Reclaiming the Public Space*

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Abstract

The spread and energy of protests against racial injustice and police brutality throughout summer 2020 featured the forcible removal of monuments by members of the public. In this paper, we argue that these "publicly-initiated" monument removals are a novel tactic in the protest repertoire that can be differentiated from the removal of monuments by public officials. Using data from the Confederate Monuments Project, we analyze whether factors like protest momentum and state repression of demonstrators differentiate a removal type. We find that monuments in locations with a greater number of protests in June 2020 were more likely to be removed by the public. We do not find support for a relationship between the use of state repression and public monument removal.

However, our findings suggest that scholars should continue to pursue the distinction between these two types of monuments, particularly in regards to the study of protest and political mobilization.

Introduction

Hand extended toward the sky, the statue of Jefferson Davis lay on the ground, toppled by protesters in Richmond, Virginia on June 10, 2020. The forcible removal of the likeness of the Confederacy's former president was one of several similar incidents in the one-time capital of the Confederate States of America (CSA). It also numbered amongst the almost 100 monument removals that took place across the country in 2020[1]. From the United States to the United Kingdom, and elsewhere around the globe, it was through acts such as these that crowds reclaimed public spaces from legacies of white supremacy.

These monuments fell amidst the historic diffusion and sustained energy of a multitude of protests that summer, including those centered around Black Lives Matter (BLM), racial injustice, police brutality, and anti-fascist ideology. These 2020 summer protests featured an unusual tactic in the American protest setting: the forcible removal of historical monuments by members of the public (Hinton 2021). Rather than petition for the removal of monuments or wait for elected officials to act, monuments were physically toppled by the public – what we refer to in this paper as "publicly-initiated removals." Just as protesters in Richmond coalesced to remove the long-standing

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[1] Treisman, Rachel. February 23, 2021."Nearly 100 Confederate Monuments Removed in 2020, Report Says; More Than 700 Remain." *National Public Radio.*

statue of Jefferson Davis, protestors around the world also toppled monuments dedicated to immortalizing histories of colonization and white supremacy.

This paper makes the argument for consideration of a new protest tactic – the publicly-initiated removal of monuments related to the Confederate cause in the United States and white supremacy. Unlike sanctioned "pre-emptive removals" initiated by the state or the monument's sponsors, activists and citizens used monument removal as a tactic to force officials' hands. While other important work on the topic has addressed circumstances that enhance the likelihood of monument removal by local officials (Benjamin et al. 2020; Evans and Sims 2021), we draw on social movements literature to consider removals as a protest tactic. While integrating theoretical perspectives on protests and social movements from comparative politics, we also build on prior explorations of contextual factors that have been linked to Confederate monument removal (Benjamin et al. 2020; Evans and Sims 2021; Hutchings et al. 2010). Drawing from this literature, we propose conditions which might differentiate publicly-initiated and pre-emptive removals, as well as posit ways researchers should consider these public removals moving forward. The interests of this paper, therefore, lay not only in better understanding the public removal of the statues but also in theorizing about these removals in light of protests and repression.

We provide evidence that public monument toppling is a distinct protest tactic by considering the contexts from which monument removal arises. Using data from the Confederate Monuments Project (Green 2020), we find that the probability that a monument was forcibly removed by members of the public in June 2020 is distinct from that of pre-emptive removals when considering these public removals as a function of protest momentum within a city. Ultimately, we conceive of these removals as a tactic utilized by protesters to set a political agenda, rather than senseless mob

action. We posit that these statue removals are reclamations of public space and expressions of power that force the state to make substantive rather than symbolic changes. In conclusion, we suggest ways that researchers can further investigate this tactic, its onset, and its implications.

Background

Confederate monuments remain symbols of the authoritarian and white supremacist foundation of the United States. Prior approaches to the study of Confederate monuments and their removal have considered both the opinions surrounding these relics (Hutchings et al. 2010) as well as the local contextual factors contribute to their dismantling and removal (Benjamin et al. 2020; Evans and Sims 2021). Some have considered the issue in regard to the racial threat hypothesis, whereby increasing political and racial threat is a function of increasing Black population size (Blalock 1967). For example, Benjamin et al. (2020) find that sizable Black populations and the presence of a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter in a location increased the likelihood that a Confederate monument in that place was removed. Evans and Sims (2021) find that urban counties throughout the South, and those with higher Black populations, are more likely to have seen the removal of a Confederate monument.

We contribute further to this literature in several ways. First, we contend that further differentiation should be made when examining the removal of Confederate monuments. While previous work has considered the organizational and demographic characteristics of a locality that influence monument removal, we argue that these removals can be further sub-divided into publicly-toppled monuments and pre-emptively removed monuments. By differentiating the means of removal, we can better evaluate their relationship with protest momentum and state repression.

The visual documentation of the murder of multiple African-Americans at the hand of police and non-state actors triggered waves of protests across the nation in May, June, and July 2020. Given the widespread nature of protest activity driven by issues of race justice and police brutality throughout 2020, this time period provides a unique opportunity to delve into monument removals in the midst of a major wave of protest. Public sentiment about these monuments was polarized. Some expressed a need to retain these monuments as historical markers, while others advocated for their urgent removal. Public officials, hesitant to take a stand on these monuments' removal, were now under pressure: either robustly defend the monument or remove it. Additionally, public officials had to act with alacrity, faced with clear indications that members of the public were willing and able to remove the statues if officials would not. As such, public officials who privately may have been resistant to removing statues were forced to do so in order to pre-empt the protestors.

Noting the variation in circumstance preceding monument removal, this paper's second major contribution is an important theoretical distinction among removals, re-centering removals as a potential tactic for activists. The public can and will exert ownership over landmarks on public lands, with or without the permission of local officials. In this fashion, publicly-initiated monument removals can be interpreted as a reclamation of public ownership over public squares and spaces, a tactic for subjugated communities to grasp power where few other outlets exist (Soss and Weaver 2017). Similar to the toppling of statues across Germany, central and eastern Europe decades ago (Lyman 2017, Kalashnikov 2018, Ype 2020), public squares were occupied and symbols of repressive state power were ousted by members of the American public. State removals of these statues, either voluntarily or as pre-emptive measures, are reflections of protest power in shifting state behavior. Drawing from both American and comparative theories of protest onset and momentum,

we predict that monument removals can be differentiated by evaluating the conditions leading to forcible removal of monuments by members of the public.

Protests, State Repression, and Monument Removal

Acts of resistance against the state are not solely challenges to authority, but also highlight media and public attention to contemporary contestation of historical narratives. Protests, specifically, act as strategic opportunities to attract media attention (Gillion 2013), a process referred to as "agenda-seeding" (Wasow 2020). From this perspective, protests are not random and spontaneous occurrences nor outpourings of unfocused emotion. Rather, protests are opportunities for activists to strategically channel attention to issues and activist goals. As emblems of the Confederacy and white supremacy, we suggest that the public removal of these statues are a function of protest momentum in a location. The public removal of a Confederate statue can be viewed as an indication that public support is no longer complacent to white supremacy. Such support could also be viewed as a response to underlying and/or previously unexposed grievances (Gurr 1970; Scott 1990).

However, protest activity is often met with state resistance. State repression against opposition groups is not restricted by regime types and democracies are just as likely to respond with negative tactics as other regimes (Carey 2006). State repression within democracies can include unjust imprisonment, free speech restrictions, and protest policing. In this paper, state repression refers to "physical sanctions" used within the confines of a state to deter threatening behaviors from challengers to that state (Goldstein 1978, Davenport 2007). As protests spread over the summer, state officials engaged in increasingly repressive tactics against demonstrators, using marginalizing

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language, harsh policing, and retaliatory surveillance. Officials moved from weaponized language, referring to protestors as "outside agitators" and framing demonstrations as riots (Turner 2020), to policing tactics of increasing intensity. As the threat level of opposition increases, government repression also increases (Gartner and Regan 1996). This work builds on other repression-dissent nexus studies in analyzing the role of repression in relation to the size and frequency of protests.

Previous scholarship has found a reciprocal relationship between state repression and protest mobilization (Carey 2006, Davis and Ward 1990, Gamson 1990), where increased repression fueled and enhanced movement opposition in democracies (Bueno de Mesquita & Dickson 2007, Rasler 1996, Muller and Opp 1986). Thus, state retaliation against demonstrators may be counter-productive, facilitating cooperation amongst state challengers (Carey 2006). State repression of protestors in democracies may actually increase public perceptions of a movement's legitimacy and potential success. We suggest that greater state repression against protestors, in conjunction with growing protest momentum, may encourage the removal of monuments.

Given these literatures that emphasize the ways in which protests and the state repression of protests might differentially impact monument removal, we expect:

H1: The publicly-initiated removal of Confederate statues can be differentiated from pre-emptive removals by the "momentum" behind protests in a locality in addition to the use of state repression in response to the protests. Therefore, these removals are more likely to occur in places that have large number of protests.

Research Design and Data

We use data from the *Confederate Monuments Project* (Green 2020) as an indicator of (1) whether a monument was removed in the aftermath of the George Floyd protests, and (2) if that monument was removed by public force rather than state decree. Therefore, we are concerned with the likelihood that a monument was removed by members of the public, if it was removed during June 2020. We define publicly-initiated monument removals as monuments physically disturbed or toppled by members of the public, rather than an authorized removal by state officials or sponsoring organizations. Sourced from local news outlets, the *Confederate Monuments Project* includes information about the location, purpose, date of dedication, and date of removal for Confederate and white supremacist monuments in the United States. The removal of a monument by the public is coded as a binary variable. We supplement this data with information from the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) on the location of Confederate monuments nation-wide, creating a binary variable noting whether a locality has a standing Confederate Monument. Additionally, we include a count of protest activity in cities across the United States from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), as well as binary variables, generated from ACLED and the *Washington Post's* Fatal Force database. Our protest data also indicates whether repression at the hands of law enforcement occurred during a protest and whether or not a locality had previously seen at least one fatal police shooting of a Black person in that locality since 2015. We also include binary indicators of the monument's identification as CSA-related and its location in the South.

Findings

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Between May 31st and June 30th of 2020, 66 monuments venerating the Confederacy or other manifestations of white supremacy were removed – by state officials, private organizations, or forcibly by members of the public. One third of these removals were at the hands of the public (N = 22), while the remaining removals were at the behest of public officials or pre-emptive efforts to prevent removal by the public. Of the 44 state removals, twenty percent were preemptive removals to avoid additional vandalism or the removal of the statue by members of the public. As such, demonstrator agency and influence accounted for 47% of the statue removals in our sample. The locations of these monuments are mapped in Figure 1. While many of these statues were venerations of the CSA, they were not exclusively located in the southern United States. Of the 66 monuments removed in June 2020, 34 were located in the 11 former states of the Confederacy[1] and 32 in other locations around the county.

Figure One about here

We use a logistic regression model to estimate the likelihood of a monument's removal by the public. This model estimates the likelihood that a monument removal was publicly-initiated given any monument removal occurred in a location. We also control for the number of protests in the city in which each monument is located, the use of repressive tactics by law-enforcement officers (LEOs), the number of fatal shootings of Black people in the city over the past five years, the monument's CSA designation, and whether or not the monument was located in the South.

The momentum of protests is highly influential over the public removal of monuments. The number of protests in the localities in our dataset ranged from no protests in the month of June 2020 to as many as 31. Generally, we find that as the number of protests increases in a location over

the course of June, the likelihood of a monument's removal by the public also increases. In support of our first hypothesis, moving from five to ten protests in city increases the likelihood of public monument removal by over ten percentage points compared to pre-emptive removals. The marginal effects of growing protest momentum on the likelihood of public monument removal are displayed in **Figure 2**.

Refuting our expectations, though, the use of repressive tactics by LEOs during a protest is not a significant factor in the likelihood of monument removal by the public. Similarly, we do not find that past fatal police shootings of Black people, whether or not the monument was Confederate, nor its location in a southern state are significant factors in the likelihood of public removal. This model is displayed in **Table 1**.

Figure 2 about here

Table 1 about here

Conclusion

This paper has established that there is a viable distinction between monuments toppled by members of the public and those removed by public officials. Anecdotally, we see this distinction as well. In June 2020, protesters in Richmond, Virginia forcibly removed the statue of Jefferson Davis; on September 8, 20 21 a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee was removed by order of the governor in the same city.[2] Just as we contend these two forms of monument removals warrant

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[2] Schneider, Gregory S. and Laura Vozzella. "Robert E. Lee statue is removed in Richmond, ex-capital of Confederacy, after months of protest and legal resistance." September 8, 2021. *Washington Post.*

greater study, we propose several avenues for researchers to take. While this paper has considered a limited number of the contextual factors that might lead to the public removal of monuments, there are certainly additional factors to consider, including the structures of local governments, prior public discussion around the monuments, as well as the monuments' physical size and structure. Given the nature of monuments in public squares and prominent spaces, greater work can be done to understand how activists and community members engaged with these places prior to 2020 and how they have done so afterward. We contend that the public removal of statues warrants greater study in the literature as both a protest tactic, with consideration for the conditions that lead to onset and the implications for local-level protest activity and politics in the aftermath. Further, we believe that this tactic is a place for further study of symbolic politics. Beyond the physical act itself, what does monument removal mean to those who have toppled them and to their broader communities? How do these actions reflect on democracy and democratic processes?

By removing Confederate statues, activists reject them as an issue for debate through representative and institutional channels. Instead, their removal becomes a signal that the movement will no longer wait for consent to strike down white supremacy and relics of the Lost Cause. Protesters initiated symbolic change, upending state inertia, and effectively speaking to the importance of public space for disrupting white supremacist equilibrium. We conceive of these removals is not as property damage, or spontaneous and chaotic events. But, instead, as public reclamations of property and political power. These spaces can be physical, like public squares, but they also indicate efforts to reclaim spaces of dialogue and political representation. Statue removal is a mobilization tactic to shape narratives and force agents of the state to view protesters as a political entity – these removals also create political opportunities where none existed before. The

act of removing these objects is an indication of who holds power. By undertaking these removals,

protestors are no longer asking for permission to act.

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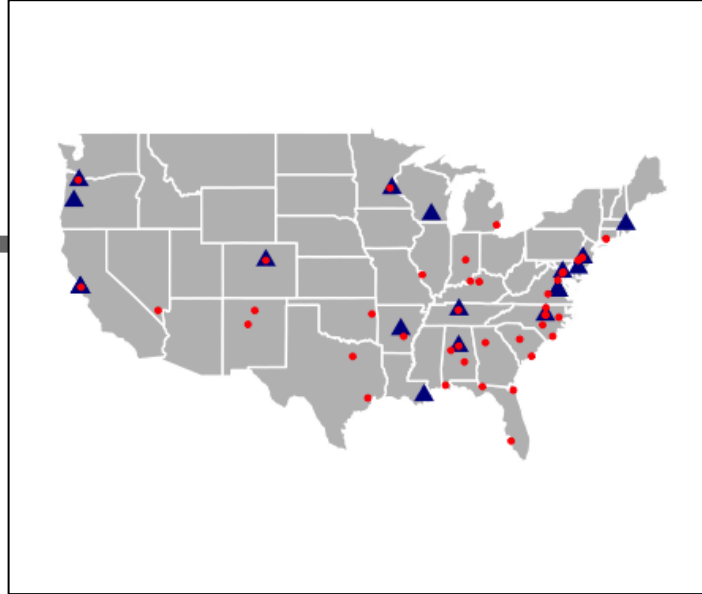
Figure 1: Location of Confederate Monument Removals in June 2020. *CSA and white supremacist statue removals in the United States between May 31, 2020 and June 30, 2020. Removals organized and facilitated by public officials or sponsoring organizations are noted with red circle. Monuments removed by members of the public are noted with dark blue triangles.*
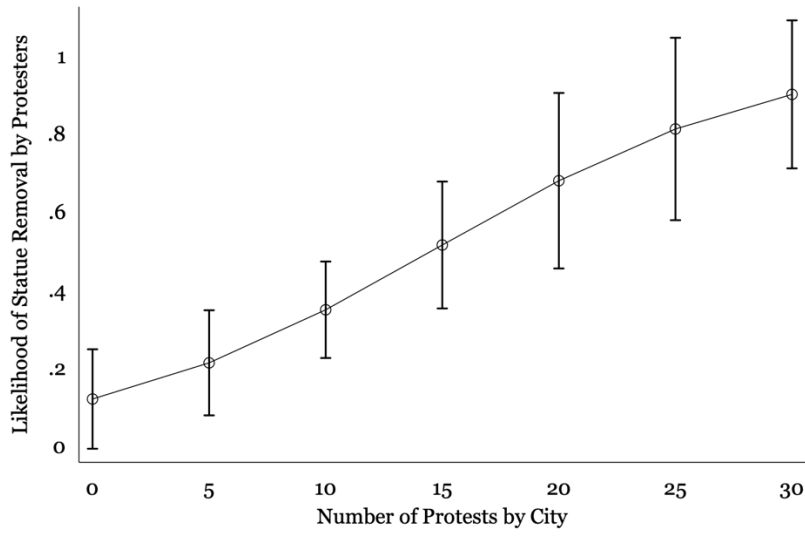
Protests and Statue Removal in June 2020

Figure 2: Marginal effects of increasing protests in a city on the likelihood of a monument's removal by members of the public.

Table 1: Logistic Regression Results Estimating Likelihood of Monument Removal by the Public.	
	Likelihood of Public Removal
Protests within City	.148*** (.055)
LEO Use of Repression	-.994

	(1.068)
City-Level Fatal Police Shootings of Black People	-.638
	(.628)
CSA Monument	-1.052
	(.754)
Southern State	.321
	(.768)
Constant	-1.385*
	(.787)
Observations	66
Pseudo R^2	.16
Standard errors are in parentheses	
*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.1	

[1] Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.