



# Patterns of Local Protests Against COVID-19 Restrictions Across America

A CivicPulse Special Issue COVID-19 Report

In collaboration with Stanford University's Bill Lane Center for the American West & Northwestern Pritzker School of Law

# Patterns of Local Protest against COVID-19 Restrictions across America

PROJECT DIRECTION



COLLABORATING INSTITUTIONS



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CivicPulse is a nonprofit organization that runs a national survey platform of local government officials. Our mission is to promote information-sharing between local governments and elevate the voice of local governments in national civic discourse. To learn more about our work, please visit [civicpulse.org](https://civicpulse.org). © 2020 CivicPulse. *Cover image: Lorie Shaull, Wikimedia Commons*

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## Summary

As restrictions, closures, and lockdowns ramped up last Spring, some Americans famously took to the streets to protest what they believed was government overreach. The risk of COVID-19 transmission as the weather cools makes the resurgence of such policies seem more likely. Will a second wave of these policies spark further civil unrest? This question, in turn, raises another: just how prevalent were protests in the spring of 2020?

To provide a data-driven answer, CivicPulse conducted a national survey of over 350 top law enforcement officials in June of 2020, representing agencies in municipal, township, and county governments across the country. Our survey yielded three main insights:

1. 12 percent of law enforcement agencies nationwide reported protests against COVID-19 restrictions in the spring of 2020.
2. Protests were about equally prevalent across both Democrat- and Republican-leaning communities.
3. Protests were more than three times as likely in Western states than in states in other regions.

## Background

In the spring of 2020, protests erupted across the nation when state and local governments enacted lockdowns and other restrictions to stem the spread of COVID-19. In Michigan, for example, thousands of demonstrators arrived at the state Capitol to protest stay-at-home orders, calling the policies an infringement on liberty.<sup>1</sup> Residents in Casper (WY), Tallahassee (FL), Long Island (NY), and many other locations across the country similarly protested against their governments' restrictions, arguing that such restrictions would decimate their business communities, unduly infringe on their Constitutionally-protected liberties, or both.

Anti-lockdown protests appear to have decreased since the spring, as state and local governments eased public health restrictions and other political issues gained increased salience. But as schools begin to open and flu season comes into full force this fall, observers expect a resurgence of COVID-19 cases and, subsequently, for some restrictions to be reintroduced.

Another wave of stay-at-home orders and health measures may reignite demonstrations against them, and such renewed protests could be especially intense given the accumulation of political and economic grievances since the spring. Such demonstrations could raise concerns about public order, and potentially jeopardize efforts to curb community spread of the virus. It is therefore important to ask how widespread the protests against COVID-19 measures actually were then, and which localities were most likely to experience them.

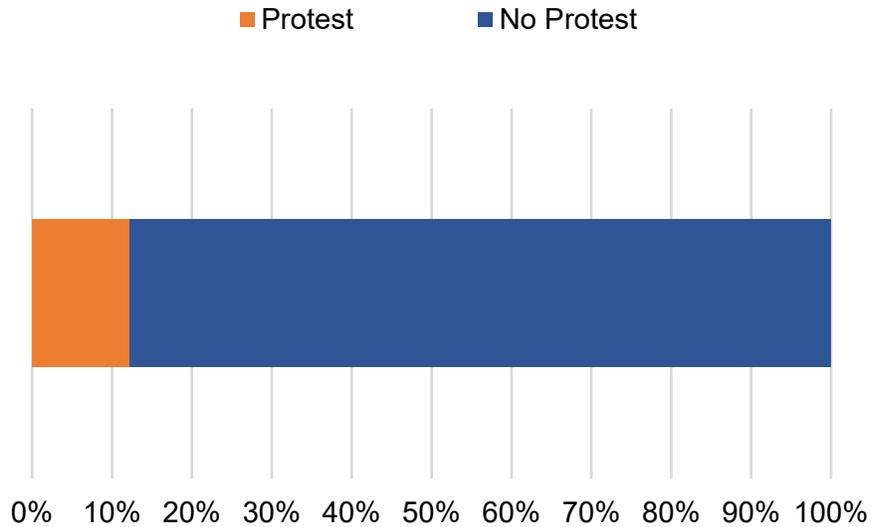
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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/04/15/lansing-capitol-protest-michigan-stay-home-order/5139472002/>

## How Prevalent Were Protests?

Nationally, we found that 12 percent of law enforcement agencies reported protest in their communities, which is no trivial amount. The remaining 88 percent did not report protests against COVID-19 restrictions.

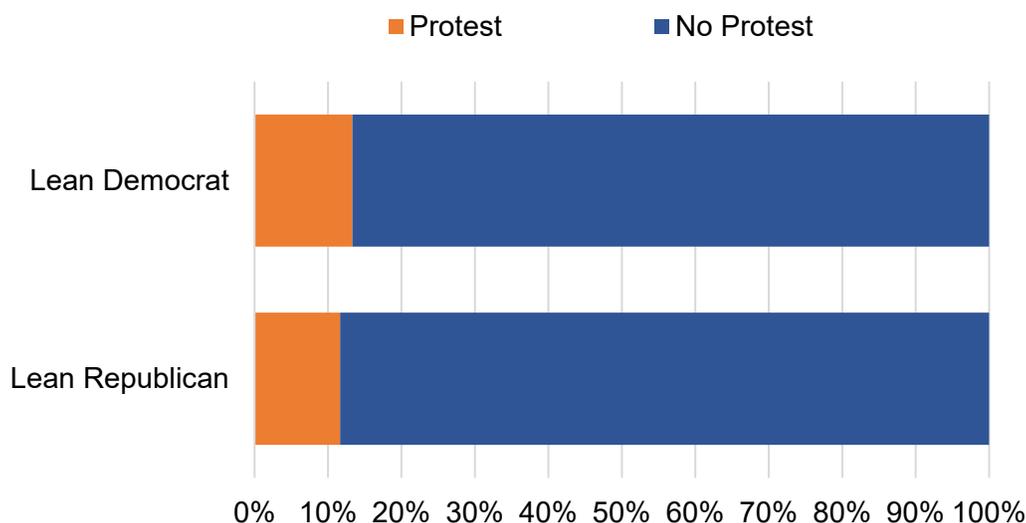


**Figure 1.** Percentage of law enforcement agencies reporting protests against COVID-19 restrictions.

## Protests Span Across Democrat and Republican Communities

The previous analysis showed that about 12 percent of law enforcement agencies reported protests in their communities, but the overall numbers may mask differences across particular localities. For one, many of these protests have been associated with conservative groups who have concerns about the impact of restrictions on the economy, so some might wonder if protests are concentrated in Republican-leaning areas.

To explore whether the partisan leaning of a community affects rates of protests, we split the data depending on how citizens of the locality voted in the 2016 presidential election. Based on this metric, it looks like community partisanship does not strongly predict protests. About 13 percent of law enforcement agencies residing in Democrat-leaning areas reported protests, while about 12 percent of their peers in Republican-leaning areas reported protests. This difference is both trivially small and not in the expected direction. So even if the protestors themselves have partisan ties, the localities in which protests are held do not reflect them.



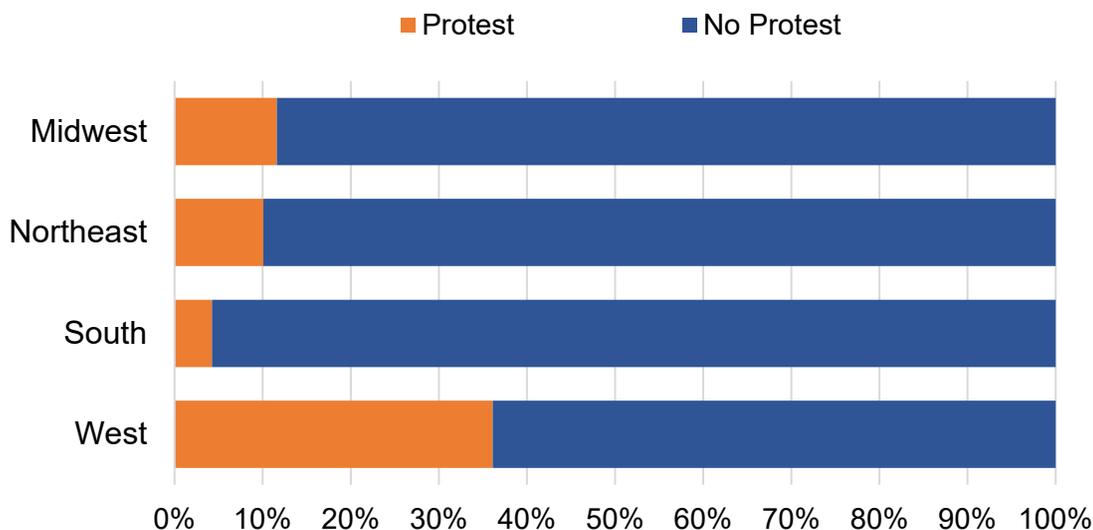
**Figure 2.** Percentage of law enforcement agencies reporting protests against COVID-19 restrictions, by partisan leaning. The partisan leaning of the community is determined by its county's vote share in the 2016 presidential election.

The fact that right- and left-leaning areas experienced protests at similar rates echoes a previous report by CivicPulse in which a survey of local elected officials expected community compliance with COVID-19 guidelines to erode regardless of partisanship.<sup>2</sup> Taken together, these surveys document the bi-partisan challenges communities face regarding the pandemic.

<sup>2</sup> See our report, "Should we open up? Our National Survey of Local Government Officials Shows We May Not Have A Choice." Available at <https://www.civicpulse.org/covid-series>.

## Protests are Concentrated in the American West

We also examined whether the rates of protests differed by geographic region. When splitting the data by the four U.S. census regions, we found a striking difference: the West experienced protests against COVID-19 restrictions at a far higher rate than any other region in the country.<sup>3</sup> 36 percent of the law enforcement agencies serving localities in the West reported protests, while that figure was no greater than 12 percent in the other three regions and as low as 4 percent in the South (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Percentage of law enforcement agencies reporting protests against COVID-19 restrictions, by region. Region is determined by the U.S. Census region of the state in which the law enforcement agency resides.

Anecdotes illustrating this larger geographic pattern are not hard to find. On April 17, citizens from various parts of Oregon went to the Capitol in Salem to protest stay-at-home orders.<sup>4</sup> A day later, hundreds of demonstrators in downtown San Diego, California called for the re-opening of businesses and beaches.<sup>5</sup> In April and May, dozens of more rallies were held throughout the region calling for their state and localities to open up.

While it is difficult to pin down one particular reason for why protests have been concentrated in the American West, we can rule out a few explanations. In a more sophisticated statistical analysis, we found that the association between the West and higher rates of protests remains even when accounting for the population size, urbanicity, partisanship, racial make-up, and average college-

<sup>3</sup> We follow the U.S. Census delineation of the West, which encompasses the Interior and Pacific West.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.koin.com/news/health/coronavirus/open-oregon-rally-arrives-in-salem/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cbs8.com/article/news/local/freedom-rally/509-cffea06c-d18e-4a45-8e8a-517961c6ae5b>

attainment of the community.<sup>6</sup> In fact, none of these other factors reduces the predictive power of geographic region (West) on protests. If none of these factors explain the regional differences, then what does?

One possibility is that protests happen when there is a disjuncture between policy and what citizens believe is warranted. On the policy side of this formulation, we might expect more restrictive policies in states ran by Democrat governors. On the citizen side, we can expect those residing in relatively rural, right-leaning localities to see the least benefit for aggressive restrictions. For example, one head of law enforcement said, "[w]e are a small county and have no major challenges. Only 13 verified cases so far."

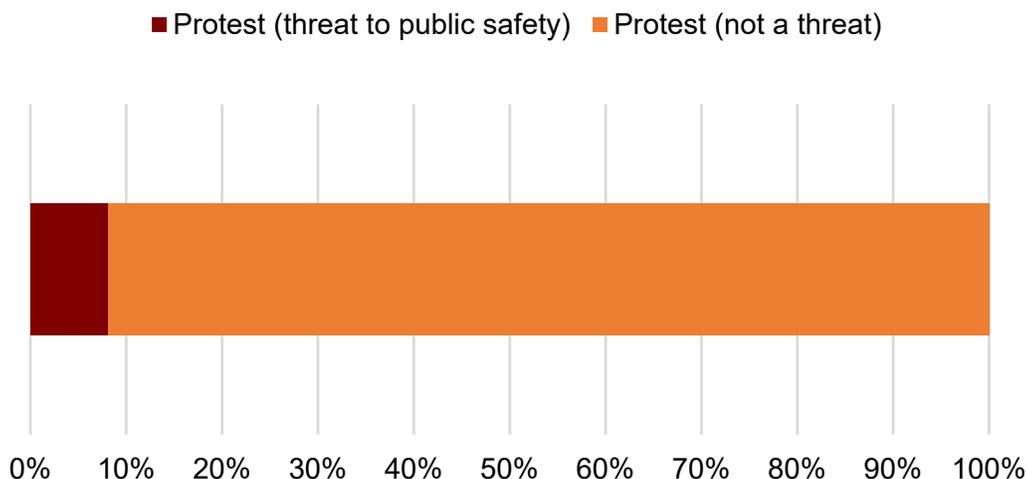
The West has the greatest gap in this regard: it has a higher proportion of Democrat governors than any other region but also includes a lot of relatively rural areas. This combination of factors could help to explain why so many localities have reported protests in the West.

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<sup>6</sup> In more technical terms, we conducted multivariate regression analysis using a variety of locality-attributes as covariates and found that the association between protests and region (West) remained positive and statistically significant.

## Most Protests Did Not Threaten Public Safety

Finally, with anecdotes about demonstrators wielding firearms and even rocket launchers, one might wonder to what extent the protests threatened public safety. To the contrary, almost all of the law enforcement agencies reported nonviolent protests. Among law enforcement agencies reporting a protest, only about 8 percent of them said that the protests threatened public safety. Given that only 12 percent of all respondents reported protests, this means that only 1 percent of law enforcement agencies overall had protests that were viewed as a public safety threat. In the April 2020 Michigan protests, for example, Lt. Darren Green of the Michigan State Police said that the protestors were “being respectful and not causing issues at all.”<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 4.** Among law enforcement officials reporting local protests, the proportion who say protests are a threat to public safety versus not a threat to public safety.

## Conclusion

If the Spring 2020 protests are any indication of what is to come, we should expect a sizeable minority of localities—especially those in the American West—to nonviolently protest COVID-19 restrictions. But whether the growing economic and political discontent in this country changes the frequency or intensity of such protests remains to be determined.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/04/15/lansing-capitol-protest-michigan-stay-home-order/5139472002/>

<sup>8</sup> To read more about the role of law enforcement agencies in managing local responses to COVID-19, including their views on enforcing public health restrictions, see Kugler, Oliver, Chu, & Lee, *American Law Enforcement Responses to COVID-19*, 111 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY ONLINE, (forthcoming 2021). [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3707087](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3707087).

# Appendix

## Methodology and Sample

CivicPulse uses Power Almanac’s continuously updated contact list of heads of law enforcement agencies associated with all townships, municipalities, and counties in the United States with populations of 1,000 or more (98% coverage).

From this list, CivicPulse invited a random sample of law enforcement officials to participate in a survey designed in collaboration with researchers at Northwestern University. 421 officials completed the survey, of which 361 answered the specific question relating to protests used in this report. Of these respondents, 20% of them represent county-level governments while the remaining 80% represent subcounty governments (Table A1). The survey fielding was completed in June 2020.

**Table A.1:** Survey Respondents by Position.

	Percent of Sample
County	20%
Municipality	69%
Township	11%



**Figure A.1:** Geographic distribution of the respondents.

The geographic distribution of the survey respondents approximates the population distribution of the United States (Figure A.1). To characterize the representativeness of our survey sample, we match these respondents to the U.S. Census using the FIPS system. Tables A.2 compare the sample and population medians for four Census-area spatial characteristics at the county level: population size, urbanicity, the proportion of residents with a 4-year college education, and the proportion of residents who voted for Trump in 2016.

**Table A.2:** Sample Representativeness

	Sample Median	Population Median
Proportion Urban	0.67	0.40
Proportion College-educated	0.26	0.19
Population Size	113,000	26,000
GOP Vote Share	0.57	0.67

Survey weights were also tabulated based on these four county-level characteristics using a post-stratification raking procedure. The findings in this report are consistent with or without the use of survey weights.

## Questionnaire

Last month, there was some news about citizens protesting against COVID-19 restrictions like social distancing, lockdowns, etc. Some of these protests have been said to threaten public safety. Which of the following statements describes how this is playing out in your community?

- There have been no acts of protest over COVID-19.
- There have been acts of protest, but they have not posed a threat to public safety.
- There have been acts of protest, and they have posed a threat to public safety.