Taking a Knee, Taking a Stand: Social Networks and Identity Salience in the 2017 NFL Protests

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Abstract

Beginning with President Trump’s speech against the national anthem protestors in September 2017, the authors consider how external sociopolitical events interacted with the network structure of the 2017 National Football League (NFL) to alter the salience of member identities and the resultant patterns of protest activity within the league. Using group membership data on the full population of 2,453 football players, the analysis tracks protest participation by membership in race and status groups and by the network variables of degree, betweenness, and closeness centrality. Black and elite players are both overrepresented among protesters throughout the season. The margins of overrepresentation narrowed during an increase in demonstrations after Trump’s first criticisms but had widened by the end of the season. The mean centralities of the protesting groups varied from week to week because of an increase in the salience of the NFL player identity and its interaction with racial identities. In general, protesters had lower mean degree and closeness centralities and a higher mean betweenness centrality than players who abstained from protest. Those who participated in high-risk forms of activism also tended to have lower mean degree and closeness centralities and a higher mean betweenness centrality than those who opted for low-risk demonstrations. These findings indicate that sociopolitical events can implicate different identities, changing their salience in the decision to join or abstain from a social movement.

Keywords

sports, social movements, identity politics, activism, networks

By the end of the 2016 National Football League (NFL) season, the image of San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem had become iconic—and in some observers’ opinions, infamous. Kaepernick’s stance entered a long and rich history of civil rights protest in sports that stems back through the 1960s to the turn of the nineteenth century and perhaps earlier. In subsequent interviews, he explained that his weekly demonstration was an objection not only to ongoing police brutality and racial inequality but also to the institutions that perpetuated these problems. After Kaepernick became unemployed for the 2017 season, debates began as to whether the NFL should be counted among these institutions.

Kaepernick’s protest garnered enough visibility, political drama, and social contention to draw the attention of President Donald Trump. When other players revived the protest in Kaepernick’s absence during the 2017 regular season, Trump quickly condemned them in a series of polemic speeches and tweets that featured ethnonationalist frames

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alongside riffs on his “You’re fired” catchphrase (see Appendix A). Other executive members doubled down on these sentiments. For example, Houston Texans owner Bob McNair was quoted in a players-owners meeting in 2017 saying, “We can’t have the inmates running the prison” (Wickersham and Van Natta 2017). The ensuing media event broached topics ranging from the meaning of patriotism to the ubiquity of race relations in America.

Instead of discouraging the protesters, Trump’s inflammatory comments prompted NFL players’ participation in the movement to surge as entire teams rallied around their “brothers in the league” (King 2017). As an example of rapid recruitment to high-risk, high-cost activism, this development raises an interesting case study for examining networks in social movements. Most network-based research emphasizes the microstructural interaction between actor position and behavior. The rapid change in NFL protest participation during the 2017 season indicates that how network position affects behavior is not static. Rather, broad sociopolitical context can directly influence how positional characteristics inform behavior. Although political events can change activity by triggering mobilization efforts throughout a network, our study is concerned with how political circumstances change behavior by directly implicating the social identity that a network represents. Simmelian theories on the structural nature of identity conceptualize social network ties as loci of nested, interrelating, and countervailing identities (Simmel [1908] 1971). Taken together, ties within the NFL network function as the site of individual members’ identities as NFL players, which may be stronger or weaker depending upon the number and multiplexity of these ties. The NFL player identity, however, does not exist in isolation, and each member of the NFL network also belongs to racial and status groups. Sociopolitical events may implicate any one of these identities, changing its salience and influencing an individual’s behavior. When President Trump insulted the NFL, the salience of players’ NFL identity should have increased in response, as it would to any threat. This change should have expanded protest participation throughout the league network, as even less-central players felt compelled to act on the appeal to their league identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Movements as Social Networks

As the field of sociological network analysis has matured, social movements have proved to be one of its most perennially popular subjects. Social scientists have applied structural approaches to diverse aspects of social movements, from the recruitment of new members to the development of organizational coalitions (Gould 1991; McAdam 1986; Snow, Zurcher, and Eckland-Olson 1980; Tilly 1998). Despite the large volume of research on the structural dynamics of activist groups, the fundamental question of how to define the interaction between network variables and actor behavior remains unresolved. Critics of structural, or “positional,” network analysis methodologies have objected to their tendency to flatten complex social relationships (Gould 1991; Krinsky and Crossley 2014; Saunders 2007). Gould (1991:716) noted that the practice of “counting [social] ties” often ignores content and multiplexity. Related measures of “structural equivalence” have drawn criticism for potential “determinism” (Saunders 2007). Conversely, overly specific definitions of social relationships risk circumscribing the diverse range of connections that operate within a social circle. Examining a network in its sociopolitical context can account for changes and variation in the network’s behavioral patterns without lapsing into determinism or requiring an infeasible degree of specificity in the enumeration of social ties. The interactions among members, the network, and their circumstances are the source of the variety of behavior that occurs in a network over the course of a social movement, as its context continually alters the salience of the members’ identification with the network and with other groups.

Network structures defy standardized models largely because they are dynamic, responding to changes in circumstance. The literature acknowledging the interaction between broader sociopolitical context and social movements is extensive. At the microstructural level, some political opportunity theorists have considered how networks predict individual recruitment as a product of forces encouraging and discouraging participation (Gould 1991; McAdam 1986; Snow et al. 1980). Referencing Granovetter’s (1973) foundational work on tie strength, McAdam (1986) offered compelling arguments for the importance of strong ties to participation in “high-risk, high-cost” activism. Additional network analyses of social movements have also presented support for the role of structural factors in determining participation type (Gould 1991; Ray et al. 2003; Rosenthal et al. 1985; Tarrow 1998). Nonetheless, how microstructural network factors translate contextual change into variation in individual behavior is unclear (Stevenson and Greenburg 2000).
Many researchers operationalize alteration in an individual’s network as changes in tie type or number, which tend to occur during the process of forming an activist identity after an individual joins a social movement (McAdam 1986). Similar theories describing “positive feedback” spurring collective action (Biggs 2003) and the “thresholds” of network participation (Granovetter 1973) fail to theorize an initial structural impetus for increased participation. In this study we argue that part of a network’s dynamism arises from variability in the individual’s relationship to it; even without drastic shifts in network structure, developments in socio-political circumstance may change the salience of otherwise unaltered network factors.

Simmel ([1908] 1971) conceptualized an individual who belongs to several social groups, each of which promotes an identity through “influences, interests, and relationships that attach the personality to its social circle” (p. 252). The composite of these group-based identities, in turn, represents the full individual identity. Identity is subject to constant variability and contestation, following one of Simmel’s key insights: an individual’s composite group identities do not exercise constant, equal influence. Ceteris paribus, small or densely connected groups will permit less differentiation among their members than larger groups and will presumably exert more control over behavior. Extrapolating Simmel’s theories on real-world dynamics allows a reimagining of the social network not merely as a flowchart for information diffusion or resource acquisition but as a diagram of its members’ nested identities, which may be complementary, concentric, or contradictory. Drawing on Stryker’s (1968) work on hierarchies of identity, McAdam and Paulsen (1993) observed that whether individuals respond to appeals to join a movement depends upon the salience of the identity the movement invokes, weighted against the demands of countervailing identities. As the identity implied in a movement becomes more salient relative to other identities, the likelihood of joining the movement increases. Incorporating Simmel’s observations on identity, external socio-political circumstances may alter the salience of an identity by either threatening or promoting it.

To decide which ties to measure in a network analysis, it is helpful to use Oliver’s (1989) description of political events as “occasions for deciding” (p. 11) whether to participate in a movement. Certain identities will have much higher stakes in these decisions than others, because of the costs and risks involved (e.g., McAdam 1986). Defining independent variables as cost-bearing identities indicates that the boundaries of the network should correspond with the groups (i.e., identities) that are most implicated by, and therefore hold the “highest stakes” in, the decision opportunity.

When evaluated using a Simmelian theoretical frame, many network-driven analyses of social movements support this guideline. In their study of movement and countermovement dynamics, Meyer and Staggenborg (1996:1639) proposed that the most sustainable countermovements are those that are able to activate larger political divisions, maximizing the number of individuals who feel threatened. These findings imply that broad identities—loosely connected “big circles” in Simmelian terms—may become salient enough to spur participation when they are implicated, though they may not initially be strong enough to produce spontaneous action. Similarly, in a study on strike activity and positive feedback, Biggs (2003) acknowledged that exogenous factors may “trigger” rapid increases in movement participation (p. 220), but whether they do so depend upon potential recruits’ positive response to the question “Are they like us?” (p. 227). In other studies, the concepts of attitudinal affinities, biographical availability, and countervailing forces make the same point (Dion 2000; Killian 1984; McAdam 1986; Snow et al. 1980; Tarrow 1998). How network members define “us” and “them,” however, depends upon the relative salience of their group identities.

Racial Equality and Sports Activism

The relative salience of group identities is particularly interesting to observe in a small, exclusive community such as the NFL. The football industry’s long work hours, high visibility, shared sponsors, team structure, and draft system ensure the formation of many multiplex ties among actors and relatively strong identification as “NFL players.” Recently, this identity was directly implicated, with high drama, in the movement against racial inequality. During the 2016 season, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick began first sitting out, and later kneeling through, the national anthem at the beginning of NFL games to protest racism and police brutality in the United States. Kaepernick’s actions remade the singing of the national anthem into a decision opportunity for players to engage politically, though only 21 players joined him in any form of protest during the 2016 season (Stites 2017). Kaepernick’s activism
cost him his career. He opted out of his contract with the 49ers at the end of the season, and the team’s management confirmed that they would have otherwise released him, a development sports analysts attributed to the kneeling controversy and not to his athletic capability (Brinson 2017). No team gave him a tryout for the 2017, 2018, and 2019 seasons, despite his strong performance record.

Knowing the potential costs, dozens of players continued Kaepernick’s protest in the 2017 pre-season and the first weeks of the regular season, including the protest’s first white participant, who joined following the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville (ESPN 2017). The movement did not die, but it seemed to grow only modestly, if at all. Then, in the third week of the 2017 regular season, President Donald Trump condemned the NFL protests with characteristically inflammatory language during a rally in Alabama. Immediately, NFL players responded by protesting in droves. Entire teams knelt, linked arms, or stayed in the locker rooms during the anthem; all said, hundreds of players participated. Trump’s opposition had implicated the entire NFL identity in the movement.

A discussion of the NFL protests must not proceed beyond this brief overview without considering the complex landscape of American racism and civil rights in sports. Using the field, court, or track as a platform for addressing issues of racial justice is far from a recent innovation. In addition to iconic moments such as Tommie Smith and John Carlos’s black power salute at the 1968 Summer Olympic Games, many more protests have occurred at the college level, calling attention first to official segregation and then to institutionalized racism (Smith 2007; Spivey 1983). Despite conservative appeals to end the protests in the name of keeping (progressive) politics out of sports, these protests have continued for decades and embody sports’ dual legacy as an avenue for minority social mobility and a site of discrimination.

With a high proportion of black athletes but a heavily white audience, football has long been a particularly racialized and politicized social space (Brooks and Blackman 2011; Kooistra, Mahoney, and Bridges 1993; Niven 2005; Sailes 1991). Although 70 percent of NFL players are black, most of the coaching, ownership, and management infrastructure is white (Sando 2016), and paternalism permeates the relationships between these two strata. Some have acknowledged disturbing parallels between antebellum slave trades and the football drafting system, wherein white men gleefully objectify, commodify, and “trade” predominantly black men as physical specimens (Oates and Durham 2005). This phenomenon underscores two crucial points: (1) football is a white-dominated space, and (2) its culture often perpetuates the othering of black men as physical objects under white management. Laden with a militaristic, law-and-order variety of patriotism, from fighter jet displays to combat imagery, the NFL game is an eminently political display packed with conservative tropes for consumption by a mostly white, male, and culturally conservative audience (Gabler 2014).

Simultaneously, black athletes in this sport have attained levels of financial and social capital and prestige unparalleled in almost any other field. Sorek and White (2016) found that although white football fans are positively associated with high levels of national pride, the opposite is true of black fans. They postulate that this difference may indicate diverging views of race relations. For white watchers, football rituals may act as representations of “ethnonational pride”; black watchers may instead see the sport as a “field of black resistance” (p. 275). Reconciling these different narratives of black engagement in football and other sports—racial exploitation versus socioeconomic ascendancy—depends on context. Even as they participate in an unambiguous act of resistance, black players (and their inconstant white allies) must contend not only with white expectations of obedience but also with a white audience that largely refuses to acknowledge that expectation as racist. Several scholars have alluded to this type of resistance within historical frames of racial justice among sports. For example, the historic moment of Tommie Smith and John Carlos raising their fists during the medal ceremony of the 1968 Summer Olympic Games reflected a cry on behalf of an impoverished black underclass that was largely untouched by the legislative advances of the civil rights movement (Henderson 2010). As a result, Smith and Carlos were banned by the International Olympic Committee. As Ratchford (2012) argued, black athletes were viewed as property rather than autonomous individuals; their sole allegiances were supposed to be to team, sport, or country, negating their racial biographical histories. The timing of such events paints a larger picture of alternative forms of resistance through unconventional modes of activism when more traditionally sanctioned channels are unavailable (Bass 2002). These types of demonstrations took place not only at the professional level; student-athlete resistance also provided a strong basis for challenging notions...
of upward mobility and equality within higher education.

Ruffin (2014) highlighted the student-athletic revolt that began in the late 1960s, commonly known among scholars as the “revolt of the black athlete.” The student-athletic movement was rooted in the civil rights and black power movements of the 1960s. Student-athletes of color have always been in a precarious position given that sports provided an entryway to success and upward mobility. However, racial tensions at colleges and institutions resulted in the formation of the Olympic Project for Human Rights (Ruffin 2014). Sociologist Harry Edwards established this movement, exposing the inherently political nature of sports. Although resistance within sports existed even in the days of slavery (Edwards 2003), the normal violence of athletic play transcends the individuals who become representatives of race and class strata within larger society. In his most recent book, Edwards (2018) illustrated how blacks can use athletics to their advantage and relates the revolt of the black athlete to the larger spirit of revolt among black citizens during the civil rights and black power movements. The cultural arena of sports provides an environment for racial minorities to draw attention to their causes (Hartmann 1996, 2004). However, it is this resistance—this challenging of racial hierarchies in society—that places athletes in a precarious position within their professional fields (Kaufman 2008). This has been seen historically with activists such as Smith, Carlos, and Edwards and even more recently with Kaepernick.

They have succeeded in sparking conversation, yet that conversation has often centered less on what they are saying about racial inequality and more on whether they have the moral or legal right to say it. Opinions on the issue fall along racial lines. Although 2017 polls indicate that most people know that the protests are about racism, the vast majority of black respondents knew that they are about disrespecting the U.S. flag and military (Casteel 2017). Trump’s original comments against the protests, delivered at a rally in Alabama on September 22, 2017, combined this latter interpretation with racist rhetoric:

Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, “Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he’s fired. He’s fired!” You know, some owner’s going to do that. He’s going to say, “That guy who disrespects our flag, he’s fired.” And that owner, they don’t know it, they’re friends of mine, many of them, they’ll be the most popular person for a week… That’s a total disrespect of our heritage, that’s a total disrespect of everything that we stand for, okay…. You know, today if you hit too hard, you’re thrown out of the game, right, they hit too hard, “fifteen yards, throw him out of the game.” They had that last week, I watched for a couple of minutes, two guys, just really beautiful tackle… they’re [the referees] ruining the game! Hey look, that’s what they wanna do. They wanna hit. But, it is hurting the game. But, but you know what’s hurting the game more than that? When people like yourselves turn on television and you see those people taking the knee when they’re playing our great national anthem [motions turning off the TV]. (CNN 2017, emphasis added)

In a follow-up interview, Trump explained the motivation for his comments:

Well, I have so many friends that are owners, and they’re in a box…. I think they’re afraid of their players, you wanna know the truth, and I think it’s disgraceful. And they’ve gotta be tough, and they’ve gotta be smart… when it comes to the respect of our nation, when it comes to the respect of our anthem and our flag, they have no choice. You have to have people stand with respect. (Fox News 2017)

Trump conveyed a polarizing dynamic, in which “our heritage” is diminished when “those people” kneel. Without mentioning the players’ reasons for protest, he presents them as violent and disposable, warranting unrestricted physical confrontation. Referencing a classic racist trope, Trump notes the “disgrace” of (overwhelmingly white) owners’ fearing (majority black) players. He urges a paternalistic response, wherein the owners should not consider the players’ stance but discipline them for disobedience.

Identity in the NFL Protests

The racism that pervades both the NFL and the American political context secures race’s position as a highly salient identity for the league’s players. For the 70 percent of NFL players who are black, police brutality and racial inequality are not remote
questions of morality or social justice but direct and relevant threats. The movement began with Colin Kaepernick’s decision to bring two of his identities, those of blackness and social activism, to bear on the carefully white-dominated realm of U.S. football. His protest came with great risk. When Kaepernick was asked why others had not joined his protest in the 2016 season, he responded that “there’s a lot of consequences that come along with this,” including losing a job and endorsements (Wyche 2016). Kaepernick lost both.

As many scholars have acknowledged, network analyses should not characterize actors as purely rational, operating only by strategy or personal interest (Blumer 1951; Killian 1984). Neither are actors wholly irrational. The emergence of Kaepernick’s black, activist, and athlete identities reframed the football field as a political space, rather than a narrowly patriotic one and created a decision opportunity for other players. Still, many of the players who protested after Trump’s comments did not originally kneel with Kaepernick. Without the structural and contextual factors encouraging participation, many of the players currently kneeling and locking arms would likely have chosen not to accept the risks and costs of activism, regardless of their opinions of it.

In interviews following the week 3 protests, several players acknowledged the importance of the NFL identity to their decision to participate. Julius Peppers of the Carolina Panthers felt that Trump had “attacked our brothers, my brothers, in the league”; the Los Angeles Rams’ Andrew Whitworth said that Trump “made it personal” (King 2017). Interviewees almost unanimously mentioned the influence other players’ actions had on their own behavior, referencing the conversations that occurred within and between teams. Kenny Vaccaro, who played for the New Orleans Saints, detailed several such interactions:

I didn’t think about it before the game. [Ravens safety] Tony Jefferson texted me and was like, Hey, are you going to sit today? I was like, ahhhh I don’t know, probably not. And then I sat and Bush sat and Alex [Okafor], my best friend, he was like, I’m sitting with you, [Punter] Thomas Morstead walks over and puts his hand on Bush’s shoulders. [Coby] Fleener walks over. AP [Adrian Peterson] sits, Mark [Ingram] sits, Cam [Jordan] sits, I’m pretty sure if the whole team would have been alert, we all would have sat. (King 2017)

Nearly every interview emphasized solidarity: the importance of standing with teammates, Kaepernick, or black Americans. No player publicly characterized the movement as a standoff between Trump and the NFL, yet this antagonism seems to have played a crucial role in elevating the identity of NFL “brother” above countervailing concerns. In the words of Johnson Bademosi, formerly of the Patriots, “There are plenty of people who have wanted to take a knee but have for some reason decided not to. After those comments, obviously we’ve seen more people take a knee than we’ve seen before” (King 2017). As countermovement scholars have noted, conflict often serves as an important impetus for mobilization (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Zald and Useem 1987). Trump’s direct assaults on the kneeling football players—tied to critiques of the game itself—may have prompted other players to rally around their shared identity.

In sum, both contextual and network factors determine the individual costs and benefits of activism (Biggs 2003; Gould 1991; McAdam 1986). Political conditions may encourage action by decreasing the intensity of opposition, generating a sense of urgency, or revealing a moment of political opportunity (Eisinger 1973; McAdam 1982; Meyer 2004; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Tilly 1998). However, little attention has focused on how socio-political circumstances and network factors might interact. One notable exception is a recent article by Weffer, Domínguez-Martínez, and Jenkins (2018), who found that specific national events increased the number of player protests, especially when it seemed that efforts were being made to discredit players who protested. We use their approach but focus more on group identity and betweenness as a way to understand how these overarching factors interact. Acting as an interface between context and network position, Simmel’s (1908) theories on identity can remedy this deficit. With social ties representing an individual’s component identities, behavioral outcomes depend largely upon the salience of each component identity to the actor. Critically, political developments that implicate a certain identity alter its salience (Stryker 1968). When a contextual factor threatens or impugns a component identity, the network associated with that identity may respond collectively, but any given member’s response depends upon the interaction of several identities. We understand the NFL protests as a way of interrogating the framework of activism in sports for the goal of racial justice
through the lenses of identity, social networks, and broader sociopolitical context.

DATA AND METHODS

Identity in the Network

The network data used in this study were compiled from official NFL and ESPN databases accessed after the 2017 regular season ended. The resultant data set comprises the entire population of 2,453 NFL players in the fall of 2017 and the players’ memberships in college teams, college conferences, 2016 NFL season teams, and 2017 NFL season teams. Shared memberships in these groups are counted as social ties that reinforce members’ identification as NFL players. These ties may represent either direct, interpersonal relationships (e.g., players who were 2017 Eagles teammates) or ties of familiarity and common experience (e.g., players who played in the Mountain West conference). An increase in a player’s total number of ties indicates a higher number of direct connections and a greater degree of familiarity with other players in the league. Although ties of mere familiarity are unlikely to be a sufficiently strong means of network mobilization, they can contribute to a process of identity formation. In a network functioning as the site of identity formation, a node’s increased familiarity with other nodes reinforces its identification with the network as a whole, moving its position closer to center. For this article’s purposes, an NFL player’s centrality in the league therefore tends to increase in tandem with the strength of his identification as an NFL player.

To account for midseason trades, 2017 team membership is defined as any instance when a player joined a team for two or more weeks from July 2017, when training camps began, through the end of the season in December. On the basis of 2017 estimates from the sports database Spotrac (2018), players who had signed contracts with terms in the top 20th percentile (for a total value of $9 million or more) were assigned to an “elite” category, while those who had signed smaller contracts were placed in a “nonelite” category. Although the salaries stipulated in NFL contracts are often inflated because they are not fully guaranteed, larger signing terms are still generally reserved for players with personal brands and highly visible leadership positions, like quarterback (Badenhausen 2015). Therefore, large contract deals serve as a reliable measure of players’ cultural, if not necessarily economic, capital.

In addition to league memberships, the analysis considers four racial or ethnic groups: black (n = 1,730), white (n = 675), Pacific Islander (n = 37), and Hispanic (n = 11). Players were categorized on the basis of phenotypic appearance in NFL portfolio headshots, supplemented by player biographies. Although self-reporting is generally preferable for studies involving the social identity component of race, no complete survey data sets for the NFL were available. Additionally, in the world of spectator sports, phenotypic appearance has the strength of measuring actors’ perceived race, which affects their treatment by franchise owners and the media (Braddock, Smith, and Dawkins 2012; Murrell and Curtis 1994; Peery and Bodenhausen 2008). Such experiences necessarily shape identity within the context of the league, as well the incentives, risks, and thresholds associated with protest participation.

Identity-Triggering Events and Eras of Analysis

The 2017 NFL regular season lasted for 17 weeks, from September 8 through December 31. This study divides that period into three “eras” according to a timeline of sociopolitical events that might have affected the salience of players’ identities (see Appendix B). The analysis focuses on the first week of each era, as well as the final week in the season. Strategically selecting four weeks as case studies conveys the variation in protest participation trends throughout the season while also permitting a depth of analysis that would not be tenable in an article-length study of all 17 weeks. Additionally, the chosen weeks offer the advantage of more extensive media coverage, as the events that they directly succeeded were often front-page news. The media attention produced more comprehensive documentation and the opportunity for more accurate data collection.

The first era lasts from the first game of the regular season on Thursday, September 7, until Friday, September 22, when President Trump delivered a hostile speech and tweets against protesting NFL players (see Appendix A for a transcript). Analyses of era one specifically use data from week 1 of the NFL season, September 7 to 11.

The second era spans the period from September 22 to October 17, when NFL owners met to discuss possible responses to the protest, including forcing players to stand. Throughout era two, Trump criticized the NFL and insulted protesting players. In interviews, many players expressed opinions...
similar to those of Broncos linebacker Von Miller, who “felt like [Trump’s speech] was an attack on the NFL...I feel like it was an attack on us” (Jhabvala 2017). The highest levels of participation in the anthem protest occurred in era two. Most of the analysis of this era centers on protests during games in week 3, which immediately followed Trump’s speech. For teams whose week 3 games occurred before the speech, week 4 data were used.

The third and final era extends from the NFL owners’ meeting on October 17 until the end of the regular season on December 31. The risk of protesting during this period intensified as NFL owners and executives began to openly oppose the protests, and protest participation decreased drastically during this period. The analysis of this period focuses on week 7, which occurred only a few days after the owners’ meeting, and on week 17, the last week of the regular season.

**Protest Risk**

According to McAdam’s (1986) definition, risk in activism refers to “the anticipated dangers—whether legal, social, physical, financial, and so forth—of engaging in a particular type of activity” (p. 67). The various types of protest in which players engaged carried different levels of risk. In this study, staying in the locker rooms and protests that occurred while standing—such as linking arms or raising a fist, or putting a hand on a kneeling player—were defined as low risk, while kneeling and sitting were categorized as high risk. After Kaepernick’s 2016 demonstrations, the imagery of the anthem protest prioritized sitting or kneeling. The risk of such actions is evident in Kaepernick’s unemployment (Kilgore 2017). Trump’s comments and news coverage often fixated on whether players “stood up” for the anthem. By era three, at least one coach had imposed a rule against kneeling on the sideline (Salguero 2017). Alternative demonstrations, therefore, served both as forms of protest and also as methods of not kneeling.

**Network Centrality**

Our analysis considers three types of centrality in the NFL player network: degree centrality, betweenness centrality, and closeness centrality. Degree centrality measures the number of direct ties a node has with other nodes in the network (Giuffre 2013:136). Members with high degree centrality have the most direct ties to others in a network, which can indicate the strength of identification with that network. The second type of centrality, betweenness centrality measures how frequently a node appears in the geodesics, or shortest pathways, between other nodes and is often used to identify gateway actors during movement mobilization (Giuffre 2013:138). The third type of centrality analyzed in this study is closeness centrality, which accounts for both direct and indirect ties by measuring the length of a node’s geodesics (Giuffre 2013:13).

Each type of centrality uses a different scale to describe a unique characteristic of members’ positions in the network. However, when taken together, they form a complementary picture of the extent of a member’s integration in a network. Those NFL players with high degree, closeness, and betweenness centrality scores will be more densely enmeshed in the NFL network, indicating a stronger identification as an NFL player. High betweenness centrality in conjunction with lower degree and closeness centralities may indicate a slightly different network position, in which members exist outside of densely connected groups and may therefore experience a weaker affiliation with the NFL identity.

**Methods**

After compiling a data set of group memberships in the NFL, we developed a person-by-person matrix of network ties in the NFL (StataCorp 2017). From this matrix, we generated degree, betweenness, and closeness centrality scores for all players in the NFL in the fall of 2017 (N = 2,453). We then analyzed protest participation during four weeks in the 2017 regular season by both network variables and individual attributes. Because our data set encompasses the entire population of NFL players during the 2017 season, we tabulated descriptive statistics to compare the network characteristics of protesting groups categorized by race, elite status, and protest risk groups during each of the three eras.

**FINDINGS**

**NFL Population and Protest Participation**

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 show that participation in the protest of the national anthem increased from 0.7 percent in week 1 to 73.3 percent in week 3 before decreasing to 19.4 percent in week 7 and finally 11.4 percent in week 17. During the spike in participation in week 3, the
majority of players, 60.5 percent, adopted low-risk demonstrations. Still, a higher percentage of players chose to abstain from protesting (26.7 percent) than chose to kneel or sit (12.8 percent). In each week, black players were overrepresented among protesters compared with the total NFL population, comprising 70.5 percent of the league but 83.3 percent of protesters during week 1 and 71.8 percent during week 3. Despite constituting 27.5 percent of the NFL population, white players accounted for only 16.7 percent of protesters during week 1, while no Pacific Islander or Hispanic players protested during that week. These representation gaps narrowed during week 3, with white players representing 26.5 percent of protesters, Pacific Islanders 1.3 percent, and Hispanic players 0.4 percent. With the exception of a relative uptick in Hispanic players’ participation, these proportions widened in weeks 7 and 17, and when the season ended, black players represented 77.1 percent of protesters.

Participation by status also shifted during week 3, from the large overrepresentation of elite players in week 1 (50.0 percent of protesters, compared with 19.9 percent of the population) to a more modest gap in week 3 (23.1 percent of protesters). These proportions remained similar in weeks 7 and 17, with elite players representing slightly more than 22 percent of protesters each week.

### Attribute Identities and Centrality

Table 2 presents statistics on the three types of protest activity broken down by week. The “abstained” category consists of players who did not protest the national anthem. “Low risk” refers to those who protested while standing, while “high risk” refers to those who knelt or sat.

In week 1, the high-risk protesters had higher mean closeness and degree centrality scores than the low-risk and abstaining groups. This remained true in all weeks observed. The high-risk group...
Table 2. Centrality, Race, and Elite Status by Weekly Protest Type.

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<th>Centrality (mean)</th>
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<th>Low Risk</th>
<th>High Risk</th>
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<td>1 3 7 17</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.012 0.009 0.009 0.010</td>
<td>0.011 0.010 0.011 0.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness</td>
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<td>0.284 0.277 0.278 0.278</td>
<td>0.290 0.279 0.285 0.285</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Closeness centrality by race (mean)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Race (%)</th>
<th>Abstained</th>
<th>Low Risk</th>
<th>High Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 3 7 17</td>
<td>1 3 7 17</td>
<td>1 3 7 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
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</tr>
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<td>0.000 13.514 0.000 2.703</td>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>0.000 54.545 27.273 18.182</td>
<td>0.000 18.182 0.000 0.000</td>
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</table>

Race (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status (%)</th>
<th>Abstained</th>
<th>Low Risk</th>
<th>High Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>98.160 15.133 78.323 87.117</td>
<td>1.237 66.258 20.450 11.861</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonelite</td>
<td>99.542 29.582 81.161 88.951</td>
<td>0.356 59.012 18.075 10.438</td>
<td>0.102 11.405 0.764 0.611</td>
</tr>
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</table>
also had higher mean betweenness centrality scores than the low-risk group in all weeks but week 1, as shown in Figures 1 to 4. The low-risk protesters had higher mean closeness and degree centrality than the abstaining group in all but week 3, when the two groups had equal mean scores. Both the high-risk and low-risk groups had decreases in their mean degree and closeness centrality scores from week 1 to week 3. These mean scores then increased between week 3 and week 7 and remained steady into week 17. The abstaining group’s mean centrality scores remained at nearly constant levels throughout the season ($M_{\text{degree}} = 0.056$, $M_{\text{betweenness}} = 0.009$, and $M_{\text{closeness}} = 0.277$), with slight changes in week 3 ($M_{\text{degree}} = 0.055$ and $M_{\text{betweenness}} = 0.010$).

The next section of Table 2 breaks down the mean closeness centralities of the three action types by race. Across all weeks, black high-risk protesters had mean closeness scores that were higher than the mean scores of the black abstainers, black low-risk protesters, the total black population ($M = 0.278$), and the total league population ($M = 0.277$). Black low-risk protesters, in turn, had mean closeness scores that were consistently higher than those observed in the black abstaining group and total population. In all but week 1, black low-risk protesters also had higher mean closeness centrality than white low-risk protesters. The white low-risk protesters had mean centrality scores that were higher than those of the white abstainers in every week. Hispanic players who engaged in low-risk protest beginning in week 3 had the lowest mean centrality of any low-risk protest group across all weeks. Low-risk Pacific Islander protesters, conversely, had the highest mean scores of any low-risk group.
Across all racial groups, the percentage of abstention was highest in weeks 1 and 17 and lowest in week 3. Both Hispanic and Pacific Islander players had 100 percent abstention rates in week 1. Pacific Islanders continued to display the highest percentage of abstention in week 3, at 37.8 percent, followed by white players at 29.5 percent. Black players had the highest participation rate in weeks 1 and 3, while Hispanic protesters had higher participation rates in weeks 7 and 17. White players had the lowest participation rate in high-risk protests during week 3, when only 4.1 percent of white players knelt or sat, as well as the highest total abstention rate, 83.9 percent, in week 7. In all four weeks, a higher percentage of elite status players protested than nonelite status players, and the elite group had the highest high-risk participation rate of any group in all weeks but week 17.

Table 3 displays the mean centrality scores of protesting groups by week. In week 1, the mean degree and closeness centrality scores of black protesters were lower than those of white players, who had a lower mean betweenness centrality. This variation is shown in Figures 5 to 7. During week 3, the mean centralities of both black and white protesters decreased, with white protesters’ mean degree and closeness scores dropping slightly lower than those of white protesters. In both protesting groups, the lowest mean centrality scores occurred in week 3. The black protesters’ mean degree and closeness centralities \( M_{\text{degree}} = 0.058 \) and \( M_{\text{closeness}} = 0.278 \) neared those of the total black player population \( M_{\text{degree}} = 0.057 \) and \( M_{\text{closeness}} = 0.278 \). The same was true of white protesters with respect to the total white player population \( M_{\text{degree}} = 0.055 \) and \( M_{\text{closeness}} = 0.277 \).
**Table 3.** Weekly Mean Centrality Scores by Race and Player Status.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NFL Player Population</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Betweenness</th>
<th>Closeness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.057</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.276</td>
</tr>
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<td>Pacific Islander</td>
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<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.279</td>
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<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.273</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite</td>
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<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.281</td>
</tr>
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<td>Nonelite</td>
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<td>0.009</td>
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<td><strong>Week 1 protesters</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
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<td>Nonelite</td>
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<td><strong>Week 3 protesters</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Race</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
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<td>0.009</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Race</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
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<td>Nonelite</td>
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<td>0.278</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Week 17 protesters</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>0.010</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonelite</td>
<td>0.058</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.279</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
compared with $M_{\text{degree}} = 0.055$ and $M_{\text{closeness}} = 0.276$). Across the board, Hispanic protesters had the lowest mean scores of any racial group. Unlike the black and white protester groups, the Hispanic protesters had their lowest mean centrality scores in week 7.

The elite players who protested in each week had higher mean degree and closeness centrality scores than nonelite protesters. In all but week 1, the two groups had equal mean betweenness centrality scores. The mean centrality scores of elite protest groups decreased in week 3 and again in week 17, finally dropping below the means of the league’s total elite population. By contrast, the nonelite protest group’s mean centrality scores only decreased in week 3 before increasing to exceed their total league means for the rest of the season.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

At the beginning of the regular season, the protesters had high mean degree, betweenness, and closeness centralities. Black players constituted almost the entirety of the protesting group in week 1 (83.3 percent), and elite players were highly overrepresented, constituting 50.0 percent of protesters but only 19.9 percent of the NFL population. After President Trump disparaged the protesters in week 3, participation increased dramatically (from 0.7 percent to 73.3 percent), and the racial and status gaps in participation narrowed, though elite and black players continued to be overrepresented while all other groups were underrepresented. All of the protesting group’s mean centrality scores decreased between week 1 and week 3. White and elite
protestors demonstrated the largest decreases in mean centrality score during this period, with the former group’s means falling below those of the black protesting group. Despite increasing slightly in the following weeks, the protesters’ mean scores in week 17 were still lower than they were in week 1. This was true across both the high- and low-risk categories, though high-risk demonstrators consistently had higher mean centrality scores than their low-risk counterparts in each week. Although black low-risk protesters’ mean closeness centrality score was lower than that of white protesters in week 1, the reverse was true after Trump’s comments in week 3. For the rest of the season, white protesters had consistently lower mean closeness centrality scores than both black and Pacific Islander protesters. Hispanic protesters’ mean scores, however, were the lowest of any low-risk group in each week.

Identity Salience and Implicating Events

The players who revived the protest in week 1 were almost all black. They had higher mean centralities than the total league averages and the league averages for black players. As part of a much broader activist movement against police brutality and racial inequality in the United States, the protest directly implicated these players’ identity as black men, as well as their identity as NFL players. The few white players who joined the protest in week 1 had even higher mean centrality scores than their black counterparts, indicating a stronger identification with the NFL. Because white players’ racial identity did not directly implicate them in the protest, they required a stronger NFL identity to spur them to act.

Taking these observations into account, how network characteristics like centrality interact with sociopolitical events is perhaps best conceptualized as a “threshold” for participation similar to Granovetter’s (1973) theory of participation but in which nodes with centrality scores below a certain level are much less likely to participate. In the case of the NFL protests, the centrality threshold responded to context. Trump’s comments denigrating the initial activists in week 3 triggered a change in the centrality profile of the protesters by threatening the NFL identity and therefore increasing its salience. Even without the reinforcement of racial identity, the NFL identity became salient enough to spur more peripheral players to action. The centrality scores of the protesters therefore decreased from week 1 to week 3.

Later in the season, the mean centrality of the protesters increased again, as those with relatively strong NFL identity continued to protest after others had begun to drop off in the face of increasing backlash against the protesters (Appendix B). Notably, the protesters’ mean centrality scores remained lower than their week 1 levels, suggesting a somewhat lasting shift in salience and implication of the NFL identity in the decision to protest. These developments did not occur uniformly across racial groups. Although the changes in black and white protesters’ mean centralities mirrored each other throughout the season—declining, rising slightly, and then remaining steady—the other racial groups’ centrality scores did not exhibit the same pattern. Pacific Islander protesters’ centrality scores rose drastically from week 3 to week 7, and Hispanic protesters’ scores fell sharply during the same period. Both the Hispanic and Pacific Islander

![Figure 7. Mean betweenness centrality scores of protestors by race and week.](image)
groups often accounted for very few players, which may have contributed to this observation. Generally, the discrepancies between groups indicate that players’ racial and NFL identities did not simply cancel each other out, but rather interacted.

Elite players with large contracts and high visibility might be expected to exhibit higher sensitivity to the risks of protest, and in week 1, elite protesters had extremely high mean centrality scores. After week 3, however, the mean centrality scores of elite protesters resembled those of the league’s total elite population. Given the disproportionately large number of white quarterbacks in the league, it is tempting to ascribe this observation to a broader shift toward increased white participation in the protest. However, as defined in this article, the elite group has an only slightly larger percentage of white members than the total league population ($P_{elite} = 28.2$ percent, $P_{total} = 27.5$ percent). Instead, it appears that elite players were particularly responsive to the increased salience of the NFL identity during and after week 3.

Centrality and Protest Risk

One of the structures that most effectively sustained the protests was the team. Although some teams fractured in later weeks, many continued to protest—or abstain—in solidarity. However, team action tended to be confined to low-risk demonstrations. Players’ individual network characteristics influenced how they protested as much as whether they protested. Those who engaged in high-risk behaviors had consistently higher centrality scores, indicating a stronger affiliation with the NFL network. The interaction of racial and NFL identities was also evident in the high-risk protest demographics. The diversity of the low-risk group did not extend to high-risk demonstrations, and only black players knelt or sat in all four weeks. When players from every racial group participated in high-risk protests in week 3, white players’ participation rate, at 4.1 percent, was by far the lowest. White players’ reluctance to kneel evidences a higher sensitivity to protest risk—and perhaps a conflict between their white identity and the iconography of kneeling. Although white and Hispanic players ceased high-risk protest in weeks 7 and 17, both black and Pacific Islander groups continued to produce high-risk protests.

Across all race and risk groups, President Trump’s derogation of the NFL in week 3 changed the network profile of the protests by increasing the salience of the NFL identity. Before this change, the protest was carried primarily by those who identified very strongly as NFL players and inhabited network positions that were relatively central to the league. The increased salience of NFL identity prompted players who were less central to the network to participate as well. Expanded involvement in the protest did not necessarily translate into a commitment to staying in it or a willingness to embrace high-risk activism. Each of these tendencies depended not on the temporary “victory” of one identity, but on extended patterns of interaction between racial and league identities.

**Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

Our study has limitations. Although the group membership variables capture the outlines of network positions, future models could attain greater nuance by using separate rosters for the selected weeks. Additionally, although protesting posed risks for every player, these risks were not identical across all teams. Some owners and coaches opposed protesting more vehemently than others, and future methods could account for this variation.

Our analysis related the intersectional nature of identity to participation in social movements. The findings indicate that a social movement implicates different group identities in response to sociopolitical events, which builds the case for examining social movements in terms of fluid participant identities, rather than the unidirectional escalation of identification with a movement, especially along the lines of race. Successful social mobilization may use current events to invoke shared identities, temporarily boost participation, and potentially change participant profiles in the long term.

**APPENDIX A**

**Selection from President Trump’s Speech Delivered in Huntsville, Alabama, on September 22, 2017**

Everyone in this arena tonight, we are unified by the same great American values: we’re proud of our country, we respect our flag—[Applause] Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, “Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he’s fired. He’s fired!” [Applause, “USA” chanting] You know, some owner’s going to do that. He’s going to say, “That guy who disrespects our flag, he’s fired.” And
that owner, they don’t know it, they don’t know it, they’re friends of mine, many of them, they don’t know it, they’ll be the most popular person for a week. They’ll be the most popular person in this country, ‘cause that’s a total disrespect of our heritage, okay, that’s a total disrespect of everything that we stand for, okay. And I know, we have freedoms, and we have freedom of choice, and we have many, many different freedoms, but you know what? It’s still totally disrespectful. And you know when the NFL ratings are down massively, massively, the NFL ratings are down massively. Now, the number one reason happens to be that they like watching what’s happening on [Trump gestures to himself], you know, with yours truly, they like what’s happening. Because you know, today if you hit too hard, right, they hit too hard, “fifteen yards, throw him out of the game.” They had that last week, I watched for a couple of minutes, and two guys, just really beautiful tackle, “Boom! Fifteen yards,” the referee gets on television, his wife is sitting at home, she’s so proud of him, they’re ruining the game! Right? They’re ruining the game. Hey look, that’s what they wanna do. They wanna hit. Okay, they wanna hit. But, it is hurting the game. But, but you know what’s hurting the game more than that? When people like yourselves turn on television and you see those people taking the knee when they’re playing our great national anthem [motions turning off the TV]. The only thing you could do better is if you see it, even if it’s one player, leave the stadium, I guarantee things will stop. Things will stop. Just pick up and leave. Pick up and leave. Not the same game anymore anyway. Now one of the things we’ve done, and when I say we it’s us [motions circularly to the crowd], together, we protect worship. (CNN 2017)

APPENDIX B

Timeline of Identity-Triggering Sociopolitical Events, Fall 2017

September 22: Trump delivers his “You’re fired” speech against the national anthem protesters (see Appendix A).

September 23: Trump tweets against the NFL and gives a follow-up interview in which he claims that NFL franchise owners are “scared” of their players (Fox News 2017).

September 24: Trump tweets about the need for a change in NFL policy.

September 25: Trump tweets several times about NFL protests; he says that the “issue of kneeling” is not about race and that there is “tremendous backlash” against the NFL (Wagner 2017).

September 26: Trump tweets about NFL ratings, booing, and “great anger” over the Dallas Cowboys’ protest (Gillman 2017).

September 28: An interview with Trump airs, following up on his anti-NFL speech. He says that NFL owners are “afraid of their players.”

September 30: Trump tweets that NFL players should stand.

October 8: Vice President Pence walks out of a Colts game during the national anthem protest. NFL owners begin to oppose the protests publicly. Cowboys owner Jerry Jones states that if players do “anything that is disrespectful to the flag, then we will not play.”

October 10: Trump tweets about changing the tax law to punish the NFL.

October 10: NFL commissioner Roger Goodell sends a letter to NFL teams suggesting that the league may consider forcing players to stand for the anthem.

October 17: NFL owners meet to discuss what actions to take in respect to the protests; they do not reach an agreement. Houston Texans owner Bob McNair makes a remark about inmates running the prison.

October 18: In a press conference, Goodell confirms that the NFL will not force players to stand. (Trump tweets about the decision.)

October 23: Trump tweets against NFL players who continue to kneel.

October 27: ESPN publishes a transcript of the NFL owners meeting, which reveals that McNair stated that NFL owners couldn’t have “inmates running the prison.” NFL executive Troy Vincent points out the racism of this comment; McNair apologizes (Davis 2017).

November 5: Some protesting players, including 49ers safety Eric Reid, invite the league to participate in a meeting before a mediator.

November 20: Trump tweets against Marshawn Lynch, who consistently knelt during the American anthem, when he stands for the Mexican anthem.
November 24: Trump tweets against the NFL protests.

December 2: The NFL agrees to fund player activism.

REFERENCES


StataCorp. 2017. “Stata Statistical Software: Release 15.” College Station, TX: StataCorp.


**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES**

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**Prentiss A. Dantzler** is an assistant professor of urban studies at Georgia State University. His research explores how and why neighborhoods change and how communities and policy makers react to those changes. His recent work has appeared in *Housing Studies, Urban Affairs Review, Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, and *Social Science Journal*. 