

Black Lives Matter Movement vs. the January 6 Insurrection

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Introduction

The Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 and the attack on the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, are frequently compared in American political debates. Supporters of one side often point to the violence associated with the other, while discussions on social media tend to reduce both events to selected photographs, damaged buildings, or isolated confrontations. Such comparisons are understandable because both involved large crowds, political anger, confrontations with law enforcement, and extensive national media coverage. Nevertheless, treating them as equivalent ignores important differences in their purposes, scale, organization, targets, and relationship to democratic government.

The Black Lives Matter movement emerged as a response to police violence, racial discrimination, and unequal treatment within the criminal justice system. The demonstrations that followed George Floyd's killing in May 2020 sought to draw attention to these concerns and pressure public institutions to adopt reforms. Although violence, looting, and property destruction occurred during a minority of the demonstrations, most events associated with the movement were peaceful.

January 6 had a different and narrower objective. A crowd of Donald Trump's supporters entered the Capitol while Congress was conducting the constitutionally required process of counting electoral votes from the 2020 presidential election. The attack interrupted the proceedings, endangered elected officials and staff, injured police officers, and attempted to prevent or delay the peaceful transfer of presidential power.

The two events therefore should not be evaluated solely according to the amount of visible disorder they produced. Their intentions and political consequences must also be considered. The Black Lives Matter movement principally sought changes within the democratic system, whereas the January 6 attack sought to obstruct a central democratic procedure. This distinction does not excuse crimes committed during racial-justice demonstrations, but it explains why the two events were fundamentally different.

Understanding the Black Lives Matter Movement

Black Lives Matter began in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin. Over time, the phrase developed into a broad and decentralized movement

addressing police violence, racial inequality, discrimination, and the treatment of Black Americans by public institutions.

It is important to distinguish between the wider movement, particular organizations using the Black Lives Matter name, and the millions of people who have participated in demonstrations associated with the cause. The movement has never functioned as a single organization capable of directing every protester, local group, or public gathering. Consequently, the misconduct of an individual at a protest cannot automatically be attributed to every participant or to a national leadership structure.

The movement gained unprecedented attention after George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020. Video footage of Floyd's death circulated widely, leading to demonstrations in cities, suburbs, and small towns throughout the United States. The protests also spread internationally as people connected Floyd's death to broader concerns about discrimination and police accountability.

Research indicates that the demonstrations affected public discussion of race and policing. Reny and Newman (2021) found that the protests increased recognition of anti-Black discrimination among some groups and reduced favourability toward the police among certain members of the public. Drakulich and Denver (2022) similarly found that public responses to the protests were shaped by political identity, racial attitudes, and how the demonstrations were presented.

The movement's impact should not be measured only through immediate legislation. It also changed public language, encouraged institutions to review their policies, and made police conduct a central national issue. A 2025 Pew Research Center survey found that 52% of American adults continued to express support for Black Lives Matter, although support had declined from 67% in June 2020. The same survey found widespread doubt that the national focus following Floyd's killing had produced enough improvement in Black Americans' lives (Pew Research Center, 2025).

Were the Black Lives Matter Protests Violent?

A fair analysis must acknowledge that violence and destruction did occur during some demonstrations associated with Black Lives Matter. Businesses were damaged, buildings were burned, people were assaulted, and looting occurred in several cities. These incidents caused genuine harm to residents, employees, business owners, and local communities. Political sympathy for a movement's general purpose does not justify arson, assault, theft, or the destruction of private and public property.

However, it is inaccurate to describe the entire 2020 protest movement as violent. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project examined more than 7,750 demonstrations associated with Black Lives Matter between May 26 and August 22, 2020. It found that more than 93% involved no serious violence or destructive activity (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, 2020).

This finding requires careful interpretation. It does not mean that the remaining percentage caused no

substantial damage. Nor does it establish who initiated every violent confrontation. Some incidents involved protesters, opportunistic looters, counterprotesters, unidentified individuals, or law-enforcement responses. The data classify events according to whether violence or destruction occurred, not whether a recognized Black Lives Matter organization directed the misconduct.

The statistics nevertheless challenge the impression that violence defined the movement. Most participants marched, carried signs, delivered speeches, knelt in silence, organized vigils, or called for public-policy reforms without attacking people or damaging property. The most dramatic incidents received extensive coverage because fire, conflict, and destruction naturally attract more media attention than an orderly march.

The accurate conclusion is therefore not that every Black Lives Matter protest was peaceful. It is that violence occurred during a minority of events and should not be used to characterize thousands of peaceful demonstrations or millions of lawful participants.

What Happened on January 6?

On January 6, 2021, Congress met in a joint session to count the electoral votes from the 2020 presidential election. This process is normally ceremonial, although members of Congress may raise objections under procedures established by law.

Outside the Capitol, President Donald Trump addressed supporters who had gathered in Washington, D.C., following weeks of false claims that widespread fraud had deprived him of victory. After the rally, thousands moved toward the Capitol. Members of the crowd broke through security barriers, fought with police officers, entered the building, damaged property, and occupied congressional spaces.

Congress suspended its proceedings as lawmakers, staff members, journalists, and others were evacuated or instructed to shelter. The crowd entered the Senate chamber, offices, corridors, and other restricted areas. Some participants searched for political leaders, while threats were directed at Vice President Mike Pence and members of Congress.

The Senate committees that later examined the attack described it as a “violent and unprecedented attack” on the Capitol, elected officials, law-enforcement officers, and the democratic process. The House Select Committee concluded that the attack formed part of a broader effort to overturn the election result and prevent the lawful transfer of presidential power (U.S. House Select Committee, 2022; U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs & Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, 2021).

Nearly 150 law-enforcement officers were injured while defending the Capitol. Officers were struck, crushed, sprayed with chemical irritants, and attacked with improvised weapons. The Government Accountability Office reported that approximately 150 Capitol Police officers documented 293 uses of

force against attackers, all of which the Capitol Police determined to be justified (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2022).

Congress returned later that night and completed the electoral count. The attack therefore failed to prevent the transfer of power, but it temporarily disrupted a constitutional procedure and exposed serious weaknesses in intelligence sharing, security preparation, and emergency decision-making.

Why January 6 Is Described as an Insurrection

The word *insurrection* has both political and legal meanings. In ordinary historical and political discussion, it generally refers to an organized or collective uprising against governmental authority. January 6 is often described as an insurrection because participants used force to interfere with Congress while it was performing a constitutional duty.

This description does not mean that every person present in Washington that day committed the same offence. Some attended the rally without entering Capitol grounds. Others crossed restricted areas but did not assault anyone. Some entered the building, while a smaller group planned coordinated action or violently attacked law-enforcement officers. Legal responsibility depended on each individual's conduct and evidence.

The criminal cases reflected these differences. Defendants faced charges ranging from unlawful entry and disorderly conduct to assaulting officers, obstructing an official proceeding, destroying government property, and engaging in conspiracy. Leaders of the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers were convicted of seditious conspiracy, demonstrating that at least some participants had engaged in coordinated efforts against lawful governmental authority.

By January 2025, more than 1,500 people had been charged in connection with the Capitol attack. President Trump subsequently granted wide-ranging clemency on January 20, 2025, for offences connected to January 6. That decision altered the legal consequences faced by many defendants, but it did not erase the documented conduct, injuries, security failures, or interruption of the electoral count.

The Most Important Difference: Political Intent

The clearest distinction between Black Lives Matter and January 6 concerns political intent.

Black Lives Matter protesters sought to influence public policy, challenge police conduct, and draw attention to racial inequality. Their demands varied. Some called for improved training, independent investigations, body cameras, restrictions on particular [police tactics](#), or stronger disciplinary systems. Others advocated reducing police budgets or replacing certain police functions with social and mental-health services.

These proposals were controversial, but they were directed toward changing laws, budgets, institutional practices, and public attitudes. Protesters used demonstrations to pressure elected officials and public agencies. In other words, their principal objective was reform within the political system.

The January 6 attackers targeted the operation of the political system itself. Their immediate purpose was to prevent or delay Congress from formally recognizing the outcome of a lawful election. They did not merely gather outside the Capitol to express opposition to the result. Members of the crowd overcame police lines, entered a restricted government building, and forced the electoral count to stop temporarily.

The difference can be stated simply: Black Lives Matter demonstrators generally demanded that government act, whereas the January 6 attackers attempted to prevent government from completing a constitutionally required action.

Political purpose does not make every tactic acceptable. A racial-justice protester who burns a building or assaults another person commits a crime, regardless of the justice of the broader cause. Similarly, a January 6 participant who attended only a lawful rally should not be assigned responsibility for conduct in which that person did not participate. Individual actions must be judged individually.

Nevertheless, when comparing the events as political phenomena, their central purposes were not equivalent.

Protest, Riot, and Insurrection Are Not Interchangeable Terms

Much of the confusion surrounding these events comes from the careless use of the words *protest*, *riot*, and *insurrection*.

A protest is an organized expression of opposition or support. The First Amendment protects “the right of the people peaceably to assemble” and to petition the government for change. This protection applies whether the cause is popular or unpopular (National Archives and Records Administration, 1791).

A riot involves serious public disorder, frequently including violence, destruction, or threats to safety. A peaceful demonstration may turn into a riot, but that does not mean every participant becomes a rioter. It is possible for lawful protesters, violent individuals, police officers, journalists, bystanders, and opportunistic criminals to be present in the same area.

An insurrection goes beyond ordinary public disorder because it challenges or resists governmental authority. The January 6 attack had this additional political dimension. It was not merely a disturbance

near a government building. The building was entered while Congress was performing the process necessary to confirm the next president.

The distinction matters because comparing all unrest through property damage alone produces misleading conclusions. A demonstration that causes extensive commercial damage may have severe economic consequences. An attack causing less property damage could still pose a greater constitutional danger if its purpose is to overthrow an election result or prevent the government from functioning.

Similarities Between the Two Events

Despite their fundamental differences, the Black Lives Matter demonstrations and January 6 shared several characteristics.

First, both were driven by deep distrust. Black Lives Matter supporters distrusted police departments, prosecutors, and criminal-justice institutions that they believed treated Black citizens unfairly. Many January 6 participants distrusted election officials, courts, news organizations, and government agencies because they believed unsupported claims that the election had been stolen.

Second, both movements were amplified through social media. Online platforms helped people arrange transportation, distribute information, circulate videos, raise money, and strengthen shared political identities. However, the same platforms also spread misleading claims, rumours, emotional footage, and decontextualized images.

Third, neither crowd was completely uniform. Black Lives Matter events included civil-rights activists, students, families, religious groups, political organizations, local residents, reform advocates, and, at some locations, people interested in theft or destruction. The January 6 gathering included ordinary Trump supporters, conspiracy theorists, organized extremist groups, militia members, political activists, and people who committed different levels of unlawful conduct.

Finally, both events forced Americans to debate the limits of political action. Democracy protects passionate dissent, but it does not protect assault, arson, looting, or the forcible disruption of government. People may defend a cause while condemning crimes committed in its name.

Key Differences at a Glance

Area of comparison	Black Lives Matter demonstrations	January 6 Capitol attack
Primary objective	Draw attention to racial injustice and demand changes in policing and public policy	Stop or delay congressional certification of the 2020 election
Time and scale	Thousands of events across many months and locations	One concentrated attack at the Capitol on a specific day
Main target	Public opinion, police departments, local governments, legislatures, and institutional practices	Congress while it was conducting the electoral count
General method	Marches, speeches, vigils, petitions, boycotts, and civil disobedience	Breaching barriers, entering the Capitol, confronting police, and interrupting proceedings
Prevalence of violence	More than 93% of documented demonstrations had no serious violence or destruction	Violence was central to the breach of the Capitol
Relationship to democracy	Sought to influence policies and institutions through public pressure	Attempted to obstruct the lawful transfer of presidential power
Organization	Broad, decentralized social movement with many independent local participants	Mixed crowd containing individual supporters and organized extremist groups
Constitutional significance	Exercise of assembly and petition when peaceful	Direct interference with a constitutionally required governmental process

Comparing the Police Responses

One of the most debated aspects of the comparison is the difference in law-enforcement preparation and response.

During the summer of 2020, protesters in several cities encountered heavily equipped police units,

chemical irritants, batons, projectiles, mass arrests, curfews, and National Guard deployments. In Portland alone, four federal agencies reported more than 700 uses of less-lethal force between June 26 and September 30, 2020. Amnesty International documented 125 incidents in which it concluded that law-enforcement officers used force against protesters, journalists, medics, legal observers, or bystanders across 40 states and Washington, D.C. (Amnesty International, 2020; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2021).

By contrast, the Capitol was inadequately protected when the January 6 crowd arrived. The relatively limited barriers and delayed reinforcements created an impression that authorities had underestimated the threat. Subsequent reviews found that federal agencies had identified possible violence beforehand, but some failed to evaluate or share critical intelligence effectively. The Government Accountability Office reported that all 10 agencies it examined had identified potential threats, while the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Capitol Police had identified credible threats (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2023).

The contrast has led many observers to ask whether a predominantly Black crowd would have been permitted to approach and enter the Capitol under similar circumstances. This is a legitimate question in a country with a documented history of unequal policing. However, the evidence should not be oversimplified.

Capitol Police officers did resist the attackers, used substantial force, suffered serious injuries, and remained badly outnumbered at several locations. The failure on January 6 was not that every officer welcomed the crowd. It involved poor preparation, intelligence failures, inadequate staffing, confused command structures, and delays in obtaining assistance.

Therefore, the comparison reveals a troubling inconsistency in preparation and threat perception, but it should not erase the sacrifices made by the officers who defended Congress.

Media Framing and False Equivalence

Public understanding of both events has been shaped by selective images. A video of a burning building can be used to portray the entire Black Lives Matter movement as violent. A photograph of a calm interaction between one officer and a January 6 participant can be used to minimize the wider attack. Neither approach captures the complete event.

A false equivalence occurs when two situations are treated as identical because they share one visible feature while their most important differences are ignored. Both the 2020 unrest and January 6 included unlawful conduct. That shared fact allows comparison, but it does not establish moral, political, or constitutional equivalence.

It is reasonable to condemn the destruction associated with some Black Lives Matter demonstrations. Residents who lost businesses or felt unsafe should not be told that their suffering was unimportant. It

is equally reasonable to reject attempts to describe January 6 as an ordinary tourist visit or a harmless political rally.

A consistent democratic position condemns violence regardless of the offender's political identity. It also evaluates political events according to evidence rather than partisan loyalty.

Effects on American Democracy

The Black Lives Matter movement tested whether democratic institutions would respond to sustained demands from citizens who believed that the legal system had failed them. The movement encouraged public debate, influenced local elections, changed institutional policies, and placed racial disparities at the centre of national politics. Its long-term policy achievements remain disputed, and many Americans believe that the attention following George Floyd's death did not produce sufficient reform.

January 6 tested whether the United States could complete a peaceful transfer of power after a bitterly contested election. Attorney General Merrick Garland later described the attack as an assault on a cornerstone of government: the "peaceful transfer of power." Congress eventually completed its duty, but the event demonstrated how misinformation, political pressure, and organized violence could threaten democratic procedures.

These effects are not equivalent. A democracy must allow citizens to protest government institutions, including the police and Congress. It cannot function, however, if political groups may use force to overturn election results whenever they reject the outcome.

Conclusion

The Black Lives Matter movement and the January 6 Capitol attack were both products of an intensely divided political environment, but they represented different forms of political action.

Black Lives Matter was a broad racial-justice movement that sought to change policing, public policy, and social attitudes. Most of its demonstrations were peaceful, although serious violence and property destruction occurred at a minority of events. Those crimes should be acknowledged and condemned without using them to misrepresent the movement as a whole.

January 6 was a concentrated attack on Congress during the certification of a presidential election. Its defining purpose was not simply to express dissatisfaction with government. It was to obstruct the constitutional process through which presidential power was transferred. The violence against officers and the forced suspension of congressional proceedings were central to the event rather than peripheral incidents occurring somewhere within a nationwide series of demonstrations.

The comparison should therefore be based on more than casualty figures, arrest totals, or property damage. Intention, target, scale, prevalence of violence, and constitutional consequences all matter.

Peaceful protest is essential to democracy because it allows citizens to challenge injustice and demand reform. Violence and destruction remain unlawful even when attached to a legitimate cause. An attack intended to stop the lawful transfer of political power presents an additional danger because it threatens the democratic system through which reform and disagreement are supposed to occur.

The strongest position is not to excuse violence committed by one political side while exaggerating violence committed by another. It is to apply consistent standards while recognizing meaningful differences. Black Lives Matter primarily demanded that American democracy fulfil its promises more equally. The January 6 attackers attempted to prevent American democracy from completing one of its most basic constitutional responsibilities.

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