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Title

The Consequences of Urban Riots in France and the United States: A Comparative Review

Abstract

This paper draws on a literature review to provide a comparative analysis of the short-term and long-term consequences of urban riots in France and the United States from the 1960s to the present. It explores how these events influence politics, public opinion, and policy. While the 1960s riots in the US catalyzed a conservative realignment and the rise of a law-and-order agenda, the riots happening along the recent Black Lives Matter protests have strengthened anti-racist activism. In France, riots have resulted in ambiguous policy and political outcomes. We conclude with a comparative discussion of the conditions for police behavior to become challenged in public debates.

* * *

Urban riots¹ are interesting phenomena for political science because they reveal underlying tensions and grievances within a society, often exposing the failures of social integration and the limits of state legitimacy. Riots serve as a barometer for public sentiment, particularly among marginalized or oppressed groups with limited access to political representation. Much has been written on the causes and precipitating factors of riots, such as socio-economic disparities, racial tensions, and police homicides (Lagrange and Oberti 2006; Ocqueteau 2007; Waddington and King 2009; Wilkinson 2009; Newburn 2021). Less has been written on the *consequences* of riots on politics and policy.

This article seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the short-term and long-term effects of urban riots in France and the United States, providing a comparative perspective that highlights how different social contexts and institutional responses shape the trajectory and impact of such events. Both France and the United States have experienced significant rioting since the 1960s. In France, urban riots involving postcolonial immigrant groups have occurred since the 1970s, and have become highly visible with the nationwide 2005 riots. In the United States, riots occurred in the 1960s in the context of the Civil Rights Movement, with more than 200 dead between 1964 and 1968. After the 1970s, US riots became infrequent and were not nationwide events; localized incidents happened in Miami in 1980 and 1989, and in Los Angeles in 1992. In 2008, just after the 2005 French riots, historian Michael Katz published an article entitled “Why don’t American cities burn very often?,” explicitly contrasting the volatile French situation with the rather placid American case. According to Katz, whites and minorities are more geographically separated in the US, and that the US has done a better job at integrating migrants and at co-opting minority elites than France. Since the mid-2010s, the United States has experienced a new wave of riots, in the context of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

Since the 1960s, most riots in France and the United States have occurred in minority neighborhoods with the death of a person of color at the hands of the police.² Riots in France and the United States have unfolded in slightly different manners. French riots typically involve clashes between law enforcement and youth, burning of garbage cans and cars, and damage to buildings, often public (Merklen 2013). Deaths are much rarer than in the United States. Although looting is also uncommon in France, it did occur during the 2023 riots following the police shooting of Nahel Merzouk in Nanterre.

The article reviews the literature on the consequences of the riots within the frameworks of political science (effect on public opinion, public debate and elections) and public policy (effect on police reform and on policy promoting a more diverse representation). Most of the scholarship on the riots' effects is not comparative, and a focus on France and the US confirms that different analytical approaches are favored on each side of the Atlantic. American studies lean more towards causal identification using quantitative data, while French studies tend to be more interpretative. We compare the US and France because of the apparent similarity in causes for riots, and the divergent consequences. We did not include the United Kingdom because of space constraints.³ In section 1, we review the effect of the riots on politics and policy in the US. In section 2, we conduct a similar analysis for France. In the conclusion, we leverage the France-US comparison to discuss the conditions for police behavior to become a social problem. We formulate hypotheses for why police behavior is more readily challenged in the United States than in France.

1. The changing impact of riots on US politics and policy

In the United States, the effect of riots changes in time. The 1964-1968 riots resulted in a conservative realignment of American politics, and helped support a broad law-and-order agenda. In contrast, the 2014-2021 riots (from Ferguson to the George Floyd protests) have strengthened antiracist activists and catalyzed both concern against racism and political polarization.

The law-and-order “backlash” of the 1960s riots in the United States

The dominant account of the 1960s' riots' effect on American politics is the “backlash,” the idea that the New Deal liberal consensus became discredited in the 1960s by rising crime rates and urban uprisings. According to Michael Flamm (2005), American liberals tried to downplay crime by challenging the accuracy of crime statistics, by associating crime concern to racism, and by framing crime as a social problem caused by poverty and to be addressed with expanding social policies. Conservatives instead faulted recent Supreme Court decisions, such as the 1966 *Miranda* ruling, accused liberals of harboring sympathy for civil disobedience, and framed Great Society / War on Poverty social programs as perverse rewards for rioters and looters. By 1968, the law and order issue had been captured by conservatives (Flamm 2005; Weaver 2007).

The political consequences of the backlash

1968 proved to be a critical year. In April, the assassination of Martin Luther King prompted nationwide riots. In May and June, the Poor People's Campaign – a

protest encampment of thousands on the National Mall organized by the main civil rights organizations – was discredited by recurring media account of unsanitary conditions, rapes and robberies (Mayer 2007). In August, the Democratic National Convention degenerated into a massive disorder with excessive police brutality directed at students and protesters; the public sympathy went for the police (Flamm 2005; Mayer 2007). In November, Republican Richard Nixon won the presidential election on a law-and-order agenda. In 1960, Nixon had lost while garnering 32% of the black vote; in 1968, he won with receiving only 12% of the black vote (Mayer 2007). The Republican Party’s weakness with black voters persists to this day, as of the early 2020s.

A key reason for the backlash was that riots intervened in the context of increased welfare state generosity and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Many whites could not understand why, in the context of racial progress, black activists were switching their rhetoric towards “black power” and support for the riots (Mayer 2007). In hindsight, riots seem clearly associated with incidents of police brutality; but at the time, popular newspapers openly discussed the possibility that riots were the first stage of a communist insurrection, or of a revolt against white society, with debates on whether rioters were “riffraff” or political actors (Flamm 2005).

In many ways, the backlash has more to do with liberal rhetoric than the Johnson administration’s policies. Scholars have documented how, as soon as 1964, the Democrats in power sought to pursue a law and order agenda (Flamm 2005; Hinton 2016). As Flamm argued,

“liberals were unable to draw meaningful distinctions between race and crime, crime and riots, civil disobedience and civil disorder, lawful and unlawful protest. Once again, they were unable to sell social programs as a remedy for social unrest” (2005, 168).

The ethnographic literature on the matter is telling. Jonathan Rieder (1985) documents the backlash from the point of view of working-class Jews and Italian-Americans in a Brooklyn neighborhood. Rieder’s informants complained about the high interest rates which trap them next to high-crime black neighborhoods. They were incensed with riots and with the empathy that Manhattan liberals had for rioters; in their perspective, “left liberalism hardened into an orthodoxy of the privileged classes” (Rieder 1985, 262).

The backlash thesis has been criticized. Vesla Weaver (2007) argues that the idea of backlash places too strong a causal emphasis on crime and riots as the catalyst for public opinion change. She proposes the concept of “frontlash” to highlight that conservative elites strategically decided to conflate race and crime in an effort to depoliticize and criminalize black activism and prevent black political and economic emancipation. According to Weaver, the backlash thesis is too sympathetic with the views of white middle-class Americans, and not attentive enough to “black fear of police brutality” (Weaver 2008).

However, a number of studies suggest that whites’ changing views over the 1960s were not simply grounded in changing elite agendas. Economists have found that riots durably depressed the residential property values in central cities, impoverishing both white and black homeowners (Collins and Margo 2004). Interestingly, riots had a limited short-term effect on residential segregation in

large cities, as most were already completely segregated, except for Detroit, which became more segregated after the 1967 riot (27 dead) (Brazil 2016). The long-term effect of the 1960s riots on urban segregation was felt in the suburbs, with increasing racial differentiation between the small suburban towns of a same metropolis. Ferguson, the St. Louis suburb where Michael Brown would be shot in 2014, is an example of this dynamic (Brazil 2016). The most conclusive recent study uses an instrumental variable design to estimate the effect of the riots on the 1968 presidential election. Wasow (2020) finds that “violent protests likely caused a 1.5-7.9% shift among whites toward Republicans and tipped the [1968] election.”

In addition, historian Michael Javen Fortner (2015) challenges the view that black Americans were mostly supportive of the riots. He shows that many African American leaders and newspapers in the 1970s were broadly supportive of the law and order agenda, including Fortner’s main case studies, the 1973 Rockefeller Drug Laws, which are widely seen as one of the first steps in the War on Drugs and a contributor to later mass incarceration. According to Fortner, black public opinion only became “softer” on crime later in the 1980s.

The policy consequences

A second debate concerns the effect of the 1960s riots on policy. This touches on an important issue in social movement research, on whether violence is effective in getting the government to agree to one’s demands (Gamson 1975; Giugni 1998). Directly related to the 1960s riots is Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward (1993)’s conclusion that “a placid poor gets nothing, but a turbulent poor sometimes gets something”, also known as the “insurgency thesis.” The main reference in support of the insurgency thesis is Isaac and Kelly (1981), who use time-series analysis to show that the 1960s urban riots played a positive role in the expansion of the US welfare system. Also using time-series, Fording (1997) finds again that riots contributed to welfare generosity, although under a number of conditions.

A number of studies contradict these findings (Durman 1973; Albritton 1979). Other studies find that urban riots led to increased spending on policing and repression (Feagin and Hahn 1973; Welch 1975; Fording 2001). The effect of riots on domestic security spending is consistent with the backlash narrative: crime and the riots fueled concern for law and order, which translated in the implementation of harsher law-and-order policies. The most recent, sophisticated treatment of the question finds that 1960s riots “may have produced a desire for more generous social policy” but “also increasing popular support for repression” (Wasow 2020).

The riots also contributed to changes in policy thinking about the police, in directions that were not law-and-order. The *Report* of the Kerner Commission, which became an influential bestseller, stated that:

“The police are not merely a “spark” factor. To some Negroes police have come to symbolize white power, white racism and white repression. And the fact is that many police do reflect and express these white attitudes.” (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders 1968, 5)

The idea that the hostile policing of African American neighborhoods was a cause of the riots is one of the core tenets of community policing, a policing strategy that aims at improving relations between the community and the police, along the Peelian idea of “policing by consent,” in order to make policing both more efficient and less prone to cause disorders (see Trojanowicz 1982, Trojanowicz and Banas 1985 and Crank 2003 on the link between riots and community policing). Community policing has been a massively successful reform in the United States (at least in rhetoric) and is usually perceived as softer on crime than other police strategies.

The conclusion from this overview of the consequences of the 1960s riots on politics and policies is nonetheless that the riots have contributed to move American politics to the right, and furthered the law-and-order policy agenda. Quantitative research backs the historians’ “backlash” thesis, but riots occurred alongside other factors, in particular rising crime and white flight, leaving uncertainty as to the riots’ specific causal weight. Research on the 2010s riots is more systematic.

The effects of the 2014-2020 riots

The hashtag Black Lives Matter was started in 2013 after the shooting of Trayvon Martin in Florida in 2012. The news media began to systematically track police use of deadly force. The deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson (Missouri) in 2014 and of Freddie Gray in Baltimore in 2015 started riots in those cities, while many other police shootings attracted national attention. It appeared that the FBI database counting police homicides was underestimating the extent of the phenomenon, and reporters and activists using local news reports created concurrent databases showing that American police officers killed somewhere between 900 and 1200 people per year. Some of these incidents were filmed with smartphones, and the videos disseminated over social media, showing that at least some of the deadly use of force was not in self-defense. The 2020 killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis resulted in a massive protest movement and nationwide riots (19 to 25 dead⁴).

Before discussing the effect of the Floyd protests, we provide context on how the police and Black Lives Matter are perceived in the United States in the early 2020s. According to favorability opinion polls, the police is the third most popular institution in the United States, behind small business and the military, at 51% in 2021 (Jones 2021, with Gallup data). It is also the institution for which the racial gap is the widest, with favorability ratings for whites oscillating between 63% in the period 2000-2009 and 56% in 2020 (George Floyd), and for blacks between 37% in 2000-2009 and 19% in 2020. Support for Black Lives Matter was at 51% in 2023, down from 67% in June 2020, with 42% of whites and 81% of blacks supporting BLM. Support for BLM is highly polarized, with 84% of Democrat voters in favor, against only 17% of Republican voters (Horowitz et al. 2023, with Pew Research Center data).

Attitudinal effects of Floyd protests on support for the police or Black Lives Matter

Scholars have emphasized that protest in general has distinctive effects from *violent* protest on support for Black Lives Matter as well as on support for the police.

Regarding the effect of protests (regardless of possible violence) on support for BLM and BLM policy goals, the emerging literature generally finds that protests help advance the BLM cause in the public opinion, with increased support for reparations, increased diffusion concepts such as “systemic racism”, and decreased white racial prejudice (Curtis 2022; Dunivin et al. 2022; Mazumder 2019; Sawyer and Gampa 2018). Shuman et al. (2022) find however that the 2020 BLM protests did not reduce prejudice. Regarding the effect of protest on support for the police, a first conclusion is that there is public support for police reform, but that appeals to “defund the police” become quickly unpopular outside core BLM supporters (Hanink and Dubar 2022; Vaughn et al. 2022). A second conclusion is that the Floyd protests decreased the favorability of the police among progressives, but had little to no effect with conservatives (Reny and Newman 2021), suggesting a polarization of public opinion on the issue of police and police reform. The rise of the hashtag “Blue [Police] Lives Matter”, as a response to “Black Lives Matter”, is an indicator of this polarization.

Protest *violence* (riots and looting) has been observed to have antagonistic effects. Both Metcalfe and Pickett (2022) and Baranauskas (2022) find that protest violence at the same time decreases popular support for BLM policy goals, and increases support for the police. In fact, given the extent to which Americans get their news through social media, conservatives are more likely to see images and videos of protest violence, while progressives are less likely to (Baranauskas 2022). This suggests that each of the involved actors, BLM and the police, should make sure to publicize on social media the images that serve them best. For instance, images and videos of riots and looting are useful for the police, because the public is more forgiving of police violence in suppressing protests when these have been violent. Conversely, and as an echo to the 1960s, police violence towards peaceful protesters increases support for BLM (Novick and Pickett 2022).

These works suggest a more complex effect of the riots than what was observed in the late 1960s, in line with the somewhat counterintuitive result that the 1992 Los Angeles riots mostly resulted in mobilizing African Americans and liberal whites to vote at the following elections (Enos et al. 2019), and to open an opportunity window for police reform (Zagrodzki 2007).

The effects of Floyd protests on policing, police reform and crime

The effects of Floyd protests on policy have also attracted scholarly attention. The first point of concern is the so-called Ferguson Effect, named after the 2014 Ferguson riots following the fatal shooting of Michael Brown. The Ferguson effect refers to the idea that protests against police violence, especially violent protests after a contentious police shooting, result in police officers reducing their commitment for proactive crime control, for fear of being involved in a high-profile scandal, or for resentment against the public criticism directed at the police. There is much debate about the reality of the Ferguson effect. Some

scholars and data-based journalists have found evidence for it in the context of the post-Michael Brown, pre-George Floyd time frame (2015-2019) (Devi and Fryer 2020; Premkumar 2020; Cheng and Long 2022), others have found evidence against (Pyrooz et al. 2016; Rosenfeld and Wallman 2019).

Recent post-George Floyd research tends to show that crime did increase in the wake of the Floyd protests. The effect was the strongest in the Capitol Hill Occupation Protest (CHOP), a Seattle autonomous zone which was left unpoliced by the Seattle Police Department between June 8 and July 1 of 2020. Piza and Connealy (2022) show that law enforcement absence resulted in a significant crime increase in and around the CHOP. In Minneapolis, where Floyd was murdered, shootings also increased about 10-fold compared to other Midwestern cities (Boehme et al. 2022). Campbell (2022) finds police departments across the US saw a statistically significant increase in homicides where protests happened, and a decrease of property crime clearance rates, suggesting a decline in police activity.

The effects of the protests on the police have been manifold. While the Ferguson riots did not witness a rise in assaults against police officers (Shjarback and Maguire 2021), the Floyd murder and protests were also associated with a 3-week spike in firearm assaults on police officers (Sierra-Arévalo et al. 2023). In the two years that followed the murder of George Floyd, out of 14 big-city police departments, 11 saw a significant increase in resignations, retirements, or both, with abnormal turnover ranging from 2.2% to 16% compared to the synthetic counterfactual (Adams et al. 2023; see also Mourtgos et al. 2022). At the same time, police budgets have overall not been slashed. One of the core demands of BLM is to defund the police. Ebbinghaus et al. (2024) collected data on police budgets in 264 major cities, and not only found that police funding did not shrink, but that a backlash effect occurred in Republican-majority cities, where budgets significantly increased. This suggests further polarization of the American public around the issue of law enforcement.

Protests have spurred significant police reforms in the United States (Rummler 2020; Subramanian and Arzy 2021; Ray 2022; Sklansky 2022; Flowers and Kelly 2024). In 2015, after the Ferguson events, the commission tasked by President Obama to reflect on race and policing published its report with detailed proposals for reform (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015). In 2016, the Obama Administration launched the "Data Initiative" to increase transparency and accountability through data collection on police use of force. In 2020, the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, a comprehensive federal bill to reform American policing, was introduced in the House of Representatives but is blocked by the Senate as of June 2024. At the local level, many states and cities have passed new statutes. The main effort has concerned the use of force, such as banning chokeholds (for instance New York State's June 2020 Eric Garner Anti-Chokehold Act) and emphasizing de-escalation training, for instance with Seattle's March 2017 Enhanced Use of Force Policy or California's June 2019 Assembly Bill 392. There has been a widespread movement of adoption of body-worn cameras to ensure transparency and accountability during police interactions with the public. Civilian review boards have been established to provide better oversight of police departments. Reformers have also sought to facilitate the

prosecution of police officers in case of misconduct. “Duty to intervene” bills, such as California’s April 2022 Assembly Bill 26, require officers to report when witnessing excessive force by another officer. Because American police officers enjoy tremendous legal protections in case of misconduct, legislators have tried to limit “qualified immunity.” Efforts at the federal level have failed, but Colorado and New Mexico have passed laws in that direction. While the relation between protests and reform is plausibly clear, the specific effect of *riots* on reform is more ambiguous; depending on local political context, violent protest may accelerate or hinder a reform agenda.

Lastly, there is the question of the effect of BLM protests (not riots) on police killings. Descriptive statistics show an overall increase of fatal police shootings—according to the *Washington Post* database, there were 958 fatal police shootings in 2016, 1050 in 2021, 1162 in 2023.⁵ Systematic research nonetheless finds that protests seem to have exerted a moderating effect on police killings. Skoy (2020) finds that BLM protests reduce police killings in the following month. In US cities from 1980 to 2019, Olzak (2021) finds that protest increases the likelihood that a city establishes a civilian review board, and that protests are associated with a reduction of police homicides of blacks and Latinos. In the most sophisticated study to date, Campbell (2022) finds that between 2014 and 2019, protests are causally related to a 15%-20% decline in police killings, or “around 300 fewer deaths.” This effect is probably mediated by the rise of body-worn cameras, a key BLM demand, and by de-policing (the so-called Ferguson effect).

In the United States, there have been two clear waves of nationwide riots, in the 1960s and the 2010s, each with clear different effects. In contrast, in France, riots are a more continuous phenomenon with more ambiguous outcomes.

2. The ambiguous effects of French riots

While 1981 is often marked as the beginning of French riots due to the Minguettes incidents and subsequent media attention (Sedel 2009), proto-riots occurred in Paris and Lyon suburbs already in the 1970s (Zancarini-Fournel 2004; Fourcaut 2007; Epstein 2013; Motta 2016; Brahim 2021). The 1990s saw an increase in riots, with 160 incidents between 1990 and 2004, including youth-police clashes and gang conflicts (Lagrange 2006; Jobard 2009). The 2000s marked the spread of riots, notably the nationwide 2005 riots following Zayed Benna and Bouna Traoré’s deaths, affecting over 200 towns and receiving extensive media coverage (Mucchielli 2010). Riots continued into the 2010s⁶, but media coverage declined, reflecting political disinterest in “city policies” and working-class neighborhoods (Epstein and Kirszbaum 2019). The 2023 riots following the death of Nahel Merzouk reignited significant media attention, with a Senate report noting 2,500 buildings destroyed and damages of at least 1 billion euros⁷.

Although no studies directly address the effects of the French riots on *politics*, research from various sub-disciplines offers interpretative insights. This reflects a broader trend in French literature, which tends to be more interpretative and less causal than its American counterpart. In this context, French research has primarily focused on public policy responses to riots, particularly in the areas of prevention, security and representation.

Interpreting the political consequences of France's riots

While it could be assumed that the riots have bolstered the law-and-order agenda, benefiting the National Front in the 1980s and 1990s and Nicolas Sarkozy after 2005, few studies have thoroughly examined the effects of the riots on elections. Fauvelle-Aymar et al. (2009)'s study stands out by examining how the 2005 riots influenced voters' behavior in "deprived urban areas" during the 2007 presidential election. Their findings suggest that in areas where violence was particularly severe compared to usual levels of delinquency, voter turnout increased, with voters showing less inclination to support the extreme right.

In spite of the paucity of work on electoral politics, riots are often referenced or connected to various studies and debates in demography, political communication, the history of post-colonial immigration and the sociology of social movements.

Riots have periodically reignited discussions about integration and diversity in the French public sphere, especially concerning their causes. The 2000s witnessed significant debates on these issues, including controversies over whether the country should develop "ethnic statistics" (Stavo-Debaugé 2003; Simon 2008; Pfefferkorn 2019). Riots are often studied within the context of these debates. One of the most influential books on racial issues in France during this period begins with an introduction titled "In the shadow of the riots" (Fassin and Fassin 2009).⁸

In addition, riots have spurred the emergence of activist groups structured similarly to U.S.-style community organizing (Talpin 2016). These associations often initially received support from public authorities aiming to channel violent demonstrations into legitimate political action (Hajjat 2008, 249). For instance, the Agora association was established in 1990 following the death of Thomas Claudio in Vaulx-en-Velin and the subsequent riots. These associations have served as crucial transmission hubs, with Agora drawing on the experience of 1980s immigration activists and maintaining close ties with other militant networks like the *Mouvement de l'immigration et des banlieues* (Immigration and Banlieue Movement). *ACLEFEU* (No More Fire) was established in 2005 in Clichy-sous-Bois following the deaths of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré and the subsequent riots. This organization serves both as a denunciation of police misconduct and a proposal for a specific organizational structure for residents of working-class neighborhoods (Pregnolato 2017). In the 2000s, alongside "city policies" that will be discussed in the next section, some municipalities developed new youth policies aimed at promoting "empowerment." Several founders of *ACLEFEU* were socialized through these policies within the Clichy-sous-Bois youth service. Their close ties to local authorities garnered support from the Communist-controlled Seine-Saint-Denis General Council and the Socialist mayor of Clichy-sous-Bois. While some of these associations have gained more political legitimacy than others, they have always remained on the fringes of the political field and have not fully succeeded in advancing their demands (Hajjat 2008).

Finally, the riots have influenced French public opinion. A study on shifts in "public sentiment," especially regarding tolerance, has shown that the 2005 riots and subsequent debates reawakened xenophobic attitudes and opinions that had

been waning. For instance, between May and November 2005, the proportion of respondents who believed there were too many immigrants in France increased from 47% to 65%; those who felt France owed a debt to its former colonies dropped from 64% to 53%; and support for public funding of mosques decreased from 27% to 15% (Stimson et al. 2010, 919).

The policy response to the riots

In France, regardless of political affiliation, government parties have recognized the reality of the *banlieue*⁹ problem. Once in power, they have consistently implemented a range of public policies to address it, sometimes perceiving the *banlieues* as dangerous, other times as meritorious. Fifteen years ago, Fabien Jobard (2009) argued that the French riots catalyzed a growth of authoritarian powerlessness, as measures to address the underlying urban and social issues were poorly implemented and ineffectual, leading to a conservative backlash from the mid-1990s that sought to reassert central state control over policing and urban policies. From the 1960s to the 2000s, these ambiguous policies focused mainly on three areas: prevention, security and representation. From 2010 onwards, the political recognition of the failure of the uniquely French “city policy” (*politique de la ville*) marked a shift away from the intense political preoccupation focus on the *banlieues* (Epstein and Kirzbaum 2019).

One of the main consequences of the appearance of riots in France is the development of a type of urban policy, called “city policy” (Epstein et al. 2023). City policy aims at focusing resources on poor suburbs with large immigrant populations (the *banlieues*), with the unofficial goal of pursuing a form of affirmative action towards ethnic minorities, while respecting French colorblind ideals (Doytcheva 2007; Simon 1999; Tissot 2007; Escafré-Dublet and Lelévrier 2018; Vulbeau 2021). The first programs were started after urban disorders in Vénissieux in 1981 and were institutionalized after the 1990 *Mas du Taureau* riots in Vaulx-en-Velin.

From 2010 onwards, the *banlieues* began to lose the political and media attention they once received, even though riots continue to break out regularly. Renaud Epstein and Thomas Kirszbaum (2019) examine this shift, noting two significant changes: a transformation of urban policy and its delegitimization by political leaders. They argue that the succession of political discourses on the *banlieues* and each government’s approach to solving their issues has exhausted itself. This shift has also been driven by narratives contrasting metropolitan France with suburban France, suggesting that the “ethnicized suburbs” receive numerous public subsidies at the expense of the working classes. This perspective, popularized by Christophe Guilluy’s work (2014), while criticized by academics (Bergel and Rivière 2016), gained significant media and political traction starting with the 2012 presidential election (Chalard 2017).

Riots have also fueled the law-and-order agenda. Laurent Bonelli (2010) traces the evolution of political discourse on security and the corresponding public actions: the creation of Local Security Contracts, the expansion of video surveillance, the deployment of the anti-criminality brigade, the introduction of minimum sentences, and more. However, this approach has been controversial. Some studies argue these political speeches were mere rhetoric and that a genuine

tough-on-crime policy was never fully implemented (Roché 2007; de Maillard 2010; Delarre 2012). Nonetheless, the riots undoubtedly influenced police policies. Taking the concept of militarization seriously (i.e. beyond the mere issue of police equipment), Fabien Jobard (2015) describes a dual process in police organization in response to riots: decentralizing of policing units to the departmental level and forming SWAT-type police units. Simultaneously, community policing (*police de proximité*) was being abandoned (Roché 2009).

A likely third consequence of the riots may be the development of laws and initiatives aimed at improving the representation of immigrant populations in the media (Cervulle 2013; Mattelard and Hargreaves 2014; Keyhani 2018). While riots may have contributed to this development, they are not the sole factor. Besides, these programs are generally of low priority and often remain largely symbolic. After 1981, the left-wing government institutionalized efforts towards intercultural integration. In 1982, Françoise Gaspard, mayor of Dreux, produced a report on television programs for immigrant audiences, commissioned by François Autin, Secretary of State for Immigrants. By 1991, the *Fonds d'action sociale pour les travailleurs immigrés et leurs familles* (Social Action Fund for Immigrant Workers and Their Families) established an audiovisual commission to support works depicting immigration history, life in French suburbs, and connections between immigrants and their countries of origin.

After the 2005 riots, the underrepresentation of immigrant populations in the media gained significant political attention. In response, Jacques Chirac delivered a speech that formalized a policy of diversity: “We are well aware that discrimination undermines the very foundations of our Republic.” He emphasized that fighting discrimination and recognizing “the diversity of French society” were crucial for the success of the country’s integration policy. Chirac urged both public and private media to “better reflect today’s realities¹⁰”, leading to a ten-million-euro fund to the National Centre for Cinema and the Moving Image to support works promoting “national cohesion.” Additionally, the Equal Opportunities Act of March 9, 2006, gave the *Conseil supérieur de l’audiovisuel* (Superior Audiovisual Council) a new mandate: to combat discrimination in visual communication.

These policies also highlight how French conservatives addressed affirmative action during this period (Simon 2007). Notably, Nicolas Sarkozy’s support for affirmative action during the 2007 presidential election distinguished him from other right-wing candidates, who opposed the concept, and left-wing candidates, who had abandoned the issue.

3. Discussion: Analyzing post-riot conditions for police criticism and reform

A key difference between the French and the American situation lies in how riots influence public discourse on police behavior. In the US, there is now a robust debate on police killings, which has resulted in a wave of police reform. In France however, the critique of the police is confined to activism and academic circles. The pressure to reform in France is weaker than in the US; the law and order backlash is also more muted. Why do riots in the United States place police action and organization at the forefront of the public and political agenda, leading to

notable reforms, while in France they do not? This enigma is particularly relevant because it also addresses a common shortcoming in the literature on social problems, which often relies on single case studies to trace the trajectory of an issue (Gilbert and Henry 2012; Best 2015). Building on this literature review and considering potential future research, we would like to offer a few conjectures. We believe that four major factors explain this difference between France and the United States.

First, a key precondition for challenging the police is the problematization of racism. There is a rich literature on French-US differences on the issue (for instance, Fassin and Fassin 2009). A key reason for why racism is more likely to be construed as systemic or structural in the US is the history of slavery, colonialism and migration in both countries. In the US, Black people have been present for centuries, consistently comprising 10-13% of the population. Slavery happened on US soil and was even referenced to in the Constitution. Segregation and lynchings are part of the collective memory. This allows a straightforward problematization of police killings of Black people.

In France, postcolonial immigrants have only become significant in the past 50 years, with their numbers notably increasing since the 1990s and 2000s (INSEE 2024). France has always seen itself as “not racist” compared to the US. French authorities tend to reject accusations of racism, preferring to highlight the abolition of slavery, figures like Alexandre Dumas and Gaston Monnerville, a tradition of colorblindness, and the fact that notable Black Americans like Miles Davis and James Baldwin moved to Paris to escape racism. Slavery and colonial atrocities happened far away from the metropolitan territory. As a consequence, accusations of racism from international organizations or social movements are often ignored. French authorities have dismissed accusations of racial profiling since 1980 (Boutros 2023). The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) has repeatedly urged French authorities to address deep-seated issues of racism and racial discrimination, particularly within the police force. Following a new CERD inquiry after the death of Nahel Merzouk, French authorities stated that “any accusation of systemic racism or discrimination by the police in France is unfounded,” while inviting CERD “to show more discernment and restraint in its statements, and regrets their one-sided and approximate nature.”

A second explanation lies with the structuration of organized social movements to act as legitimate spokespersons for the rioters. One of the reasons why the critique of the police has made it into the mainstream in the US is that major anti-racist movements in the US, such as the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the Post-Civil Rights Era of the 1970s and 1980s, have always been associated with structured organizations whose demands led to political reforms (Morris 1984). Local forms of organization, such as community organizing, are highly prevalent in the US (Talpin 2016). Since 2013, *Black Lives Matter* has relied on a coalition of organizations with strong local roots, established networks, proven activist practices and routines, and extensive media presence (Celestine and Martin-Breteau 2016).

In France, the literature on working-class neighborhoods has refuted the notion that there is no political organization in these areas (Hajjat 2008; Marlière 2023). Significant anti-racist demonstrations, such as the 1983 March for Equality and Against Racism, have occurred. However, these events have rarely translated into lasting organizational structures. Indeed, anti-racist organizations and movements against police violence in France remain fragmented and wield limited political influence (Boutros 2023). Many of these groups are comprised of activists who lack political legitimacy and are sometimes unknown even to the residents of the neighborhoods they aim to represent (Hajjat 2008).

It is worth noting that the use of violence during protests is not uncommon in France. When Breton workers kidnapped business owners in the 1960s, local media would downplay the scale of violence (Porhel 2008). Contemporary farmers' protests usually involve major vandalism, and French governments almost always favor conciliation and appeasement over police and judicial repression (Lynch 2019). The relative acceptance of farmer violence can be attributed to the strength of major trade-unions.

The organization of anti-racist movements can enhance their ability to access the media and garner publicity for their demands. However, this process is not automatic. Countervailing forces, such as opposing groups or political coalitions, may actively work to delegitimize these claims or shift the focus to other issues, such as immigration or security concerns. When rioters lack influential allies in the political or media arenas, backlash is more likely, as condemnation of the violence suppresses public debate and limits the opportunity for dissenting voices to be heard.

Therefore, a third reason for why the police are more challenged in the US than in France may be the involvement of major political parties in the issue. In the United States, the George Floyd protests have deepened the polarization between Democrats and Republicans. Initially, some Democrats embraced the "Defund the Police" movement, with certain Democratic-led cities even reducing their police budgets¹¹. The Democratic Party then moderated its stance, but not without passing a number of non-trivial police reforms. In France however, there was a relative political consensus among the main parties to denounce the violence of rioting, and the main political parties have abstained from criticizing the police, at least until the late 2010s for the left-wing government parties (see below).

Incorporating this explanatory element allows for an analysis of both access to decision-making arenas and other conditions under which a social movement secures media coverage. This approach goes beyond examining how activists gain media access; it also considers the criteria journalists use to determine credibility and legitimacy in their reporting (Sigal 1973, 193). This includes investigating which voices journalists prioritize and what perspectives they consider valid for interpreting current events. Daniel Hallin's research (1986) demonstrates that journalistic stances often mirror political authorities' conflict, debunking the myth that media coverage alone caused the American defeat in the Vietnam War. Hallin shows that major television networks only adopted a critical stance after public opinion had turned against the war *and* some political elites began opposing it. In France, the absence of political actors willing to openly criticize the police or

advocate for fundamental reforms, akin to the “Defund the Police” rhetoric in the U.S., compelled journalists in mainstream media to rely heavily on official statements.

However, since 2016, several events beyond the riots – such as the demonstrations against the Labor bill (*Loi travail*) in 2016, the Yellow Vests movement, and the rise in fatal police shootings against moving vehicles since 2017 – have led left-wing parties *France Insoumise* (“France Unbowed”) and the Ecologists to change their stance on the police. Both parties now openly condemn police violence, both during and outside protests, and call for parliamentary commissions of inquiry into the issue. Researcher Manuel Cervera-Marzal, drawing on his study of *France Insoumise* believes that these developments, along with other key turning points for the party, go beyond a simple change in electoral strategy following the 2017 defeat and in preparation for the 2022 presidential election.¹² As for the Socialist Party, while it is still reluctant to use the term “police violence”, it called for police reform following the death of Nahel Merzouk and the ensuing riots in 2023.

A fourth difference between France and the US is the institutional organization of policing. In France, there are two main police organizations (the urban “national police” and the rural *gendarmerie*), and municipal police departments, although growing, remain residual: there are, as of 2020, more than 10 police officers or gendarmes for every municipal police officer (see de Maillard and Skogan 2020). In the United States however, there are 17,500 local law enforcement agencies, at the municipal, county and state level, and more than 50 federal agencies (as of 2018, Gardner and Scott 2022). American mayors appoint local police chiefs giving them more room for local initiatives, which translates in greater responsiveness of US police departments to political demands, and in greater variations in local law enforcement policies (see for instance Zagrodzki 2007 on police reform after the 1992 Los Angeles riots). The greater centralization in France probably results in more homogenous local effects, but this remains to be shown by further research.

To conclude, we emphasize that a comparative perspective should not imply that these France and the US operate independently of each other. The Black Lives Matter movement in the United States has already made a significant impact globally, with pro-Floyd demonstrations occurring in countries such as Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and France. Following Floyd’s death in June 2020, numerous demonstrations have been held across France. The rallies on June 2 and June 13, 2020, have marked the largest anti-racist gatherings in the country’s recent history (Celestine et al. 2022). In addition to examining the various national-level dynamics, future research on the effects of riots could benefit from focusing on the transnational responses to riots and the broader influence of social movements across borders (Hajjat 2021).

¹ The word “riot” is sometimes contested. Some perceive the term “riot” as having negative connotations and as depoliticizing the actions of those involved, and thus prefer the words “uprisings”, “revolts” or “urban rebellions” (Tilly 2003, Hajjat, 2008 and 2014). Kokoreff (2023) argues that “riot” has a threefold advantage: acknowledging street violence, recognizing the protest

dimension (against the police, the state, inequalities, and injustices), and facilitating international comparisons. Additionally, the term avoids presuming the rioters' intentions and considers the diverse motivations behind participation.

² There are exceptions. In the United States, the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968 prompted nationwide riots (43 dead). In France, riots occurred after the victory of Nicolas Sarkozy at the 2007 presidential election, and there are "ritual riots" on July 14th and New Year's Eve with annual car burnings.

³ On UK riots, see Waddington, Jobard and King (2009). On why there are virtually no riots in Germany, see Lukas (2009).

⁴ 19 dead according to *Forbes* (McEvoy, Jemima [June 8, 2020]. 14 Days Of Protests, 19 Dead. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jemimamcevoy/2020/06/08/14-days-of-protests-19-dead/>, retrieved August 27, 2024), 25 according to the *Guardian* (Beckett, Lois [Oct. 31, 2020] At least 25 Americans were killed during protests and political unrest in 2020, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/31/americans-killed-protests-political-unrest-acted>, retrieved August 27, 2024).

⁵ Police shootings database. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database>. Accessed 19 June 2024.

⁶ Grenoble, 2010, Saint-Aignan, 2010, Clermont-Ferrand, 2012, Avion, 2013, Vannes, 2014, Tourcoing, 2015, Beaumont-sur-Oise, 2016, Nantes, 2018, to mention just a few.

⁷ Buffet, François-Noël. 2024. Rapport d'information de la commission d'enquête sur les émeutes survenues à compter du 27 juin 2023. <https://www.senat.fr/notice-rapport/2023/r23-521-notice.html>. Accessed 19 June 2024.

⁸ In French public debates, two different conceptions of citizenship have clashed. The first is the integration model, rooted in the republican universalist tradition, which opposes recognizing particularities and advocates for the assimilation of differences into the national identity. The second is the diversity model, which values difference and encourages the recognition of distinct identities to effectively combat racism and xenophobia (Cervulle 2013, 104). The discourse on diversity in France is akin to walking a fine line, with concepts such as "visible minority" attempting to designate ethno-racial minorities without explicitly naming or quantifying the inequalities they are meant to identify and mitigate (Macé 2006).

⁹ Originally, the term "banlieue" referred to an urban area on the outskirts of a central city. However, it has gradually come to be associated more specifically with housing estates (*cités*) where a significant portion of the working-class immigrant population resides.

¹⁰ Chirac, Jacques. 2005. Déclaration de M. Jacques CHIRAC, Président de la République, aux Français. <http://www.jacqueschirac-asso.fr/fr/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Les-événements-des-banlieues.pdf>. Accessed 19 June 2024.

¹¹ For example, in June 2020, the Hartford City Council decided to cut the budget of the Hartford Police Department and redirect a portion of the funds to social services. The Minneapolis City Council also voted to reallocate \$8 million from the police budget to fund community alternatives, while maintaining the current police force size.

¹² Girier-Timsit, Pierre. 2021. « En 2017, Mélenchon n'a en aucun cas abandonné la gauche, sa culture, son histoire, son identité » – Entretien avec Manuel Cevera-Marzal. November 13. <https://lvsl.fr/en-2017-melenchon-na-en-aucun-cas-abandonne-la-gauche-sa-culture-son-histoire-son-identite>. Accessed 28 August 2024.

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