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ABSTRACT

This article studies the Ferguson Commission, the government-appointed commission tasked with studying the 2014 uprising in Ferguson, Missouri. Using an original research design that relies on elite interviews of Ferguson Commissioners and community leaders, as well as content analysis, I analyze the commission process and outcome, primarily through the lens of conflict theory, urban governance theory, and theories regarding race-driven urban policy outcomes. Previous research has shown that riot commissions do nothing more than give the appearance of strong and responsive government action during an uncertain time of racial unrest, while at the same time undermining any larger civil rights message involved in the violence. Here, I analyze the Ferguson Commission to see if it similarly operated as a mechanism of evasion. I find that the commission, so far, has not handled the uprising in the same way—a promising sign for the way in which government responds to racial tension.

KEYWORDS

Ferguson; riot; riot commission; urban studies; urban uprising; urban politics; race

Introduction

In August 2014, protesters spilled into the streets of St. Louis County to demand justice in the death of Michael Brown—an unarmed Black teenager shot and killed by a White officer in the city of Ferguson, Missouri. The unrest primarily occurred in the urban St. Louis region but represented nationwide outrage over perceptions of systemic inequity and racial injustice in communities around the country. In response, Governor Jay Nixon announced in October 2014 that an independent, state-level commission (the “Ferguson Commission”) would study the broad social, economic, and political issues underscored by Mr. Brown’s death and the resulting unrest. Additionally, Governor Nixon asked the commission to issue recommendations—however hard-hitting—“for making this region a stronger, fairer place for everyone to live” (Wicentowski, 2014). Governor Nixon assured the community that the commission would not hesitate to wade into uncomfortable territory, stating that their work would “not be for the faint of heart” (Wicentowski, 2014). However, Missouri’s Lieutenant Governor almost immediately dismissed the formation of the commission, arguing that the commission’s report would be likely to “gather dust on lots of shelves” and would not “be an important part of the solution to Ferguson” (Stuckey, 2014). Perhaps it was a prescient claim, as just over a year later (and 4 months after the commission released their final report), Governor Nixon gave his final State of the State address—and he never once mentioned the Ferguson Commission (Wicentowski, 2016).

The lack of response from the governor’s office probably will not surprise anyone who has even casually observed the role of commissions in American politics. As with other types of political commissions, riot commissions in America have long acted as stopgaps, as they allow the government to appear responsive, but avoid responsibility (Lupo, 2011). These riot commissions have been

instituted by public officials representing varying levels of government—from rural-focused governors to urban-based mayors to the president of the United States—but in all cases and for over a century, they have undermined the race-based tensions that underlie the violence in cities. They have done so by offering only symbolic reassurance, thereby helping to perpetuate racial divisions in the United States, both within urban areas or cities and also between the urban areas and cities and the more rural parts of the country. In short, these commissions maintain the power status quo. Thus, riot commissions in the United States have historically acted as mechanisms of evasion that simply aim to manage—and often delegitimize—racial violence (Lipsky & Olson, 1977; Lupo, 2011; Platt, 1971). Drawing on the work of Lipsky and Olson (1977), I have previously described riot commission politics as “the manner in which the riots become depoliticized and the sense of urgency is minimized as it appears that the political system is responding to the conflict” (Lupo, 2011, p. 4). The result of the commission politics process is that the racial violence is characterized as anomalous and nonpolitical, political elites are credited with being responsive and engaged, and the underlying causes of the violence remain unchallenged as the commission response “typically involves nothing more than a symbolic nod toward the rioters” (Lupo, 2011, p. 210).

In researching these dynamics in five different race riots that occurred in some of America’s biggest cities in the 20th century (Chicago 1919, Harlem 1935, Los Angeles 1965, U.S. [multiple urban cities] 1967, and Los Angeles 1992), I found that commission politics was at work in all five cases. And notably, the bureaucratic management and evasion actually worsened with the 1992 riot, despite—or perhaps in response to—the country’s progress with regard to dismantling racialized actions and policies between the 1967 riots and the 1992 riot (Lupo, 2011). Indeed, the riot commissions that studied the 1992 riot were “less tolerant of the rioters’ demands, less acknowledged by the public, more focused on economics than race, and even less likely [than prior commissions] to implement recommendations” (Lupo, 2011, p. 5). At the time, I argued that this was a permanent shift and predicted that future riot commissions would operate in a similar manner: “When future American riots occur, we are likely to witness an even higher level of commission politics” (Lupo, 2011, p. 254). The events that occurred in the city of Ferguson and the surrounding St. Louis area allow us the opportunity to assess this argument. Has commission politics, as a longtime elite response to racial violence in America’s cities, remained the primary way that government manages urban violence? In particular, this article asks the question: to what extent were commission politics at work with the 2015 Ferguson Commission?

Framing the government response to racial uprisings: Theoretical foundations

This research is grounded in two theoretical areas: conflict theory and urban politics. First, as mentioned above, many kinds of commissions in democratic societies become a tool of the government elite to maintain control, as the commissions are strategically used, for instance, to test policies, manipulate public opinion, and push through pet policy projects (Bell, 1966; Drew, 1968). Thus, a useful framework for studying commission politics is conflict theory (Marx & Engels, 1868/2014); (Du Bois, 1903); (Dahrendorf, 1959); (Poulantzas, 1968/2018). Broadly, conflict theory states that stratified groups in society are often in conflict with one another in political, social, and economic arenas, as power imbalances push them to either cling to their influential status (the powerful) or fight to gain it (the powerless). Conflict theorists differ in their analysis of the inequities and competing interests that underlie the conflict, but all view conflict, coercion, and change as intertwined and inevitable. This article analyzes each of these components, by looking at the way in which conflict erupts in the form of urban violence, coercion is utilized by the government on the front end (policing the violence) and the back end (instituting a commission to appear responsive), and systematic change does or does not occur as a result of the conflict and the commission response (though these changes may serve only to push elite-backed policies).

Thus, this study uses conflict theory to center the analysis on the elite response to the violence—namely, the commission process. For instance, conflict theory helps frame key attributes of the riot commission that work to simultaneously assuage the conflict and protect the status quo: from lack of authority to limited resources to a tendency to frame the violence as opportunistic rather than protest-oriented (Lipsky & Olson, 1977; Platt, 1971). In contrast to pluralist theory, which would posit that commissions are an effective political actor in a generally balanced political arena, conflict theory helps us understand the way in which these inherent obstacles and the elite-favoring narratives in the commission process may be intentional, thus perpetuating a racial power imbalance. Conflict theory, with its focus on tokenism, symbolic policy allocation, and the suppression of marginalized groups, helps us better understand how these commissions seek to subordinate the protesters and calm the fearful non-protesters, and in doing so, avoid a deeper search for an understanding of why the urban violence occurred. Thus, conflict theory offers a helpful lens for us to see how riot commissions work to depoliticize and disempower the violence, resulting in a race-based elite status quo. However, conflict theory also recognizes the potential for change, as it may occur as a result of the uprising. Therefore, this article assesses the government response to the Ferguson uprising, analyzing the extent to which the violence resulted in deepened government coercion or racial equity-driven change.

Additionally, this article offers the Ferguson Commission as an example of how governments respond to urban uprisings and in doing so, highlights two new developments in the study of urban politics. First, over the last two decades, the urban politics subfield has experienced a foundational shift in its theoretical approach to the study of power and politics—from urban regime theory to governance theory. Both approaches view government as central and public-private partnerships as necessary for effective governing of metropolitan areas, but governance theory offers a more holistic approach, as it views government as “one of many actors seeking collaboration in the absence of hierarchy” (Clarke, 2012, p. 656). It focuses on “relationships and interactions” between local government actors, private actors, and non-governmental organizations in the policy process (De Cruz et al., 2019, p. 2). In contrast, urban regime theory focuses on the central role of local government institutions. Thus, in the urban politics field, the theoretical lens has shifted from formal institutional powers to a “highly contextualized” and systematic perspective on power—in other words, it is a shift in focus from government to governance (Pierre & Peters, 2012, p. 74; De Cruz et al., 2019). The shift is in some ways due to the effectiveness of viewing all politics—from local to national to global—from an urban perspective (Clarke, 2012). At every level of politics, power is decentralizing as coalitions of actors—both public and private—are collaborating and coordinating (as was showcased in this journal’s recent special issue on urban space and public-private partnerships, “Examining Public-private Partnerships and the Production of Urban Space” (Journal of Urban Affairs, 2021)). Governance theory offers a robust framework for assessing urban political power in an increasingly globalized and decentralized world. This analysis of the Ferguson Commission also illustrates the utility of governance theory, as I assess the way in which the Commission’s final report names “accountable bodies” for each of its 189 Calls to Action. These accountable bodies include both governmental (e.g., the state legislature, local school districts, the public transit system) and nongovernmental actors (e.g., the philanthropic community, businesses, universities) and asks them to work together to tackle some of the region’s most endemic issues. Governance theory thus gives us the tools to analyze the commission’s process—particularly with regard to change as discussed with conflict theory above—and focus on accountability.

This study also contributes to a second development in the field of urban politics—namely, that scholars are increasingly focusing on the ways in which local governments, not the choices of individuals or the invisible hand of the market, have designed and generated race and class segregation in American cities (Mele, 2017; Trounstine, 2018). Trounstine (2018) refers to this as a theory of “segregation by design.” Drawing upon sophisticated and empirically-grounded methods, urban politics scholars have increasingly argued that racism is at the root of these local policies and outcomes, a perspective that sits in contrast to longstanding beliefs in democratic pluralism in the United States (Trounstine, 2018, p. 13). These scholars contend that the result of these local

government actions is a cycle of inequality as racially motivated policies (driven by the economic and political self-interest of Whites) lead to segregation and disinvestment in communities, which in turn lead to unequal access to public services and eventually, a lack of social mobility (Trounstine, 2018, p. 18). However, other urban studies scholars are less convinced, noting that race may be an important outcome of policy, but that regional inequality, driven by sprawl and economic discrimination, is what is at the root of any racially divided development patterns (Mollenkopf & Swanstrom, 2019, p. 143). These competing theoretical perspectives are applied not only in the United States, but to other consolidated democracies as well, as these countries also grapple with persistent racial and class segregation (Andersson, 2019). This article, in analyzing the Ferguson Commission, relies on the segregation by design model. The very high levels of segregation in the greater St. Louis region, combined with a damaging mix of policing, race, and revenue-raising practices (Boyles, 2015; W. Johnson, 2015; Rios, 2020), have systematically embedded race-based disparities in health and well-being in the region (Purnell et al., 2014). In utilizing the segregation by design model, I turn away from pluralist theories—further aligning with conflict theory as described above—and frame race at the center of a policy-driven system that produces inequity. More specifically, when riot commissions act to undermine any larger civil rights message of the violence (Lupo, 2011, p. 2), they are institutionally perpetuating these systematically designed racial inequities.

In short, this analysis of the Ferguson Commission rests on two broad theoretical foundations. First, this project draws upon conflict theory as it seeks to highlight the ways in which power resists disruption. Second, it exemplifies the theoretical shifts in the field of urban politics. Governance theory offers the analytical framework for assessing the interaction between the various actors involved in the commission process and named as key in the policy formulation and implementation stages. Further, anti-pluralist theories that point to the role of racially motivated policies in creating and perpetuating inequality provide a foundation upon which to assess the power dynamics at work in the commission process—from inception to policy recommendation to policy implementation. By looking at the extent to which government commissions truly study the policy-driven inequities in society, we can better understand why they did or did not recommend race-informed policies to offset these inequities. Drawing upon these theories in tandem helps us see first, how government institutions remain very powerful (e.g., the creation of segregation through policy design), and second, the necessity of governance models (e.g., the inclusion of actors beyond the government) to effectively implement policies that work to dismantle and replace current discriminatory policies.

Thus, this article studies the way that the government responds—not in the moment but weeks later—to racial urban unrest. Previous studies tell us that government commissions in the United States often act as mechanisms of evasion. Regardless of whether these commissions are instituted at the local, state, or national level, they do little more than give the appearance of government action. The analysis below empirically analyzes whether this occurred with the 2015 Ferguson Commission, and in doing so, advances our theoretical understanding of the role of commissions in studying urban racial violence.

Riot commissions in the 21st century

These developments in the field of urban politics are particularly helpful given the new empirical context of riot commissions. Previous studies of urban uprisings have ended their analysis with the 1992 Los Angeles riot, but three decades later much has changed. The Obama administration ushered in an era of optimism about race, though this optimism proved to be misguided, as President Obama's time in office ended with deeper racial divisions in America than before his election (Tesler, 2016). This growing polarization over race and by race, in combination with the mass protests that followed George Floyd's killing in May 2020, the insurrection at U.S. Capitol in early 2021, and the Congressional commission that has been appointed to study this event, are just some of the recent trends and events that will affect the ongoing Ferguson Commission process. In particular, this article assesses the extent to which the commission's recommendations have been

implemented; thus, present-day societal context matters. Where applicable, this article will offer insight into the current political and social climate surrounding the ongoing efforts of the Ferguson Commission.

Riot commission politics

The sections above have laid out the broad ideas behind commission politics and the theories underpinning the process. This section aims to offer a more detailed look at the empirically-based, commission politics framework used in this study. Riot commission politics is a bureaucratic process that involves three steps—“elites first discredit the political demands of the rioters. Second, they alleviate the urgency of the violence with the appointment of an official and independent commission of respected leaders. Finally, they fail to implement commission recommendations” (Lupo, 2011, p. 8). Thus, riot commission politics involves three stages: commission, recommendations, and implementation. The first two stages are internal to the commission, while the last stage is external to the commission. In other words, the implementation stage is what occurs—particularly in terms of policy—after the commission has completed its work. I further operationalize the theory of riot commission politics by stipulating the components of each stage: timing, funding and resources, and commissioners appointed (commission stage); tone of the report, recommendations made, and reaction to the recommendations (recommendation stage); and extent to which the recommendations were implemented (implementation stage; Lupo, 2011). This categorization allows for an empirical assessment of riot commission politics at work, as this article seeks to do with the Ferguson Commission process.

In my work on the five American race riots mentioned above, I found that the above described commission process was at work in all of them, but at different stages and to varying degrees. In other words, the deflection and bureaucratic processing were heightened in some phases and more muted in others (see Table 1).

As mentioned previously, what was most notable in that research was that in the most recent riot (1992) that I studied, the processing occurred at high levels in all three stages of the riot commission process. In contrast, each of the previous four riot commissions (1919, 1935, 1965, and 1967), in certain stages of the commission process, offered more than just deflection. For instance, the Kerner Commission that studied the widespread urban riots of the “long, hot summer” of 1967 included in their final report some hard-hitting language that blames “white racism” for the “explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II” (Kerner Commission). Such direct language contributes to the lack of a mark in the “recommendation stage” in Table 1 above.¹ The finding regarding the 1992 riot commission process—with its high levels of commission politics in all three stages—indicates that riot commission politics could be growing in intensity. It is indeed a counterintuitive twist, as “earlier riot commissions [1919 and 1935] were more willing than the 1992 commissions to respond in a more socially progressive and racially tolerant manner” (Lupo, 2011, p. 9). I concluded that the country was growing increasingly unwilling to genuinely study or understand racial insurgency and increasingly eager to sweep the violence under the rug, focus on law and order, and move on.

Table 1. Presence of riot commission politics.

Stage of the Commission	1919 Chicago Commission	1935 Harlem Commission	1965 McCone Commission	1967 Kerner Commission	1992 Los Angeles Commissions
<i>Internal Commission Politics:</i> Commission Stage	X		X	X	X
<i>Internal Commission Politics:</i> Recommendation Stage			X		X
<i>External Commission Politics:</i> Implementation Stage		X		X	X

What caused the increase in commission politics in the post-Kerner Commission years? The reasons for the shift were threefold: a different context for the 1992 riot, a late twentieth century stoking of the American ideals of individualism and equality, and the presence of the Christopher Commission, a commission instituted after the Rodney King beating but before the riot (Lupo, 2011, p. 212). First, the context surrounding the 1992 riot differed from the previous riots. This played out in a few ways: the media played a much larger role (particularly with regard to constant television airings of looting; Lupo, 2011), the riot of 1992 was an isolated event and not part of a larger national call for race-related legal reform (Gale, 1996), and finally, liberal policies had been in decline as public opinion had shifted in the direction of a smaller role for government in achieving the goals of racial equality (Gale, 1996; Lupo, 2011; Omi & Winant, 1993). Second, the ideals of individualism and equality—key components of American political ideology according to Kingdon (1999)—were stoked to a greater extent in the latter part of the twentieth century, in large part because the civil rights movement was followed by an increased focus on law and order (Weaver, 2007). Third, after the Rodney King beating, the Christopher Commission, an independent police commission, was tasked with investigating the Los Angeles Police Department and making recommendations for change with regard to practices and culture. The final report received quite a bit of media coverage, perhaps offsetting the need for a hard-hitting and prominent riot commission. All three of these aspects impacted the way in which the 1992 riot was studied by the commissions that followed the uprising—their reports heavily focused on boosting the economy and law enforcement and they were widely ignored by the public, the media, and politicians. In other words, the level of commission politics was high with the 1992 riot and I argued that the riot commissions that studied the uprising illustrated a shift in commission politics—with less of a focus on race, less depth, and less attention. Further, I argue that future riot commissions would behave in a similar manner as many of these components—for instance, media presence, social movements that ebb and flow in prominence, and the decline in support for liberal policies and the backlash against initiatives pushing racial equity—may be long-lasting features of American politics. The 2014 appointment of the Ferguson Commission offers us the chance to test these predictions.

Data and methods

This article utilizes the riot commission politics framework—with the measurable components of each stage stipulated above—to analyze the extent to which the Ferguson Commission employed riot commission politics. In particular, I examine each of the three stages of riot commissions to assess whether—and how—riot commission politics was at work at that stage in the commission process. In order to do so, I used two research methods: elite interviews and content analysis. The elite interviews involved interviewing more than two-thirds of the Ferguson Commissioners, as well as commission staff members, community leaders, journalists, political elites, and members of the business community—all of whom reside in the St. Louis area.² I contacted and requested an interview with fifteen of the 16 members of the Ferguson Commission (one did not have publicly available contact information) and eleven interviews were completed—a response rate of 73.3%. Non-commissioners were selected using a snowball sample that began with commission staffers, local academics, commissioners, and journalists. Twenty-one non-commissioners were contacted and fifteen were interviewed—a response rate of 71.4%. Of the 15 non-commissioners that I interviewed, six were community and/or business leaders, four were commission staffers, three were journalists, one was an elected official, and one was an academic. Every effort possible was made to ensure a representative sample, including asking for potential interviewees who were both supportive and critical of the commission (both are included in this sample).

In total, I completed 30 elite interviews, each lasting in the range of 20 to 40 minutes. The questions focused on how they came to be involved with the commission and their perception of multiple key areas: the relationship between commissioners, the hearing process, level of support from Governor Nixon's office, level of consensus with regard to the final report, community reception of the final report, and level and type of implementation of the calls to action. The interviewees' recorded answers

were assessed by pulling out themes (common phrases or wording), comparing answers across a single question, and analyzing consistencies and differences in the interviewees' general comments about the commission process. With only 30 interviews, I was able to focus on an in-depth, but still systematic, approach to the interview analysis process. In some ways, this was a quantitative process—for instance, I conducted a hand count of commonly used words and phrases. But the bulk of the analysis focused on qualitative assessment, as it would offer a more holistic approach to the raw interview data. However, it is important to note that the very benefits of such qualitative research—in-depth, reasoned and informed interpretation—are often perceived as lessening the scientific nature of the research. Thus, I approached the data knowing that the analysis process would require more attention to curbing personal bias. As Hochschild (2009) notes about elite interviews: “The great temptation is to pick and choose strong quotations that make the points the interviewer wanted to have made to begin with, and to string together a set of ideas from the respondent that cohere in a particular way.” Hochschild also notes the ways that elite interviews are distinct from similar research methods like survey research, arguing that elite interview analysis is where “one is basically developing a history or analytic narrative” that is qualitative—but still empirical—in nature (Hochschild, 2009). To prevent bias and ensure empiricism, I sought to pay attention to the “noise”—the seemingly arcane, irrelevant, or contradictory comments that offered deep insight. Doing so ensured a robust, comprehensive, and qualitative elite interview analysis.

The content analysis involved analyzing both written and verbal items of communication, including the final commission report (written), the commission meetings (written and verbal), and media coverage (written) with regard to the commission's recommendations and implementation.³ Additionally, the content analysis was substantive, rather than structural, meaning that the focus was on what was said (e.g., phrasing and content) rather than how it was said (e.g., amount space dedicated to say it; Brians et al., 2016). In content analyzing the final commission report and the commission meetings, the unit of analysis was the item (Brians et al., 2016; Colton & Covert, 2007). Thus, I analyzed the entirety of the report and the deliberations of the meetings⁴ as whole units, a different approach than content analysis of a word, theme, or person, which often involves content analysis software. Doing so allowed me to view the communication holistically, to assess the commission's overall message and conversation surrounding the uprising. While content analysis with words, themes, or persons helps to bring precision, it often fails to capture nuance and the multifaceted nature of a long written report or a yearlong meeting process. Finally, to analyze the commission's recommendations and implementation levels, I conducted content analysis of media news sites, legislative tracking sites, and organizational sites, based on entering key words and phrases from the recommendation into a search engine.⁵

In short, the qualitative nature of the methods used here offer a thorough and empirical assessment of the data. Though not as quantitative in nature, the analysis should not be misunderstood as less rigorous or scientific. To further flesh out the analysis, below I offer more details on the operationalization and measurement process.

Operationalization

So how will we know if riot commission politics is present in each of these stages? In other words, how do I operationalize commission politics and what are the specific indicators of commission politics? With regard to the first stage of the commission process, the commission stage, the commission will face a shortage of resources. For instance, they are typically granted a very short period of time in which to conduct their research and write the report—typically under a year. The McCone Commission, in studying the 1965 Los Angeles riot, had a 3-month deadline to complete its research and the report, leaving little time for thorough and valid analysis (Lupo, 2011). And this condensed timeline for action leads to further resource scarcity, as it makes it difficult to recruit trained and knowledgeable commission members who are likely to be unavailable at the last minute (Lipsky & Olson, 1977). Additionally, they will be underfunded and under-resourced for the task at hand, often

with a budget that is far below what is needed to complete a rigorous analysis of the violence. For instance, the commission that studied the Chicago riot of 1919 did not receive any government funding, despite being appointed by the governor of Illinois, and relied entirely on private contributions from concerned community members (Lupo, 2011). Finally, the commissioners appointed tend to be substantively unrepresentative of the variety of perspectives—particularly with regard to the causes of the uprising and the needs of the community (Lipsky & Olson, 1977; Lupo, 2011). In one extreme case, a commissioner with the 1965 McCone Commission occasionally pulled up to the commission's Watts office in a chauffeured limousine—and asked it to wait in the community for the duration of the meeting (Jacobs, 1966).

In the second stage, the policy recommendation stage, there are three indicators: tone of the report, recommendations made, and reaction to the report. If commission politics is present, the tone of the report will be more disparaging than empathetic with regard to those involved in the uprising. This typically involves the use of “riff-raff” language that deems the rioters to be the riff-raff of society, whereby their actions are outside the norms of the political system—they are characterized more as criminals or opportunistic looters than protesters (Sears & McConahay, 1969). For instance, the commission that studied the Harlem riot of 1935 wrote that “some of the destruction was carried on in a playful spirit . . . done in the spirit of children” (Harlem Commission (Mayor's Commission on Conditions in Harlem), 1969, p. 12). With regard to recommendations made, riot commission politics are present when the recommendations are unoriginal and uncontentious and when they describe more than they prescribe. For instance, the Chicago Commission recommended “interracial tolerance”—“we recommend dispassionate, intelligent, and sympathetic consideration by each race of the other's needs and aims” (Chicago Commission on Race Relations [1922], 1968, p. 644). The reaction to the final commission report is another criterion for assessment of the presence of riot commission politics. When elite reaction is one of disregard and dismissal—essentially, an ignoring of the report—riot commission politics is at work. Notably, President Johnson was extremely angry at the work of the Kerner Commission that studied the 1967 riots, refusing to sign thank you notes for the commissioners, as he noted that doing so would make him a hypocrite (Johnson, 1968). President Johnson's hostility toward the Kerner Commission had actually begun much earlier and even when the commission had tried to soften the report's recommendations (for instance, by removing the social science data), he remained silent on their work. In the days before the Kerner Commission report's release, the Johnson administration sought ways to undermine it and potentially “diminish its overall impact, point up its enormous cost, and the unrealistic nature of its recommendations” (Lupo, 2011, p. 147). This negative reaction to the report ushered in high levels of commission politics in the next commission stage—implementation of report recommendations.

In the third and final stage, the implementation stage, riot commission politics is present when the recommendations made are only minimally (or not at all) implemented. For example, four commissions investigated the 1992 Los Angeles riot—and very little changed as a direct result of their work (one commissioner noted that they all knew the recommendations were “largely symbolic”; Lupo, 2011, p. 196). Similarly, 30 years after the Kerner Commission, former commissioner and former U.S. Senator, Fred Harris, offered a bleak update in his report, “The Kerner Report Thirty Years Later.” Summing it up on NBC News, Harris stated bluntly: “Things got better . . . and then that progress stopped and in many ways began to reverse” (Harris, 1998). On the 50th anniversary of the Kerner Commission, Harris was joined by Eisenhower Foundation president and chief executive, Alan Curtis, in the still glum assessment: “The Kerner ethos—‘Everyone does better when everyone does better’—has been, for many decades, supplanted by its opposite: ‘You're on your own’” (Harris & Curtis, 2018).

In the analysis that follows, I assess each of the three stages for the presence of riot commission politics in the Ferguson Commission process. Evidence from previous commissions illustrates the way in which the government response to uprisings is typically one of evasion or a delegitimizing of the violence. Further, I (2011) found that the commission politics process worsened with the 1992 Los Angeles riot and predicted that future commissions would similarly deeply undermine the root causes

of the uprising. Thus, I hypothesize that the Ferguson Commission engaged in high levels of commission politics in all three stages of the commission process. To test this hypothesis, an assessment of all three stages of the Ferguson Commission follows.

Analysis

Instituted in the months following Michael Brown's death, the Ferguson Commission had a threefold charge from the Governor: "To examine the underlying causes of [social and economic] conditions, including poverty, education, governance, and law enforcement; To engage with local citizens, area organizations, national thought leaders, institutions, and experts to develop a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the concerns related to these conditions; and To issue an unflinching report containing specific, practical policy recommendations for making the region a stronger, fairer place for everyone to live" (Ferguson Commission, 2015, p. 14). However, in the introduction to the final report, the commissioners note that they quickly established the need to go beyond these three areas and to more broadly embrace "as [their] charge helping the community chart a new path toward healing and positive change for the residents of the St. Louis region" (Ferguson Commission, 2015, p. 14). They note that their work is the beginning of a conversation rather than a final assessment—an outline and a narrative, rather than a list of specific policy recommendations and suggestions for implementation. Indeed, the post-commission establishment of a board ("Forward Through Ferguson") and an action plan (#STL2039) to continue the work of the commission illustrates the way in which this commission process seems to differ from previous processes.

In short, the Ferguson Commission—so far—appears not to adhere to the commission politics framework. In terms of reversing a century of riot commission politics in which racial violence was disregarded as anomalous and opportunistic, this is good news for more productive conversations about racial tensions and the persistence of racial inequality. In this section, I turn to each stage of the riot commission process to empirically analyze the level of deflection.

Commission

As mentioned above, there are three parts to the commission stage: timing, funding and resources, and the commissioners. These three areas are critical for understanding how the commission process is impacted in its incipience—before the release of the final report. Below is a brief discussion of the Ferguson Commission with regard to each of these three areas.

Timing

With regard to the timing of the commission, Governor Nixon announced the creation of the commission two and a half months after Michael Brown's death, a length of time that had some in the community frustrated at the slow response. A month after his announcement, on November 18, 2014, the 16 commissioners were sworn in and the commission began its work. The commissioners were given 10 months to complete their work—with a deadline of September 15, 2015 to release a final report. Unlike other commissions that had either too little time (6 months or less) or too much time (2 years or more) to conduct their work, the Ferguson Commission's process was appropriate for the task at hand—long enough to fully engage the community in the process through a series of hearings, long enough to hear from experts and gather empirical data on economic and social conditions in the region, but also short enough to feel responsive and timely with regard to the racial unrest of August 2014. The commission held its first meeting on December 1, 2014, released its final report on September 14, 2015, and held its final meeting on December 7, 2015—with 17 full commission meetings taking place during the almost year long process. In addition, each of the working groups met throughout the year, boosting the number of public meetings to a total of 55. Thus, it was a full few months, but the timing of the commission was suitable for

their charge. However, one interviewee involved in the commission’s work did note that the process felt rushed and that they had less time than they needed since they could not come to consensus on the calls to action (Interview, 2018).

Funding

With regard to funding, the commission funded their \$1.26 million budget through a mix of both public and private funding. The public funding came from the state of Missouri in the form of “economic development, community service, and community development block grant dollars” (Wilson, 2016) as well as from the Higher Education Loan Authority (MOHELA). The commission leaders negotiated early on with the Governor’s office, asking for \$1 million, a process that, according to one commissioner, led to a relationship with the governor that was not perfect, but supportive (Interview, 2016). Another individual involved with the commission echoed this sentiment, saying that that any holdups that occurred in the funding process seemed to stem more from typical government bureaucracy rather than obstinance and that, in the end, the governor’s office even offered support staff to help the commission navigate the budget process (Interview, 2016). An additional \$255,000 came from private funding, including the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Missouri Foundation for Health, and a number of smaller foundations based in the St. Louis region. Finally, the commission received some in-kind support, such as pro-bono or reduced-rate work from community professionals, meeting space at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, as well as interns and office space from Washington University. In the end, the commission had a healthy budget, and even reduced their budget by over \$200,000 halfway through their process. In their May 11, 2015, meeting, Managing Director Bethany Johnson-Javois said this about the budget reduction: “we’ve learned to work smarter; we’ve learned to work harder, leaner, and longer for this amount of time. And we do so actually very happily because this really is a labor of love” (Ferguson Commission Meeting Transcript, May 11, 2015, p. 142).

Commissioners

Finally, in terms of choice of the sixteen commissioners, one local media outlet declared them representative of the surrounding region: “a mix of lawyers, CEOs, former and current police officials and educators—along with one 20-year-old protester” (Deere, 2014). The editorial board of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* wrote the following on November 18, 2014, upon the announcement of the commissioners:

The 16-member commission that Missouri’s Democratic governor announced Tuesday afternoon is broadly diverse and representative of the communities of people who live in St. Louis. It has an activist and a cop. It has academics, pastors and business people. It has some civic clout and some street cred. It has Republicans and Democrats, eight blacks and eight whites.

Indeed, the commissioners ran the gamut in terms of their experience, demographic characteristics, and “outsider/insider” status. One individual involved in the commission noted that there were multiple sides represented on the commission—not just two (Interview, 2016). This was a common sentiment in the interviews, as interviewees routinely noted the balance in the selection process. Interviewees used such phrases as: “notable inclusions,” a “wide array,” a “wide range of voices,” “diverse perspectives,” “cross-community leadership,” “varied opinions,” a “broad cross-section of

Table 2. Ferguson Commission composition as compared to the surrounding area.

	Percent Black	Percent White	Percent Female	Percent Male
Ferguson Commission	50	50	37.5	62.5
City of Ferguson	67	29	55	45
County of St. Louis	23	69	53	47

people—not just political allies,” and “a good cross-section of the best of St. Louis” (Multiple interviews, 2016 and 2018). Finally, many interviewees—both those inside and outside the commission—mentioned the high regard that the community had for the co-chairs of the commission.

However, there was imbalance in some areas of commissioner appointment (see Table 2). First, the city of Ferguson is 67% Black and 29% White,⁶ making the Ferguson Commission over-representative of Whites. However, the surrounding area (St. Louis County) is largely the reverse—69% non-Hispanic White and 23% Black. Thus, one could say that the Ferguson Commission—at 50% Black and 50% White—was a middle point between the demographics of the city of Ferguson and the larger St. Louis region. Second, the gender make-up of the commission was not proportionate. With ten men and six women, the commission did not match the 55% and 53% female population of Ferguson and St. Louis County respectively.⁷

Finally, according to one commissioner, the commission ideologically leaned a little left with only 3–5 members leaning right or center-right (Interview 2016). However, this commissioner was quick to add that the commissioners immediately developed a deep respect for one another, despite these ideological differences (this commissioner put himself in the “center-right” category). In short, Governor Nixon instituted a balanced, independent commission that was willing to be bold and far-reaching—a choice that, according to one commissioner, may not have always aligned with what the governor wanted (Interview, 2016).

Indeed, the positive and respectful relationships were common themes that came up repeatedly in my interviews. One commissioner noted that there was a “genuine interest in learning” and an “amazing willingness to step back” and just listen, despite very different perspectives and points of view (Interview, 2016). Another also commented on how commissioners tended to listen well to one another—“we didn’t always agree but we understood the bigger picture” (Interview, 2016). One observer noted that it seemed as though the commissioners were “not doing it for personal or professional gain—they were doing it for the right reasons. They really seemed to want change” (Interview, 2018). Another noted a consistent high level of respect among the commissioners, despite some heated early meetings (Interview, 2016). Another commissioner commented on how the governor had avoided just selecting the “usual” to be on the commission—few commissioners knew more than one or two other commissioners at the outset. However, as one commissioner noted, “over time, a cohesion happened . . . I saw change on almost everyone’s part” (Interview, 2016).

Finally, the public meetings held by the commission were a critical part of the commission’s process. Most notably, the meetings were well-attended (70 people on average; Ferguson Commission, 2015, p. 186). One interviewee not involved in the commission’s work mentioned that the commission worked hard to make them accessible by holding the meetings in a wide variety of non-traditional locations (for instance, schools and businesses) across the entire region (Interview, 2018). The same interviewee lauded that there were “so many opportunities to give input” (Interview, 2018). And the use of electronic, handheld keypads to survey the crowd proved a useful tool in capturing the size, demographics, perspectives, and life experiences of each meeting’s attendees. For those unable to attend, the commission encouraged social media engagement and emailed comments. The meetings were well-organized, thoroughly planned, and professionally run. The format of each meeting became predictable early on, as each meeting included the following elements: welcome comments from the host institution, an invocation, public comments, and expert presentations. The public comment portion of each meeting elicited strong, emotional comments from members of the community and helped the commission establish the accountability it needed to do its work in a transparent manner.

And this accountability only grew throughout the process. The vast majority of interviewees—mostly outsiders—mentioned their own skepticism or the skepticism of others at the start of the commission process. However, when this initial pessimism was mentioned, it was always followed with an optimistic note of how this perspective shifted as the commission continued in its work—one spoke of it as a move from “skepticism” to a sense of “sincerity” (Interview, 2018). In speaking about this growing sense of legitimacy, one interviewee noted how many observers began from a place of

suspicion but quickly moved away from this when it became clear that the commissioners took the process seriously and would not be a rubber stamp for the governor's office (Interview, 2018). Another non-commissioner interviewee mentioned that there was initially some controversy regarding whether activist groups should validate the commission by engaging with it, but that these suspicions were eventually replaced with optimism (Interview, 2018). Similarly, another non-commissioner admitted that they were part of a larger group that did not initially favor the idea of a commission, but that they "begrudgingly came to respect it" (Interview, 2018). Another non-commissioner interviewee reflected on how the commission gained their trust by showing that they could hold the room together while still letting the emotions run free (Interview, 2018). Another said: "I admired that they let [people] vent because it set the tone going forward. This commission was going to be patient and let the people speak to them" (Interview, 2018). Indeed, it seems that this accountability grew from what one interviewee, a journalist, referred to as a "model of transparency" (Interview, 2018).

Notably, the first commission meeting drew the largest and most vocal audience, with a number of commission members citing this meeting as the most difficult one, both in terms of the heated discussion and the newness of the process. But from here, the meetings grew more focused and practical, while remaining dedicated to allowing room for emotional testimony. One interviewee mentioned the effectiveness of this tricky balance: "It's counterintuitive to what you would think—it was productive despite being so open" (Interview, 2018). Thus, people kept attending meetings throughout the process—at the sixteenth meeting of the commission, about three weeks before the release of the report, 36% of the attendees were there for the first time and the commission had recorded close to 3,000 attendees over the course of the commission process, indicating that the commission had maintained its credibility throughout this difficult process. The demographic breakdown also indicates consistent and continual engagement across all races—at one of the first full commission meetings, 53% of attendees were White, 38% Black, and 9% other/decline, while at one of the last commission meetings, 63% of attendees were White, 30% Black, 4% American Indian, and 3% other/decline.⁸ On average, 46% were White, 44% of attendees were Black, 1% were Hispanic, and 9% were other/decline (Ferguson Commission, 2015, p. 188). Again, these numbers largely reflect a demographic average between the City of Ferguson and St. Louis County.⁹

In sum, in the commission stage of the Ferguson Commission process, commission politics were low. The commission was given an appropriate amount of time to study the wide-ranging, pressing economic and social conditions of the region, they were well-funded to carry out this task, the commissioners chosen were representative of the varying perspectives and experiences in the region, and the commission meetings were engaging, transparent, productive, and civil. In addition, they did not shy away from difficult conversations and they showed themselves to be willing to set aside their personal ideologies and viewpoints in order to listen and learn. I turn now to the second stage of the commission process—the recommendation stage.

Recommendations

With regard to the recommendation stage of the riot commission process, we can assess the extent to which riot commission politics were at work by qualitatively analyzing the three components: tone of the report, recommendations made, and reaction to the recommendations. Riot commissions that have heightened "commission politics" at this stage often use riff-raff language to refer to rioters (for instance, "hoodlums"), focus on surface-level recommendations that address a law and order response to the riot, emergency preparedness, or economic development rather than underlying causes of the riot, and face an elite reaction that ranges from passive (if the recommendations are surface-level) to dismayed (if the recommendations are more hard-hitting).¹⁰ I turn now to an assessment of the three areas of the recommendation stage of the commission process as they played out with the Ferguson Commission: tone of the report, recommendations offered, and reaction to these recommendations.

Tone of the report

With regard to the tone of the report, the most notable aspect of the entire commission report is the way in which they placed race (and racial equity) at the center of the report. This is evidenced throughout the report—from the sub-title (“a path toward racial equity”) to the two-page “context” section of the report (which clearly lays out their dedication to a commission report that focuses on racial inequities) to the “racial equity lens assessment” that follows each signature priority.¹¹ In order to address the issue of racial inequity head-on, the four working groups (citizen-law enforcement relations, municipal courts and governance, child well-being and education equity, and economic inequity and opportunity) were all asked to “intentionally apply a racial equity lens to their work” (Ferguson Commission, 2015, p. 17) as this was the overarching theme of the report. The details of the signature priorities and calls to action that emerged from the working group process will be discussed below, but what is worth noting now is the way in which each of the three signature priorities (justice for all, youth at the center, and opportunity to thrive)—and each signature call to action under these priorities—had a “racial lens assessment” completed for it. An example of the way in which race is integrated as a primary theme in the report appears below in Table 3.

In short, this racial equity lens, as an overarching theme of the report, shifts the tone of the report to being one of greater willingness to speak boldly and honestly about racial issues—something that previous riot commissions were often unwilling to do. As one Ferguson Commission staffer noted, “there are 189 calls [to action] but really just one . . . racial equity. [It’s really just] 189 ways to get at racial equity” (Interview, 2016). The tone of the report is therefore very different from previous riot commission reports, where the tendency is to blame rioters and deflect from the underling societal problems.

Recommendations made

In terms of recommendations made, the recommendations of the Ferguson Commission are far-reaching and hard-hitting. As noted above, riot commissions typically issue recommendations for policy change, presumably to “solve” the public problems that are plaguing the community. . . . However, early in its report, the Ferguson Commission makes it clear that their report is “a narrative . . . not a list of policy recommendations” (Ferguson Commission, 2015, p. 10). Thus, in making recommendations, the commission chose to present empirically-grounded policy recommendations, but also powerful personal stories of “why.” In fact, one commissioner commented on the commission’s extensive conversations regarding the choice between offering limited but potentially successful recommendations or broad but potentially impotent recommendations (Interview, 2016). The commission chose the latter—sweeping calls to action to match the grim inequities faced by the community. One outsider to the commission said that the report’s release caused many in the community to say “huh, they really did their job” (Interview, 2018). Many calls to action are specific and “easy” (such as “open municipal court sessions” to the public) but most are far-reaching (such as “prohibit profiling and

Table 3. Example of the racial equity lens assessment (for the third “signature priority”—opportunity to thrive) in the Ferguson Commission Report (Ferguson Commission, 2015, p. 57).

SIGNATURE CALLS TO ACTION	INDICATORS
Expand Medicaid Eligibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In St. Louis County, 17.57% of Black residents are uninsured compared to 7.18% of White residents (American Community Survey, 2010–2012). • In St. Louis City, 23.37% of Black residents are uninsured compared to 13.84% of White residents (American Community Survey, 2010–2012).
Enhance and Expand Collaboration between Educators and Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2013, nationally, the unemployment rate for Black Americans is 10.2%, compared to 4.7% for White Americans (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). • For youth ages 16–19, the unemployment rate is 30.1% for Black Americans compared to 15.5% for White Americans (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). • In MO, the unemployment rate for Black residents is 18.2%, compared to 5.2% unemployment for White residents (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

discrimination,” “raise the minimum wage,” and “increase health insurance coverage and access”). In short, the 189 calls to action were extensive and demanding, especially as compared to many previous riot commission recommendations.

On the one hand, these wide-ranging calls to action are appropriate for the scope of the problems in the St. Louis region. Many of them call for nothing short of a full restructuring of deeply embedded political, economic, and social structures—systematic change that would require an enormous amount of political capital, compromise, and grit. It is the struggle of many riot commissions—issuing sweeping recommendations that are necessarily general, broad, and inexact so as to tackle the deep and complex problems that led to the uprising and violence, but then so far-reaching that real action seems near impossible (Lipsky & Olson, 1977, p. 76). When the recommendations are more ambiguous and sweeping than specific and restricted, it makes it easier for the appointing body (and others being asked to respond) to ignore all of them. Simply put, political leaders can easily dismiss them as politically impossible. However, when the recommendations are more narrow and explicit, their impact will be limited. It is a conundrum for all riot commissions: must their recommendations be either hard-hitting (and sweeping) or insignificant (and specific)? The former risks their recommendations being ignored as politically unviable and the latter risks their recommendations not going far enough in tackling the root of the problems.

The Ferguson Commission worked to offset this problem in a few ways. Most notably, the Ferguson Commission included an “accountable body(ies)” section under each of the 189 calls to action, making it very clear who should be held accountable for the failure of government to act. These ranged from local governments, the Missouri state highway patrol, municipal departments—all the way up to the U.S. Congress and the president. They also included non-governmental actors, such as the business and philanthropic community in St. Louis and local colleges and universities. Additionally, the report offered a number of specific steps that the accountable bodies could take to achieve the call to action. Second, the Ferguson Commission included an introductory section to each “sub-chapter” of the “calls to action” section of the final report. This introductory section had the following heading: “The expert testimony, research, scholarship, and lived experience collected by the commission revealed the following . . .” What followed was typically 3–5 bullet points with stories of real individuals, data, and expert findings, all of which helped to ground the calls to action in a real-world setting. The section gave context to the calls to action and made it difficult to dispute the need for such comprehensive—but politically difficult—changes. Finally, the commission did prioritize the calls to action, pulling some of the 189 general calls to action and naming them “signature calls to action.” This helped to prioritize the recommendations, which in turn could help make them more politically feasible.

Reaction to the recommendations

In terms of the reaction to the recommendations, Governor Nixon—who would be term-limited out of office just over a year from the report’s release—seemed amenable. Upon receiving the final report, he noted at a press conference: “I commit to you today that these efforts will not be in vain. Our journey will continue. Through the sheer force of our collective will and our personal acceptance of responsibility for our communities’ safety and well-being, we will keep moving forward together” (Rosenbaum & Lloyd, 2015). The Republican Speaker of the Missouri State Assembly, Todd Richardson, offered supportive words as well: “there are a number of things in the report I think the legislature can work on and build some consensus on. We’re certainly going to take those recommendations seriously. And we’re going to evaluate them, because we know the work that went into them. So they’ll certainly have an impact on how we look at things” (Rosenbaum & Lloyd, 2015). And yet these elected officials almost immediately turned the process into a political battle. On September 14, 2015, St. Louis Public Radio reported:

“I think if the governor focuses on the areas where we can find some common ground, he’ll be very successful in that effort,” said Richardson, when asked what role Nixon would play in getting some of the recommendations passed. “I think if the governor chooses to focus on some of the items in the report that are more partisan, I don’t [think] he’ll be very successful. But we welcome the governor’s input and the opportunity to work with his office on the things we can build consensus on.” (Rosenbaum & Lloyd, 2015)

Additionally, Missouri’s Lt. Governor, Peter Kinder, again questioned the process, publicly wondering whether the commission’s recommendations would be adopted and whether the money spent on the commission was worth it (Rosenbaum, 2015). In his campaign for governor 6 months later, he reiterated his unhappiness with the commission: “I am frankly disappointed in the Ferguson Commission report on a number of accounts. I think they ignored the issue of school choice and charter schools, which we should be expanding. Michael Brown graduated from an unaccredited school. It is not clear what kind of future he was headed for” (Rosenbaum & Mannies, 2016). Implied in this statement is the idea that Michael Brown’s death somehow saved him from a dismal future—a position that the commission firmly stood against. Thus, the commission’s report quickly became an opportunity to propagate already established political views—especially if those views were contrary to the report’s framing of the uprising and subsequent policy recommendations. One non-commissioner interviewee noted how some “entrenched interests” have been “resistant and even hostile” to the report and its recommendations (Interview, 2018). Indeed, just a few months later, the candidates for governor all offered critical assessments of the Ferguson Commission and the recommendations they made. Thus, overall, the response from politicians has been mixed.

Implementation

Analysis of the third stage of the commission process—implementation—requires an assessment of the extent to which the recommendations have been implemented. Many interviewees spoke positively and optimistically about the community’s embrace of the report’s recommendations. One staffer stated that they felt as though they were living it daily, as they saw dog-eared and stickered copies of the report around town (Interview, 2016). A commissioner concurred, stating that people from all sectors of society—business, community organizations, philanthropy, and politics—had genuinely stepped up (Interview, 2016). And one interviewee noted that they hear the language of the report used often and that it is “brought up as a resource very frequently” (Interview, 2018). Another non-commissioner interviewee indicated that they “hear people referencing the report in terms of strategy” (Interview, 2018). And one interviewee—a commissioner—said, “I hear anecdotally that people are paying attention to the report and using it as a guide to make decisions—it’s just to what degree? And in what areas?” (Interview 2016). Finally, one interviewee admitted that the community is “not using it as a guiding light as much as we could” (Interview, 2018). In short, many interviewees, both inside and outside the commission, discussed the informal ways in which the commission’s recommendations are being discussed in the community, but others were quick to point out the dearth of real change.

In order to assess the extent to which the commission’s calls to action have actually been implemented, I researched each recommendation and classified them according to the categories in Table 4. As noted earlier, these assessments are based upon a content analysis of media coverage. More than a third of the 189 calls to action have been fully or partially implemented in the last 6 years, while just over half have not been implemented. I included a category for “unknown” given that some of the

Table 4. Implementation of calls to action.

	Number of Calls to Action	Percentage of Calls to Action
Fully Implemented	30	15.9%
Partially Implemented	40	21.1%
Not Implemented	105	55.6%
Unknown	14	7.4%
TOTAL	189	100%

calls to action used vague language regarding informal changes that are difficult to operationalize and measure (for instance, “Ensure employer-educator collaborations build a love of learning”). One example of a fully implemented call to action is #143 (“Implement a statewide M/WBE (Minority/Women’s Business Enterprises) program”)—in October 2015 Governor Nixon signed an executive order establishing a state program aimed at increasing diversity contracting.

These percentages can be compared to the commission’s own analysis of implementation. In August 2018, the Forward Through Ferguson organization (discussed below) released a State of the Report, which assessed the 47 “signature priority” calls to action. They found that five of 47 calls to action had been achieved and that some progress had been made on all 47. Using a scale of implementation ranging from zero (“no or little implementation activity at any level”) to five (“nearly complete or complete implementation at the highest appropriate level”), the signature priority calls to action achieved an overall implementation score of 2.54 (“blend of programmatic and policy implementation activity”; Forward Through Ferguson, 2018). This number corroborates my findings above, where I indicate that about half of the 189 calls to action have been implemented or partially implemented. In short, 6 years after the release of the Ferguson Commission report, some implementation has occurred but there is much work to be done.

However, the question of how successful the commission has been in getting their recommendations implemented is a tricky one, as the commission purposely focused on long-term (and potentially sweeping) changes, rather than quick (and potentially shallow) fixes. In their report, they note the following: “while this report includes many specific policy calls to action, it is not an implementation plan” (Ferguson Commission, 2015, p. 11). Instead, they offer an outline for the future—along with the list of accountable bodies for each call to action. They call the report a “springboard”—a way “to initiate conversations and action” (Ferguson Commission, 2015, p. 11). The goal, then, seems to be one of ongoing conversation and communication across entities. One interviewee noted that the commission never saw their report as “the hub of implementation,” instead they sought to “call forth activity on the part of [other] accountable bodies” (Interview, 2018). And another said that they are intentionally not focusing on policies and programs in any kind of individual way (“the idea is not to say that x% were implemented”), but rather to focus on changed hearts and minds (Interview, 2018). Another called the report a “community organizing plan” and said that the intention was “keeping up public conversation and setting up work to measure these goals” (Interview, 2016).

But a conversation about implementation should necessarily focus on what is perhaps most distinct about the Ferguson Commission, as opposed to other riot commissions—that this commission called for a post-commission body to oversee progress on the commission’s recommendations. The commission report calls for “an oversight body [to] track progress on implementation and impact, and keep the public informed on how the accountable bodies are advancing down the path toward positive change” (Ferguson Commission, 2015, p. 22). They erected a nonprofit organization—Forward Through Ferguson—“designed to be a catalyst for the infrastructure needed to make lasting positive change in the St. Louis region as outlined in the report” (Forward Through Ferguson, 2017). The board members and staffers of Forward Through Ferguson have been tasked with continuing the work of the Ferguson Commission—they are promoted as the body empowered “to carry on [the commission’s] work, to help the region turn those calls into action, and to catalyze St. Louis’ efforts toward Racial Equity” (Forward Through Ferguson).

Indeed, Forward Through Ferguson seems committed to keeping the report alive. In the spring of 2018, Forward Through Ferguson launched their #STL2039 Action Plan, a proposal that pushes for long-term goal attainment (the year 2039) with short-term benchmarking (the next 3 years). In particular, the plan proposes three action strategies for the next 3 years: advocate for policy and systems change, build racial equity capacity, and sustain the work (Cooksey et al., 2018, p. 9). In this plan, Forward Through Ferguson calls out the inaction in the post-Kerner Commission years, noting that despite nationwide debate following the 1967 uprisings, the Kerner Commission report remained “a prescription left unfilled” (Cooksey et al., 2018, p. 3). Forward Through Ferguson is seeking to change this propensity toward inertia by sustaining the drive toward change. One way that they have pushed forward is in staffing their organization. Currently, the organization has five staffers (two directors and three catalysts)

to support the Board Members and to promote the recommendations of the Ferguson Commission. Another way that they continue the work of the commission is through financing community groups in the region. For instance, in 2020 the Forward through Ferguson organization, along with two community partners, created a \$1.69 million St. Louis Regional Racial Healing + Justice Fund with the goal of “healing community trauma and changing the conditions that reinforce systemic racism” (Forward Through Ferguson, 2021; Kukuljan, 2021). In August 2021, they announced they were distributing a second round of grant dollars—almost \$400,000 to 21 St. Louis-area community groups—just 5 months after their first round of grant distribution (Forward Through Ferguson, 2021). Also in August 2021, Forward Through Ferguson helped organize the second Racial Equity Summit in St. Louis, gathering equity advocates from around the region. Indeed, that the Ferguson Commission is continuing its work in the form of a well-organized, well-staffed, well-funded, and engaged organization¹² makes it different in yet another way from previous riot commissions.

Discussion

This research set out to find if the Ferguson Commission engaged in deflection and evasion to the same extent as previous riot commissions. Historically, these riot commissions have simply managed—rather than truly grappled with—the racial violence. They give the appearance of action but in reality, they act as a stopgap for further action. As a result, the complex and tough questions of “why the violence?” go unexamined and unanswered by these commissions.

However, the Ferguson Commission set out to do things differently. As compared to previous riot commissions, they knew of these potential pitfalls and actively worked against them. Did they succeed? I find that the Ferguson Commission successfully avoided commission politics in the first two stages (the internal stages), at the commission and recommendation level, and to some extent in the third stage (the external stage), implementation. Therefore, I do not find support for my hypothesis regarding commission politics.

How exactly does the Ferguson Commission differ? The analysis above illustrates a commission process marked by ample time and funding to carry out their work, a representative balance of commissioners, a transparent public meeting process, recommendations grounded in a racial equity lens, named accountable bodies, and established a permanent body to oversee implementation of recommendations. All of these aspects showcase how the Ferguson Commission differs from previous commissions. However, there are some ways in which it does not differ, thus fitting the mold of commission politics. For instance, the way in which political elites largely ignored or shunned the report is a tactic pulled from the playbook of previous commissions. Yet it remains the case that the Ferguson Commission was different: the levels of commission politics—though not absent—were low in all three stages of the commission process. In contrast, previous riot commissions had high levels of commission politics in at least one stage. In the case of one of the most recent race riot commissions, the commissions that studied the Los Angeles 1992 riot had high levels in all three stages.

Why does the Ferguson Commission have low levels of commission politics in all three stages? What makes it different from previous riot commissions? There are a few reasons. First, the national context matters, as the Black Lives Matter movement had gained national momentum in the years leading up to the uprising. However, although social movements can lead to policy change (Meyer, 2003), prior riot commissions that were underscored by a large, national movement (Los Angeles 1965, U.S. 1967) still experienced commission politics. Thus, there were more dynamics at work with the Ferguson Commission. Indeed, to offset many of the common barriers in the commission and recommendation stages, the Ferguson Commissioners studied previous riot commissions (the Kerner Commission and others), fully understanding that these commissions were often beset with problems—some internal and some external (Interview, 2016). From the beginning of the process, the Ferguson Commission worked to minimize these obstacles. Third, to lessen the chances of the implementation stage going awry, the Ferguson Commission set up a permanent body to oversee implementation of the recommendations. Doing so bolsters accountability, something that previous commissions

Table 5. Presence of riot commission politics.

Stage of the Commission	1919 Chicago Commission	1935 Harlem Commission	1965 McCone Commission	1967 Kerner Commission	1992 Los Angeles Commissions	2015 Ferguson Commission
<i>Internal Commission Politics:</i> Commission Stage	X		X	X	X	
<i>Internal Commission Politics:</i> Recommendation Stage			X		X	
<i>External Commission Politics:</i> Implementation Stage		X		X	X	

struggled with, as the entities empowered to make changes often ignored the commission report and the commission lacked the political and legal authority to hold them to anything. And in the case of the 1992 Los Angeles riot, the commissions were *preceded* by a commission (the Christopher Commission) which actually served to undermine the later commissions, thereby increasing the levels of commission politics. Indeed, the Ferguson Commission did what no other riot commission has done—they proactively set up a permanent body to oversee implementation of the commission’s work.

This component of the Ferguson Commission is critical in explaining why this process differs from previous riot commission processes. Never before has a riot commission had any power—or even presence—beyond the release of the report. Thus, with the Ferguson Commission, there is post-commission political pressure, accountability, and oversight in a way that no other commission has experienced. To use the language of conflict theory, there is continued power for the powerless. And in the language of urban politics theories, change is most likely when governments collaborate with other local entities, particularly when it comes to the untangling of decades of “segregation by design.” The Forward Through Ferguson organization has been actively promoting the work of the Ferguson Commission in the community, as they continue to push, advocate, and lobby for the 189 calls to action in the final commission report. This consistent and sustained advocacy has helped the Ferguson Commission, despite the building racial backlash of the Obama and post-Obama years (Tesler, 2016)—racial resentment that is not unlike the race fatigue and liberal backlash that was occurring nationally at the time of the 1992 Los Angeles riot. In short, the Forward Through Ferguson organization acts as an extraneous factor that offsets other factors that serve as obstacles. The organization has focused on sustainable, institutional changes that will take years to enact, but if Forward Through Ferguson remains active for years to come, we could have our first case of a successful riot commission. Thus, in the table below, a duplicate of Table 1 but with the Ferguson Commission added, I tentatively indicate that riot commission politics did not occur in any of the stages (as evidenced by the lack of Xs). Thus, I did not find support for my hypothesis—the Ferguson Commission did not have high levels of commission politics in all three stages and in fact, not any of the stages (see the final column in Table 5). However, this should be assessed throughout the coming years. First, continued assessment with a particular eye on the work of the Forward Through Ferguson organization will be critical in analyzing commission politics. Second, the larger “most racial” context that underscores the polarization of American politics today could prove to be a formidable barrier to real racial reform, as racial backlash—similar to the decades before and after the Los Angeles 1992 riot. Therefore, the assessment here of low commission politics is empirical and decisive, but only for the moment.

Urban politics: Insights from the Ferguson Commission and future of research

This study has looked at the government response to urban uprisings, focusing particularly on government-instituted commissions that study the violence and the conditions underlying the violence, and that ultimately offer recommendations. The case of the Ferguson Commission offers us a recent example of a riot commission, as well as the opportunity to analyze the extent

to which it engaged in commission politics. Two theoretical areas provide guidance in this analysis. First, conflict theory offers a foundation for predicting that post-uprising commissions will seek to invalidate the protest message of the rioters, thereby contributing to and perpetuating societal and racial power imbalances. However, conflict theory also notes that conflict can be—or, according to some conflict theorists, inevitably will be—the catalyst for change. In the case of the Ferguson Commission, conflict theory thus helps us understand that government coercion via the commission process is not certain and that conflict-driven momentum toward change is possible.

Second, two urban politics theories—governance theory and segregation by design theories—also offer guidance. Governance theory helps us to view the commission process (commission, recommendations, and implementation) on a wider, more contextualized scale by looking at the multiple actors that influenced the process and the implementation of policy. From local government to community groups to the local business community, many entities played a role or were asked to play a role, particularly in the implementation stage and in the years after the report's release (through Forward Through Ferguson). Governance theory allows us to assess the process beyond implementation of government policy and instead, consider the many ways that groups coordinated action and importantly, offered accountability in a way that previous riot commissions did not. Second, recent urban politics research has shown us how race-influenced policies driven by White self-interest—rather than economic inequality or racial antipathy—have produced segregated and uneven outcomes in America's urban cities (Trounstine, 2018, p. 205). These studies undermine pluralist urban politics theories by framing racial imbalance—stemming from biased policies—as a main driver of inequality and elite power. Previous riot commission analyses bolster this argument by illustrating how government commissions typically act to maintain the elite and race-based status quo. However, this analysis of the Ferguson Commission displays the way in which these government commissions may advocate for race-influenced policies that work in the opposite direction, in order to *undo* the policies of the past. Thus, using conflict theory and urban politics theories as a foundation, we see that government riot commissions may indeed serve as coercive mechanisms of evasion, but that this is not inevitable and indeed, they can be change-seeking.

More practically, this research could help in the development and work of future commissions that study urban violence. Additionally, it contributes to the larger conversation about the role of all types of political commissions—in America and other democracies—and the question of the inevitability of their inefficacy as change agents. These findings indicate that commissions can affect change and are not inevitably mechanisms of evasion. Commissions that study the moral reasons behind the violence (Edsall, 2021), as well as both the immediate cause of the violence and the underlying conditions that have spurred the uprising, could find more success in assuaging the causes and conditions that led to the violence. Indeed, I (2011) argued that riot commissions increase efficacy if they: have adequate resources with regard to funding of the commission and time available for research, include commissioners that represent all aspects of the population, include funding estimates for their recommendations, continue in some kind of oversight role even after the report's release (Lupo, 2011, pp. 251–52). Returning to our conversation about conflict theory helps us to see the benefit of these commission features, as government response to the conflict is less likely to be coercive and more likely to be change-oriented with regard to policy. Thus, government commissions of all types would benefit from these recommendations, though governments that are seeking to deflect and evade a genuine response would of course benefit from continuing to engage in commission politics.

Additionally, the connection to urban politics theories—particularly governance theory and segregation by design theory—is clear. If local governments have designed and generated race and class segregation (Trounstine, 2018), local governments can implement policies that work to undo the inequities. Yet it is not the work of local government alone, as multiple players, both private and public, will play a role in the policy process. This research thus pushes forward some urban politics

theories and future studies in the field should look to draw upon segregation by design theories and governance theory. For example, more recent works on racism and segregation (Kendi, 2016; Rothstein, 2017; Trounstein, 2018) highlight the power of policy in creating inequality and therefore, the need for policy to more intentionally undo centuries of discrimination. And more recent iterations of governance theory helps us better understand how multiple players in an urban region contribute to the policy process and address social problems, including racial injustice (McCann, 2017). The study of riot commissions—with its focus on the government and beyond-the-government actors, policy analysis, and policy implementation—contributes to the emergence of these new conversations in the field of urban politics. Thus, this analysis of the government response to urban violence adds to the growing and much needed empirical research agenda on uprisings, governance, policy, and race in cities.

Notes

1. The “white racism” and “explosive mixture” language appears in the introductory summary of the Kerner Commission report (often called the “Lindsay Summary”), as does the oft-referenced line: “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal” (Kerner Commission 1968). These two phrases, as well as a version of the “two societies” verbiage, appear in both the summary and the full report, and thus, the hard-hitting Lindsay Summary is indeed representative of the full commission report (Loessberg, 2018, pp. 1054–55). However, the language in the summary is concise, well-crafted, and powerful, and therefore stands out as compared to the lengthy sections of the 700-page report (Loessberg, 2018). And yet, two elements of the Kerner Commission illustrate the way in which commission politics was at work: first, the commissioners were often at odds with their social science team (the commissioners eventually fired most of them and did not use the social science research that was conducted) and second, President Johnson dismissed the findings of the commission. Both of these reasons led Lupo (2011) to argue that commission politics was at work to some extent in the Kerner Commission, particularly in the first stage (“commission”) and last stage (“implementation”).
2. These interviews took place between August 9–October 11, 2016 and February 2–March 12, 2018. The second round of interviews—consisting entirely of non-commissioners—were conducted after receiving feedback from academic peers and in an effort to bolster the rigor of the methods and to add to the empirical nature of the original research. All of the interviews were conducted over the phone due to the physical distance between the researcher and the interviewees. They were not recorded. However, interview notes were typed during the interview process and any quotes that appear in the article are verbatim quotes that the researcher typed as the interviewee spoke. Interviewees were made aware of the notetaking at the start of the interview. Interview notes are available from the researcher upon request.
3. The commission report was analyzed in its written form (PDF) and its website form, while the commission meetings were analyzed by watching their proceedings on the Ferguson Commission YouTube channel.
4. The meetings were watched on the publicly available STL Positive Change YouTube channel.
5. The full assessment is available upon request. I did not utilize content analysis software. The decision to put a recommendation into the categories of implementation (“fully,” “partially,” or “not”) was based on the research team’s calibrated assessment.
6. All figures are from the 2010 U.S. Census.
7. Later, the opposite problem would emerge—too few males applied to the Forward Through Ferguson Board of Directors, the entity tasked with implementing the Commission’s recommendations.
8. At the May 11, 2015 full commission meeting (a little more than halfway through the process), the attendees were 45% White, 33% Black, and 22% other/decline.
9. At each of the full commission meetings, the vast majority of attendees self-reported that they lived in either the City of St. Louis or St. Louis County.
10. The commissions that studied the 1965 Los Angeles riot and the 1992 Los Angeles riot were both characterized by high levels of commission politics at this stage in particular (see Lupo, 2011).
11. The three signature priorities are: Justice for All, Youth at the Center, and Opportunity to Thrive. At times, the report seems to indicate a fourth: Racial Equity.
12. Forward Through Ferguson received some leftover money from the Ferguson Commission, and has also received donations from foundations and individual donors. One interviewee says they are “incredibly privileged,” but that it still may not be enough for their “huge undertaking” (Interview 2018).

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