06, p = .015$. Simple slope analyses revealed that for more liberal participants ($-1 \ SD$), the experimental condition was not a significant predictor of how much they support the cause, $b = -.004, SE = .14, p = .979$, whereas it did have a significant effect on the more conservative participants ($+1 \ SD$), $b = -.50, SE = .14, p < .001$ (see Supplemental Figure S2 in the online supplemental material). These results therefore suggest that although both liberals and conservatives were equally negatively impacted by the extreme protest actions in terms of how much they supported the protesters and how much they would be willing to join the movement, when it came to attitudes about supporting the movement’s cause, the type of protest behavior only had a negative impact on conservatives.

**Serial mediation.** We conducted a series of serial mediation analyses to test our hypotheses about the mechanisms driving the reduced support for protesters who have engaged in extreme protest actions. Using Model 6 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2012), we entered experimental condition (moderate protest condition = 0; extreme protest condition = 1) as the independent variable, perceived immorality as the first mechanism, felt emotional connection as the second, social identification as the third, and support prophets and join movement as separate dependent variables. In line with our predictions the 95% CI for the bootstrap analysis (5,000 resamples) for the five-step serial mediation path predicting support prophets did not include 0 (indirect effect = -.34, $SE = .05$, lower level [LL] = -.44, upper level [UL] = -.26), likewise the serial mediation predicting join movement did not include 0 (indirect effect = -.56, $SE = .07$, LL = -.70, UL = -.44). In addition, we also conducted an exploratory examination of this 5-step serial mediation in predicting participants’ support for the cause. This analysis also yielded an indirect effect that did not include 0 in the 95% CI (indirect effect = -.27, $SE = .05$, LL = -.37, UL = -.18; see Figure 6 for full path diagrams for the three dependent variables). Thus, for each dependent variable, we found extreme protest actions led observers to view the protesters’ behavior as more immoral, which predicted them feeling less emotional connection with the protesters, and in turn, feeling less social identification with them, ultimately leading to less support for the protesters, less willingness to join the movement, and less support for the protesters’ cause. However, it is important to note that although we found strong support for the serial mediation, some of the mediated relationships in our model remained significant. For instance, the effect of perceived immorality on our measures of support for the movement and its cause remained significant when both emotional connection and social identification were entered. This result may indicate that other psychological processes link the perceived immorality of extreme protest behaviors with support for the movement. Likewise, the association between emotional connection and our dependent measures remained significant when social identification is included, suggesting that feelings of emotional connection could result in support for a movement and its cause via psychological processes besides social identification.

The results of Study 4 conceptually replicate and extend the findings from Studies 1–3. Once again we found clear evidence indicating that extreme protest actions will decrease support for a movement and its cause. Our results also provide a deeper understanding of the social psychological processes that occur in response to observing extreme protest actions. Specifically, we found support for our hypothesized serial mediation, demonstrating that extreme protest actions lead observers to view the protesters’ behavior as immoral, which leads to lower levels of emotional connection, resulting in decreased feelings of social identification, and ultimately less support for the movement and its cause. In addition, as shown in Figure 6C, the impact of extreme protest actions on support for the cause becomes positive when the three psychological mechanisms are entered into the regression. This suggests that these mechanisms may be suppressing an additional mechanism resulting from extreme protest actions that positively impacts attitudes toward the cause. We discuss this in more depth in the General Discussion.

**Study 5**

In Studies 1–4 we found clear evidence indicating that extreme protest actions have a negative impact on observers’ support for a social movement. We also found support for our hypothesized mechanisms underlying this effect. We replicated our findings across various types of extreme protest actions and across completely different social movements. However, one shortcoming of this research is that all the movements we have explored thus far are associated with liberal or progressive causes. Although we did not find evidence of moderation by political ideology in Studies 2–4, there is still a possibility that the effects of extreme protest actions in support of a more conservative cause might have different psychological effects on observers. Therefore, to make more general claims about the impact of extreme protest actions on observers, it is important to also test the effects of such behavior conducted by protesters fighting for a more conservative cause.

In Study 5, we explore whether a movement employing extreme protest actions in support of a conservative cause—specifically making abortion illegal in the United States—would lead to similar results as those we found in Studies 1–4. As with these other studies, we randomly assigned participants to either a moderate protest condition or an extreme protest condition, with those in the moderate protest condition reading about anti-abortion activists chanting and protesting outside of an abortion clinic, and those in the extreme condition reading about anti-abortion activists blocking the entrance to the clinic and “bringing the work of the center to a halt.” We hypothesized that participants in this study would respond in the same manner as they did in Studies 1–4. Specifically, we expected that participants in the extreme condition would indicate significantly less support, and this would be driven by the same psychological processes as in Study 4.

11 Because more participants reported being liberal than conservative, we also used the Johnson-Neyman Method to calculate the region of significance, finding that the effect of condition had a significant impact on support cause for political ideology scores of 3.28 and above.

12 See Supplemental Table S3 in the online supplemental material for additional tests examining alternative orders of the variables in the serial mediations.
Method

Preregistration. We preregistered our sampling plan, exclusion criteria, procedure, composites, hypotheses, analyses, and serial mediation models at osf.io/d7hgq.

Participants. In line with our sampling plan, we recruited six hundred and sixty participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk and used the same three predetermined criteria for excluding participants’ data from analyses as we used in Study 4. After exclusions, 591 participants (295 male, 296 female) remained. Four hundred and seventy-three participants (80%) reported being White, 47 (8%) reported being Black, 24 (4%) reported being Hispanic, 36 (6%) reported being Asian, 11 (2%) reported being “other.” Par-
Results

Table 4 provides the means, standard deviations, and correlations for key variables measured in Study 5.

Manipulation check. An independent means t test found that participants in the extreme protest condition rated the protesters as significantly more extreme, M = 3.60, SD = 1.16, than the participants in the moderate protest condition, M = 2.08, SD = 1.16, t(589) = 16.02, p < .001, d = 1.32. Further, participants’ perceptions of how extreme the protesters were strongly correlated with how disruptive, r = .73, p < .001, and harmful they perceived the protesters’ actions to be, r = .71, p < .001, indicating that participants’ understanding of “extreme” was closely aligned to our definition. In addition, participants in the extreme protest condition scored significantly higher on a composite of disruptive and harmful, M = 4.03, SD = .97, than participants in the moderate protest condition, M = 2.36, SD = 1.04, t(589) = 20.22, p < .001, d = 1.67.

Main effects. Following our predetermined plan of analysis, we conducted a series of t tests examining the impact of experimental condition on each of the proposed mediators and dependent variables. The means, standard deviations, and significance test statistics for these analyses are presented in Table 5. As shown in the table we found support for our hypotheses that those in the extreme protest condition would find the protesters’ behavior to be more immoral, feel less emotional connection with them, identify with them less, support them less, and be less willing to join the movement in the future. We also found that our experimental manipulation had a significant effect on participants’ support for the movement’s cause (i.e., those in the extreme protest condition indicated less support for abolishing abortion in Kentucky than those in the moderate protest condition).

Moderation by political ideology. Using a multiple regression approach, we next explored whether participants’ political ideology (mean centered) might moderate the effect of the experimental manipulation (moderate protest condition = 0; extreme protest condition = 1) on our measures of perceived extremity and the three measures of support. For perceived extremity, unlike what we found in Studies 2–4, we found both a significant effect of political ideology, b = −.19, SE = .03, p < .001, and an interaction between experimental condition and participants’ political ideology, b = −.13, SE = .05, p = .013. Simple slopes analyses indicated that although conservatives (−1 SD) in the extreme protest condition viewed the protesters as more extreme than did conservatives in the moderate protest condition, b = 1.26, SE = .13, p < .001, this difference in perception due to exper-

### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Moderate protest condition M (SD)</th>
<th>Extreme protest condition M (SD)</th>
<th>t-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immorality</td>
<td>1.93 (1.22)</td>
<td>3.07 (1.37)</td>
<td>t = 10.70, p &lt; .001, d = .88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional connection</td>
<td>2.60 (1.39)</td>
<td>2.08 (1.25)</td>
<td>t = 4.76, p &lt; .001, d = .39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social identification</td>
<td>2.12 (1.34)</td>
<td>1.68 (1.09)</td>
<td>t = 4.36, p &lt; .001, d = .36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support protesters</td>
<td>2.48 (1.54)</td>
<td>1.89 (1.29)</td>
<td>t = 5.08, p &lt; .001, d = .42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Join movement</td>
<td>1.71 (1.20)</td>
<td>1.44 (1.02)</td>
<td>t = 2.92, p = .004, d = .24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support cause</td>
<td>2.31 (1.60)</td>
<td>2.02 (1.43)</td>
<td>t = 2.39, p = .017, d = .20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All correlations are significant at p < .001.
mental condition was stronger for liberal participants (+1 SD), \( b = 1.72, SE = .13, p < .001 \) (see Supplemental Figure S3 in the online supplemental material). Similarly, for the disruptive-harmful composite, there was a main effect of political ideology, \( b = -1.19, SE = .02, p < .001 \), and a significant interaction, \( b = -1.10, SE = .05, p = .035 \), and simple slopes analyses indicated that the effect of condition in predicting conservatives’ scores on the disruptive-harmful composite, \( b = 1.47, SE = .11, p < .001 \), though highly significant, was not as strong as it was for liberal participants, \( b = 1.80, SE = .11, p < .001 \) (see Supplemental Figure S4 in the online supplemental material). Thus, although we can conclude that our manipulation had its intended effects for both liberals and conservatives, the effect was not the same across these two political groups.

For support protesters we found a main effect of political ideology, \( b = .44, SE = .03, p < .001 \), but there was not a significant interaction, \( b = -.09, SE = .06, p = .098 \). For join movement there was a main effect of ideology, \( b = .24, SE = .02, p < .001 \), and no significant interaction, \( b = -.09, SE = .05, p = .077 \). Finally, for support cause, we also found a main effect of political ideology, \( b = .49, SE = .03, p < .001 \), and no significant interaction, \( b = -.06, SE = .06, p = .345 \). These results, therefore, suggest that effect of experimental condition on these various measures of support did not differ between liberal and conservative participants.

**Serial mediation.** We next tested our five-step serial mediation hypotheses. As in Study 4, we used the PROCESS Macro for SPSS (Model 6), entering experimental condition (moderate protest condition = 0; extreme protest condition = 1) as the independent variable, perceived immorality as the first mediator, felt emotional connection as the second, and feelings of social identification as the third, and support protesters and join movement as separate dependent variables. In line with our hypotheses, the 95% CI for the bootstrap analysis (5000 resamples) for the 5-step serial mediation path predicting support protesters did not include 0 (indirect effect = \(-.24, SE = .03, LL = -.32, UL = -.18\)). We found parallel results when entering join movement as the dependent variable (indirect effect = \(-.25, SE = .04, LL = -.34, UL = -.19\)). In addition, we conducted an exploratory test of the five-step serial mediation in predicting support cause which also yielded an indirect effect that did not include 0 in the 95% CI (indirect effect = \(-.27, SE = .04, LL = -.36, UL = -.21\); see Figure 7 for full path diagrams for the three dependent variables). Together, these results indicate that extreme protest actions led participants to view the protesters’ behavior as more immoral, which led them to feel less emotionally connected with the protesters, and in turn, identify with them less, ultimately leading to less support for the protesters, their cause, and less willingness to join the movement. However, as we found in Study 4, some of the predictors’ relationships with the dependent variables remained significant even when entering our hypothesized mediators, suggesting that other psychological processes, beyond those we measured, also help explain the relationship between these variables.

Further, in line with Study 4’s results, we again found evidence of a suppressor effect: when the three psychological mechanisms driving reduced support are included in the serial mediation analysis, the effect of extreme protest actions on support cause becomes positive (see Figure 7C).

### Study 6

In Study 6 we explore further whether reactions to extreme protest actions differ depending on whether the protesters are advocating for a conservative or liberal cause. However, unlike in Studies 1–4 where participants learned about protesters who advocated either for a liberal cause (Studies 1–4), or a conservative one (Study 5), in Study 6 participants read about an (extreme or moderate) protest regarding gun control legislation, and we varied whether the protesters advocated for a more liberal position (a ban on assault weapons) or a more conservative position (blocking a ban on assault weapons). By independently manipulating the extremity and ideological direction of the protest, we were able to systematically explore whether liberals and conservatives have similar or different reactions to ideologically consistent, as compared to ideologically opposed, extreme protest actions.

In addition, in Study 6 we measured participants’ system justifying beliefs to explore whether these beliefs are related to negative reactions to extreme protest actions. It may be that extreme protest actions, relative to more moderate protest actions, signal to observers a greater desire to make substantial changes to society and the status quo. If so, individuals high in system justification should be particularly averse to these protest actions (see Hennes, Nam, Stern, & Jost, 2012; Jost et al., 2017; O’Brien & Crandall, 2005; Osborne et al., 2019; Osborne & Sibley, 2013). Further, because we also manipulated whether the protesters advocating to change (ban on assault weapons), or oppose changing (blocking the ban), the status quo, we were also able to test the possibility that individuals high in system justification are particularly averse to extreme protest actions that support changing the status quo.

### Method

#### Preregistration.

We preregistered our sampling plan, exclusion criteria, procedure, composites, hypotheses, analyses, and serial mediation models at osf.io/t56nc.

#### Participants.

We used the same three criteria for excluding participants’ data from analyses as those used in Studies 4 and 5. After exclusions, 1,102 (604 male, 497 female, one did not identify) remained. Eight hundred and twenty-nine (75%) reported being White, 103 (9%) as Black, 66 (6%) as Hispanic, 83 (8%) as Asian, and 20 (2%) as “other.” Participant age ranged from 18 to 76 years, with a mean of 37.41 years (SD = 11.51).

#### Procedure.

Participants first completed a questionnaire that included demographics measures, political ideology, as well as the System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003) which measures perceptions of the legitimacy of the social and economic system (\( \alpha = .91 \); e.g., “In general the American political system operates as it should”). Participants responded to each item on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

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13 Simple slope analyses for the marginally significant effects indicate that the effect of condition for conservatives was highly significant for both support protesters, \( b = -0.67, SE = .14, p < .001 \), and join movement, \( b = -0.37, SE = .12, p = .002 \), but for liberals the effect of condition was weaker for support protesters, \( b = -.34, SE = .14, p = .015 \), and nonsignificant for join movement, \( b = -0.07, SE = .12, p = .540 \), suggesting that conservatives were more negatively affected by the extreme protests. However, it is likely that these effects for liberals were due to a floor effect (see Supplemental Figures S5 and S6 in the online supplemental material).
Following this, participants read a short description of a recent protest relating to gun legislation. To examine our hypotheses, we manipulated two variables within the description. Like Studies 1–5, we manipulated the extremity of the protesters’ behavior. In the extreme condition, participants read that the protesters formed a human blockade that stopped traffic for hours, and that some protesters climbed on the hoods of cars and chanted slogans. In the moderate condition, participants read that protesters peacefully held signs and chanted slogans. In addition, we manipulated the ideological direction of the protesters’ advocacy to either be liberal or conservative. Specifically, the protesters either supported legislation that would ban all semiautomatic weapons statewide, or

Figure 7. Depiction of the hypothesized serial mediation predicting support for the protesters (A), willingness to join the movement (B), and support for the cause (C). Total variance explained: support protesters: $R^2 = .75$; join movement: $R^2 = .63$; support cause: $R^2 = .71$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. 
they opposed the legislation (see the online supplemental material for full text). After reading their assigned article participants provided a short summary that we used to determine who should be excluded from analyses (see above), and finally, completed the same outcome measures as in Studies 4 and 5, adapted to fit Study 6’s social movement (see Supporting Information for exact wording).

**Results**

Table 6 provides the means, standard deviations, and correlations for key variables measured in Study 6.

**Manipulation check.** Participants in the extreme protest condition perceived the protesters as significantly more extreme, $M = 3.30, SD = 1.18$, than the participants in the moderate protest condition, $M = 1.63, SD = .96, t(1100) = 25.49, p < .001, d = 1.54$. We also found that extreme scores correlated very strongly with both how disruptive, $r = .77, p < .001$ and how harmful, $r = .80, p < .001$, participants perceived the protesters’ behavior to be, once again indicating that participants’ understanding of “extreme” was in line with our definition. In addition, we created a composite of the disruptive and harmful items ($\alpha = .83$) and found that participants in the extreme protest condition scored significantly higher, $M = 3.39, SD = 1.04$, than participants in the moderate protest condition, $M = 1.71, SD = .84, t(1100) = 29.30, p < .001, d = 1.77$.

**Main effect of extremity condition.** Following our predeter-
mined analysis plan, we conducted a series of $t$ tests to examine the effect of the extremity manipulation on each of our outcome measures. Table 7 presents the means, standard deviations, and significance test statistics for each analysis. Results of these analyses indicate that participants in the extreme protest condition viewed the protesters’ behavior to be more immoral, felt less emotional connection with them, identified with them less, supported them less, and were less willing to join their movement in the future. Further, we found that participants in the extreme protest condition indicated less support for the movements’ cause than participants in the moderate protest condition.

**Serial mediation.** As in Studies 4 and 5, we ran serial med-
iation analyses to examine the process by which extreme protest actions result in less support for a movement. Specifically, we entered experimental condition (moderate protest condition = 0; extreme protest condition = 1) as the independent variable, perceived immorality as the first mediator, felt emotional connection as the second, feelings of social identification as the third, and support protesters and join movement as separate dependent variables. In support of our hypothesis, the 95% confidence interval for the bootstrap analysis (5000 resamples) did not include 0 for either support protesters (indirect effect = $-.18, SE = .02, LL = -.23, UL = -.14$) or for join movement (indirect effect = $-.21, SE = .03, LL = -.27, UL = -.16$). Likewise, an exploratory test of the five-step serial mediation in predicting support cause also yielded an indirect effect that did not include 0 in the 95% confidence interval (indirect effect = $-.18, SE = .02, LL = -.23, UL = -.14$) (see Figure 8 for full path diagrams for the three dependent variables). Thus, as we found in Studies 4 and 5, extreme protest actions resulted in observers viewing the protesters’ behavior as more immoral, which predicted them feeling less emotional connection with the protesters, and in turn less social identification with the protesters, extreme protest condition.

**Table 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Moderate protest condition $M (SD)$</th>
<th>Extreme protest condition $M (SD)$</th>
<th>t-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immorality</td>
<td>1.48 (.94)</td>
<td>2.60 (1.36)</td>
<td>$t = 15.80$ $p &lt; .001$ $d = .95$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional connection</td>
<td>2.95 (1.34)</td>
<td>2.43 (1.33)</td>
<td>$t = 6.39$ $p &lt; .001$ $d = .39$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social identification</td>
<td>2.69 (1.26)</td>
<td>2.10 (1.24)</td>
<td>$t = 7.85$ $p &lt; .001$ $d = .47$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support protesters</td>
<td>3.17 (1.51)</td>
<td>2.38 (1.39)</td>
<td>$t = 9.02$ $p &lt; .001$ $d = .54$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Join movement</td>
<td>2.30 (1.43)</td>
<td>1.72 (1.19)</td>
<td>$t = 7.31$ $p &lt; .001$ $d = .44$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support cause</td>
<td>3.08 (1.59)</td>
<td>2.77 (1.62)</td>
<td>$t = 3.20$ $p = .001$ $d = .19$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6**

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Key Variables Measured in Study 6, Separated by Advocacy Direction (Support Gun Ban vs. Oppose Gun Ban)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Support gun ban $M (SD)$</th>
<th>Oppose gun ban $M (SD)$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Political ideology</td>
<td>3.55 (1.77)</td>
<td>3.51 (1.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. System justification</td>
<td>3.75 (1.34)</td>
<td>3.87 (1.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Immorality perceptions</td>
<td>1.90 (1.26)</td>
<td>2.22 (1.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Emotional connection</td>
<td>3.12 (1.35)</td>
<td>2.25 (1.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Social identification</td>
<td>2.71 (1.33)</td>
<td>2.06 (1.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Support protesters</td>
<td>3.17 (1.50)</td>
<td>2.35 (1.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Join movement</td>
<td>2.32 (1.44)</td>
<td>1.68 (1.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Support cause</td>
<td>3.49 (1.53)</td>
<td>2.35 (1.49)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Correlations above the diagonal are for participants in the support gun ban condition and correlations below the diagonal are for participants in the oppose gun ban condition. All correlations $|r| \geq .09$ are significant at $p < .05$. 
which ultimately resulted in less support for the protesters, their cause, and less willingness to join the movement. Of note, however, as in Studies 4 and 5, some of the predictors’ relationships with the dependent variables remained significant even when entering our hypothesized mediators, indicating that other processes beyond those we hypothesized also led to associations between these variables (see Supporting Information). Finally, replicating Studies 4 and 5, we found evidence of a suppressor effect: When the three psychological mechanisms driving reduced support are included in the serial mediation analysis, the effect of extreme protest actions on support cause becomes positive (see Figure 8C).
Moderation by political ideology. We explored the possible moderating role of political ideology (mean centered) on experimental condition (moderate protest condition = 0; extreme protest condition = 1) in predicting perceptions of how extreme participants viewed the protesters to be. Results yielded a strong effect of political ideology, $b = .10, SE = .02, p < .001$, but there were no significant interactions between experimental condition and political ideology, $b = .03, SE = .04, p = .351$. Similarly, for disruptive-harmful, we found a significant effect of political ideology, $b = .07, SE = .02, p < .001$, but no significant interaction, $b = .04, SE = .03, p = .228$. These null interaction results indicate that the effect of experimental condition on perceptions of extremity was the same for liberals and conservatives.

For support protesters, the main effect of political ideology was nonsignificant, $b = -.02, SE = .03, p = .498$, as was the interaction, $b = -.08, SE = .05, p = .096$. Likewise, there was no main effect of political ideology for either join movement, $b = -.02, SE = .02, p = .385$, or for support cause, $b = -.003, SE = .03, p = .907$, nor was there an interaction for join movement, $b = .04, SE = .05, p = .423$, or support cause, $b = -.09, SE = .06, p = .097$. These results indicate that the effects of the extremity manipulation had an equally negative effect on liberals and conservatives.

Three-way interaction of extremity condition, advocacy direction condition, and political ideology. To examine whether there might be an asymmetry between liberals and conservatives in terms of how they perceive and respond to extreme protest actions that either support or oppose their policy agenda, we entered extremity condition (moderate protest condition = 0; extreme protest condition = 1), advocacy direction condition (oppose gun ban condition = 0; support gun ban condition = 1), and political ideology (mean centered), and their various interactions as predictors. We report the results of the three-way interactions here, but full model results can be found in the online supplemental material, including evidence of Advocacy Direction Condition × Political Ideology interactions, showing both liberal and conservative bias toward ideologically aligned protesters (independent of whether these protesters were behaving in extreme or moderate ways).

For extreme, we found no significant three-way interaction, $b = .11, SE = .07, p = .132$, but for disruptive-harmful the interaction was significant, $b = .15, SE = .06, p = .024$. To explore this significant interaction, we probed the effects by focusing on how the different protest actions (moderate vs. extreme) might differently affect liberals and conservatives depending on whether the protesters were advocating for the more liberal (support ban) or more conservative (block ban) stance. These analyses indicated that for liberal participants, though there was an overall bias favoring the more liberal protesters, $b = -.55, SE = .11, p < .001$, there was a nonsignificant interaction between the two experimental manipulations, $b = -.15, SE = .16, p = .355$. The effect of extremity condition on liberals’ disruptive-harmful perceptions was not significantly different depending on whether the protesters were advocating for, $b = 1.55, SE = .11, p < .001$, or against, $b = 1.70, SE = .11, p < .001$, an assault weapons ban (see Supplemental Figure S7 in the online supplemental material). For conservatives there was a significant interaction between the two experimental manipulations, $b = .36, SE = .16, p = .024$; the effect of extremity condition for conservatives in the oppose gun ban condition, $b = 1.54, SE = .11, p < .001$, was significantly weaker than the effect of extremity condition for conservatives in the support gun ban condition, $b = 1.90, SE = .11, p < .001$.

It is possible that the different protest actions (moderate vs. extreme) might differ in their capacity to affect liberals and conservatives depending on whether the protesters engaged in extreme tactics. Conservatives showed no ingroup bias toward the protesters engaging in moderate tactics. As such, although liberals and conservatives differed in how they perceived the behavior of protesters using moderate tactics, the pattern of results for this study suggests there was not an asymmetry between the two sides in judgments of protesters using extreme protest tactics.

In addition, we found nonsignificant three-way interactions for both support protesters, $b = .12, SE = .09, p = .168$, and for support cause, $b = .01, SE = .09, p = .927$. We did find a significant three-way interaction for join movement, $b = .26, SE = .08, p = .001$. To examine this interaction further, we again focus on how extremity condition might have affected liberals and conservatives differently depending on which stance the protesters were advocating for. These analyses indicated that for liberal participants, there was a significant interaction between the two experimental manipulations, $b = -.74, SE = .20, p < .001$, for liberals in the oppose gun ban condition, the effect of extremity condition, $b = -.30, SE = .14, p = .036$, was statistically smaller than it was for liberals in the support gun ban condition, $b = -1.04, SE = .14, p < .001$. This result indicates that liberal participants’ willingness to join the movement was more negatively affected by the extreme protest actions of the protesters who advocated in support of the gun ban than the protesters who advocated against the gun ban (see Supplemental Figure S8 in the online supplemental material). For conservative participants, in contrast, there was a nonsignificant interaction between the two experimental manipulations, $b = .18, SE = .20, p = .374$. The effect of extremity condition for conservatives in the oppose gun ban condition, $b = -.55, SE = .14, p < .001$, was not statistically different from the effect of extremity condition for conservatives in the support gun ban condition, $b = -.37, SE = .14, p = .008$. Thus, for conservatives, the influence of extremity condition on willingness to join the movement did not differ depending on whether the protesters were advocating for or against the gun ban. Overall, the mixed results are difficult to interpret since the majority of the three-way interactions were not significant and the two analyses that were significant do not point to any clear, systematic asymmetries between liberals and conservatives in their reactions to extreme versus moderate protest tactics employed by advocates pursuing liberal versus conservative causes. We return to discussion of these results, and analyses of moderation by political ideology for Studies 1–5, in the General Discussion.

Moderation by system justification. Multiple regression analyses exploring the moderating role of system justification (mean centered) on experimental condition (moderate protest condition = 0; extreme protest condition = 1) in predicting perceptions of extremity yielded a significant effect of system justification, $b =$
.12, SE = .03, p < .001, but a nonsignificant interaction, 
b = −.03, SE = .05, p = .576. Likewise, for disruptive-harmful, 
we found a significant effect of system justification, b = .05, SE = 
.02, p = .023, but no significant interaction, b = .006, SE = .04, 
p = .897. These results indicate that, while system justification 
was associated with viewing protesters as generally more extreme, 
the effect of experimental condition on extreme and disruptive-
harmful perceptions were the same for those scoring high and 
those scoring low on system justification. In addition, we did not 
find any significant effects of system justification in predicting 
support protesters, b = .04, SE = .03, p = .246, join movement, 
b = .04, SE = .03, p = .208, or support cause, b = −.01, SE = 
.04, p = .760, nor did we find any interactions predicting support 
protesters, b = −.09, SE = .07, p = .203, join movement, b = −.04, 
SE = .06, p = .480, or support cause, b = −.08, SE = .08, p = .267. 
These null interactions indicate that scores on system justification 
did not moderate the extremity manipulation’s effect on participants’ 
support for the movement and its cause.

Three-way interaction of extremity condition, direction of advocacy condition, and system justification. We next 
explained the possibility that system justification scores might interact with our two experimental manipulations in tandem. We 
conducted parallel analyses as those described above for the three-way 
interactions, but instead of examining the potential moderating role of 
political ideology, we explored the moderating role of system 
justification.15 There was no significant three-way interaction for 
extreme, b = .09, SE = .10, p = .390, nor for disruptive-harmful, 
b = .05, SE = .09, p = .554. Likewise, the three-way interaction 
was not significant for support protesters, b = .23, SE = .13, p = 
.068, join movement, b = .18, SE = .12, p = .135, nor for support 
cause, b = .16, SE = .14, p = .251. Together, these results suggest 
that, regardless of whether the protesters were advocating for 
change or to block change, system justification beliefs did not 
moderate how participants perceived and responded to extreme 
versus moderate protester behavior.

General Discussion

The six studies presented here provide consistent evidence that 
extreme protest actions reduce observers’ support for social move-
ments. This effect was found for a diversity of extreme protest 
actions—including the use of inflammatory rhetoric, blocking traffic, 
and vandalism—and affected perceptions of a variety of move-
ments—including those advocating for progressive (e.g., opposition 
to Donald Trump’s presidential candidacy) and conservative 
causes (e.g., antiabortion).16 Moreover, we found that extreme protest actions 
ot only negatively affected attitudes toward the movement, but 
typically also reduced support for the movements’ central positions.

We also found support for a psychological process model for why 
extreme protest actions would result in decreased support for a social 
movement. In all six studies we found that lower levels of social 
identification with the movement helped explain why extreme protest 
actions reduced popular support. Further, in Studies 4–6, we tested 
and found evidence supporting our more in-depth model of observer 
responses to extreme protest actions, showing that observers viewed 
these actions as more immoral, leading to reduced feelings of emo-
tional connection, less social identification with the movement, ulti-
mately resulting in lower levels of support for the movement and its 
cause. In addition, in Studies 2–6, we tested the possibility that a

15 We present the full models in the online supplemental material and 
also discuss significant two-way interactions between system justifying 
beliefs and the direction of advocacy, which replicate past research (e.g., Osborne et al., 2019).

16 It is possible our extremity manipulations affected perceptions of how 
much change the protesters desired. If so, this would imply an alternative 
exploration for our results, namely that observers were averse to those 
movements they perceived as advocating for radical change. To examine 
this possibility, we presented new participants (N = 888) with the stimuli 
provided in all of our studies, randomly assigning them to one of the protest 
conditions (moderate or extreme), and had them rate how much change the 
protesters were advocating for. We found no significant differences be-
tween conditions, suggesting this explanation likely does not account for 
our results (see the online supplemental material for more detail).
The Activist’s Dilemma

The results of the present research, taken together with past research showing extreme protest actions can effectively apply social and financial pressure on institutions (Biggs & Andrews, 2015; Ingram et al., 2010; King & Soule, 2007; Luders, 2006), and gain publicity for movements (e.g., Amenta et al., 2009; Myers & Caniglia, 2004; Oliver & Myers, 1999; Sobieraj, 2010), highlight a challenging trade-off faced by activists: Although extreme protest actions can be effective for directly pressuring institutions to change, and have been shown to win attention for movement’s grievances, these behaviors can also alienate observers, reducing popular support for a movement and its cause. Our research suggests that overcoming this activist’s dilemma may be critical for movement success. It is unclear, however, whether activists commonly perceive this dilemma. One possibility is that activists typically recognize these trade-offs, choosing extreme tactics where the benefits outweigh the likely downside of diminished support. Another possibility is that activists generally do not perceive the trade-off, viewing extreme protest actions as potentially effective for building support. The latter possibility is consistent with research suggesting individuals, especially those with strong beliefs, often overestimate how similar others’ beliefs and perspectives will be to their own (e.g., the false consensus effect; Mullen et al., 1985; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). Activists—whose contributions to social movements usually reflect deeply held support for the cause at hand—may find it challenging to take the perspective of an observer who does not also support, and might even oppose, a given cause.

Relatedly, social movement participants are often driven by strong moral convictions (Zald et al., 2017; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2012) that can create a “moral empathy gap” that challenges activists’ abilities to take the perspective of nonactivists (Ditto & Koleva, 2011; Feinberg & Willer, 2015). Because moral convictions feel intuitively correct, people often assume their own moral intuitions are widely shared by others (Haidt, 2001; Skitka et al., 2005) and, as a result, struggle to recognize and understand the perspectives of those holding different convictions from their own. As a result, what may seem to be a minor and necessary nuisance (e.g., blocked traffic) to a strong supporter, could actually be a major annoyance to the majority of the public who do not share that strong support.

As an exploratory pilot study of how activists perceive and negotiate the “activist’s dilemma,” we recruited 121 social movement activists from a prescreened pool of 2,000 participants who had indicated membership in a social movement (a summary of Methods and Results can be found in the online supplemental material). These participants filled out a survey about the types of protest behaviors they would be willing to do and what results the behaviors would likely have. Of the participants, 114 were at least “somewhat willing” to engage in extreme protest actions. These activists then filled out a scale that assessed how much they believed these behaviors would recruit popular support for the movement, measured on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal). We found that the mean response was M = 3.64, SD = 1.13, suggesting that these activists generally saw extreme protest actions as more likely to increase than decrease popular support. These results provide preliminary evidence that activists often do not perceive an activist’s dilemma. Indeed, activists may expect extreme protest actions to increase—or at least not reduce—popular support, though further research is needed to thoroughly test this possibility.

Overcoming the Activist’s Dilemma

Given their complex effects, one might wonder whether extreme or moderate protest tactics are on the whole more effective. Evidence on this question is unfortunately scant. As mentioned above, Stephan and Chenoweth (2008) found that nonviolent “resistance campaigns” were twice as likely as violent campaigns to achieve their goals. Although it is unclear if these results would generalize to the broader class of extreme protest actions, these results suggest moderate protest tactics may be more effective. There are, however, apparent exceptions (Enos, Kaufman, & Sands, 2019; Piven & Cloward, 1979), and it may be that consideration of specific situations is strategically superior to categorically choosing extreme versus moderate tactics in all instances. For example, it is possible that a nascent movement seeking visibility could use extreme protest tactics in early stages of mobilization to raise awareness, thereafter switching to more moderate tactics to be persuasive.

In addition, there may be contexts—cultural, situational, or historical—where extreme tactics can foster, or at least not reduce, support. The American, Cuban, Russian, and French Revolutions, for example, resulted in fundamental social change that was popularly supported to one degree or another. Cases where extreme protest actions succeed in this way, however, are likely atypical in modern democracies, as these settings offer institutionalized, legitimate procedures by which popular grievances are ostensibly received and channeled into social change, making nonviolent, nonextreme advocacy the norm. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to assume extreme, perhaps even violent, protest actions can never recruit popular support for a social movement, even in a modern democracy (e.g., Enos et al., 2019).

Our process model of why extreme protest actions typically reduce popular support lends insight into when extreme protest actions might foster, or at least not reduce, popular support. The model shows that extreme protest actions are typically seen as immoral, which leads to subsequent psychological processes that result in decreased support. One implication is that extreme protest actions will not reduce popular support if observers do not perceive the disruptive and/or harmful actions as immoral, and the relationship could reverse if observers view extreme protest as morally righteous and necessary. Though most harmful and highly disruptive behaviors trigger perceptions of immorality (Gray et al., 2012; Schein & Gray, 2018), there are contexts where such behaviors would foster positive reactions (Rai & Fiske, 2012). For example, during war, killing is not perceived as immoral because the context deems inflicting harm as necessary and appropriate (Bandura, 1999; Bastian & Loughman, 2017). We expect that extreme protest actions will not reduce, and could even increase, support for a movement when used against an opponent, system, or social problem viewed as highly immoral (e.g., severely corrupt regimes, totalitarian dictatorships, state-sponsored mass killing), and where other means of effective resistance are seen as impossible or impractical. Consistent with this reasoning, Thomas and Louis (2014) found observers supported violent protests against a corrupt organization (cf. Simpson et al., in press).

A further implication is that movements which employ extreme protest actions may shape perceptions of extremity, and mitigate potential loss of support, by framing their actions as necessary for effectively opposing deeply immoral social problems. How might activists achieve this? One possibility could be to engage in
extreme protest actions that emphasize the corruption and immorality of the targeted group. For instance, extreme protest actions that involve reenactments of the target’s crimes or immorality might effectively draw attention to the social injustices committed by the group they are protesting against.

Relatedly, when accounting for our hypothesized mechanisms (perceived immorality, emotional connection, social identification), we found in Studies 4—6 that extreme protest actions had a positive effect on observers’ support for the cause (see Panel C in Figures 6–8). This suppressor effect suggests the negative psychological mechanisms leading to decreased support may obscure an additional mechanism that, in isolation, would lead extreme protest actions to increase movement support. This additional mechanism may be increased awareness of how serious and in need of change a social problem is. After all, why else would protesters be so willing to engage in harmful and disruptive behaviors? However, since the other psychological mechanisms studied, originating with perceived immorality, suppress this mechanism, the benefits of using extreme protest actions to signal the seriousness of the issue will likely only manifest where activists successfully convey that their extreme protest actions are not immoral in nature.

Limitations

Future research could address a variety of limitations to the present research. To maximize internal validity, we used highly controlled experiments in which we provided specific information about protesters’ behavior. This helped ensure all participants were equally knowledgeable about the protest behaviors in question. However, using controlled settings in this way also removed much of the real-world context that might shape activists’ choice of protest behaviors and observers’ responses to those behaviors. Along these lines, there may be contexts where extreme protest actions win popular support, for instance, settings where extreme protests elicit very unpopular responses (e.g., violent repressive actions) from the state or other actors. Also, movements in contexts where high-levels of discontent have built up, as in totalitarian regimes, may succeed in triggering cascades of resistance, regardless of the specific protest tactics used (Kuran, 1995).

Although our definition of extreme protest behavior specifies “highly disruptive” behavior, an important question left unanswered is the extent to which protesters’ behavior must be disruptive to engender immorality judgments, and the subsequent influence those judgments have on movement support. In our studies, the disruptive activities we describe in the extreme protest conditions (e.g., blocking a road, forcing cars to drive into oncoming traffic) were judged to be highly disruptive (mean judgments in Studies 4, 5, and 6 were 4.24, 4.37, and 3.88, out of 5) and were strongly associated with subsequent judgments of immorality (correlations in Studies 4, 5, and 6 were $r = .50$, .45, and .51, respectively). We would not expect minor forms of disruption, such as standing in the middle of a busy sidewalk handing out flyers, to be considered immoral. But how disruptive do protest activities need to be to be viewed as immoral? Understanding where this threshold lies in a given setting may be useful to activists seeking to navigate the activist’s dilemma.

Relatedly, it is reasonable to wonder whether observers’ prior levels of support for the protesters’ cause shaped their judgments of the immorality of disruptive protest activities. To explore this possibility, we examined whether participants’ political ideology (a proxy for existing levels of support) moderated the relationship between disruptiveness perceptions and immorality judgments for participants in the extreme protest conditions of Studies 4, 5, and 6, the studies where perceived disruptiveness was measured directly. Importantly, we find the interaction is significant in each study, such that those who were likely more sympathetic to the activists’ cause viewed a given level of disruption to be less immoral (see the online supplemental material). Probing these interactions further, however, revealed that in all cases those who were likely more sympathetic to the activists’ cause still showed a significant positive relationship between perceived disruptiveness and judgments of immorality, there is still a general tendency for individuals to judge disruptive behavior as immoral.

In addition, our studies did not examine the longer-term effects of being exposed to extreme protest actions, nor did we look at the effect of witnessing more than one protest event. We also did not examine how exposure to various types of tactics by the same movement might influence observers’ level of support. Social movements often consist of various groups employing diverse tactics, and scholars have argued for the possibility of “radical flank effects,” whereby radical tactics impact the effectiveness of more moderate factions (Chenoweth & Schock, 2015; Haines, 1984, 2013). Extreme protest actions may undermine support for the faction doing the behavior, but indirectly increase the credibility of more moderate factions. Future research is needed to examine this potential outcome of extreme protest actions.

Our research also did not examine how observers might respond when protesters act in non-normative, but nonextreme ways (Tausch et al., 2011; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). How observers respond to such behaviors is likely more complicated than reactions to the extreme protest actions we explored here, because many non-normative behaviors will not trigger perceptions of immorality. Indeed, protests featuring non-normative activities that have prosocial effects—such as creating an art installation or cleaning up an empty lot in a neighborhood—would more likely trigger positive, even moral, perceptions of the activists’ behavior, and subsequently result in increased support.

Further, a critic could reasonably point out that our studies are all done in the contemporary United States—a context where a strong norm exists in favor of peaceful protest (McCarthy & McPhail, 1998; Soule & Earl, 2005), in part a legacy of the highly influential Civil Rights Movement. One might wonder whether negative responses to extreme protest actions would obtain in other settings without such a strong norm. Although the extent of negative reactions to extreme protest actions may vary depending on the strength of norms favoring peaceful protest, we expect reactions to these protest actions will typically be negative, consistent with our expectation that negative moral judgments of harmful and/or highly disruptive behavior in general are likely robust across cultures. Nonetheless, specifically examining responses to extreme protest actions across different normative contexts would lend further insight.

Finally, understanding the motivations underlying why members of a social movement would engage in extreme protest actions remains
an important unanswered question. Although beyond the scope of the present research, it would be useful to understand how much extreme protest actions stem from strategic planning on behalf of movement leaders versus other, more spontaneous group dynamics (see, e.g., the social identity model of crowd behavior; Drury & Reicher, 1999; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). For instance, activists outraged by the status quo and/or believing that change is largely impossible may engage in extreme protest actions as a form of self-expression or even catharsis without any strategic calculations about the effects such behavior will have in the long-run (Becker & Tausch, 2015; Jiménez-Moya, Spears, Rodríguez-Bailón, & de Lemus, 2015; Tausch et al., 2011; Wright et al., 1990; see also Shuman, Cohen-Chen, Hirsch-Hoeffer, & Halperin, 2016). Similarly, even if a movement plans to not engage in extreme behaviors, a small number of dissidents in the group may incite extreme actions in others. In all, although our results suggest observers will support a movement less regardless of why its members engage in extreme protest action, understanding activists’ motivations to engage in these behavior is substantively important.

Conclusion

Overall, the present research highlights a key challenge social movements face. While engaging in extreme protest actions may benefit a movement in some ways, these actions also typically undermine popular support for the movement. Although here we do not empirically document a means for escaping the tactical dilemma posed by these findings, we hope our research clarifies this difficult trade-off and thus proves useful for movements seeking to enact positive social change.

References


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