Uncivil Discourse:
Soft News Coverage of Racial Injustice

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Introduction

Having diversity of opinions in a democratic system is (almost) always welcoming. In theory and in fact, these differences can help fuel the ultimate decisions of our times in a way that acknowledges *both* ends of the political spectrum. These differences, however, have also been the catalyst for the rising problems that we see among American politics and its citizens today. Looming fears of neo-nazi sympathizers are still fresh in our minds as courts reach referendum for Charlottesville (Lavoie 2018); all while another fragment of the populous does not feel warm and welcome towards their figures of authority (Fingerhut 2017). All in this is to let us understand that there is foreseeable danger in this direction if there are no attempts to resolve tensions.

However, as divisive rhetoric becomes a natural part of political platforms, and ceaseless argumentation of policy is a sign of times, it can be easily understood that citizens may not *care* to compromise, and then grow more polarized and extreme on some sensitive issues; including but not limited to race, immigration, criminal justice, and protests with respect to partisanship and political leanings. It is in this extent that these divides, and dissent for the institutions, have been foreseen as a *symptom*, and bound to happen in heated democracies (Mair 2013). Therefore, everyone is a major player in our civil discourse: policy makers (curators of law), citizens (those

who vote and contest), and the press (the free and principally un-biased pillar between people and their representatives).

With the press and the media as the torch of information for what exists within government, the citizen is then responsible for making some vital decisions (i.e. voting) that either conforms, or disbands from our society's common conceptions and predispositions. In theory, anyone is able to get involved, for in the creation of the internet and our free-enterprise system, dozens of news sources and groups have ignited. In one light, the oversaturation of facts and fictions increases awareness for our nation's most salient topics, and feed into the *Burglar Alarm News Standard*; the notion that frazzled, apolitical citizens need news that is easy to digest (Zaller 2003). Yet, in another, the conflicting information among news outlets can also establish this cult-like (blind) partisanship among voters that creates unwelcoming for new ideas (Zaller 2003), and growing *accustomed to the dark*, as once premised by Plato.

It is for these very reasons that our paper evaluates the press and its political commentators. With an analysis on the effects of specific soft-news media personalities, some with clear left or right leaning biases, we hope to see the implicit and explicit effects that such commentators have in fueling our modern political discourses (noting hostility and enthusiasm towards specific groups, among other topics); relative to the current presidential administration. In this there are multimedia personalities that support the demeanor of the President, his Twitter, and respective nominees for the institutions (Brett Kavanaugh, senate endorsements, to name a few); and even more that at least take his actions with a grain of salt. From there, commentators try and make their content somewhat informative; getting the masses to think/react to the issues.

In a measurement of this content, we can all think deeper on the polarization and the messaging of our politics in a way that can help appeals to the average citizen.

Research Question

Our research question is: "How do talk show hosts and political commentators cover the topic of racial injustice?" The patterns that talk show hosts and political commentators use to discuss the topic of racial injustice are especially relevant in today's time due to the saliency of soft news outlets. With the growth of websites like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, soft news outlets have taken a leading role in public discussion especially on the topic of racial injustice. In order to properly analyze the role that soft news outlets have in leading the discussion on racial injustice, we decided that we must look at numerous different sources of soft news that range from very conservative to very liberal.

Theory

Since the 2016 Election, racial injustice has become a key topic of debate in public discourse. This rise has been seen particularly in soft news outlets such as late-night talk shows and political commentary segments. This coverage of racial injustice has led our group to consider how soft news outlets present the topic of racial injustice. Outlets tend to be either enthusiastic or hostile towards the topic of racial injustice. Cassese and Holman (2018) discuss the differences between enthusiasm and hostility. While they view these two attitudes through the lens of sexism, a similar understanding of hostility can be applied to the topic of racial injustice. For example when defining a hostile sexist, Cassese and Holman say on page 2, "Hostile sexism encompasses a set of beliefs focusing on threats to men's power over women". This definition

can be translated into a definition for racial injustice. We define hostility as encompassing a set of beliefs that focus on a perceived threat that a racial minority group presents. We also use the Cassese and Holman piece to determine a definition for enthusiasm as well. We define enthusiasm as the endorsement of positive racial stereotypes. While most of the pieces we coded for were either explicit in their enthusiasm or had no enthusiasm at all, some pieces were more difficult to discern. This led us to expanding the term of enthusiasm to also include sympathy. If we found a piece to have a sympathetic tone but not an enthusiastic tone, we coded that piece as if it was enthusiastic. We also use Gilens (1999) to determine a definition for sympathy. We define sympathy as referring to a group that is viewed in a compassionate light and that garners sympathy. Cassese and Holman, along with Gilens for the basis for our first hypothesis.

The foundation of our second hypothesis stems from the Valentino, Hutchings, and White (2002) piece. We wanted to explore how the ideology of a specific news outlet would affect how they covered the topic of racial injustice. With this line of thinking, we believed that the ideology of a news outlet would determine whether or not they would be explicit with their cues towards racial injustice. First, we had to define implicit and explicit cues in order to be able to code how different soft news outlets covered racial injustice. As mentioned previously, our definitions of implicit and explicit racial cues was informed by the Valentino, Hutchings, and White (2002) piece. We defined implicit cues as implying a racial stereotype but not outwardly mentioning race. For example, if a more conservative outlet mentioned "the good old days" or discussed going back to the "traditional" way of doing things, we could code that as an implicit racial cue

hinting at a pre-Civil Rights Movement time period. For explicit racial cues, we defined them as cues outwardly using racial language. For example, if a soft news outlet specifically mentioned that a black NFL player was kneeling for the national anthem, that could be coded as an explicit racial cue. As our second hypothesis will show, we believe that conservative outlets will be more implicit with their use of racial cues and liberal news outlets will be more explicit with their racial cues. This stems from all four group members being active consumers of the news and making observations about how different soft news outlets cover the topic of racial injustice. Our primary reasoning for this line of thinking is that we have noticed how liberal soft news outlets act like a referee and call out racially antagonistic language that conservative soft news outlets use. Liberal soft news outlets do not tiptoe around the issue of racial injustice and that has formed our groups thinking that will form our second hypothesis.

Hypotheses

H1: Relative to conservative outlets, liberal news outlets will be more hostile towards white supremacists protests, while being more sympathetic towards Black Lives Matter protests.

H2: Relative to conservative outlets, liberal news outlets will use explicit (positive/negative) racial language when referring to Black Lives Matter and white supremacists demonstrations to call rhetoric out as racially antagonistic.

These two hypotheses form what our group anticipates finding through our content analysis of soft news sources. We believe that liberal outlets will be like referee's in a game where they will call out explicitly what they see in regards to rhetoric surrounding racial injustice in Black Lives

Matter events and white supremacists demonstrations. We believe the inverse will happen with conservatives. These anticipations stem from our group's observations of how liberal and conservative news outlets cover news stories in our daily lives.

Method

Our group spent the majority of our meeting time deciding what types of sources should be selected to be analyzed. We decided that we would use YouTube videos of either talk show hosts or political commentators as our primary source of content analysis. We selected four political commentators with more conservative views. This group of people included; Tomi Lahren, former host of The Blaze and frequent Fox News guest, Ben Shapiro, host of his own political talk show, The Daily Wire, Sean Hannity, host of his own show, Hannity, on Fox News, and finally, Charlie Kirk, founder of Turning Point USA, an organization seeking to educate young people about conservative values. We selected these four because they each bring a slightly different perspective, and each cover the news in a different way. Tomi Lahren has her own talk show outside of the realm of Fox News, Ben Shapiro created his own talk show, Sean Hannity is inside of Fox News, who is widely viewed as the largest conservative news outlet on cable, and Charlie Kirk, who doesn't have his own talk show but is a frequent guest on conservative soft news outlets. We then selected seven talk show hosts and political commentators from liberal soft news outlets. These included; The Young Turks, a group who has their own talk show outside of any cable news outlet, Stephen Colbert, host of The Late Show, Hasan Piker, primary host on The Young Turks , Trevor Noah, host of The Daily Show, Sarah

Silverman, who is a frequent commentator on current events, James Corden, host of The Late Late Show, and finally Jimmy Kimmel, host of Jimmy Kimmel Live!. The reason that there are more liberal sources compared to conservative sources is due to the saliency of liberal soft news outlets. There are far more liberal soft news outlets and they were more accessible on YouTube. We selected 30 different YouTube segments from across these sources and conducted a content analysis on each of the YouTube segments. Each source was created after both the Republican National Convention and the Democratic National Convention in order to a modern spread of sources and have an accurate picture of how soft news outlets cover the topic of racial injustice in today's time period.

In order to test our hypotheses, we analyzed each segment's political leaning, whether or not it covered issues such as Black Lives Matter and white supremacy and whether or not there were explicit and implicit cues.When coding for Black Lives Matter and white supremacy, we used a 0-5 Likert scale measurement, using 0 as more conservative and 5 as more liberal. When coding for explicit and implicit cues, we used a -1 to 1 Likert scale measurement, using -1 as implicit and 1 as explicit.

Results

Hypothesis One

Our first hypothesis consisted of two types of events: one concerning Black Lives Matter, and one concerning white supremacy. Both parts of our first hypothesis were supported by our findings. Regarding Black Lives Matter, our group predicted that in comparison to conservative

soft news outlets, liberal soft news outlets would show more enthusiasm and less hostility

towards Black Lives Matter. According to a 2016 Pew Research Center poll, Democrats are more

likely than Republicans to express support for Black Lives Matter (Livingston and Menasce

Horowitz 2016). Therefore, we believed that it was reasonable to expect liberal soft news outlets

to be more enthusiastic and less hostile than conservative soft news outlets towards Black Lives

Matters. An example of showing enthusiasm for Black Lives Matter would be when a soft news

outlet says that they are supportive of NFL players kneeling during the National Anthem to

protest police brutality (Piker 2018). An example of showing hostility towards for Black Lives

Matter would be when a soft news outlet states that Colin Kaepernick does not deserve to

headline a major Nike campaign because they believe his actions during NFL games are unjust

(Shapiro 2018).

Graphs 1 and 2 both show that our inference in our first hypothesis was correct. For Graph 1,

we measured for the extent of enthusiasm expressed toward Black Lives Matter using a Likert

Scale which ranged from 1-5. 1 represented a low level of enthusiasm, 3 represented no

enthusiasm, and 5 represented a high level of enthusiasm regarding the topic. As we can see in

Graph 1, liberal sources had an average 3.56 level of enthusiasm, while conservative sources

only had an average 2.34 level of enthusiasm. These two numbers show that liberal sources are

more enthusiastic about Black Lives Matter. Looking at Graph 2, it is coded using the same

Likert Scale for hostility as we used for enthusiasm, measuring for low to high hostility using a

numerical range from 1-5. Graph 2 shows that liberal sources had an average 2.23 level of

hostility for Black Lives Matter, while conservative sources had an average 3.09 level of hostility. Thus, Graphs 1 and 2 show that the first part of Hypothesis 1 is proven, determining that liberal soft news sources are indeed more supportive of Black Lives Matter, showing more enthusiasm and less hostility for the movement.

The second part of our first hypothesis states that in comparison to conservative soft news outlets, we expect liberal soft news outlets to be less enthusiastic and more hostile towards white supremacy. Regarding white supremacy, it is important to keep in mind that our group coded for sympathetic appeals as a type of enthusiasm. Conservative politicians have shown sympathy for white supremacists; for instance, Donald Trump stated that some members of the Ku Klux Klan are fine people (Haberman and Shear 2017). An example of showing enthusiasm for white supremacy would be when a news outlet agrees with President Trump's above statement on the Ku Klux Klan (Kirk 2018). An example of showing hostility for white supremacy would be when a news outlet labels white supremacy as a disgusting form of racial bigotry (Piker 2017).

Graphs 3 and 4 both demonstrate support for the second part of our first hypothesis. Graph 3 shows levels of enthusiasm for white supremacy. Just as we did for Graphs 1 and 2, our group measured for white supremacy using a Likert Scale from 1-5. 1 represented low levels of enthusiasm, while 5 represented high levels of enthusiasm. Graph 3 shows that liberal sources had a 2.17 average level of enthusiasm for white supremacy. Conversely, conservative sources had a 2.75 average level of enthusiasm for white supremacy, thus showing that conservatives are more enthusiastic than liberals about white supremacy. Graph 4 is looking at levels of hostility

for white supremacy; our group used the same Likert Scale described above to code for hostility.

We found that liberal sources expressed a 3.4 average level of hostility for white supremacy,

while conservative sources had a 2.47 average level of hostility. Therefore, Graphs 3 and 4 prove

that the second part of our first hypothesis is correct. Due to the fact that Hypothesis 1 was

proven to be fully correct, none of our findings thus far have been surprising or extremely

intriguing. Instead, our results for our first hypothesis further confirmed what we already knew

about American racial political dynamics.

Hypothesis Two

Regarding our second hypothesis, our group expected to find that liberal soft news outlets

would use explicit (positive/negative) racial cues more than implicit racial cues. Today, it is

regarded as socially unacceptable to use racial slurs and language loaded with racial bigotry or

bias. Due to the fact that conservative news outlets are more likely to be enthusiastic towards

racist groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, and liberal news outlets are more likely to hostile

towards racist groups, we expected that liberal soft news outlets would use more explicit racial

cues because they would be acting as the watchdogs of the conservative racial narratives. This

means that the liberal soft news outlets would want to be open and blunt when they used racial

language, clearly showing viewers the correct and incorrect ways of approaching racial topics.

An example of using explicit racial cues would be when a news outlet states the race of a player

in the NFL protesting during the National Anthem (Shapiro 2018). An example of using implicit

racial cues would be when a news outlet says that some Americans are more deserving of government assistance than others (Lahren 2018).

Graph 6 shows that our second hypothesis was not supported by our findings. For Graph 6, we measured for the use of explicit (positive/negative) racial cues among liberal sources and conservative sources using a Likert Scale which ranged from -1 to 1. -1 represented the use of an explicit negative racial cue, 0 represented the utilization of no explicit racial cue, and 1 represented the use of an explicit positive racial cue. As we can see in Graph 6, liberal sources used an average .05 amount of explicit racial cues, while conservative sources used an average -.16 amount of explicit racial cues. Therefore, Graph 6 shows that conservative sources utilized explicit (positive/negative) racial cues more than liberal sources, thus disproving our second hypothesis.

While our second hypothesis was disproved by our results from coding, we did discover an additional interesting finding by looking at Graphs 5 and 6. Similar to Graph 6, for Graph 5, we measured for the use of implicit (positive/negative) racial cues among liberal and conservative sources using a Likert Scale which ranged from -1 to 1. -1 represented the use of an implicit negative racial cues, 0 represented the utilization of no implicit racial cue, and 1 represented the use of an implicit positive racial cue. Looking at Graph 5, we can see that both liberal and conservative sources utilized implicit negative racial cues instead of implicit positive racial cues, with liberal sources using an average -.19 amount of implicit racial cues and conservative sources using an average -.25 amount of implicit racial cues. For Graph 6, we can see that

conservative sources utilized explicit negative racial cues, while liberal sources used explicit

positive racial cues. We found it interesting that when racial cues are utilized by soft news

outlets, our findings show that 3 out of the 4 times the racial cues used is negative. As we will

discuss in our conclusion, the superfluous use of negative racial cues could have dire

consequences for the American government.

Conclusion

In a country whose political system is becoming more of a competitive game rather than

a unified democracy, we see that political actors may play a part in influencing further divisive

debate. We notice across a variety of policy issues the effects political actors' rhetoric and

emotions can have on their audiences. We rarely see political actors opposing their respective

party's opinions. Further, as each political pundit touches on the ideals of race or racial disparity

in their rhetoric, we see in our research that they are instead furthering the divide rather than

bringing our nation together.

We noticed in our study that soft news outlets and their actors will rely on emotion when

delivering their content, applying tones like hostility or empathy towards a certain movement or

topic within their argument. For example, with Black Lives Matter vs. white supremacists

movements, like Charlottesville, liberal political commentator Hasan Piker offers a large amount

of hostility when talking about the latter, while showing a lot of enthusiasm when speaking about

the former, which is displayed in his facial expression and tone (Piker 2017). If a viewer has

closely followed alongside Piker's videos and outtakes, this could cause no change of course in

that viewers opinions or ideas. So, when we coded videos that were similar to Piker's noting

extreme hostility or others where pundits were more enthusiastic towards a cause, our pre-existing biases may have already left us with an idea of what we would think after watching.

In Taber and Lodge (2006), they propose that when stimuli elicit an affective response, strong partisans on an issue are more likely to engage in selective exposure and motivated reasoning in response to the stimuli. If we went into viewing the clips with pre-dispositions, this would reflect in our reactions once the clip was over. Since most of the actors we viewed swayed pretty strongly to the left or right, the ideals promoted by those actors in themselves held no objectivity. If there is an increase in partisan attacks, the viewer may start to get more in tune with their own emotions, sympathies, and their pre-existing biases. Viewers watching this content might then more often seek out actors they may have previously seen, or actors whose ideas reaffirm those ideas or issues they agree with.

We saw a weakness in our research when we found that this happened with our own biases, as they often crowded our thoughts when analyzing each of our examples. Since we're all students studying political science as well, this could have caused a different reaction to more intense topics, versus someone who was apolitical or not politically active. Continuing, another weakness we found was that that though we had a variety of sources, we did not have as diverse of a set as we would have liked. It would have made our points stronger to include more female commentators or conservative commentator choices. However, to that point, there aren't generally many female soft news commentators that cover political topics. Additionally, we found that soft news lacks a variety of conservative commentators as well.

Positively, we found that we used proper choices when coding, which made searching for cues more accessible within our media content. Honing in on choices like "implicit" and

"explicit" cues was a uniform choice for us to use when deciding to code specifically within the realm of racial cues. Another strength we had was how we were able to find concrete research samples from social sciences, while relying on previous research we already held. These strengths helped us in the advancement of our project.

With the topic of racial injustice and its various underlying cues, we noticed how as different political actors comment on this issue, we found increased trust in partisan actors. This leaves us with the clear result of confirming what we believe while also motivating us to seek out more choices in media that we agree with. Yet if in consumed media we are confirming divisiveness in rhetoric or our biased pre-existing ideas, there will be uncivil discourse for our country and our nation moving forward.

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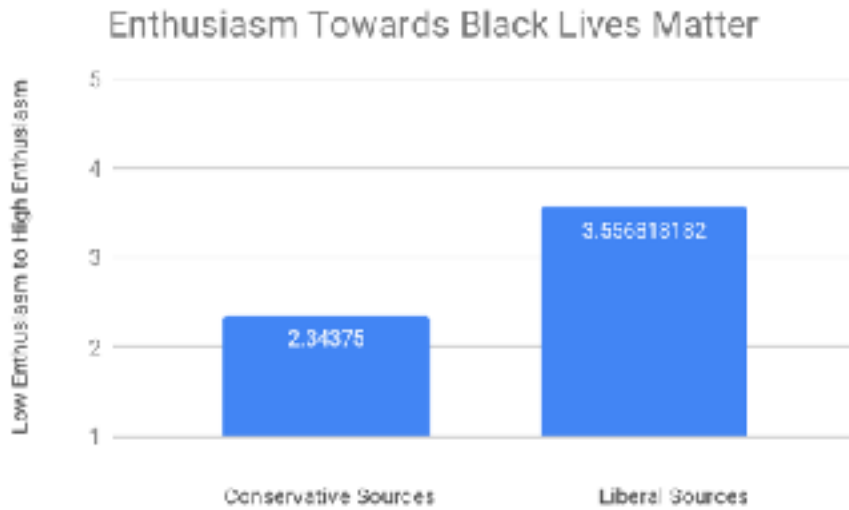
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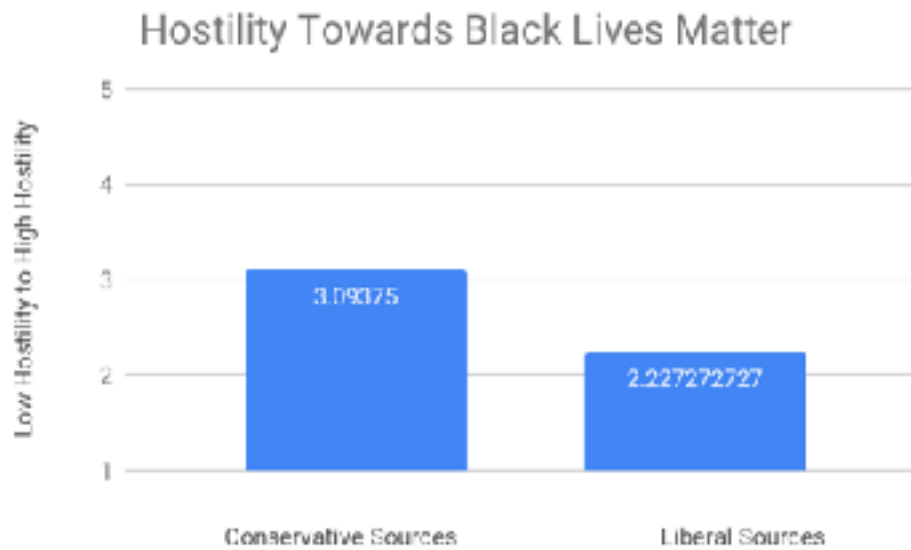
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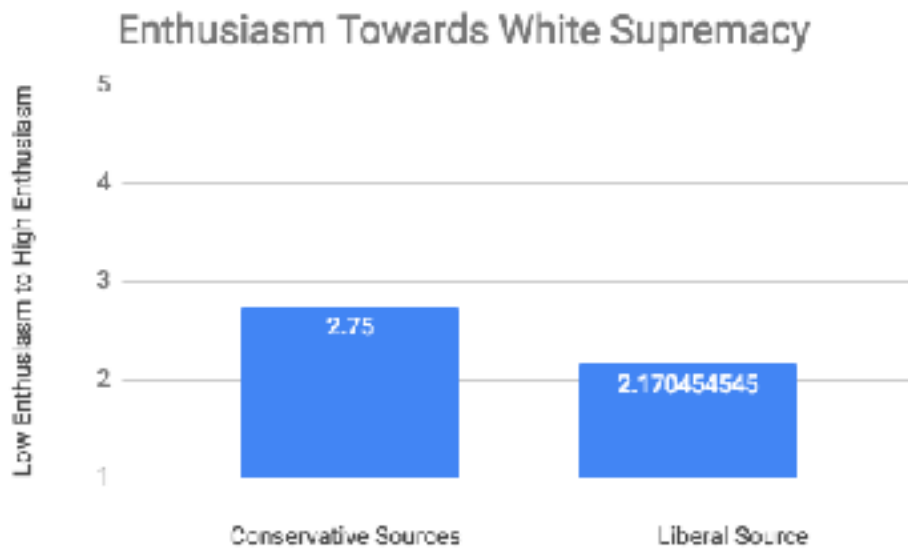
Graph One

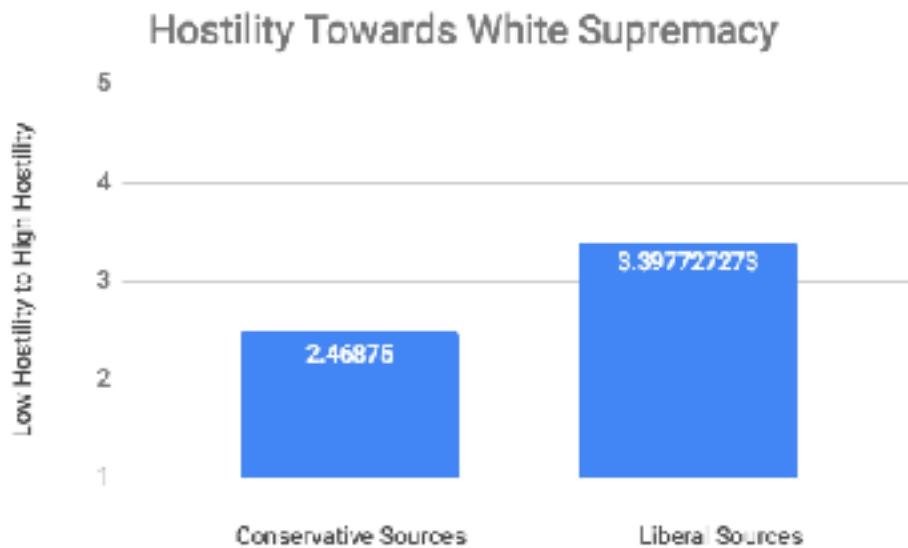## Enthusiasm Towards Black Lives Matter

Low Enthusiasm to High Enthusiasm

- Conservative Sources: 2.34375
- Liberal Sources: 3.556818182

Graph Two

Hostility Towards Black Lives Matter

Low Hostility to High Hostility

- Conservative Sources: 3.09375
- Liberal Sources: 2.227272727

Graph Three

Enthusiasm Towards White Supremacy

Low Enthusiasm to High Enthusiasm

- Conservative Sources: 2.75
- Liberal Source: 2.170454545

Graph Four

Hostility Towards White Supremacy

Low Hostility to High Hostility

- Conservative Sources: 2.46875
- Liberal Sources: 3.397727273

Graph Five

Implicit Racial Cues

Graph Six

Explicit Racial Cues