Letter

An Incomplete Recognition: An Analysis of Political Science Department Statements after the Murder of George Floyd

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A s a discipline centered on power, political science provides an important window into potential responses to episodes of heightened attention to long-standing racial violence and inequality in the United States. During the summer of 2020, political science departments, like many other entities, issued public statements in response to the brutal murder of George Floyd and the long and ongoing history of deadly violence against Black people at the hands of law enforcement. This paper examines these statements, providing a descriptive analysis of themes raised and types of commitments to action. Rhetorical responses to racism constitute important sites for understanding how discursive power is deployed. Ultimately, we observe that proposed solutions contained in statements are not commensurate with the structural understanding of racism encapsulated in statements. These statements suggest that the status quo prevails even among those who study power. We document limited commitments to addressing racism in political statements.

The politicization and racialization of George Floyd's murder ignited the largest protests that the United States has seen (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020). It also ushered in responses from corporations (Jan, McGregor, and Hoyer 2021), organizations (Yancey and Krome 2021), and community conversations (Sullivan, Eberhardt, and Roberts 2021) aimed at addressing racism. Protests shape how people feel about policing (Reny and Newman 2021), and political scientists are no exception. Political science as a discipline as well as the academy writ-large (Forte 2021) is not immune from real-world phenomena that deeply call into question core tenets of American democracy, which purport equality, justice, and liberty (Sandel 1998).

The events that unfolded after Floyd's murder led many public and private entities to issue statements about racism in the United States. What did political scientists say? We examine whether they discussed structural racism (defined below) as an overarching system, the ideas they emphasized, and what action steps they committed to. We discuss the value of this descriptive approach below. Our intention was not to conduct an inferential analysis to identify the causal drivers that predict which types of departments made statements or the type of content that might be included in a statement. Rather we asked:

1. When describing the events around George Floyd's murder during the Spring and Summer of 2020, how did departments characterize racism in the United States? In particular, did they characterize the murder as part of a larger system of structural racism or not?
2. How, if at all, did the statements describe calls for action or actionable next steps within their departments?

Universities are sites that can reify the existing power structure (Hypolite and Stewart 2021; Van Dijk 2006). However, given the discipline's aim of understanding political power as encompassing structural and behavioral processes as well as being a social institution (Almond et al. 1962), political science may use our unique disciplinary focus to view Floyd's murder as an instance of systemic injustice which requires structural change.

WHY POLITICAL SCIENCE?

Race and racism are often not central themes in political science studies—both theoretical and empirical. Yet race is central to the study of politics (Mills 2015). The discipline of political science has its origins in the study of race. Jessica Blatt's *Race and the Making of*

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Political Science challenges readers to grapple with the roots of social scientific inquiry as deeply rooted in racial thinking.[1] The discipline's origins stem from the "co-production of 'race' and the social sciences in the United States" (Blatt 2018, 145). Smith (2004) refers to the discipline's study of race as akin to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* where many leading political scientists held racist beliefs or racial conceptions that shaped the political construction of non-whites. Yet, race-based analysis recognizing the pervasiveness of racism is inconsistent. What Mills calls the "irrational social hierarchies of the ancient regime" (2017, 3) is studied at the individual level in political science by examining "races," with variable attention to the fundamental role of white supremacy in creating racial categories and the aggregate forces that point toward cultures, systems, or institutions that perpetuate racism.

Building on the tangible legacies of racism and the study of race in political science, the only two Black women to preside over the American Political Science Association led task forces on race in the discipline—a decade apart (American Political Science Association 2011; McClain and Mealy 2022). These task forces point to the troubling pace of change in the field. In 1980, 2.4% of political science faculty identified as Black. The share of Black faculty rose to 5% by 2010. Yet, in 2019, Black faculty made up 3.86% of the field.

A key to full-reckoning with the racist origins of early political science is to examine the continued role of racism in society as well as in the discipline itself.

IT'S ABOUT STRUCTURAL RACISM, NOT RACE

George Floyd's murder challenged the nation to confront racism as a social structure. Race, as supposed biological difference of human beings, is a concept that many recognize as an essential fact although it is a sociological process (Barzun 1937). Rather, racism—not race—is a worldview that developed a political order. We employ the definition of racism as "the infliction of unequal consideration, motivated by the desire to dominate, based on race alone" (Schmid 1996, 31). In short, racism is defined as "prejudice plus power" (Tatum 2007, 126). When combined with social power, racism creates systematic advantages and disadvantages that lead to the institutionalization of racist policies and practices. *Structural racism* expands this definition to stretch beyond individual actions or beliefs. Rather, structural racism is "a system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often

reinforced ways to perpetuate racial group inequity" (Shim 2021, 592).

By moving from individual approaches to a structural view of race-based inequities, we examine how the discipline as a whole think about—if at all—racism as a structural phenomenon. The 2020 uprisings presented a modern catalyst for political scientists to move beyond categorial forms of difference to grapple with structural racism. Thus, we examine how political science departments responded when systemic racism was highlighted through a major national event. By examining the self-reports of statements issued at George Floyd's murder, we glean insights into how political scientists frame race-based realities and possible solutions to addressing racism. We seize an ephemeral opportunity to evaluate dominant frames about racism among scholars of political science in a time of racism's increased visibility.

PUBLIC STATEMENTS, DISCURSIVE POWER, AND FRAMING RACISM

As performative and interpretive acts, public statements can be consequential interventions (Denzin 2002). Political science statements released after Floyd's murder deployed discursive power, which we understand as the communication of ideas that transmits and produces power (Weedon 1996).[2] This discursive power has the potential to fashion resonant and even dominant understandings of social problems (Ofoegbu and Ekpe 2022). University statements can also serve as a proverbial contract that requires action to reduce institutionalized racism on campus via the construction of new programs and/or policies (Harper, Patton, and Wooden 2009; Harris 2020; Hurtado et al. 1999).

In response to George Floyd's murder, students across the world participated in social justice protests that called on their institutions to reduce racialized harm (Rim 2020), motivating universities to issue statements (Garcia et al. 2020). Yet, criticism of these statements pointed to the lack of commitment to action and narrow notions of racism (Garcia et al. 2020; Hypolite and Stewart 2021). Scholars have used university statements to examine how public leaders have responded to racist incidents on and off campus (Jones 2019; Morton et al. 2021; Ofoegbu and Ekpe 2022). Statements can be used to downplay racism through the vantage point of privilege and color blindness (Jones 2019) or fail to explicitly call out institutionalized racism (Cole and Harper 2017).

Statements, then, reveal how political science thinks and talks about racism, highlighting subjectivity and making apparent inherent power relationships that systematically form the phenomenon they speak about

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[1] Indeed, John W. Burgess and Herbet Baxter Adams, who founded the first doctoral programs in politics in the United States, taught students that Anglo-Saxons were genetically superior. Furthermore, Anglo-Saxons were sons of liberty and thus created democratic institutions (Blatt 2018).

[2] Alternatively, Reed (2013, 203) defines discursive power as "the degree to which the categories of thought, symbolizations and linguistic conventions, and meaningful models of and for the world determine the ability of some actors to control the actions of others, or to obtain new capacities."

(Foucault 1972). A nonbehavioral component of power influences or shapes people's perceptions of their role in the existing world order.[3] Political science departments displayed discursive power by shaping, selecting, or amplifying the ideas, frames, and sources of authority that guide political decisions (Miller 1990).

Political scientists are societally recognized interpreters of social problems, including through the promotion of particular issue frames. Framing refers to the efforts of organizations to portray information in ways that shape public understandings of problems, their origins, and solutions (Kosicki 1993). Framing structures how communication encourages specific interpretations of a phenomenon through how people already make sense of the world (Entman and Usher 2018). Frames signal the social relevance or irrelevance of an issue and offer indications of the status of societal power relations and contentious politics (Hall et al. 2019). New information spreads among elites to help refine the frames people spread through strategic and nonstrategic forms of communication. Framings of social problems have the power to shape responses to them, policymaking agendas, and mobilize collective action (Benford and Snow 2000; Kingdon 2010). Resonant frames related to racism can mobilize collective action even in inopportune political climates (Benford 2022).

As a discipline centered on the study of power, and perhaps structural power more concretely (Culpepper 2015), we ask: what were the rhetorical responses to George Floyd's life and murder by political science departments? Here, we are most interested in learning how rhetorical responses may or may not reveal how discursive power is deployed to frame both the problem of racism and responses to that problem. We ask if racism is described, or framed, as a problem deeply embedded in our social, political and economic systems, or as an unfortunate aberration. We hone in on this discursive distinction because how political scientists describe the nature of the problem will also determine their proposed solutions. In particular, is the problem one that requires a structural response, or is it one that requires a more superficial solution?

DATA DESCRIPTION

In the early fall of 2020, we issued a public call for statements from Political Science departments related to George Floyd's murder. We started with a list of Political Science departments provided by the American Political Science Association. This list was the basis for the Association's 2019-2020, Annual Departmental Survey of chairs of departments offering degrees and courses in Political Science and Government and the

most comprehensive list of political science departments available. The list consists of 1,252 departments, including stand-alone political science departments and multidisciplinary departments that contain political science units[4].

We cross-checked the primary contact for each department using a departmental database provided by the American Political Science Association. We sent an email indicating that we were collecting "public statements made by Political Science departments in response to George Floyd's death and the resulting protests occurring across the nation" for a research study. Respondents were invited to fill out a Google form indicating whether or not their department had issued a statement and, if so, asking them to upload the statement. We followed up with nonrespondents twice. If the first contact did not respond, we searched department websites to find additional contact information to email a department administrative staff member and verified whether the statement was available on the department's website.

Our sample is much larger than similar studies of nursing associations and schools (Knopf et al. 2021) and medical schools (Kiang and Tsai 2022), which focus on the "top-ranked" nursing or medical schools. We collected 323 responses (26% of those on the APSA list responded). Just over half (53%) of our sample consisted of public universities, while 42% of departments on the APSA political science department list are public. We note that 27% of departments in our sample offered PhDs compared with 13% of the APSA list. We provide these comparisons for context, while also noting that the purpose of this study was to analyze statement content, rather than develop a predictive model based on a representative sample of which types of institutional factors led to a statement being issued. A fruitful direction for future research would be to conduct inferential analysis along these lines.

In our analysis, departments are anonymized, and all statistics are presented at the aggregate level. More than half of the responding departments indicated that they did not issue a statement. However, 144 departments shared their statements with our research team. Our analysis is based on these statements. We build on Mangala Subramaniam's coding scheme (see Supplementary material) to develop a coding schema of key terms prior to reviewing the statements. We relied on two students to conduct semantic coding (Küppers 2013) of the statements. Then, we conducted intercoder reliability tests. After comparing the coding, we did another round of semantic coding to ensure consistency and produced a final dataset.

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[3] This is a radical view of power, according to Lukes (2021). Whereas Clegg (2023) is most concerned about agency as more important than structure and how this agency is shaped by an actor's strategic societal position, Lukes (2021) argued for a dialectic view of agency and structure.

[4] We have uploaded our coding statements and the spreadsheet we used to code the statements to the APSR Dataverse (see Brown, Tormos-Aponte, and Wong 2024). We have included our letter to political scientists used to solicit department statements. We stated in that solicitation that we would only share aggregate-level data and that individual departements would not be identified. There is no way to credibly redact statements to de-identify individual campuses without significantly changing the contexts of the statements themselves, so the statements themselves are not shared.

TABLE 1. Degree to Which Departments Recognize George Floyd's Murder As Part of Structural Problem

Characterize problem as present-day, ongoing	78%
Mentions systemic or institutional racism	66%
Mentions white privilege or supremacy	33%

N = 144.

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Recognition of Structural Racism

The majority of statements analyzed suggest that political scientists see the problem of racism in the United States as structural (Table 1). 66% of those departments that shared statements mentioned "systemic racism" or "institutional racism" explicitly, and more than 75% noted that problems that led to George Floyd's murder were ongoing, not limited to the past. About a third (33%) also mentioned "White privilege or supremacy" in their statements.

Thematic Terms

George Floyd, as a figure, and his death at the hands of state actors were clearly the touchstones for statements in the summer of 2020. About 64% of statements analyzed mentioned Floyd by name, and 60% mentioned his murder or killing of Black people (Table 2). More than half (54%) also mentioned the "police" or "police brutality."

Black Lives Matter represents the social movement associated with addressing anti-Black systemic racism in the United States and across the world. Just 31% of the sample statements mentioned Black Lives Matter. The reference to collective action (Black Lives Matter) is much less the norm than a reference to a single individual (Geoge Floyd). Although most statements (78%) mentioned the word "Black," "African American," "Black Lives Matter," or referred to Black people in some way, nearly 25% of the statements did not refer to Black

TABLE 2. Thematic Terms Mentioned

Black people, anti-blackness, anti-black racism, Black Lives Matter	78%
George Floyd	64%
Killing of Black people	60%
Police/police brutality	54%
Mentions other marginalized identity (gender, trans, immigrant, undocumented, low-income, LGBT)	20%
Diversity	35%
Black Lives Matter	31%
Mentions gender	19%
Mentions Black women	6%

N = 144.

TABLE 3. Commitments to Action

Facilitated discussion	40%
Enhance curriculum, new classes	24%
Community engagement programs	17%
Recruit/hire faculty	17%
Reading group	15%
Meeting/listening session with students	15%
Meeting with university leadership	14%
Retain/promote faculty	14%
Diversity/anti-bias training	12%
Taskforce, new committee	11%
Seminar/speaker series	10%
Increase funding/funds	6%
Hire diversity, equity, inclusion consultant	5%

N =144.

people at all. "Diversity" in an ambiguous way was mentioned in 35% of the statements. We note that there is some overlap in these themes. Still, it is worth underscoring that among those that mentioned "diversity" in this ambiguous way, 12% did not mention Black/African American people or "Black Lives Matter" at all, and 20% of those that mentioned "diversity" did not mention systemic or structural racism.

We also note that about one-third of the shared statements mentioned racism as a problem in higher education, and a similar proportion mentioned racism as a problem in the field of political science (Table 2).

Commitment to Action

How do political science departments commit to action in their shared statements (Table 3)? The most frequent action step that department statements mentioned was holding a "facilitated discussion" about race (40%). Adding more course content, such as adding a class on race, was also among the most frequently mentioned action steps, with 24% committing to a course offering. About 1 in 5 departments in the sample (17%) mentioned "community engagement" as a part of their response. We find that commitments to community engagement vary widely. Statements mentioned community work they had previously supported, faculty service work in university committees, educating the community, listening to the local Black community, encouraging students to engage, and sharing expertise about civic engagement, among other references. References to community engagement were often vague, lacked details about the nature of engagement, and tended to be encouragements lacking clear support for this type of action.

A significant minority of departments also included terms in their statements that referred to recruiting (17%) and retaining or promoting (14%) faculty of color or experts on race and racism. About 6% mentioned increasing funds or devoting funding to confronting racism. Note that these action steps, perhaps considered the most robust with regard to forwarding a structural response

requiring material resources, were no more likely to be mentioned than starting a reading group (15%).

Perhaps not surprisingly, those who mentioned systemic or structural racism were 1.5 times more likely to commit to action that included recruiting faculty of color and more than 3 times more likely to say they would increase funds to confront racism than those who did not mention systemic or structural racism, though as noted above, these types of material commitments to action were relatively rare.

AN INCOMPLETE RECOGNITION

The proposed solutions contained in statements are not commensurate with the structural understanding of racism encapsulated in statements. The gap between university efforts to appear diverse and the measures needed to be diverse (Jackson 2019) mirrors the gap between departmental efforts to appear to care about racism and measures to address it. This long-standing practice of recognizing racist histories of exclusion signals an incomplete recognition. Void of moving beyond recognizing the problem of racism and enacting institutional solutions to structural problems, void of engagement in societal efforts to subvert racism, political science is complicit in its continuity. This study provides substantive content to inform departures from the limited use of statements and collective disciplinary and institutional efforts to envision and enact systemic and polycentrically coordinated solutions to systemic racism.

Political science studies power. As such, it is unsurprising that many departments associated Floyd's death with enduring institutional and structural racism. Many departments raised the issue that racism is a challenge in political science and the academy in general. In sum, the statements clearly identify racism as a structural problem. Yet, our analysis shows that departments recognize the issue but are less willing to commit to actionable items to address structural racism. These statements suggest that the status quo prevails even among those who study power. Political science departments do not have an all-encompassing agency. However, departments have some responsibility in shifting the discourse around the study of race and challenging racist practices.

Scientific societies, such as the American Political Science Association, can also take responsibility for coordinating action against racism among political scientists across institutional settings. Yet, scientific society statements tend to lack explicit commitments to action, few forward systemic understandings of racism, and only offer conditional support of activists engaged in social change efforts (Tormos-Aponte 2022). Statements can be an empowering tool articulating diverse tactics to challenge the status quo.

CONCLUSION

Interpretations of George Floyd's murder provide opportunities for collective meaning-making. We underscore the utility of this study for understanding everyday conceptions of racial discrimination by political scientists. Although this descriptive analysis is at the heart of our project, this analysis raises critical questions for future research. First, what are the institutional and contextual drivers that determine whether a department will issue a statement, and how do those factors influence the content of a statement? Relatedly, what are the institutional constraints and factors that influence particular commitments to action? For example, how does faculty or student diversity, having more or fewer resources, or state context matter for the type of action a department will commit to or adopt to address structural racism?

An important limitation of this project is that there is some selection bias related to which departments shared statements. However, we have some confidence that our sampling captured a wide swath of institutions, especially since a nearly equivalent number submitted statements as did not. Our final sample included private and public institutions, minority-serving institutions, research-intensive, liberal arts, and comprehensive universities. Three percent (3%) of our sample were Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), compared to 4% of all public and private 4-year institutions. Among the 10 HBCUs in our sample, only one department (North Carolina Central University) issued a statement at the department level. Two noted that their department reissued the campus-wide statement.

Outside of a moment that brings national attention to racism, we would expect those who study race explicitly, such as scholars who participate in the Race, Ethnicity, and Politics Section, to most clearly discuss racism from the perspective of political scientists. The murder of George Floyd and the "national conversation" it engendered, including within the broader discipline of political science, allows us a very unique window into how the discipline, more broadly, understands and responds to racism. Critically, this view extends beyond those who study race and politics explicitly.

Statements can be aspirational and set agendas. As such, some political science departments have used this discursive tool to signal their commitments. Insofar as departments foreclose the possibility of structural shifts, other university entities will not feel compelled to enact commitments to antiracism and institutional change.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423001375.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the American Political Science Review Dataverse: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KOX2GH.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.

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