Public opinion and black NFL players after the national anthem protests

Bethany Lacina
University of Rochester
blacina@ur.rochester.edu

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Abstract

I use consumer surveys to compare black and white National Football League (NFL) stars' popularity among US adults before and after player protests during the national anthem. The popularity of 43 of the best-known NFL stars is observed in spring 2015 and spring 2018. Difference-in-differences analysis shows that black stars who participated in the protests lost three percentage points of approval in the general population relative to white players who did not participate. Protesting players especially lost popularity among whites and less educated adults. There was a particularly important backlash against black NFL players among whites without a college education. In that population, black players lost public approval relative to white players even if they did not participate in the protests. The lost popularity of non-protesting blacks is evidence of the role of racial resentment in public opinion regarding the anthem controversy.

In August 2016, Colin Kaepernick of the San Francisco 49ers began a protest against racial injustice and police violence.[1] He sat or knelt during the playing of the national anthem prior to NFL games. Kaepernick's teammate Eric Reid joined the protests and about a dozen other players participated at some point in the 2016 season.

Kaepernick became a free agent after the 2016 season ended and has been unsigned since then. In October 2017, Kaepernick filed a complaint against the NFL ownership for colluding to prevent his employment, a violation of the NFL players' collective bargaining agreement. Eric Reid filed a similar complaint against the NFL in May 2018.

Despite Kaepernick's exit from the league, the anthem protests blew up as a political issue during the 2017 season. President Trump argued in fall 2017 that team owners should fire players who would not stand for the national anthem. Vice President Mike Pence orchestrated a walk-out from an Indianapolis Colts game (Watkins 2017). In polls afterward, 90% of US adults said they were aware of the protests (McCarthy 2017).

Public reactions to the anthem protests differed widely by race and partisanship. The protests were very popular with black Americans (74% approving in one 2016 poll) and very unpopular with whites (62% disapproving in the same poll) (Quinnipiac University 2016). Negative views of the NFL soared among Trump-voters but were unchanged among Clinton-voters (Quealy 2017). The number of Republicans and independents who said they were NFL fans fell 12-15% between 2012 and 2017, while the league's popularity with Democrats was unchanged (Jones 2017).

Analyses of public reactions to these events has focused on three areas: approval of the protests themselves; views on the league management's response; and possible damage to the NFL brand.[2]

[1] Kaepernick explained his rationale: "There are a lot things that are going on that are unjust. People aren't being held accountable for. And that's something that needs to change. . . . There's a lot of things that need to change. One specifically? Police brutality. There's people being murdered unjustly and not being held accountable" (quoted in Biderman 2016).

[2] For example, a CNN poll in 2017 asked "Do you, personally, plan to boycott NFL games, broadcasts or products as a result of protests by players, or do you not plan to boycott the NFL on account of those protests?" 24% of respondents said they would (CNN 2018). In a poll conducted in May 2018, 21% of respondents said that, in light of the anthem protests, they viewed brands that sponsored the NFL less favorably. 22% said they viewed the brands more favorably (Morning Consult/Politico 2018).

This paper focuses instead on the popularity of individual NFL players measured in consumer polling before and after the protests.

Protesting black players lost popularity in the general population relative to white NFLers. The lost popularity was particularly clear among whites, older Americans, and less educated respondents. African-Americans were the only constituency that became somewhat more favorable toward the protestors.

Among whites who have never attended college, black players lost popularity relative to white players *even if they did not participate in the anthem protests*. The decreased popularity of black non-protestors can only be explained by racial resentment, as opposed to rejection of the protestors' cause or tactics on other grounds.

Race, party, and sports

Sociologists and economists have created a detailed picture of how race influences the business of professional sports (Edwards 1973). In professional football, black players face bias in media coverage (Coogan 2012; Murrell and Curtis 1994; Rada 1996), scouting (Mercurio and Filak 2010; Woodward 2004), and hiring (Conlin and Emerson 2006). The league and its fans are striated by race. 70% of NFL players are black (Lapchick and Marfatia 2017). African-Americans are a larger share among NFL fans than in the population. On the other hand, white fans account for 80% of NFL stadium attendance and 70% of the NFL's television audience (Kertscher 2017). Most of the league's coaches and 34 of 36 team owners are white (Lapchick and Marfatia 2017).

Contrary to stereotypes, NFL watchers are politically diverse, as well. Because of its extreme popularity, professional football has a more bipartisan fan base than other professional sports. Pre-protests, 65-70% of independents, Republicans, and Democrats called themselves NFL fans (Jones 2017).

The anthem protests highlighted the racial and political differences among NFL observers.

Polling showed whites were more critical of the protests than blacks. Republicans went further than Democrats in their discontent, with many telling pollsters they were no longer fans of the NFL. As we shall see, changes in player popularity differed widely by subpopulation as well.

Marketing data on NFL players

Q Scores[3] gauge the appeal of people, brands, and intellectual properties. A firm might buy this data when choosing a celebrity spokesperson or a licensing a cartoon character, for example. NFL players are included in the survey once per year in the window between the Super Bowl and the draft of college football players. I have compared two rounds of the Q Scores survey: 2015 data collected before the anthem protests started and 2018 data collected just after the controversy peaked.[4]

NFL players' Q Scores cannot tell us how popular NFL players are in general. The survey does not bother to ask about people who are obscure or obviously unpopular. In this respect, the marketers clearly know their business: the players they bothered to ask about were popular with a majority of the people who knew who them. It is possibly telling that, in 2015, marketers chose a pool of players that was 40% white. By 2018, the pool of players they expected to be popular was 50% white.

NFL stars are not interchangeable cogs. Even before the anthem protests, they had wide dif-

[3]Q Scores are a product designed by Marketing Evaluations, Inc.. The surveys are conducted by Lightspeed Research. Lightspeed Research, maintains a pre-recruited panel of about one million US residents. Respondents take the survey on-line.

[4]In spring 2015, the biggest NFL story was an ongoing investigation into whether the New England Patriots had deflated game balls used during their January 2015 playoff game against the Indianapolis Colts. Earlier in the same season, TMZ released security camera footage of Baltimore Ravens player Ray Rice assaulting his fiance. The NFL Commissioner denied knowledge of the footage but law enforcement sources then alleged the video had been shared with the NFL months earlier.

Throughout the 2015–2018 period there were news stories about chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) in NFL players. Milestones in public awareness of CTE include a fall 2013 documentary and book, both called *League of Denial*, and the December 2015 release of the film *Concussion*. In March 2016, the NFL gave Congressional testimony admitting that playing football is a cause of CTE. Since January 2017, the League has been paying CTE-related claims per the terms of a 2013 court settlement.

ferences in popularity based on recent performance, past and current teams, and public persona. Most people in the Q Scores survey play in high profile positions. However, black players are more likely than white players to hold defensive positions and less central offensive roles (Edwards 1973). Whites are especially overrepresented as quarterbacks, who are the league's biggest stars (Berri and Simmons 2009).

All of these factors translate into player popularity. To take those differences into account, players' relative popularity in 2018 needs to be benchmarked against the differences in their ratings before the anthem protests started. For example, in 2015, Aaron Rodgers—a white quarterback for the Green Bay Packers—had a popularity score that was 13 percentage points higher than Colin Kaepernick's rating. In 2018, Rodgers was 36% ahead of Kaepernick. Rodgers has always been more popular but the gap between the two of them has grown.

A difference-in-differences analysis starts by comparing each player's popularity in 2018 to his own popularity in 2015. The two key questions are how the changes in individual popularity compare for (1) white NFLers versus black players who protested and (2) white players versus black players who did not protest.

These comparisons are based on 43 NFL players who were included in both the 2015 and 2018 Q Scores surveys. 21 of the 43 are black, the rest are white. Nine of the black players knelt, sat, raised a fist, or stayed in the locker room for the national anthem before at least one game during the 2016 or 2017 seasons. None of the white players participated in those ways.

Approval in 2015 versus 2018

Data on public approval come from Q Scores surveys fielded each year to 2,000 US adolescents and adults selected to be representative of the US population in terms of age, census region, race, and sex. I analyzed only US adults, ages 18 to 64, and calculated custom survey weights to maintain representativeness on region, race, sex, and age distribution.

The survey first asks if a particular person is "someone you have definitely seen or heard of

before." If the survey respondent says they have heard of the person, they are asked to give an opinion about them, using a scale of "Poor", "Fair", "Good", "Very Good", or "One of your favorites." I calculated a player's approval rating as the share of people whose opinion was "Good" or better as a percent of people who had an opinion at all.

In 2015, the 43 black and white players in this study had the same median approval rating among U.S. adults: 82 percent. In 2018, the black players' median approval rating was still 82 percent while the white players' median score had risen to 85 percent. On this measure, the gap in black and white stars' popularity increased from 0 to 3 percent.

Opinion by subgroup

In most of the analysis below, respondents are separated using the demographic data in the survey. I focus on cleavages that are associated with partisanship and political ideology. The first distinctions are ethnic categories similar to those used in the US census: white, non-Hispanic respondents; black, non-Hispanics; Hispanic respondents of any race; and Asian non-Hispanics. Ethnicity is a very strong indicator of partisanship in the US. In 2015, non-Hispanic whites were the only ethnic group in which Republicans (49%) outnumbered Democrats (40%) (Pew Research Center 2015). Whites were also the most evenly divided ethnic category. The preponderance of Democrats was widest among blacks (80% Democrat, 11% Republican); followed by Asians (65%/23%); and finally Hispanics (56%/26%).

The analysis distinguishes respondents by sex, age, and education, as well. Age and education are strong predictors of whites' political affiliation. Younger whites are more likely to be Democrats than older whites. Whites who have never attended college are less likely to describe themselves as liberals and Democrats than whites with some college education. In the 2016 election, education was a particularly strong predictor of white partisanship (Suls 2016).[5]

[5]Unfortunately, the Q Score survey does not ask respondents about religion, another key predictor of whites' political affiliation.

Difference-in-Differences regression analysis: technical details

The next section presents the results of ordinary least squares regressions of the 2015 and 2018 Q Scores surveys on NFL players. The data is organized into player/respondent dyads. Respondents' opinions of players are captured in a 0/1 variable for approval. This variable is a one if the respondent said the player was "good," "very good," or one of their favorites. Approval is coded as missing if the respondent did not know the player.

The simplest equation to be estimated is:

$$O_{pi} = \beta_0 y_i + \beta_1 A_p y_i + \beta_2 a_p y_i + \iota_p + \varepsilon_{pi}$$

Where the variables are:

O_{pi}	Opinion of player p given by respondent i (0/1)
y_i	Respondent i took the survey in 2015 ($y_i = 0$) or in 2018 ($y_i = 1$)
A_p	Player p is black and participated in the anthem protests (0/1)
a_p	Player p is black and did not participate in the anthem protests (0/1)
ι_p	Fixed effect for player p
ε_{pi}	Error term for player p and respondent i

Recall that among the players in the survey, only black NFLers participated in the protests. The variables A and a have a value of 1 for the relevant players in any observation involving that player. The variables are "turned on and off" by the interaction with y_i. An uninteracted variable for players' race is absorbed by the player fixed effects.[6]

The estimated divergence in popularity between a white player and a black player who partic-

[6]There are a large number of mathematically equivalent ways to specify the equation above. It could be written with separate interactions terms for race and participation in the protests, for example. Alternatively, the equation could be written without any interaction terms and with a longer series of dummy variables that would partition the players by race, protests, and year. Any of these specifications will provide the same estimates of differences-in-differences between black and white players.

ipated in the protests is $\hat{\beta}_1$. The estimated difference-in-differences between a white player and a black player who did not participate in the protests is $\hat{\beta}_2$.

The models are then modified to estimate popularity by subgroup. Variables for respondent characteristics are added to the equation alone and in interaction with the terms for player characteristics and year.

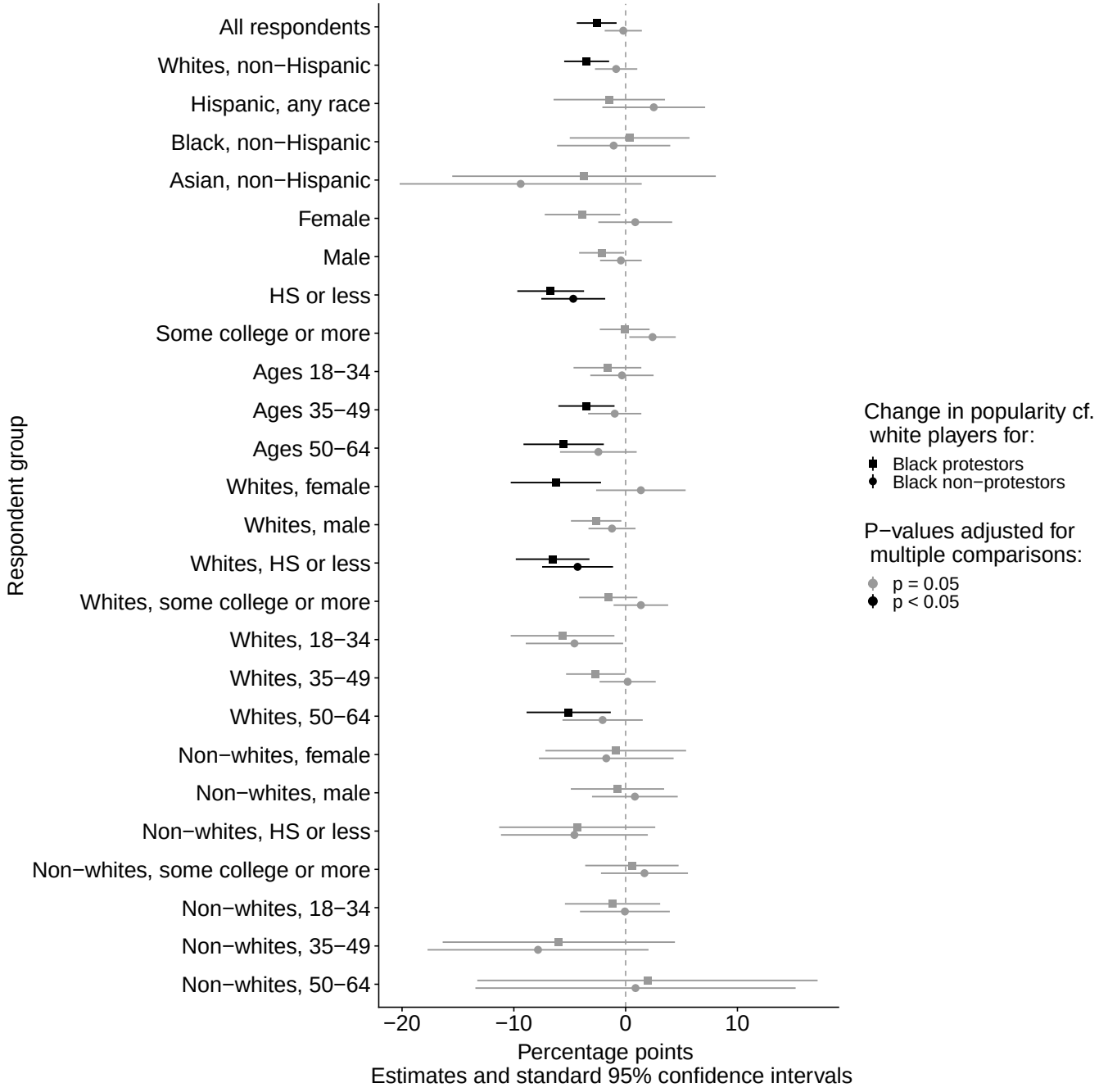
Figure 1 presents the estimated difference-in-differences comparisons. Point estimates appear with error bars representing 95% confidence intervals. Because the number of estimates presented is large, there is a danger of coincidentally significant results. I have recalculated p-values to reduce the false discovery rate using the method proposed by Benjamini and Hochberg 1995. In Figure 1, an estimate is graphed in black if it is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level after that correction for multiple comparisons.

The appendix to the paper contains reanalysis of the data under different modeling choices. Figure 2 shows differences-in-differences estimated in equations that include respondent fixed effects. Figure 3 was produced by converting the dependent variable to a continuous scale. Nonfamiliarity is coded as a neutral response. Figure 4 is based on models including player performance in recent seasons.

Reading the results in Figure 1

Figure 1 shows how the popularity of black players changed relative to white players between 2015 and 2018. The horizontal axis is the change in relative popularity in percentage points, with a vertical dotted line at zero. Squares mark the number of percentage points of popularity that black protestors lost or gained relative to white players. The circles are points lost or gained by black non-protestors relative to white NFLers. Estimates are shaded black if the data are precise enough to conclude that the popularity gap between black and white players changed in the time from 2015 to 2018. Estimates in gray are less certain.

Figure 1: Change in white adults' approval ratings for black NFL players relative to white NFL players, 2015 to 2018



The topmost line indicates that protesting black players lost about 2.5 percentage points of popularity relative to white players in the general population. The second line shows that the relative popularity of white players and non-protesting black players was not significantly different in 2015 compared to 2018. The rest of the figure breaks those changes down further. Going down the chart, the general population is broken down by race, sex, education and age. Then, the results for white, non-Hispanic respondents are presented separately by sex, education, and age. For completeness, I have included the results of a similar analysis of non-white and Hispanic respondents. Those estimates appear at the bottom of the figure. They are based on very small samples, however—all of the bars are gray, indicating great uncertainty.[7]

Racial resentment and black NFL players

The core constituency of the Republican electoral coalition, whites without prior college attendance, had a particularly negative and generalized reaction to the anthem protests. This backlash was against even non-protesting black players, which suggests that racial resentment is behind the change in attitudes toward black NFL players.

Black players lost popularity with respondents who had never attended college regardless of whether they participated in the anthem protests. Protestors lost 6.7 points of popularity relative to white players. Non-protesting black players lost 4.7 percentage points. The opinion shift among only whites without college attendance was identical: -6.5% for protestors and -4.3% for non-protestors. In a variety of robustness test, black NFLers—protestors and non-protestors—lost popularity with whites without college education.

The protestors lost popularity relative to white players in the general population (-2.6%). The loss of popularity for protesting players was statistically significant among whites (-3%); less educated respondents (-6.7%); respondents ages 35–49 (-3.5%); those ages 50 to 64 (-5.5%); and

[7] In a survey of about 2,000 US respondents that has the same ethnic breakdown as the population, the number of non-white respondents will be too small for most analyses of subgroups.

white females (-6.2%).

Discussions of statistical significance should not overshadow the observation that protesting players lost popularity in every subgroup of white respondents, including college-educated whites. If I had opted for a less conservative hypothesis testing procedure, Figure 1 would show a statistically significant loss of popularity for the protestors in every white subgroup except those with prior college study.[8] Whites' overwhelming rejection of the protests contrasts with African-Americans, the only group in which the protestors gained popularity relative to white players.

Discussion

As a business, the NFL has a substantial cushion of popularity and revenue protecting it from controversy over the anthem protests. Loss of public approval is more significant for individual black football players' livelihoods. Marketers rely on surveys like Q Scores to decide whether or not to make lucrative endorsement or licensing deals. Losing popularity in these polls could bring a tangible financial penalty.

New NFL rules kept player protesting to a minimum during the 2018 season. However, periodic partisan controversy involving the NFL is likely to continue for some time. Ironically, that prediction stems for professional football's exceptional popularity in most political and demographic categories. If the country is politically polarized, then NFL fans are, too. Optimistically, the NFL is something polarized Americans have in common. However, being the site of converging political factions also puts the NFL at the front lines in a culture war.

[8]The standard 95% confidence intervals do not cross the zero line for a white subgroup other than the college-educated. Estimated popularity losses among white men, whites 18-34, and whites 35-49 become statistically insignificant after adjustment for multiple comparisons.

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Bethany Lacina
University of Rochester
blacina@ur.rochester.edu

Supplementary Materials

Figure 2: Models including respondent fixed effects

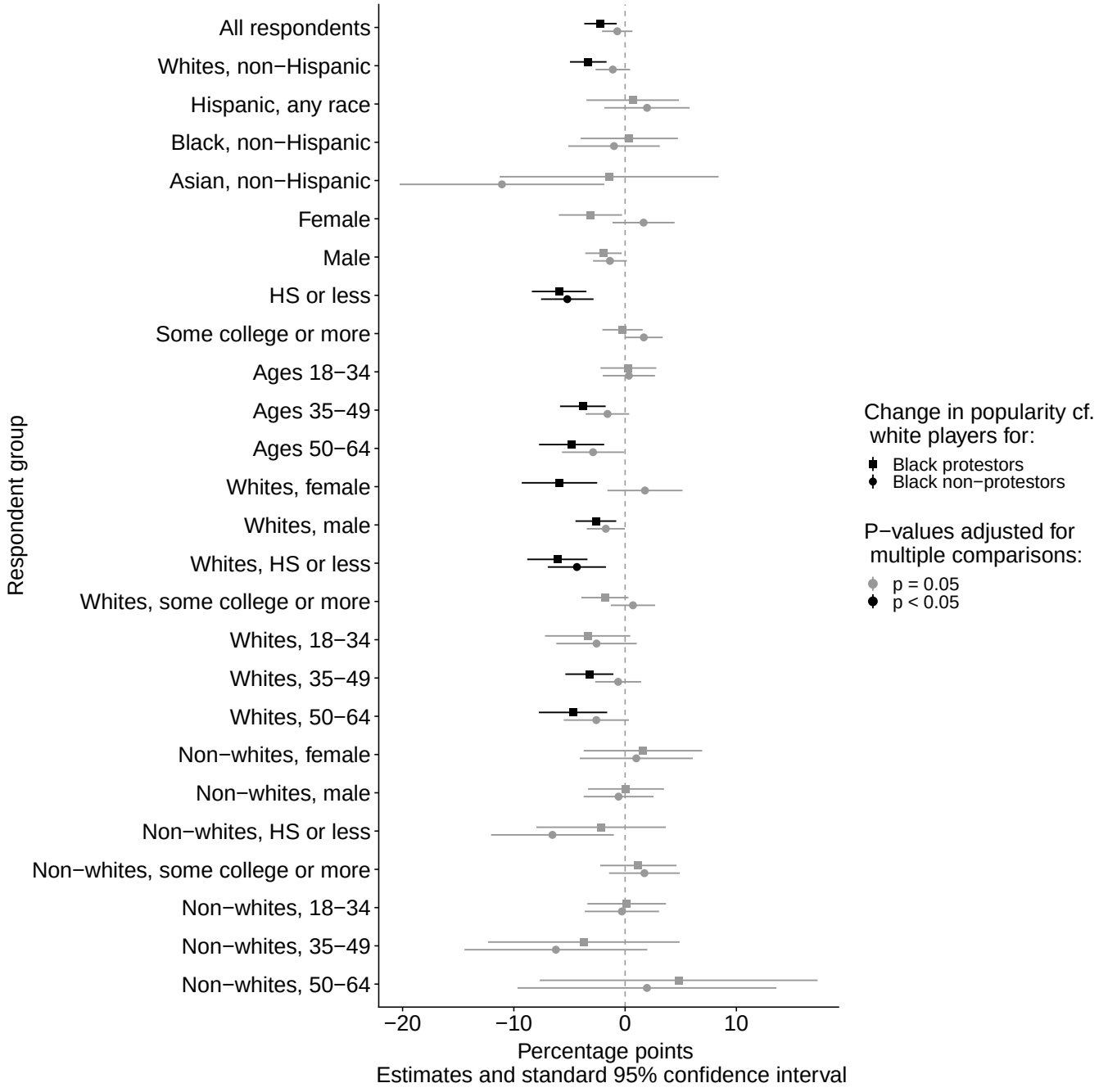

Figure 3: Models including respondent fixed effects and a dependent variable transformed to a six-point scale
Scale values: -2 (Poor), -1 (Fair), 0 (Have not heard of player), 1 (Good), 2 (Very Good), or 3 (One of your favorites)

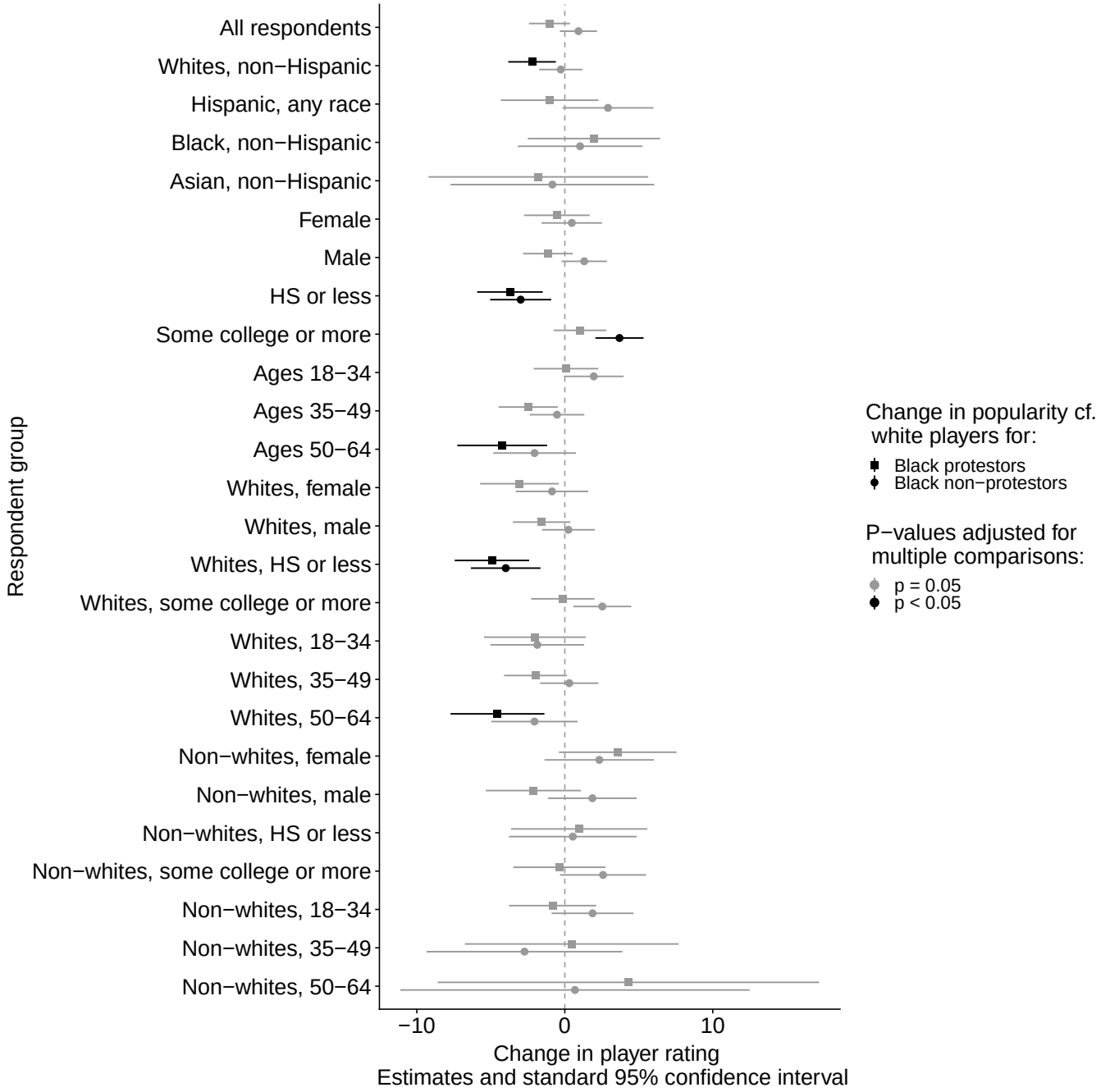

Figure 4: Models including dummy variables for recent player performance
The dummies record whether players were selected to the Pro Bowl or the Associated Press NFL All-Pro Team after the most recent season