

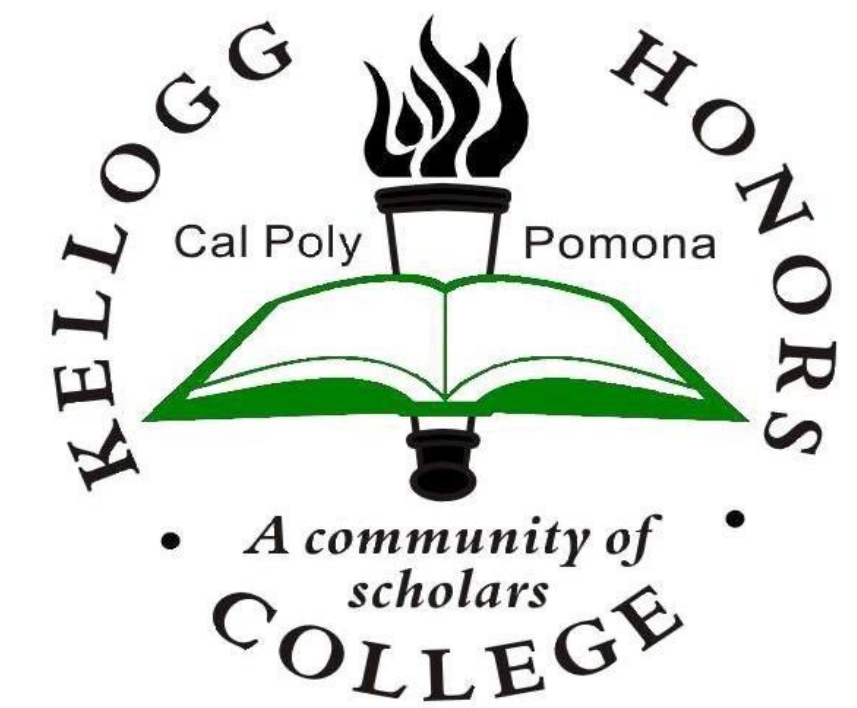
The Link Between the Opposition of Flag Desecration and National Anthem Kneeling



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Kellogg Honors College Capstone Project



Abstract: As most Americans are aware, controversy has shrouded professional athletes in recent years, most notably Colin Kaepernick, who have made the decision to kneel while the playing of the national anthem occurred during professional sporting events. The people that oppose this movement refer to it as unpatriotic, and disrespectful to the United States military and veterans. These opposing attitudes to the athletes' protests reflect a similar movement rooted in the patriotic defense of American symbols, the movement to criminalize flag desecration. This movement gathered momentum a few decades ago after the Supreme Court ruled in favor of protecting flag desecration as a form of symbolic speech in the 1989 landmark decision of *Texas v. Johnson*. The patriotic outcry against this decision was massive, with many even calling for a constitutional amendment to prohibit flag desecration. With my thesis, I will examine the extent the movement to criminalize flag desecration is tied with the attitudes opposing professional athletes kneeling during the national anthem. This study is important because this is a link that has not previously been heavily examined, and will yield useful information about people's attitudes toward patriotism, and indicate the strength of constitutional protections toward unpopular political minorities.

Literature Review:

Through my research of different literature surrounding both opposition groups, I was able to find a plethora of valuable information that helped me draw commonalities and differences between the two. The first area with strong comparisons between the two movements was their mutual struggle with protections under the First Amendment. Despite *Texas v. Johnson* having established that flag desecration was a protected form of symbolic speech, there was strong support for legislature and even constitutional amendments banning desecration. Similarly, there is massive public backlash against the movement of professional athletes that have taken to kneeling during the national anthem, with many calling the NFL to ban public kneeling. In addition to the First Amendment paradox, a major factor that explains the motivations of both groups is the intense reverence for the flag and other patriotic symbols in American culture, as well as the sports world. Due to the deeply embedded patriotism in our culture, it is inevitable that massive backlash will occur when someone breaks these norms, such as flag burners or national anthem kneelers. These patriotic values also helped motivate both political parties to attempt to criminalize flag desecration, however, there was more partisan polarization with the response to the NFL protests, due to the racial element of the protests and intense political polarization. Along with political party identification, other demographics of the two groups were examined, such as education for anti-flag desecration individuals and race for those who support or oppose the anthem protests.

Hypotheses: From my review of literature, I was able to formulate several hypotheses surrounding my study of the link between the movement to criminalize flag desecration and those with political attitudes opposing the athletes who protest by kneeling during the national anthem. Due to the fact that 77% of Americans support upholding free speech rights for those with unpopular opinions (PEW, 2017), but a majority of Americans support both criminalizing flag desecration (Taylor, 2006) and oppose kneeling during the national anthem (Casteel, 2017), I hypothesize that most people I survey will support upholding free speech rights, but a smaller number will support allowing flag desecration and anthem kneeling. Because the flag has a sacred place in American civic ritual (Sabella, 2019), I hypothesize that when prompted about their beliefs toward flag desecration and national anthem kneeling, many respondents will have strong negative opinions in regard to their "sacred" traditions being disregarded. With more Republicans than Democrats supporting criminalizing flag desecration, but with a somewhat bipartisan divide (Carroll, 2006), I hypothesize that a higher percentage of Republicans will support criminalizing flag desecration than Democrats, by a modest margin. In terms of the opposition to kneeling, on the other hand, because of the more polarized divide in support for the NFL protests (Dann, 2018), I hypothesize that a vast majority of Republicans will oppose the protests, while most Democrats will support them. Finally, in terms of demographics, because of the heightened level of empathy for the racial justice motivations behind the national anthem kneeling protests (Chaplin and Montez de Oca, 2019), more respondents who are minorities, particularly Black, will be less supportive of a kneeling ban than whites.

Data Analysis: Due to the closure of Cal Poly Pomona's campus stemming from the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak, I was unable to use the university-provided SPSS software. Thus, I analyzed my data remotely using JASP, a free statistical analysis program that mimics the basic statistical functions of SPSS. Before uploading my data to the JASP software, I coded my survey answers with numbers in Google Sheets, so they could be input into a quantitative software. After doing so, I uploaded the data from Google Sheets into JASP, and made sure all of the variables were correctly labeled as nominal, ordinal, or interval ratio. I then ran several tests to determine the relationships between several of the variables included in my survey. The first variable I tested from my hypotheses was race, and its relationship with both those who supported banning national anthem kneeling and American flag desecration. The first race demographic I examined was that of the respondents who identified as African American or Black. Out of my 49 responses, only five labeled themselves that category. Of those five responses, all five responded that they did not support banning kneeling during the National Anthem. According to my hypotheses, this was to be expected, as the racial justice motivating the kneeling protests serves as a good motivator for sympathy in the Black community. I also examined the white respondents' opinions on banning kneeling during the national anthem. Out of the ten white responses, nine were opposed to a ban, and one was in favor. While my hypothesis was technically correct, a higher percentage of white respondents were in favor of banning kneeling, a vast majority of whites (ninety percent) were still opposed to a ban. The unpopularity of the kneeling ban was consistent throughout my entire sample size, with 41 out of the 47 respondents being opposed to the ban. This actually contrasts with my initial hypothesis that a majority of people would be in favor of a kneeling ban, due to its popularity in national polls. The question of criminalizing American flag desecration, however, was much more controversial throughout my sample size. Of the 47 responses to the question, 28 were opposed to its criminalization, and 19 were in favor. While a majority of the respondents were still in favor of protecting symbolic speech rights, the decision was not as decisively popular, as there was an almost exact 60/40 percent divide between those who were in favor and those who were opposed. Like the results on national anthem kneeling, the response on American flag criminalization was contrary to my hypotheses, as I had predicted that a majority of respondents would be in favor of the criminalization of American flag desecration, due to its popularity in national polls. The next variable from my hypotheses that I examined in my survey was political ideology. Out of the 49 respondents who answered the question, five identified themselves as Republicans, 14 as Democrats, seven as Independent/Other, and twenty-three as Non-political. Due to the high proportion of non-political and differently affiliated (from the two main parties) respondents, there is a slight deviation from my hypotheses, which only accounted for the Democratic and Republican parties, the two major parties in the United States. Of the 49 people who stated their political party when they responded, 14 marked that they identified as Democrats. Out of those 14, 11 responded that they opposed a kneeling ban, while three responded that they were in favor. This was in accordance with my hypothesis that Democrats are more likely to be opposed to a kneeling ban. In terms of criminalizing flag desecration, this was slightly more controversial, with 5 respondents in favor of criminalization, and 9 opposed. This slight controversy also corresponds with my hypothesis.

Methodology: Due to the innovative nature of my topic, there is a lack of existing data that examines my aforementioned variables in an in-depth context that directly compares those who oppose athletes kneeling during the national anthem and the movement to criminalize American flag desecration, so I conducted my own survey to examine the relationship between the two groups. The population I surveyed consisted of those present at Cal Poly Pomona on the day I conducted the survey, Thursday, February 27th. In order to ensure the least biased and most representative sample of Cal Poly students possible, I stood by the Bronco Student Center, a popular location utilized by a wide variety of students, and asked every third person to walk by to fill out my survey. In order to obtain the maximum comfort and anonymity of my respondents, I printed out the surveys and had them fill out the answers privately. With my survey, I asked questions relating to my most crucial dependent variables, whether they supported banning National Anthem kneeling and American flag desecration. I also asked questions pertaining to independent variables that were possible influences to the dependent variables, including age, race, religion, religiosity, political party, gender, level of patriotism, and if they support the protection of controversial speech. I ordered the questions strategically to avoid any bias with the dependent variables being related or too close to each other on the survey.

Conclusion: Generally, my findings from my survey reflected what I had initially hypothesized. However, I must acknowledge, that these survey data were gathered in February, months before the current politically charged situation sparked by the death of George Floyd and nationwide protests against police brutality. If I were to continue researching this topic, I would take new surveys to gather opinions that reflect these cultural changes, and look into any new publications that examined the effect of this phenomenon on American culture. Also, due to COVID-19 restrictions, I did not collect as large of a sample as I hoped, I would be interested in collecting a larger sample obtain a more accurate measure of the general population.