

Carceral Political Discussion: Measuring Discussion Across Domains of the State*

Jasmine English[†]

May 4, 2026

Word count: 9,889

Abstract

What constitutes political discussion, and for whom? Measures of political discussion in American politics typically focus on government and elections and neglect the coercive “second face” of the state. This paper expands this framework by identifying and measuring *carceral political discussion*—discussion about policing and the criminal justice system—using real-world conversational data and original survey measures. Drawing on these data, I first show that Black Americans engage in less conventional political discussion but more carceral political discussion than white Americans. I then show that conventional and carceral discussion are associated with distinct political attitudes and forms of participation. Substantively, the findings indicate that standard measures provide an incomplete account of political discussion and that patterns differ across domains of the state. Methodologically, the paper demonstrates how real-world conversational data can be used to identify and measure domains of political discussion that are excluded from standard survey instruments.

*Competing interests: The author(s) declare none.

[†]Assistant Professor, Reed College (jasenglish@reed.edu)

1 Introduction

At the core of the study of American politics are concepts that capture engagement with the political process. With some notable exceptions, scholars operate as if the scope and nature of these concepts are uniform across racial groups. However, the racial stratification of American politics provides reasons to expect these concepts to look and operate differently by race. This paper examines this possibility in one emblematic form of political engagement: political discussion. I argue that commonly reported racial differences in political discussion are, in part, a function of how the concept is defined and measured, such that what counts as “political discussion” depends on which face of the state is in view. Standard measures capture electorally oriented discussion but overlook discussion of state coercion, yielding a partial account that obscures how citizens engage with other forms of state authority.

This partial account reflects how political discussion is conventionally defined. Most research defines political discussion as “conversation between citizens that deals with political matters” (Conover and Miller 2018). This concept is viewed as central to democratic life and underpins political knowledge, participation, and tolerance (Eveland and Thomson 2006; Eveland and Hively 2009; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Searing et al. 2007; Mutz 2006; Pattie and Johnston 2008). Empirically, this concept has been measured by asking respondents whether they discuss topics such as “politics,” “government,” or “elections.” This measurement approach provides a valuable foundation for studying political engagement and illuminates what Soss and Weaver (2017) describe as the “first face” of the state that operates through electoral-representative processes. However, it does not capture discussion about the state’s carceral “second face” that operates through institutions of policing and punishment.

This paper addresses that gap by introducing *carceral political discussion*: informal discussion among citizens about policing, courts, and punishment. This concept is not simply issue-specific discussion. Rather, it captures engagement with a distinct domain of governance. Whereas conventional measures capture discussion about institutions that operate through representation and participation, carceral discussion concerns institutions that operate through surveillance and coercion. The distinction is thus not between topics, but between

domains of governance that differ in how state authority is exercised and encountered. This distinction matters because exposure to the first and second face of the state is unequal. Measures of political discussion are built around electoral institutions, yet individuals within marginalized groups are more likely to encounter the state through its coercive arm (Soss and Weaver 2017). When discussion measures omit this domain, they risk mischaracterizing patterns of discussion and engagement among those most exposed to state coercion.

I examine these dynamics in the context of Black and white Americans. A large body of research finds that white Americans are more likely to engage in political discussion and have larger discussion networks than Black Americans (Leighley and Matsubayashi 2009; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 2003; Wong et al. 2011; Carlson, Abrajano, and Bedolla 2019). However, these findings rely on conventional measures of political discussion. Because exposure to the criminal legal system is racially disparate and shaped by social, historical, and informational processes that structure how it is experienced among Black Americans (Pettit and Western 2004; Baumgartner, Epp, and Shoub 2018; Pierson et al. 2020; Anoll and Engelhardt 2023), I expect a different pattern to emerge when discussion is measured in relation to the carceral state. Specifically, I expect Black Americans to discuss policing and punishment more than their white counterparts, reversing the conventional hierarchy in political discussion.

Carceral discussion may also have distinct political correlates. Research on political discussion typically emphasizes its democratic benefits: discussion can expose citizens to information, promote reasoning, and support engagement (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Klofstad 2007; Searing et al. 2007). But discussion about coercive state authority may not operate in the same way as discussion about elections or representative institutions. Talking about policing and punishment may be associated with lower efficacy or trust, particularly when discussion reflects experiences of surveillance, unfairness, or state violence. At the same time, carceral discussion may also be associated with mobilization. Like proximal and community carceral contact, discussion may reveal injustices and move people to action (Lee, Porter, and Comfort 2014; Walker and García-Castañón 2017; Walker 2020; Anoll and Israel-Trummel 2019; Morris and Shoub 2024; Williamson, Trump, and Einstein 2018; Ang and Tebes 2024).¹

¹This expectation does not assume a particular ideological direction. Carceral discussion could generate

To study these expectations, I combine survey measurement with an inductive approach grounded in qualitative data. I first adapt standard survey questions to capture discussion participation, discussion frequency, and number of discussion partners in both conventional and carceral domains. I then use “analytic listening”—that is, “listening to the way people talk about public affairs, ideally in the venues they normally inhabit and with the people with whom they normally spend time” (Cramer 2024, 194)—to identify carceral discussion in practice. Drawing on a corpus of facilitated small-group conversations from Fora—a conversation platform created by the MIT Center for Constructive Communication and Cortico that facilitates small-group discussions about topics like policing, education, and elections—I identify recurring topics of discussion about policing and the criminal justice system grounded in direct and secondhand experience of state authority.² I use these inductively derived topics to construct a survey battery capturing positive and negative carceral discussion, combining the interpretive depth of listening methods with the generalizability of survey data.³

The analyses proceed in two steps. First, I examine racial patterns in conventional and carceral discussion. I show that Black Americans are less likely than their white counterparts to engage in conventional political discussion but more likely to engage in carceral discussion. This pattern contrasts with established findings and indicates that patterns of discussion differ systematically across domains of the state. Second, I examine the correlates of each domain—not to establish causal effects of discussion, but to show that carceral and conventional discussion correlate with distinct political orientations in ways that conventional measures do not reveal. Conventional discussion, for instance, is more consistently associated with internal efficacy and voting, whereas carceral discussion is more consistently associated with linked fate and protest. Notably, negative carceral discussion is associated with lower external efficacy among Black Americans—suggesting that discussing the coercive face of the state may reflect and reinforce perceptions of an unresponsive government. These findings

support for less punitive policies or a reactionary response (Engelhardt 2021; Drakulich and Denver 2022).

²Fora contains over 1,500 in-person and virtual conversations among over 8,000 people. Section 3 provides more information about the data and process of constructing the survey measure.

³“Positive” and “negative” refer to evaluative stances toward carceral institutions. Positive discussion characterizes policing and punishment as fair, necessary, or legitimate, whereas negative discussion characterizes them as unfair, excessive, or discriminatory. I discuss this point and provide examples in Section 3.

add complexity to the view that political discussion generates political engagement and voice (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Klofstad 2007; Klofstad 2010; Searing et al. 2007).

The paper makes three main contributions. First, it shows that standard measures of political discussion capture only the “first face” of the state and thus provide a partial account of political engagement. By incorporating discussion of state coercion, the analysis reveals patterns that conventional measures obscure, including a reordering of racial differences across domains. More broadly, these findings suggest that commonly used measures embed a particular model of politics tied to electorally mediated institutions and therefore mischaracterize engagement under unequal exposure to state authority.

Second, the paper contributes to research on racial politics by using this case to revisit a broader issue: the scope and meaning of core political concepts. The findings show that political discussion is not a uniform form of engagement but varies in meaning and distribution depending on the domain of the state. In this respect, the paper joins a growing literature showing that concepts such as knowledge, efficacy, trust, participation norms, punitiveness, and ideology look and operate differently by race (Cohen and Luttig 2020; Pérez 2015; Phoenix and Chan 2022; Chudy and Engelhardt 2023; Anoll 2018; Jefferson 2023; Jefferson 2024).⁴

Third, the paper contributes methodologically by combining analytic listening with survey measurement. Surveys are well suited to identifying broad patterns, but often rely on pre-defined categories (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Mutz 2006). Listening methods are better suited to identifying how people actually talk about politics but are typically limited in scope (Cramer 2016; Harris-Lacewell 2004). By using real-world conversations to construct survey measures, this paper shows how qualitative insights can improve measures of political engagement: listening methods to find patterns we might not know to look for (topics of carceral discussion), and surveys to investigate patterns at scale (patterns of positive and negative carceral discussion). This contribution joins a growing literature that uses qualitative methods to refine survey research (Thachil 2018; Auerbach and Thachil 2023; Verghese 2024).

⁴This effort to revisit concepts across race can be situated in a longer history of conceptual critiques. For instance, research on domain-specific attentiveness shows that racial gaps in political knowledge decline significantly on issues that are salient to racial minority groups (Iyengar 1986; Iyengar 1990; Hutchings 2001).

Most broadly, this paper shows that unequal exposure to the state reshapes what counts as political discussion. Although the empirical focus is on racial differences in discussion about policing and punishment, the logic extends to other domains where the state can operate through coercion or discretion, including immigration, welfare, and courts. For large segments of the population, interactions with the state occur as often through these institutions as through elections and representation. If political discussion is measured only with reference to electoral institutions, then core inferences about who is engaged, how they are engaged, and what discussion does will be systematically biased. The stakes are therefore broader than the study of a single domain: they concern whether foundational concepts in political behavior capture the full range of how citizens encounter and interpret state authority. In this sense, this study uses political discussion as a window but its implications extend beyond discussion: when politics is operationalized through electoral institutions alone, core concepts provide only a partial account of political life.

2 Political Discussion Across Faces of the State

Scholarship on political discussion in the United States has a long history. Political theorists have long associated political talk among citizens with a healthy democracy (Thompson 1970; Habermas 1989; Mansbridge 2007; Dryzek 2002; Gutmann and Thompson 1996). Moreover, empirical research in the social sciences links political discussion to a range of important political attitudes and behaviors, including political knowledge (Eveland and Thomson 2006; Eveland and Hively 2009), political and civic engagement (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Searing et al. 2007), and tolerance (Mutz 2006; Pattie and Johnston 2008).

How might political discussion impact political outcomes? This literature proposes several non-mutually exclusive channels of influence (Eveland 2004). First, political discussion can expose participants to new political information or provide additional exposure to political information of interest. Second, the expectation of political discussion provides motivation to cognitively engage with the discussion topic (by deciding how it is relevant, noticing important issues, and so on). Third, the act of engaging in political discussion encourages cognitive

engagement and information processing during the discussion. Although not the empirical focus of this study, these channels of influence underpin my expectations for the potential role and impact of political discussion about the carceral state.

These expectations respond to the observation that research on political discussion defines political discussion as “spontaneous, unstructured face-to-face conversation between citizens that deals with political matters” (Conover and Miller 2018). Some measures of this concept ask if and with whom respondents discuss “politics” or “political matters.” For instance, the American National Election Studies (ANES) asks: “Do you ever discuss politics with your family or friends?”⁵ Scholars have also asked more targeted questions, such as: “We are interested in the sort of political information and opinions people get from each other. Can you give me the first names of the three people you talked with most about the events of the past election year?” (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995, italics added). Other more targeted examples include questions about “local politics or community issues” (Kwak et al. 2005), “local community politics or local community affairs” and “national politics or national affairs” (Scheufele 2002), and “elections, politicians and candidates, and the performance of local, state, and national government” (Eveland and Appiah 2019).

Both these targeted and more general questions, however, focus on what Soss and Weaver (2017) describe as the “first face” of the state that operates through elections and national branches of government. In other words, these measures do not do a good job of capturing discussions about the carceral or “second face” of the state that exercises power through coercion and shapes the political experiences of marginalized communities of color, who most often encounter the government through police, courts, parole agencies, prisons, and immigration authorities (Western 2006; Lerman and Weaver 2014; Gottschalk 2008).

Importantly, this distinction is not simply between issue areas but between domains of governance: conventional discussion concerns institutions of representation, whereas carceral discussion concerns institutions of coercion. Many political issues—such as abortion, immigration, or welfare—can be incorporated into existing discussion measures as discrete policy

⁵For more on the measurement of political discussion, see Klofstad, McClurg, and Rolfe (2009).

issues. By contrast, the carceral state is not a single issue but a set of institutions through which the state exercises authority outside electoral channels. The measures developed in Section 3 capture discussion that extends beyond policy positions to include accounts of coercive encounters, perceptions of unequal treatment, and evaluations of how these institutions operate in practice. Although some items reflect evaluative stances toward policing and punishment, these evaluations are embedded in broader patterns of engagement with state coercion. The paper therefore examines discussion across domains of governance: one organized around representation, and another organized around coercion and discretion.

Yet this conceptual distinction raises an important measurement question: when respondents are asked about political discussion, do they include both domains of governance, or only the electoral-representative domain? If respondents already include policing and punishment when asked about political discussion, then existing measures are broader than their wording suggests. I address this possibility in Appendix S1 with an original survey of 1,400 Americans conducted on YouGov in October 2023.⁶ Respondents who discussed politics in the past year were asked: “When you discussed politics with other people, what kinds of topics did you talk about? You should include all topics that you consider to be “political.” Please be as detailed and thorough as possible.” Using a structural topic model (STM), I measure the ten most frequent topics for the full sample and white and Black respondents separately.⁷ In brief, I find that respondents focus on the “first face” of the state—politicians and parties (president, congress), major electoral issues (economy, war), and participation (voting, elections)—and that carceral topics do not feature in the ten most frequent topics for any sample.

This finding creates an apparent tension: if respondents do not themselves classify these discussions as “politics,” why treat them as political discussion? I interpret this gap not as evidence that carceral topics are apolitical, but as evidence that dominant conceptions of politics are anchored in the first face of the state and therefore fail to capture engagement with coercive state authority. Rather than omitting a marginal topic, standard measures systematically exclude discussion about state coercion. This reflects a broader conceptual

⁶See Appendix S1 for a more detailed discussion of this data and analysis.

⁷An STM inductively discovers themes in a text corpus using document structure and word frequencies.

limitation: existing measures capture engagement with one domain of governance while overlooking another. That respondents do not spontaneously classify these topics as “politics” is itself evidence of the measurement problem: standard measures of political discussion exclude domains of governance that are nevertheless politically consequential.

Incorporating this domain has implications for how we understand political discussion. First, I expect carceral discussion to alter established patterns of political engagement across racial groups. Most research finds that white Americans are more likely to engage in political discussion and have larger discussion networks (Leighley and Matsubayashi 2009; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 2003; Wong et al. 2011; Carlson, Abrajano, and Bedolla 2019). However, exposure to the carceral state is racially unequal and shaped by historical, social, and informational processes that structure how different groups experience, interpret, and discuss coercive state authority. Together, these mechanisms suggest that patterns of carceral political discussion will differ by race in ways that conventional measures do not capture.

The first and perhaps most obvious mechanism is differential exposure to the carceral state. In the United States, racialized patterns of coercive and punitive governance—across policing, courts, and related institutions—are strongly entrenched, and Black Americans consistently experience higher rates of incarceration, police stops, and police violence (Soss and Weaver 2017; Pettit and Western 2004; Lerman and Weaver 2014; Baumgartner, Epp, and Shoub 2018; Enamorado, McDonough, and Mendelberg 2024; Streeter 2019).

A second, related mechanism is the historical development of the carceral state. Carceral expansion has been closely tied to the governance of Black communities, from earlier forms of racial control to contemporary policing and punishment (Western 2006; Gottschalk 2008; Lerman and Weaver 2014). As a result, interactions with coercive institutions are more likely to be experienced not as isolated events, but as part of a broader historical pattern. Because these experiences may be understood in collective rather than individual terms, they are also more likely to be socially transmitted. Research on political socialization shows that political learning occurs not only through direct state contact, but through family and community networks (Niemi and Hepburn 1995; Nelsen 2023; Hughes et al. 2006). In this

context, discussions of policing and punishment may reflect shared understandings of state coercion rather than individual exposure alone, and may reinforce perceptions of linked fate.

A third mechanism concerns the visibility of the carceral state, shaped by media and political mobilization. The circulation of images and accounts of police violence, along with movements such as Black Lives Matter, has made the exercise of state coercion more salient, particularly for Black Americans (Horowitz, Cox, and Hurst 2025). These dynamics may reinforce the perception that the carceral state is a central feature of political life and a relevant topic of discussion. Together, these processes not only shape how the carceral state is experienced, but also increase the likelihood that it becomes a topic of everyday political discussion, particularly among Black Americans. I therefore expect carceral discussion to be more prevalent among Black than white Americans, reversing conventional patterns of political discussion. I also expect Black Americans to be more likely to engage in negative than positive evaluations of carceral institutions in their political discussion.

Second, I expect carceral and conventional political discussion to have distinct political correlates.⁸ Drawing on Lerman and Weaver’s (2014) “custodial citizenship” theory—which links exposure to state coercion to perceptions of an unresponsive government—I expect carceral discussion to be negatively associated with external efficacy, particularly among Black Americans, for whom the carceral state is more punitive. This expectation departs from the longstanding finding that political discussion promotes political efficacy and engagement (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Klofstad 2007; Searing et al. 2007), suggesting instead that discussion about the coercive face of the state is associated with different political orientations.

At the same time, I expect carceral discussion to be associated with linked fate, as discussions of shared exposure to coercive authority may reinforce perceptions of collective experience. I also expect carceral discussion to correlate with political mobilization under certain conditions. Research on proximal and community carceral contact shows that exposure to the criminal legal system can catalyze participation by highlighting injustice and motivating action (Lee, Porter, and Comfort 2014; Walker 2014; Walker and García-Castañón 2017;

⁸These expectations are agnostic about causal direction: political discussion may shape political orientations, but it may also reflect underlying experiences and beliefs about the state.

Williamson, Trump, and Einstein 2018; Ang and Tebes 2024). Similarly, discussion about policing and punishment may provide opportunities to identify injustice and view political action as necessary, particularly in the form of non-electoral participation such as protest.

In sum, this paper revisits the concept of political discussion to make the case that carceral political discussion is an important component of the political experience of Americans, and one that has been overlooked by existing scholarship on political discussion. The study thus aims to complement work by Weaver, Prowse, and colleagues, who collect and analyze conversations about policing in highly policed neighborhoods in five cities in the United States (e.g., Weaver, Prowse, and Piston 2019). These papers represent the richest treatment of political discussion about the carceral state in political science and draw important lessons about the experience of race-class subjugated communities. The present study complements this work by approaching carceral discussion from a higher vantage point: in exchange for rich conversational data from highly policed race-class subjugated communities, this project draws broader lessons about carceral discussion with national data.

3 Identifying and Measuring Carceral Political Discussion

The structural topic model in Section 2 establishes the measurement problem: carceral topics are absent from what respondents call political discussion. This suggests that standard measures of political discussion fail to capture discussion of state coercion. Addressing this gap requires identifying what carceral discussion looks like in practice and developing measures to capture it. I pursue two complementary measurement strategies to achieve this aim. First, I adapt three standard political discussion measures to include conventional and carceral topics:

1. *Participation in discussion*: “During the past year, did you talk with anyone about [the police or criminal justice system / government or elections]?” (0 = No, 1 = Yes)
2. *Frequency of discussion*: “During the past year, how often did you discuss [the police or criminal justice system / government or elections]?” (1 = Never to 5 = Very Often)
3. *Number of discussion partners*: “With roughly how many different people did you talk about [the police or criminal justice system / government or elections] during the past year?” (1 = Zero to 5 = 10 or more)

Second, I use “analytic listening” to identify the content of carceral discussion and construct a topic-based battery grounded in observed conversations. This approach uses real-world conversations as the basis for defining what counts as political discussion rather than pre-defined categories. Analytic listening entails “listening to the way people talk about public affairs...in the venues they normally inhabit and with the people with whom they normally spend time” (Cramer 2024, 194). This method is well-suited to uncovering information that we do not know to look for (here, topics of carceral discussion) and can be situated within a grounded theory framework. Broadly, grounded theory involves taking an inductive, iterative approach to qualitative data to develop knowledge about a phenomenon (Charmaz 2014). It is thus central to the measurement strategy: it provides a basis for identifying the substance of carceral discussion before translating that domain into survey items.

To develop the survey measure, I apply this approach to a corpus of facilitated small-group conversations from Fora, a platform created by the MIT Center for Constructive Communication and the affiliated nonprofit Cortico. The platform launched in 2018 and contains over 1,500 in-person and virtual conversations among over 8,000 people. Fora brings together community members for structured dialogues about public issues such as policing, education, and elections. Each collection of conversations is convened by a partner organization (e.g., community organizations, corporate spaces, schools) in partnership with Cortico. Conversations are hosted virtually or in scheduled locations (e.g., public libraries or private homes). Each conversation is facilitated by a trained facilitator who guides the conversation with discussion prompts to elicit experiences, opinions, and questions from participants.⁹

To generate topics of carceral discussion, I focused on the 18 collections that dealt with some aspect of the criminal justice system. These collections contained 44 total conversations (each around 1–1.5 hours long) and are listed in Appendix S3. Examples include the “City of Madison Police and Fire Commission Conversations” (seven conversations about law enforcement among residents of Madison, Wisconsin) and the “Mott Haven Branch Conversation

⁹All facilitators participate in a Cortico orientation which provides facilitation guidance and an opportunity to practice the conversation guide. Orientations are tailored to each partner and project. For more details on Fora conversations, see: <https://help.fora.io/hc/en-us/categories/360005919073-Cortico-FAQ>.

on Criminal Justice” (a conversation hosted by the New York Public Library). Facilitator prompts from these collections include: “I’d like to invite you to take a minute to think about a story that illustrates your first interaction with the police, or ideas about the police and maybe if that still impacts you today” (City of Madison Police and Fire) and “From your experience, what do you see as the positive role the police in our community play today? What gaps or needs do they fill?” (Mountain West: Law Enforcement in your Community Conversations). Although Fora does not provide group racial composition, these conversations include white and Black participants (evident from names, self-identification, explicit discussions of race) such that we have reason to expect racial variation in represented voices.

To examine these data for patterns and topics of carceral discussion, I began by closely listening to and reading the collections on the criminal justice system. My analysis involved several rounds of qualitative coding (Saldaña 2015). The first round involved listening to and reading the 18 collections and taking preliminary jottings about potential carceral discussion topics (Saldaña 2015, 20-21). After developing an initial topic list, I conducted a round of structural coding to identify and revise this list. Structural coding involves the application of a conceptual phrase to a segment of data to categorize the data corpus (Saldaña 2015, 84-97). In this context, structural coding involved categorizing segments of conversations into one or more carceral discussion topics (for instance, I coded excerpts in which participants criticized or lamented racial disparities in incarceration rates as part of the broader topic, “how the police or criminal justice system treat Black people unfairly”).

After this round of structural coding, I searched Fora for keywords related to policing and criminal justice and read selections of the associated transcripts.¹⁰ For each keyword, I categorized relevant sections into existing or new carceral discussion topics. I continued this exercise for each keyword until all new data could be categorized into existing topics. The goal was not to exhaustively catalogue all possible discussions of the carceral state, but to identify recurring and recognizable themes that could be translated into survey measures.

¹⁰I used keywords from the Fora “Topics” function. This function uses the conversations to automatically identify and categorize keywords into topics. Keywords for “criminal justice” include police, policing, criminal justice, jail, law enforcement, arrest, incarceration, gun violence, public safety, probation, prison, and parole.

Across these conversations, carceral political discussion does not appear as a set of isolated issues or policy debates, but as a patterned way of talking about state authority. In the initial round of open coding, I noted repeated references to personal encounters with police, secondhand stories about stops or arrests, and advice or rules of thumb about how to act if stopped or questioned. These observations were refined through structural coding into four recurring frames that organized the bulk of the discussions. First, participants frequently described experiences with coercion, including direct or secondhand encounters with policing, accounts of stops or arrests, and discussions of the use of force. These were often recounted in narrative form, as stories about specific incidents or people. Second, many conversations centered on unequal treatment, especially racialized disparities in who gets stopped, arrested, or harshly sentenced, often illustrated through comparisons across groups or neighborhoods. The third frame concerned public safety and order, in which participants weighed the perceived necessity of policing against concerns about harm or overreach. Fourth, discussions regularly turned to institutional legitimacy, including whether police and courts are fair, effective, or deserving of trust. These frames map onto the survey battery below, which includes items capturing discussions of coercive encounters (e.g., force and interactions), unequal treatment, public safety tradeoffs, and evaluations of police legitimacy.

These frames emerged inductively as I iterated between transcripts and coding categories, collapsing overlapping codes and expanding categories until new excerpts could be consistently classified within the existing scheme. Importantly, these patterns are not reducible to standard issue-based discussion. Participants rarely framed these conversations in terms of discrete policy debates (e.g., specific reforms or legislation). Instead, they drew on lived experience, secondhand accounts, and shared understandings of how state authority operates. The survey battery is designed to capture these recurring dimensions of carceral discussion as they emerge in these conversations, translating them into measurable categories that reflect how people actually talk about the coercive arm of the state in practice.

I use these insights to construct a nine-item battery capturing the content of carceral political discussion. Respondents were asked: “How often, if at all, did you talk about the

following topics during the past year?” followed by nine topics derived from the analytic listening process (presented in randomized order). Responses were coded “Never” (0), “Once” (1), “A few times (2-3)” (2), or “Several times (4+)” (3). Table 1 presents these items alongside illustrative excerpts from the Fora conversations. Appendix S4 includes additional examples. This measure is designed to be indicative rather than exhaustive, capturing common and recognizable forms of carceral discussion rather than the full universe of possible topics.

Unlike the binary and frequency measures, which capture whether respondents engage in carceral discussion, this battery captures what they discuss within that domain. I further classify these topics as positive or negative based on respondents’ evaluative stance toward carceral institutions. This distinction reflects whether discussions portray policing and punishment as fair, necessary, or legitimate versus unfair, excessive, or discriminatory. It is intended to capture evaluative orientation rather than emotional tone.

As a final validation step, I assess whether carceral and conventional political discussion are empirically distinct. If carceral discussion simply reflects a general propensity to talk about politics, we would expect high correlations between the two domains. Appendix S6 presents weighted Pearson’s r correlations between carceral and conventional discussion and shows only moderate overlap: for instance, correlation coefficients for the binary measure are 0.35 for Black respondents and 0.34 for white respondents. The correlations are somewhat higher for frequency and discussion partners but well below unity. This suggests that people who discuss policing and the criminal justice system are somewhat more likely to discuss government and elections, but the relationship is far from one-to-one. Within the carceral domain, positive and negative discussion are also moderately correlated (e.g., $r = 0.44$ for Black respondents and $r = 0.46$ for white respondents), indicating that they capture related but distinct dimensions of discussion content. Together, the structural topic model, analytic listening, and observed correlations support the conclusion that carceral discussion is conceptually distinct and excluded from standard measures of political discussion.

Beyond this application, it is important to note that this measurement approach is not limited to policing and criminal justice institutions. More broadly, it provides a framework for

Table 1: Carceral Discussion Topics and Illustrative Examples

| | |
|--|--|
| 1. Negative: About police killings or police brutality | <i>“We are constantly living in a system that doesn’t value us...that is in fact designed to injure us in some way, both emotionally and economically. Sometimes it manifests in the case of police violence...right?”</i> |
| <hr/> | |
| 2. Negative: About how the police often use more force than necessary | <i>“...people are getting tired of police shootings. They’re getting tired of turning—you go on your phone. You look at a video. You see cops beating up people. For what?”</i> |
| <hr/> | |
| 3. Negative: About how the police or criminal justice system treat Black people unfairly | <i>“Anyone can pull up the annual report, it is very clear that police officers here in Madison will arrest if you’re a black teenager, I think the odds, it’s like insane. You’re like twice as likely.”</i> |
| <hr/> | |
| 4. Negative: About a negative interaction with the police or criminal justice system | <i>“...she arrested me, and she threw me in the back of her car. It was over 80 degrees outside...And she put me back there with the windows completely rolled up... And you wouldn’t do that to a dog, right?”</i> |
| <hr/> | |
| 5. Positive: About how the police are necessary for public safety | <i>“What’s going to happen if we defund the police? I mean, are we going to go back to Wild West days?”</i> |
| <hr/> | |
| 6. Positive: About how the police or criminal justice system usually treat people fairly | <i>“Yeah, my experience with officers in the schools is that they do everything they can not to arrest kids. They’re extremely kind and very, very positive role models for kids in the schools.”</i> |
| <hr/> | |
| 7. Positive: About how the police are often viewed unfairly | <i>“But this total hatred towards all policemen, I think I should be corrected. You can’t hate them all, you’ve got to trust some of them.”</i> |
| <hr/> | |
| 8. Positive: About how police should be allowed to use force because policing is dangerous | <i>“...the only way to stop somebody that has a gun is with a gun.”</i> |
| <hr/> | |
| 9. Positive: About a positive interaction with the police or criminal justice system | <i>“...our police officers here are trained in mental health. And the way they deescalated my son and our whole family situation was fantastic.”</i> |

identifying and measuring discussion about domains of governance, including but not limited to those where state authority can operate through coercion or discretion, such as immigration enforcement or welfare. In these contexts, citizens encounter the state in ways that may shape both the prevalence and content of political discussion beyond what conventional measures can capture. Extending this framework to other domains can therefore provide a more complete account of how political discussion varies across groups and institutional contexts.

4 Patterns and Correlates Across Discussion Domains

4.1 Data and Empirical Strategy

The analyses draw on a nationally diverse survey of 1,258 Black and white American adults fielded in Spring 2024 on Prolific. This sample excludes 69 respondents who failed an attention check. To improve representativeness, I construct and apply post-stratification weights using population benchmarks for gender, age, and education from the 2022 American Community Survey (in addition to quota sampling on the front end). Because of missing cases on weighting variables, the final analytic sample for weighted analyses is 1,232. Appendix S2 presents descriptive statistics for the unweighted and weighted samples.¹¹

In what follows, Section 4.2 reports weighted means to compare discussion prevalence and content by racial group. Section 4.3 then estimates unweighted OLS regression models to examine associations between discussion and political attitudes and behaviors. These models include standard demographic controls (age, gender, education, income, and party identification). All analyses are cross-sectional and descriptive: the weighted means are intended to characterize population patterns, while regression models examine conditional associations.¹²

4.2 Racial Patterns in Conventional and Carceral Discussion

Before turning to the results, I outline two expectations. First, given differences in how Black and white Americans experience and interpret the carceral state, focusing on carceral

¹¹Post-stratification weights bring the sample into closer alignment with these population benchmarks.

¹²Appendix S16 describes adherence to APSA's Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research.

discussion should reverse the familiar pattern in which white respondents report higher levels of conventional political discussion. Second, these differences suggest that we should observe racial differences in the content and evaluative orientation of carceral discussion.

The first analysis examines racial differences in conventional and carceral political discussion. Table 2 reports weighted means for Black and white respondents across three measures of discussion in each domain: whether respondents discussed the topic in the past year (Binary), how often they discussed it (Frequency), and the number of discussion partners (Discussion Partners). Differences between Black and white respondents are reported in percentage points for the binary measure and in scale units for the frequency and partner measures.¹³

Table 2: Racial Variation in Conventional and Carceral Discussion

| | Carceral Discussion | | | Conventional Discussion | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|-------|-------------------|-------------------------|-------|--------------------|
| | Black | White | Diff. | Black | White | Diff. |
| Binary | 0.78 | 0.74 | 0.04 ^b | 0.84 | 0.92 | -0.07 ^a |
| Frequency | 2.90 | 2.43 | 0.47 ^a | 3.04 | 3.20 | -0.15 ^a |
| Discussion Partners | 2.58 | 2.31 | 0.27 ^a | 2.73 | 2.97 | -0.25 ^a |
| N | 555 | 677 | | 555 | 677 | |

Notes: Entries are weighted means. Diff. reports the Black–White difference. Significant differences between Black and white respondents are indicated with *a* based on two-tailed t-tests, $p < 0.05$, and *b* indicates $p < 0.10$. Binary discussion is coded 0/1. Frequency ranges from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often). Discussion partners ranges from 1 (Zero) to 5 (10 or more).

Turning first to carceral discussion, Black respondents are somewhat more likely than white respondents to report discussing the police or criminal justice system. 78 percent of Black respondents report any carceral discussion in the past year compared to 74 percent of white respondents, a 4 percentage point difference that is marginally significant ($p < 0.10$). Differences are larger and more precisely estimated for discussion intensity. Black respondents report discussing these topics more frequently (2.90 vs. 2.43, $p < 0.01$) and with more people (2.58 vs. 2.31, $p < 0.01$). Substantively, this corresponds to moving from between “rarely”

¹³Tables A3 and A4 in Appendix S5 present OLS regression models for each discussion measure estimated on the unweighted sample. In these models, the coefficient on the indicator for white respondents captures the Black–white difference while adjusting for gender, age, education, income, and party identification. The direction and statistical significance of these differences are consistent with the patterns shown in Table 2. I present unadjusted means in the main text because including demographic controls when interpreting racial coefficients can obscure the social and institutional processes that constitute racial differences (King and Zeng 2006; Sen and Wasow 2016).

and “sometimes” toward “sometimes” on the frequency scale, and from roughly 1–2 discussion partners toward the 3–5 range. Across these measures, the pattern indicates greater engagement in carceral discussion among Black respondents, particularly in how often and how broadly these conversations occur.

This pattern is reversed for conventional political discussion. Black respondents are less likely than white respondents to report discussing government and elections (84 percent vs. 92 percent, a 7 percentage point difference, $p < 0.01$). They also report lower discussion frequency (3.04 vs. 3.20, $p < 0.01$) and fewer discussion partners (2.73 vs. 2.97, $p < 0.01$). These differences are smaller in magnitude than those for carceral discussion but are consistent across measures and align with established findings that white Americans report higher levels of conventional political discussion (e.g., Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 2003).

Taken together, these results highlight a clear domain contrast. Focusing only on conventional political discussion reproduces the familiar pattern in which white respondents appear more politically engaged, whereas incorporating carceral discussion reveals greater engagement among Black respondents in this domain of governance. At the same time, this pattern reflects layering rather than replacement. Conventional discussion remains common for both groups: large majorities of Black and white respondents report discussing government and elections. The point is not that carceral discussion replaces conventional discussion, but that it captures a distinct domain of political engagement.

Importantly, these differences largely disappear when discussion is aggregated across domains. This addresses the concern that observed differences reflect variation in overall propensity to talk rather than variation across domains of discussion. Appendix S15 shows that when discussion is coded as occurring in either domain, the Black–white discussion gap narrows from 7 to approximately 2 percentage points and is statistically indistinguishable from zero. This indicates that Black and white respondents are similarly likely to discuss politics in at least one domain, ruling out differences in overall propensity to talk. Instead, differences in political discussion are primarily about where discussion occurs rather than whether individuals engage at all. Both groups are highly likely to discuss public affairs, but

they do so in different domains of the state. Conventional measures therefore mischaracterize these patterns by capturing only one domain of discussion, making engagement appear lower among Black respondents when it is in fact differently distributed.

For space considerations, Table 2 focuses on broad comparisons by racial group. Appendix S7 examines heterogeneity by party identification and gender and shows that these patterns are largely robust but not uniform across subgroups.¹⁴ Across partisan groups, Black respondents consistently report higher levels of carceral discussion than their white counterparts, indicating that this pattern is not driven by party identification. By contrast, racial differences in conventional discussion are concentrated among Democrats and are smaller and statistically indistinguishable among Republicans. These results indicate that differences in political discussion are domain-specific and not reducible to partisanship.

Heterogeneity by gender reveals a similar pattern of qualified consistency. Black men and women report higher levels of carceral discussion than their white counterparts, particularly in the frequency of discussion and number of discussion partners. These differences are evident for both groups but are more pronounced and consistently statistically significant among men. For conventional political discussion, the pattern is less uniform. White men report higher levels of conventional discussion than Black men across multiple measures, while among women racial differences are smaller and less consistently statistically significant. Together, these analyses reinforce the core argument while clarifying its scope: racial differences in political discussion are not reducible to subgroup composition or overall propensity to talk, but instead reflect domain-specific patterns of engagement that vary across social groups.

Taken together, the results in this section show that patterns of political discussion differ across domains of the state. Black respondents report higher levels of carceral discussion but lower levels of conventional political discussion relative to white respondents. This contrast departs from the familiar pattern in which white Americans appear more politically engaged (Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 2003; Leighley and Matsubayashi 2009; Wong et al. 2011; Carlson, Abrajano, and Bedolla 2019) and indicates that conventional measures capture only

¹⁴These results should be interpreted as suggestive given smaller subgroup sample sizes.

part of the distribution of political discussion. Incorporating discussion of the carceral state reveals an additional domain of engagement that standard measures do not capture. A pilot study fielded on a different platform (November 2023) yields similar patterns (Appendix S8), providing additional support for the robustness of these findings.¹⁵

The analyses thus far, however, do not speak to the content or evaluative orientation of carceral discussion. Using the nine-item measure of carceral discussion topics, Table 3 reports the share of respondents who discussed at least one positive or negative topic about policing and the criminal justice system in the past year. The positive (negative) measure is coded as “1” if respondents discussed any positive (negative) topic at least once.¹⁶

Table 3: Racial Variation in Positive and Negative Carceral Discussion

| | Black | White |
|------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Positive Carceral Discussion | 0.84 | 0.77 ^a |
| Negative Carceral Discussion | 0.92 [†] | 0.78 ^a |
| N | 555 | 677 |

Notes: Entries are weighted means. Carceral discussion is coded as positive/negative if respondents report discussing at least one positive/negative topic in the past year. *a* indicates significant differences between Black and white respondents ($p < 0.05$). [†] indicates significant differences between negative and positive carceral discussion (paired weighted t-test, $p < 0.05$).

Table 3 shows clear racial differences in the content of carceral discussion. 92 percent of Black respondents report discussing at least one negative carceral topic compared to 78 percent of white respondents, a 14 percentage point difference ($p < 0.01$). In other words, negative carceral discussion is widespread and more common among Black respondents. Black respondents are also more likely to report negative than positive discussion (92% vs. 84%, $p < 0.01$), a pattern that does not appear among white respondents.

The pattern for positive discussion is more modest. 84 percent of Black respondents report discussing at least one positive carceral topic compared to 77 percent of white re-

¹⁵I fielded this pilot survey on Lucid. The details and results of the pilot are reported in Appendix S8.

¹⁶Appendix S9 presents regression models estimated on the unweighted sample that adjust for gender, age, education, income, and party identification; the direction and statistical significance of the results are consistent with those shown here. Appendix S10 presents results for each individual topic. Positive and negative measures are not mutually exclusive; respondents may be coded as discussing both types of topics.

spondents, a 7 percentage point difference ($p < 0.05$). While smaller than the difference for negative discussion, this pattern indicates that positive discussion is common and somewhat more prevalent among Black respondents. Rather than a clean theoretical expectation, this suggests that carceral discussion among Black Americans includes both critical and supportive evaluations of policing and the criminal justice system and that “positive” discussion may carry different meanings depending on who is doing it and under what conditions.

For white respondents, positive carceral discussion may reflect a relatively straightforward alignment between favorable evaluations of policing and limited personal exposure to its coercive face. For Black respondents, this picture may be more complex. Positive discussion need not imply the same relationship to the carceral state: it may reflect support for policing as a public safety resource in communities that also bear the costs of crime victimization (Tate 2010), endorsement of specific forms of policing such as community-oriented models that are experienced as more legitimate (Branton et al. 2024), or the influence of respectability politics, whereby system-supportive positions coexist with awareness of racial disparities (Jefferson 2023). On this view, positive carceral discussion among Black Americans may not be an expression of institutional trust but more conditional or instrumental orientation that can acknowledge the potential value of policing. These explanations are not mutually exclusive, and this analysis cannot adjudicate among them. However, what this finding does establish is that carceral discussion is not uniformly negative. The meaning of positive discussion may differ across groups, reflecting the distinct racialized contexts in which it occurs.

For space considerations, Appendix S7 examines heterogeneity by party and gender. These analyses largely reinforce the main findings but clarify how patterns vary across subgroups. By party, Black respondents are more likely than white respondents to engage in positive discussion among both Democrats and Republicans, whereas differences in negative discussion are present only among Republicans. By gender, a different pattern emerges: Black respondents are more likely than white respondents to engage in negative discussion among both men and women, whereas differences in positive discussion appear only among men. Together, these results show that racial differences in carceral discussion are not uniform across

types of discussion. Differences in positive discussion are more consistent across party, while differences in negative discussion are more consistent across gender.¹⁷

Overall, these findings extend the earlier results by showing that racial patterns differ not only in the prevalence of carceral discussion but also in content and evaluative orientation. In particular, Black respondents are more consistently likely to engage in negative discussion, while differences in positive discussion are smaller and less uniform across subgroups. Conventional measures of political discussion therefore miss not only an additional domain of political discussion, but also meaningful variation in how that domain is discussed.

4.3 Political Correlates Across Discussion Domains

I next examine whether conventional and carceral political discussion are associated with different political attitudes and behaviors. These analyses are not designed to estimate the causal effects of discussion. Rather, they examine whether different domains of discussion align with different political orientations and forms of engagement. To preserve space, I analyze potential predictors of conventional and carceral discussion, including age, gender, education, income, organizational membership, and carceral contact, in Appendix S11.¹⁸

I focus on six variables modeled as dependent variables: (1) internal efficacy, or the belief that one is qualified to participate in politics (Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991); (2) external efficacy, or the belief that government leaders care about “people like me” (Balch 1974);¹⁹ (3) linked fate, or the belief that one’s life chances depend on the status and fortunes of one’s racial group (Dawson 1995);²⁰ and the perceived personal importance of (4) voting,

¹⁷These subgroup results should be interpreted as suggestive given smaller cell sizes.

¹⁸Several findings are worth noting. First, party identification does not correlate with carceral or conventional discussion for white or Black respondents, suggesting that racial variation in discussion is not simply an artifact of partisanship. Second, organizational membership correlates with carceral discussion but not conventional discussion for both white and Black respondents. Third, proximal carceral contact positively correlates with both forms of discussion for Black and white respondents, consistent with research on its mobilizing effects (e.g., Walker 2020). See Appendix S11 for more detail.

¹⁹To measure internal efficacy, respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement: “I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics” on a scale from “Strongly disagree” (1) to “Strongly agree” (5). To measure external efficacy, respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement: “The leaders in government care about people like me” on a scale from “Strongly disagree” (1) to “Strongly agree” (5).

²⁰Although developed to explain Black political attitudes and behaviors, expressions of linked fate have been found in other racial groups (e.g., Gay, Hochschild, and White 2016; Junn and Masuoka 2008; Segura 2012), including white Americans (Schildkraut 2017; Berry, Ebner, and Cornelius 2021). To measure linked fate,

(5) campaigning for a political candidate, and (6) attending a protest.²¹

The analyses are cross-sectional and should be interpreted as associational. Political discussion may shape attitudes and behaviors by exposing participants to political information and encouraging cognitive engagement (Eveland 2004). However, the reverse ordering is also plausible: respondents with stronger efficacy, linked fate, or participatory orientations may be more likely to engage in particular kinds of political discussion. These associations may reflect discussion itself, the experiences that give rise to discussion (e.g., carceral contact), or both. I therefore interpret the results as evidence about the political correlates of conventional and carceral discussion, not as evidence that discussion causes these outcomes.

Table 4 presents regression models for white and Black respondents and highlights the political correlates of conventional and carceral discussion. For ease of interpretation, I present models separately for white and Black respondents. Pooled interaction models in Appendix S14 formally test for racial differences in these associations and provide little evidence of systematic racial differences in these associations. For space considerations, I present only the frequency measures as independent variables.²²

Three patterns stand out. First, conventional political discussion positively correlates with internal efficacy for white and Black respondents ($p < 0.01$), while carceral discussion has no meaningful relationship with internal efficacy for whites and only a weak positive association for Black respondents. This pattern suggests that discussion of government and elections aligns more closely with feeling qualified to participate in formal politics than discussion of policing and the criminal justice system. In substantive terms, these differences are nontrivial: among white respondents, a one-unit increase in conventional discussion frequency is associated with roughly a 0.26 increase on the 1–5 internal efficacy scale—about a quarter of a response category—while the corresponding association for carceral discussion is close to zero.

I asked two standard questions: Do you think what happens to [Respondent’s race/ethnicity] people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life? If yes: Do you think that what happens generally to [Respondent’s race/ethnicity] people in this country will affect you: A lot, some, not very much. Responses coded 0 (No), 1 (Not very much), 2 (Some), or 3 (A lot).

²¹To measure these political behavior variables, I asked: “How important is it for you personally to do the following activities?” Vote in elections, Campaign for political candidates, Attend protests or rallies. Responses were coded on a 1–5 scale from “Not at all important” (1) to “Extremely important” (5).

²²Appendix S12 presents similar models with the binary and discussion partner measures.

A similar pattern holds among Black respondents, where conventional discussion is associated with a 0.28 increase, compared to a much smaller 0.09 increase for carceral discussion.²³

Table 4: Correlates of Frequent Political Discussion
White Respondents

| | <i>Attitudes</i> | | | <i>Participation</i> | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | Internal | External | Linked Fate | Vote | Campaign | Protest |
| Carceral | 0.070 (0.047) | -0.049 (0.046) | 0.178*** (0.050) | -0.052 (0.050) | 0.081* (0.045) | 0.200*** (0.047) |
| Conventional | 0.262*** (0.047) | -0.024 (0.045) | 0.019 (0.050) | 0.287*** (0.050) | 0.259*** (0.045) | 0.166*** (0.047) |
| Party ID | -0.155*** (0.048) | -0.204*** (0.046) | -0.096* (0.051) | -0.305*** (0.051) | -0.217*** (0.045) | -0.294*** (0.047) |
| Constant | 1.986*** (0.258) | 2.284*** (0.250) | 1.018*** (0.274) | 2.366*** (0.273) | 1.289*** (0.246) | 2.015*** (0.256) |
| N | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 |
| R ² | 0.156 | 0.069 | 0.044 | 0.191 | 0.133 | 0.172 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.147 | 0.060 | 0.034 | 0.183 | 0.124 | 0.163 |

Black Respondents

| | <i>Attitudes</i> | | | <i>Participation</i> | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | Internal | External | Linked Fate | Vote | Campaign | Protest |
| Carceral | 0.092* (0.049) | -0.022 (0.048) | 0.154*** (0.054) | -0.056 (0.053) | 0.143** (0.057) | 0.246*** (0.058) |
| Conventional | 0.281*** (0.052) | 0.065 (0.050) | 0.059 (0.057) | 0.348*** (0.056) | 0.324*** (0.060) | 0.174*** (0.061) |
| Party ID | -0.099** (0.049) | -0.232*** (0.047) | 0.048 (0.053) | -0.438*** (0.053) | -0.318*** (0.056) | -0.251*** (0.057) |
| Constant | 1.454*** (0.268) | 1.608*** (0.259) | 1.424*** (0.292) | 3.229*** (0.289) | 1.665*** (0.311) | 1.247*** (0.314) |
| N | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 |
| R ² | 0.221 | 0.168 | 0.034 | 0.235 | 0.209 | 0.205 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.211 | 0.157 | 0.022 | 0.226 | 0.199 | 0.195 |

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Suppressed coefficients are income, age, education, and gender. Appendix S13 presents tables with estimates for all covariates. p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

²³Importantly, this difference should not be interpreted as indicating that carceral discussion reflects a deficit in political competence. Weaker or absent associations with efficacy may reflect engagement with institutions that are experienced as unresponsive or coercive, particularly under unequal exposure to the carceral state.

Second, carceral discussion positively correlates with linked fate for both white and Black respondents ($p < 0.01$), while conventional discussion is not associated with linked fate for either group. In substantive terms, a one-unit increase in carceral discussion frequency is associated with roughly a 0.15–0.18 increase on the 0–3 linked fate scale for both groups, indicating a modest but consistent shift toward stronger perceptions of linked fate. One possible interpretation of this finding is that discussing the carceral state is associated with greater attention to how group-level conditions shape individual life chances. However, the reverse ordering is also plausible: respondents with stronger linked fate may be more likely to engage in conversations about policing and the criminal justice system. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive, and the cross-sectional design does not adjudicate between them.

Third, conventional political discussion is positively associated with assigning importance to voting, campaigning, and protesting for both groups ($p < 0.01$ across outcomes). Carceral discussion is positively associated with assigning importance to campaigning and protesting for both groups, but is not associated with assigning importance to voting for either group. Substantively, these associations are comparable in magnitude: among Black respondents, a one-unit increase in carceral discussion corresponds to roughly a 0.25 increase in the perceived importance of protest on the 1–5 scale, compared to about 0.17 for conventional discussion. This suggests that carceral discussion aligns more closely with non-electoral forms of participation than with voting, consistent with research linking exposure to the carceral state to nonvoting political activity (Walker 2020; Ang and Tebes 2024). At the same time, these associations may reflect experiences that give rise to both discussion and participation.

Taken together, these results indicate that conventional and carceral discussion are associated with distinct political attitudes and behaviors. Conventional discussion aligns with internal efficacy and the perceived importance of voting, while carceral discussion aligns with linked fate and the perceived importance of campaigning and protest. Carceral discussion is not associated with the perceived importance of voting for either group. These patterns suggest that focusing only on conventional political discussion obscures a set of political orientations associated with discussion of the carceral state.

Next, I extend the analysis with binary measures of positive and negative carceral discussion as independent variables. I again present results separately by race for ease of interpretation, but the observed patterns are not an artifact of disaggregation. In contrast to the largely similar patterns observed for conventional and carceral discussion (Table 4), pooled interaction models indicate that several associations involving positive and negative carceral discussion vary by race (Appendix S14). These associations are more numerous and more consistently significant among Black respondents, while among white respondents they are weaker and less systematically related across outcomes. These patterns suggest that evaluative orientations toward the carceral state are more consistently linked to political attitudes and behaviors among Black respondents than among white respondents.

Table 5 shows that the correlates of carceral discussion vary by evaluative orientation (positive vs. negative). First, positive carceral discussion is positively associated with external efficacy for Black ($p < 0.01$) and white respondents ($p < 0.05$), while negative discussion is negatively associated with external efficacy for Black respondents ($p < 0.01$) and not meaningfully related to external efficacy for whites. These patterns indicate that positive and negative discussion capture distinct orientations toward the state. Positive discussion aligns with higher perceived government responsiveness, while negative discussion among Black respondents aligns with lower perceived responsiveness. The magnitudes are substantial: among Black respondents, negative discussion is associated with a roughly 0.65 decrease in external efficacy on the 1–5 scale, while positive discussion is associated with a 0.81 increase—indicating large shifts in perceived government responsiveness across evaluative orientations. However, the direction of these relationships is unclear: discussion may correspond to differences in perceived responsiveness, or respondents with differing external efficacy may be more likely to engage in positive or negative carceral discussion.

Second, Table 5 shows that the correlates of positive and negative discussion differ across outcomes. Positive discussion is positively associated with linked fate and campaign activity for white respondents, and with internal efficacy, external efficacy, and the perceived importance of voting, campaigning, and protest for Black respondents. Negative discussion,

Table 5: Correlates of Positive and Negative Carceral Discussion

White Respondents

| | <i>Attitudes</i> | | | <i>Participation</i> | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | Internal | External | Linked Fate | Vote | Campaign | Protest |
| Positive | -0.027 (0.106) | 0.235** (0.100) | 0.242** (0.110) | 0.045 (0.112) | 0.227** (0.101) | -0.101 (0.105) |
| Negative | 0.317*** (0.114) | -0.096 (0.106) | 0.049 (0.118) | 0.227* (0.119) | 0.232** (0.108) | 0.444*** (0.113) |
| Party ID | -0.167*** (0.050) | -0.216*** (0.047) | -0.099* (0.052) | -0.332*** (0.052) | -0.243*** (0.047) | -0.278*** (0.049) |
| Constant | 2.553*** (0.255) | 2.082*** (0.239) | 1.292*** (0.265) | 2.780*** (0.268) | 1.826*** (0.243) | 2.526*** (0.253) |
| N | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 |
| R ² | 0.103 | 0.074 | 0.029 | 0.154 | 0.081 | 0.123 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.094 | 0.064 | 0.019 | 0.145 | 0.072 | 0.114 |

Black Respondents

| | <i>Attitudes</i> | | | <i>Participation</i> | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | Internal | External | Linked Fate | Vote | Campaign | Protest |
| Positive | 0.320** (0.132) | 0.809*** (0.117) | -0.196 (0.137) | 0.381*** (0.141) | 0.764*** (0.151) | 0.503*** (0.152) |
| Negative | 0.166 (0.183) | -0.653*** (0.163) | 0.851*** (0.191) | -0.0002 (0.195) | -0.007 (0.210) | 0.387* (0.211) |
| Party ID | -0.134*** (0.050) | -0.239*** (0.045) | 0.040 (0.053) | -0.467*** (0.054) | -0.359*** (0.058) | -0.281*** (0.058) |
| Constant | 1.985*** (0.298) | 1.742*** (0.265) | 1.279*** (0.311) | 3.671*** (0.318) | 2.267*** (0.341) | 1.545*** (0.344) |
| N | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 |
| R ² | 0.156 | 0.235 | 0.041 | 0.188 | 0.162 | 0.165 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.145 | 0.225 | 0.028 | 0.177 | 0.152 | 0.154 |

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Carceral discussion coded as positive/negative if respondents talked about any positive/negative topic at least once in the past year. Suppressed coefficients are income, age, education, and gender. Appendix S13 presents tables with estimates for all covariates. $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

in contrast, is strongly associated with linked fate and protest among Black respondents, while showing weaker or more diffuse associations for white respondents. These patterns are consistent with the idea that positive and negative carceral discussion capture different evaluative orientations. At the same time, the direction of the relationships is unclear: these associations may reflect experiences that shape both discussion and political behaviors.

Third, these differences are especially pronounced for political participation. Positive discussion is associated with broader forms of engagement among Black respondents, while corresponding relationships are weaker among white respondents. Negative discussion is most consistently associated with protest, with stronger and more consistent relationships among Black respondents and attenuated patterns among whites. This pattern is consistent with work linking carceral contact to non-electoral activity, though the analyses cannot establish whether discussion, experience, or both underlie these relationships.

Overall, these findings indicate that the political correlates of carceral discussion vary by domain and evaluative orientation. Positive and negative carceral discussion are associated with different patterns of external efficacy, linked fate, and political engagement. For example, positive discussion aligns with higher external efficacy, while negative discussion—particularly among Black respondents—aligns with lower external efficacy and greater emphasis on protest. More broadly, these results suggest that focusing only on conventional political discussion obscures variation in how individuals evaluate and engage with the state. Rather than reflecting a single form of engagement, political discussion appears to encompass multiple orientations that correspond to different attitudes and behaviors.

5 Conclusion

Core concepts in political behavior—such as political discussion, knowledge, trust, and participation—are fundamental to how scholars understand citizen engagement with the state. Political discussion is central among these concepts and linked to political knowledge, policy preferences, civic mindedness, and engagement (Eveland 2004; Eveland and Thomson 2006; Sinclair 2012; Sokhey and McClurg 2012; Klofstad 2007; Mutz 2006; Pattie and Johnston

2008). This literature, however, typically defines political discussion as talking about “politics” or “government or elections.” This approach is limited because it focuses on what Soss and Weaver (2017) describe as the “first face” of the state and does not capture the carceral “second face” that exercises power through policing and punishment (Soss and Weaver 2017).

In this paper, I argue that we should broaden our conception of political discussion to include the coercive “second face” of the state. By adapting conventional measures to include the carceral state, the paper shows, first, that familiar racial patterns in political discussion differ across domains. Black Americans are (a) less likely to engage in conventional political discussion than white Americans, (b) more likely to engage in carceral discussion about policing and the criminal justice system, and (c) more likely to report negative than positive carceral discussion. Focusing only on conventional measures thus provides an incomplete picture of patterns of political discussion among Americans (Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 2003; Wong et al. 2011; Carlson, Abrajano, and Bedolla 2019).

Second, I show that carceral discussion correlates with political outcomes in ways that differ across evaluative orientations and, in some cases, across racial groups. Among white respondents, positively oriented carceral discussion correlates with external efficacy and linked fate, while negative carceral discussion correlates with assigning importance to voting, campaigning, and protesting. Among Black respondents, positive discussion correlates with external efficacy and assigning importance to voting, campaigning, and protesting, while negative discussion correlates with linked fate, lower external efficacy, and assigning importance to protest. These findings complicate the view that political discussion uniformly aligns with the kinds of knowledge and engagement that generate political influence and voice (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Klofstad 2007; Klofstad 2010; Searing et al. 2007).²⁴

These findings have several implications for research on political discussion, the carceral state, and racial and ethnic politics. First, the paper challenges the assumption that political discussion uniformly aligns with political engagement and voice (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Klofstad 2007) by revisiting the definition of political discussion and highlighting differences

²⁴In this context, associations between carceral discussion and lower external efficacy should not be read as democratic deficiency; they may reflect accurate learning about state responsiveness under unequal conditions.

across domains. Second, the paper extends research on the limits of using white Americans to generalize about political concepts (Cohen and Luttig 2020; Phoenix and Chan 2022; Chudy and Engelhardt 2023; Jefferson 2023) by documenting consistent racial differences in carceral discussion. Finally, the paper demonstrates the value of combining survey and listening methods to study political discussion and builds on a growing body of work that integrates qualitative tools into survey research (Thachil 2018; Vergheze 2024). This approach can be used to investigate both conventional political discussion and other understudied domains to complement the nuanced insights of “analytic listening” studies (e.g., Harris-Lacewell 2004; Cramer 2016; Weaver, Prowse, and Piston 2019).

Despite these contributions, several limitations suggest directions for future research. First, more work is needed to examine carceral discussion from an intersectional perspective. Individuals experience the carceral state differently along lines of gender (Nuamah and Mulroy 2023; Katzenstein and Waller 2015; Cobbina-Dungy and Bailey 2024), sexuality (Kunzel 2008; Dillon 2018), disability (Parsons 2018; Laniyonu and Goff 2021), and religion (Felber 2020). While this paper briefly examines heterogeneity by party and gender, the subgroup analyses warrant further investigation. In particular, Black women appear more likely than white women to engage in negative carceral discussion but show no corresponding difference in positive discussion—a pattern that diverges from that of Black men, who are more likely than white men to engage in both. Future work could more systematically examine how patterns like these vary across intersecting identities.

Second, my analysis focuses on policing and criminal justice institutions but the carceral state also includes immigration enforcement (Harris, Walker, and Eckhouse 2020) and works alongside welfare agencies (Michener, SoRelle, and Thurston 2022; Katzenstein and Waller 2015; Roberts 2014; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Gustafson 2011; Wacquant 2009). Focusing on these aspects of the carceral state could illuminate additional group differences in political discussion. For instance, we might expect immigration enforcement discussion to be more prevalent and linked to efficacy and engagement among Latinos (Walker, Roman, and Barreto 2020; Vargas, Sanchez, and Valdez 2017; Maltby et al. 2020). We might also expect

discussion about programs like Child Protective Services and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families to be more prevalent among women and mothers of color (Roberts 2002; Roberts 2012). Moreover, we might expect talking about unresponsive welfare programs to correlate with more pessimistic views of government and depressed efficacy and engagement (Soss 1999; Soss 2000). Such findings would further complicate the expectation that political discussion generates political engagement (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Klobstad 2007).

Third, although the paper incorporates real-world conversational data to inform measurement, the analyses rely on cross-sectional data. As a result, the findings are associational rather than causal: observed relationships may reflect the effects of discussion, the experiences that give rise to discussion, or both. Constitutive studies (about what carceral discussion is and how it works) could further illuminate the scope of carceral discussion and how it might interact with political attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Weaver, Prowse, and Piston 2019). Causal analyses could do more to establish whether the correlations here are causal relationships. Similarly, while this paper draws on established channels through which political discussion shapes political orientations—information exposure, cognitive engagement, and information processing (Eveland 2004)—it does not measure these mechanisms. The analyses show that carceral and conventional discussion have distinct political correlates; identifying the pathways through which those associations operate is a direction for future work.

The central goal of the present paper, however, is to demonstrate that carceral discussion is an important component of political experience, and that its prevalence and correlates differ across groups. Understanding political discussion thus requires attention to how citizens talk about different domains of governance. More generally, a complete account of political life requires recognizing that political experiences vary across groups and institutional contexts. This paper provides one window into that variation through the study of political discussion.

At a broader level, then, this paper demonstrates that measures of political engagement depend on which face of the state is in view. When core concepts in political behavior are defined around the electoral arena, their measures capture only one domain of political life. As a result, these measures provide an incomplete account when citizens encounter the state

through coercion or discretion. The implication is not simply that additional topics should be added to existing measures, but that standard measures themselves encode a particular model of politics. When that model does not match how citizens encounter the state, it mischaracterizes and obscures engagement across groups. Addressing this problem requires attention to what counts as relevant and important political experiences—and for whom.

References

- [1] Ang, Desmond and Tebes, Jonathan. “Civic Responses to Police Violence”. In: *American Political Science Review* 118.2 (2024), pp. 972–987.
- [2] Anoll, Allison. “What Makes a Good Neighbor? Race, Place, and Norms of Political Participation”. In: *American Political Science Review* 112.3 (2018), pp. 494–508.
- [3] Anoll, Allison and Engelhardt, Andrew. “A Drop in the Ocean: How Priors Anchor Attitudes Toward the American Carceral State”. In: *British Journal of Political Science* 53.4 (2023), pp. 1150–1169. DOI: 10.1017/S0007123423000133.
- [4] Anoll, Allison and Israel-Trummel, Mackenzie. “Do Felony Disenfranchisement Laws (De)Mobilize? A Case of Surrogate Participation”. In: *The Journal of Politics* 81.4 (2019), pp. 1523–1527.
- [5] Auerbach, Adam and Thachil, Tariq. *Migrants and Machine Politics: How India’s Urban Poor Seek Representation and Responsiveness*. Princeton University Press, 2023.
- [6] Balch, George I. “Multiple Indicators in Survey Research: The Concept “Sense of Political Efficacy””. In: *Political Methodology* 1.2 (1974), pp. 1–43.
- [7] Baumgartner, Frank, Epp, Derek, and Shoub, Kelsey. *Suspect Citizens: What 20 Million Traffic Stops Tell Us About Policing and Race*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- [8] Berry, Justin A., Ebner, David, and Cornelius, Michelle. “White Identity Politics: Linked Fate and Political Participation”. In: *Politics, Groups and Identities* 9.3 (2021), pp. 519–537.
- [9] Branton, Regina et al. “Community-Oriented Policing, Perceptions of Police Performance, and Trust in Local Government”. In: *Working Paper* (2024).
- [10] Carlson, Taylor N., Abrajano, Marisa, and Bedolla, Lisa García. “Political Discussion Networks and Political Engagement among Voters of Color”. In: *Political Research Quarterly* 73.1 (2019), pp. 79–95.
- [11] Charmaz, Kathy. “Grounded Theory in Global Perspective: Reviews by International Researchers”. In: *Qualitative Inquiry* 20.9 (2014), pp. 1074–1084.
- [12] Chudy, Jennifer and Engelhardt, Andrew. “Who Trusts? The Relevance of Race for Political Trust”. In: *Working Paper* (2023).
- [13] Cobbina-Dungy, Jennifer E. and Bailey, Caroline. “Black Women Perceptions Matter: The Role That Gender Plays in the Assessments of Law Enforcement in Ferguson and Baltimore”. In: *Race and Justice* 16.2 (2024). DOI: 10.1177/21533687241231622.
- [14] Cohen, Cathy and Luttig, Matthew. “Reconceptualizing Political Knowledge: Race, Ethnicity, and Carceral Violence”. In: *Perspectives on Politics* 18.3 (2020), pp. 805–818.
- [15] Conover, Pamela and Miller, Patrick. “Taking Everyday Political Talk Seriously”. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*. Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 378–391.
- [16] Cramer, Katherine. “Interviewing and Listening to Ordinary People”. In: *Doing Good Qualitative Research*. Oxford University Press, 2024, pp. 195–208.
- [17] Cramer, Katherine. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- [18] Dawson, Michael C. *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics*. Princeton University Press, 1995.
- [19] Dillon, Stephen. *Fugitive Life: The Queer Politics of the Prison State*. Duke University Press, 2018.

- [20] Drakulich, Kevin and Denver, Megan. “The Partisans and the Persuadables: Public Views of Black Lives Matter and the 2020 Protests”. In: *Perspectives on Politics* 20.4 (2022), pp. 1191–1208.
- [21] Dryzek, John S. *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations*. Oxford University Press, 2002.
- [22] Ekins, Emily. “Policing in America: Understanding Public Attitudes toward the Police”. In: *Cato Institute 2016 Criminal Justice Survey* (2016).
- [23] Enamorado, Ted, McDonough, Anne, and Mendelberg, Tali. “The Shadow Carceral State and Racial Inequality in Turnout”. In: *British Journal of Political Science* 54.4 (2024), pp. 1318–1339. DOI: 10.1017/S0007123424000358.
- [24] Engelhardt, Andrew. “The content of their coverage: contrasting racially conservative and liberal elite rhetoric”. In: *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 9.5 (2021), pp. 935–954.
- [25] Eveland, William P. “The Effect of Political Discussion in Producing Informed Citizens: The Roles of Information, Motivation, and Elaboration”. In: *Political Communication* 21.2 (2004), pp. 177–193.
- [26] Eveland, William P. and Appiah, Osei. “A National Conversation About Race? Political Discussion Across Lines of Racial and Partisan Difference”. In: *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 6 (2019), pp. 1–27.
- [27] Eveland, William P. and Hively, Myiah Hutchens. “Political Discussion Frequency, Network Size, and “Heterogeneity” of Discussion as Predictors of Political Knowledge and Participation”. In: *Journal of Communication* 59.2 (2009), pp. 205–224.
- [28] Eveland, William P. and Thomson, Tiffany. “Is It Talking, Thinking, or Both? A Lagged Dependent Variable Model of Discussion Effects on Political Knowledge”. In: *Journal of Communication* 56.3 (2006), pp. 523–542.
- [29] Felber, Garrett. *Those Who Know Don’t Say: The Nation of Islam, the Black Freedom Movement, and the Carceral State*. University of North Carolina Press, 2020.
- [30] Gay, Claudine, Hochschild, Jennifer, and White, Ariel. “Americans’ Belief in Linked Fate: Does the Measure Capture the Concept?” In: *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 1.1 (2016), pp. 117–144.
- [31] Gottschalk, Marie. “Hiding in Plain Sight: American Politics and the Carceral State”. In: *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008), pp. 235–260.
- [32] Gustafson, Kaaryn S. *Cheating Welfare: Public Assistance and the Criminalization of Poverty*. New York University Press, 2011.
- [33] Gutmann, Amy and Thompson, Dennis. “Democracy and Disagreement”. In: *Ethics* 108.3 (1996), pp. 607–610.
- [34] Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. MIT Press, 1989.
- [35] Harris, Allison P., Walker, Hannah, and Eckhouse, Laurel. “No Justice, No Peace: Political Science Perspectives on the American Carceral State”. In: *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 5.3 (2020), pp. 427–449.
- [36] Harris-Lacewell, Melissa. *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought*. Princeton University Press, 2004.
- [37] Horowitz, Juliana Menasce, Cox, Kiana, and Hurst, Kiley. *Views of Race, Policing and Black Lives Matter in the 5 Years Since George Floyd’s Killing*. Report. Pew Research Center, May 2025.

- [38] Huckfeldt, Robert and Sprague, John. *Citizens, Politics and Social Communication: Information and Influence in an Election Campaign*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- [39] Hughes, Diane et al. “Parents’ Ethnic–Racial Socialization Practices: A Review of Research and Directions for Future Study”. In: *Developmental Psychology* 42.5 (2006), pp. 747–770.
- [40] Hutchings, Vincent L. “Political Context, Issue Salience, and Selective Attentiveness: Constituent Knowledge of the Clarence Thomas Confirmation Vote”. In: *The Journal of Politics* 63.3 (2001), pp. 846–868.
- [41] Iyengar, Shanto. “Shortcuts to Political Knowledge: The Role of Selective Attention and Accessibility”. In: *Information and Democratic Processes*. Eds. John A. Ferejohn and James H. Kuklinski. University of Illinois Press, 1990, pp. 160–185.
- [42] Iyengar, Shanto. “Whither Political Information”. In: *ANES Pilot Study Report, No. nes002253* (1986).
- [43] Jefferson, Hakeem. “The Curious Case of Black Conservatives: Construct Validity and the 7-point Liberal-Conservative Scale”. In: *Working Paper* (2024).
- [44] Jefferson, Hakeem. “The Politics of Respectability and Black Americans’ Punitive Attitudes”. In: *American Political Science Review* 117.4 (2023), pp. 1448–1464.
- [45] Junn, Jane and Masuoka, Natalie. “Asian American Identity: Shared Racial Status and Political Context”. In: *Perspectives on Politics* 6.4 (2008), pp. 729–740.
- [46] Katzenstein, Mary Fainsod and Waller, Maureen R. “Taxing the Poor: Incarceration, Poverty Governance, and the Seizure of Family Resources”. In: *Perspectives on Politics* 13.3 (2015), pp. 638–656.
- [47] King, Gary and Zeng, Langche. “The Dangers of Extreme Counterfactuals”. In: *Political Analysis* 14.2 (2006), pp. 131–159.
- [48] Klofstad, Casey. “Talk Leads to Recruitment: How Discussions about Politics and Current Events Increase Civic Participation”. In: *Political Research Quarterly* 60.2 (2007), pp. 180–191.
- [49] Klofstad, Casey. “The Lasting Effect of Civic Talk on Civic Participation: Evidence from a Panel Study”. In: *Social Forces* 88.5 (2010), pp. 2353–2375.
- [50] Klofstad, Casey, McClurg, Scott, and Rolfe, Meredith. “Measurement of Political Discussion Networks: A Comparison of Two “Name Generator” Procedures”. In: *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 73.3 (2009), pp. 462–483.
- [51] Kunzel, Regina. *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- [52] Kwak, Nojin et al. “Talking Politics and Engaging Politics: An Examination of the Interactive Relationships Between Structural Features of Political Talk and Discussion Engagement”. In: *Communication Research* 32.1 (2005), pp. 87–111.
- [53] Laniyonu, Ayobami and Goff, Phillip Atiba. “Measuring disparities in police use of force and injury among persons with serious mental illness”. In: *BMC Psychiatry* 21.500 (2021).
- [54] Lee, Hedwig, Porter, Lauren C., and Comfort, Megan. “Consequences of Family Member Incarceration: Impacts on Civic Participation and Perceptions of the Legitimacy and Fairness of Government”. In: *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 651.1 (2014), pp. 44–73.
- [55] Leighley, Jan and Matsubayashi, Tetsuya. “The Implications of Class, Race, and Ethnicity for Political Networks”. In: *American Politics Research* 37 (2009), pp. 824–855.

- [56] Lerman, Amy and Weaver, Vesla. *Arresting Citizenship: The Democratic Consequences of American Crime Control*. University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- [57] Maltby, Elizabeth et al. “Demographic Context, Mass Deportation, and Latino Linked Fate”. In: *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 5.3 (2020), pp. 509–536.
- [58] Mansbridge, Jane. “‘Deliberative Democracy’ or ‘Democratic Deliberation’”. In: *Deliberation, Participation and Democracy: Can the People Govern?* Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 251–71.
- [59] Michener, Jamila, SoRelle, Mallory, and Thurston, Chloe. “From the Margins to the Center: A Bottom-Up Approach to Welfare State Scholarship”. In: *Perspectives on Politics* 20.1 (2022), pp. 154–169.
- [60] Morris, Kevin T. and Shoub, Kelsey. “Contested Killings: The Mobilizing Effects of Community Contact with Police Violence”. In: *American Political Science Review* 118.1 (2024), pp. 458–474.
- [61] Mutz, Diana. *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- [62] Nelsen, Matthew D. *The Color of Civics: Civic Education for a Multiracial Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.
- [63] Niemi, Richard G., Craig, Stephen C., and Mattei, Franco. “Measuring Internal Political Efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study”. In: *The American Political Science Review* 85.4 (1991), pp. 1407–1413.
- [64] Niemi, Richard G. and Hepburn, Mary A. “The Rebirth of Political Socialization”. In: *Perspectives on Political Science* 24.1 (1995), pp. 7–16.
- [65] Nuamah, Sally and Mulroy, Quinn. “‘I am a Child!’: Public Perceptions of Black Girls and their Punitive Consequences”. In: *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 8.2 (2023), pp. 182–201.
- [66] Parsons, Anne E. *From Asylum to Prison: Deinstitutionalization and the Rise of Mass Incarceration after 1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018.
- [67] Pattie, Charles J. and Johnston, Ron J. “It’s Good to Talk: Talk, Disagreement and Tolerance”. In: *British Journal of Political Science* 38.4 (2008), pp. 677–698.
- [68] Pérez, Efrén. “Mind the Gap: Why Large Group Deficits in Political Knowledge Emerge—And What To Do About Them”. In: *Political Behavior* 37.4 (2015), pp. 933–954.
- [69] Pettit, Becky and Western, Bruce. “Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Inequality in U.S. Incarceration”. In: *American Sociological Review* 69.2 (2004), pp. 151–169.
- [70] Phoenix, Davin L. and Chan, Nathan K. “Clarifying the ‘People Like Me’: Racial Efficacy and Political Behavior”. In: *Perspectives on Politics* (2022), pp. 1–18.
- [71] Pierson, Emma et al. “A Large-scale Analysis of Racial Disparities in Police Stops Across the United States”. In: *Nature Human Behaviour* 4.7 (2020), pp. 736–745.
- [72] Roberts, Dorothy E. “Child Protection as Surveillance of African American Families”. In: *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law* 36 (2014), pp. 426–437.
- [73] Roberts, Dorothy E. “Prison, Foster Care, and the Systemic Punishment of Black Mothers”. In: *UCLA Law Review* 59 (2012), pp. 1474–500.
- [74] Roberts, Dorothy E. *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*. Basic Civitas, 2002.
- [75] Saldaña, Johnny. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Sage, 2015.

- [76] Scheufele, Dietram. “Examining Differential Gains from Mass Media and their Implications for Participatory Behavior”. In: *Communication Research* 29.1 (2002), pp. 46–65.
- [77] Schildkraut, Deborah J. “White Attitudes about Descriptive Representation in the US: the Roles of Identity, Discrimination and Linked Fate”. In: *Politics, Groups and Identities* 5.1 (2017), pp. 84–106.
- [78] Searing, Donald D. et al. “Public Discussion in the Deliberative System: Does It Make Better Citizens?” In: *British Journal of Political Science* 37.4 (2007), pp. 587–618.
- [79] Segura, Gary M. “Latino Public Opinion & Realigning the American Electorate”. In: *Daedalus* 141.4 (2012), pp. 98–113.
- [80] Sen, Maya and Wasow, Omar. “Race as a Bundle of Sticks: Designs that Estimate Effects of Seemingly Immutable Characteristics”. In: *Annual Review of Political Science* 19.1 (2016), pp. 499–522.
- [81] Sinclair, Betsy. *The Social Citizen: Peer Networks and Political Behavior*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- [82] Sokhey, Anand Edward and McClurg, Scott. “Social Networks and Correct Voting”. In: *The Journal of Politics* 74.3 (2012), pp. 751–764.
- [83] Soss, Joe. “Lessons of Welfare: Policy Design, Political Learning, and Political Action”. In: *American Political Science Review* 93.2 (1999), pp. 363–380.
- [84] Soss, Joe. *Unwanted Claims: The Politics of Participation in the U.S. Welfare System*. University of Michigan Press, 2000.
- [85] Soss, Joe, Fording, Richard C., and Schram, Sanford F. *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race*. University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- [86] Soss, Joe and Weaver, Vesla. “Police Are Our Government: Politics, Political Science, and the Policing of Race–Class Subjugated Communities”. In: *Annual Review of Political Science* 20.1 (2017), pp. 565–591.
- [87] Streeter, Shea. “Lethal Force in Black and White: Assessing Racial Disparities in the Circumstances of Police Killings”. In: *The Journal of Politics* 81.3 (2019), pp. 1124–1132.
- [88] Tate, Katherine. *What’s Going On? Political Incorporation and the Transformation of Black Public Opinion*. Georgetown University Press, 2010.
- [89] Thachil, Tariq. “Improving Surveys Through Ethnography: Insights from India’s Urban Periphery”. In: *Studies in Comparative International Development* 53.3 (2018), pp. 281–299.
- [90] Thompson, Dennis. *The Democratic Citizen: Social Science and Democratic Theory in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- [91] Vargas, Edward D., Sanchez, Gabriel R., and Valdez, Juan A. “Immigration Policies and Group Identity: How Immigrant Laws Affect Linked Fate among U.S. Latino Populations”. In: *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 2.1 (2017), pp. 35–62.
- [92] Verba, Sidney, Burns, Nancy, and Schlozman, Kay Lehman. “Unequal at the Starting Line: Creating Participatory Inequalities across Generations and Among Groups”. In: *The American Sociologist* 34.1 (2003), pp. 45–69.
- [93] Verghese, Ajay. “Measuring Hindu Religiosity”. In: *Working Paper* (2024).
- [94] Wacquant, Loïc. *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Duke University Press, 2009.

- [95] Walker, Hannah. “Extending the Effects of the Carceral State: Proximal Contact, Political Participation, and Race”. In: *Political Research Quarterly* 67.4 (2014), pp. 809–822.
- [96] Walker, Hannah. *Mobilized by Injustice: Criminal Justice Contact, Political Participation, and Race*. Oxford University Press, 2020.
- [97] Walker, Hannah and García-Castañon, Marcela. “For Love and Justice: The Mobilizing of Race, Gender, and Criminal Justice Contact”. In: *Politics & Gender* 13.4 (2017), pp. 541–568.
- [98] Walker, Hannah, Roman, Marcel, and Barreto, Matt. “The Ripple Effect: The Political Consequences of Proximal Contact with Immigration Enforcement”. In: *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 5.3 (2020), pp. 537–572.
- [99] Weaver, Vesla, Prowse, Gwen, and Piston, Spencer. “Too Much Knowledge, Too Little Power: An Assessment of Political Knowledge in Highly Policed Communities”. In: *The Journal of Politics* 81.3 (2019), pp. 1153–1166.
- [100] Western, Bruce. *Punishment and Inequality in America*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2006.
- [101] Williamson, Vanessa, Trump, Kris-Stella, and Einstein, Katherine Levine. “Black Lives Matter: Evidence that Police-Caused Deaths Predict Protest Activity”. In: *Perspectives on Politics* 16 (2018), pp. 400–415.
- [102] Wong, Janelle et al. *Asian American Political Participation: Emerging Constituents and Their Political Identities*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2011.

Supplementary Material for “Carceral Political Discussion: Measuring Discussion Across Domains of the State”

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| S1 What Do Existing Discussion Measures Capture? | 2 |
| S2 Sample and Descriptive Statistics | 4 |
| S3 Fora Conversation Collections | 5 |
| S4 Illustrative Fora Excerpts of Carceral Discussion | 6 |
| S5 Adjusted Estimates for Discussion Prevalence | 8 |
| S6 Correlations Between Discussion Domains | 10 |
| S7 Heterogeneity by Party and Gender | 11 |
| S8 Pilot Study (November 2023) | 14 |
| S9 Adjusted Estimates for Discussion Content | 15 |
| S10 Means for Individual Content Items | 16 |
| S11 Predictors of Political Discussion | 17 |
| S12 Correlates Using Alternative Discussion Measures | 20 |
| S13 Full Regression Models (All Covariates) | 24 |
| S14 Pooled Interaction Models | 28 |
| S15 Combined Discussion Measure Across Domains | 30 |
| S16 Ethical Considerations | 31 |

S1 What Do Existing Discussion Measures Capture?

I argue that existing measures of political discussion focus on the “first face” of the state. But what if respondents think about the carceral state (e.g., policing, criminal justice, incarceration, prisons) when asked about their discussions of “politics?” To investigate this concern, I draw on data from a nationally representative original survey of 1400 Americans (700 white respondents, 700 Black respondents) conducted on YouGov in October 2023.

This survey asked the following questions: “From time to time, people discuss politics with other people. During the last year, did you talk with anyone about politics or did you not do this with anyone during the last year?” and “When you discussed politics with other people, what kinds of topics did you talk about? You should include all topics that you consider to be “political.” I used the “politics” prompt rather than “government and elections” because this prompt is more likely to elicit responses that include carceral topics than “government and elections,” which is more tightly focused on the state’s first face.

Using a structural topic model (STM), I analyzed responses to these questions to investigate whether existing political discussion measures neglect the carceral state. An STM is a model that inductively discovers themes in a text corpus using document structure and word frequencies. I estimated an STM with ten topics to examine what people talk about when talking about “politics.” Figure 1 presents the ten most frequent topics for the full sample. The words next to each topic represent words most frequently associated with each topic. Figure 1 shows that respondents frequently refer to topics related to the state’s “first face”: politicians and parties (president, congress), electoral issues (economy, war, immigration), and participation (voting, elections). However, issues related to the carceral state do not feature in the ten most frequent topics. Figure 2 presents similar patterns for white and Black respondents separately. These data suggest that existing measures are indeed not capturing the carceral face of the state.

Figure 1:

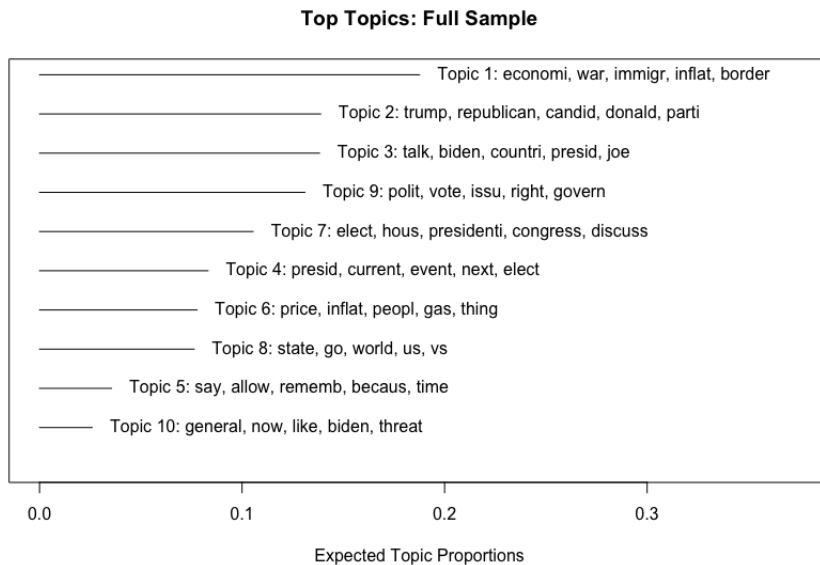
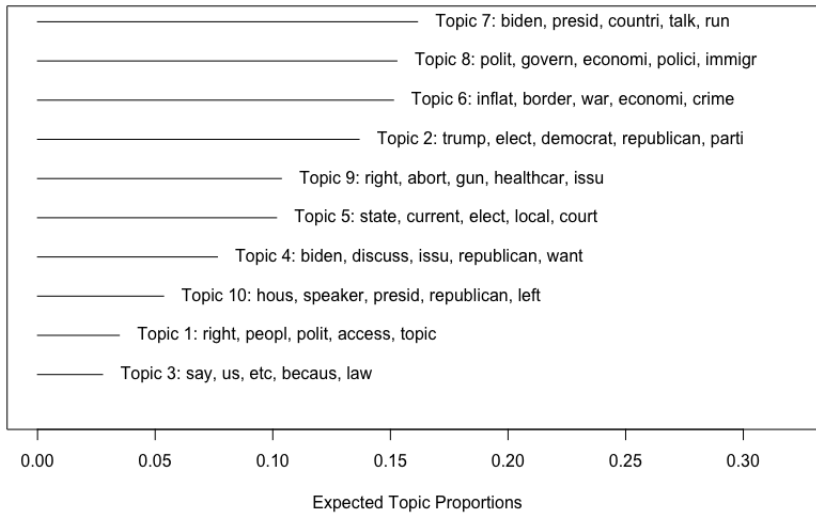
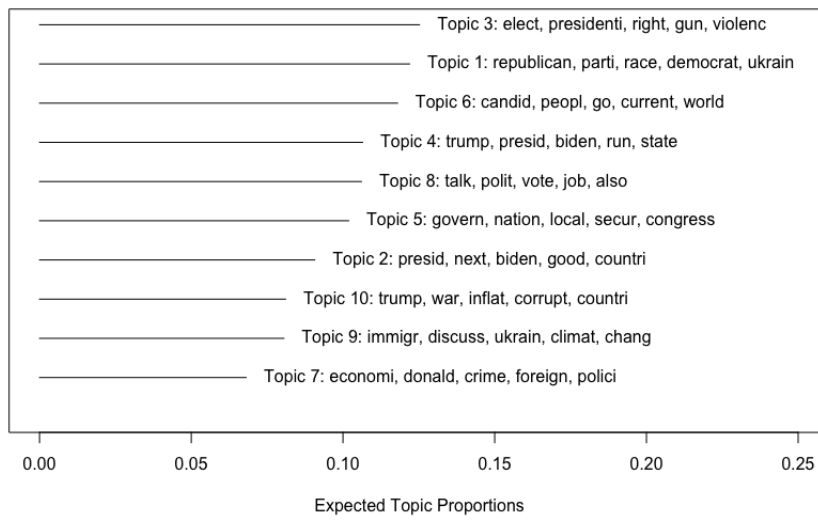


Figure 2:

Top Topics: White Respondents



Top Topics: Black Respondents



S2 Sample and Descriptive Statistics

Table A1: Descriptive Statistics for Prolific Sample

| | Unweighted |
|----------------------|------------|
| Female | 0.50 |
| 18-29 | 0.16 |
| 30-39 | 0.33 |
| 40-49 | 0.23 |
| 50-59 | 0.16 |
| 60+ | 0.12 |
| High school only | 0.14 |
| Some college or more | 0.86 |
| Democrat | 0.36 |
| Republican | 0.27 |
| Independent | 0.37 |

Sample collected on Prolific, Spring 2024. Includes only Black (N=564) and White (N=694) respondents.

Table A2: Descriptive Statistics for Prolific Sample (Weighted)

| | Weighted |
|----------------------|----------|
| Female | 0.50 |
| 18-29 | 0.12 |
| 30-39 | 0.26 |
| 40-49 | 0.18 |
| 50-59 | 0.13 |
| 60+ | 0.30 |
| High school only | 0.29 |
| Some college or more | 0.71 |
| Democrat | 0.33 |
| Republican | 0.30 |
| Independent | 0.36 |

Weighted to 2022 American Community Survey benchmarks for gender, age, and education. Includes only respondents with complete weighting variables: Black (N=555) and White (N=677).

S3 Fora Conversation Collections

Fora collections related to the criminal justice system (as of June 2024). Number of conversations indicated after the collection title:

1. City of Madison Police and Fire Commission Conversations, 6
2. Madison Police Civilian Oversight Board, 9
3. Mountain West: Law Enforcement in your Community – America Amplified, 1
4. Digital Coverage of Crime & Justice Conversations – Alabama Media Group, 6
5. Rikers Public Memory Project, 4
6. Mott Haven Branch: Criminal Justice – New York Public Library (NYPL), 1
7. St. George Branch: Policing and Building Opportunities for Dialogue Across Staten Island Shores – NYPL, 1
8. Allerton Branch: Homelessness, Crime & Prison System – NYPL, 1
9. Allerton Branch: Poverty and Prison – NYPL, 1
10. St. George Branch: Police, Mental Health & Social Issues – NYPL, 1
11. Grand Central Branch: Transportation, Culture and Policing – NYPL, 1
12. Harlem Branch: Gentrification & Police Presence – NYPL, 1
13. New York Center for Interpersonal Development: Young Adults discuss Poverty and Prison in Stapleton – NYPL, 1
14. Staten Island Justice Center: Politics of a Community – NYPL, 1
15. Arkansas Justice Reform Coalition – Reimagine Arkansas, 2
16. Policing and the Criminal Legal System: UNC Chapel Hill – JUST Inequities Community Conversations, 1
17. Castle Sq Teens: Violence in our Communities Local Voices Network – MA Pilot, 1
18. Sterling MA Guns Conversations, 5

S4 Illustrative Fora Excerpts of Carceral Discussion

Negative carceral discussion topics:

1. About police killings or police brutality: “For black folks in the United States, we are constantly living under oppression. We are constantly living in a system that doesn’t value us, that doesn’t appreciate us, that is in fact designed to injure us in some way, both emotionally and economically. Sometimes it manifests in the case of police violence physically, right? To live in that kind of heightened state creates something referred to as a flight or fight response.”
2. About how the police often use more force than necessary: “I’m always stressed out and worried because of the police. And then, one time, I was into a little altercation on the South side of Madison and it took five police officers to come and try to arrest me. Of course, I wasn’t in my right mind and I started fussing and cussing, but that was a lot. Five men with guns drawn for one person, so I believe Madison police, they are a little excessive, like they ain’t got nothing better to do. They just can’t wait to get that call. That’s how I feel.”
3. About how the police or criminal justice system treat Black people unfairly: “I think even looking at there are racial disparities, they are documented. Anyone can pull up the annual report, it is very clear that police officers here in Madison will arrest if you’re a black teenager, I think the odds, it’s like insane. You’re like twice as likely. Who knows what the data is? But it’s like very obvious that there are some huge racial disparities.”
4. About a negative interaction with the police or criminal justice system: “I think my first experience with police was when I was 18. We were traveling from Fayetteville to Fort Smith. We got pulled over, and we had weed in the car. We got pulled over for a broken windshield. I just remember, I was real young. I had never interacted with police officers. They were always there to help, not to... Like I was never the target. I remember these cops wanted to get us so bad. I’m so upset, and I’m getting really nervous. He comes up to me, and he’s like, “Why are you freaking out, if there’s nothing in the car?” I said, “I just have anxiety.” He said, “No. I’m medically trained. That vein in your neck is not from anxiety. It’s from nervousness, because you know.” In my head I was thinking, “What an uneducated dude, because anxiety and nervousness is basically the same thing. You’re making me nervous.” From then on, my whole perspective of the police was kind of shifted, because I was like, this dude has all the power. And he used it, and I got charged. All the power to decide my future right now, and he thinks that anxiety and nervousness are different. Yeah, I just remember kind of being shaken by that, and having my whole view of the police be shaken.”

Positive carceral discussion topics:

1. About how the police are necessary for public safety: “There’s a lot of gun and gang violence activity happening on Findlay and College Avenue. Just recently somebody was killed in front of the building of 1150 College just walking out the door and was shot up. That concerns me. I’m actually happy with the police presence. There’s a cop car on every corner now. Just about every corner you’re going to see a cop car. That seems to deter people from acting crazy and I appreciate that.”

2. About how the police or criminal justice system usually treat people fairly: “Yeah, my experience with officers in the schools is that they do everything they can not to arrest kids. They’re extremely kind and very, very positive role models for kids in the schools. The schools I’ve worked in, some of the resource officers are people of color, and they’re working with students of color. They’re able to see a police officer in a responsible role being good with kids, being supportive.”
3. About how the police are often viewed unfairly: “But this total hatred towards all policemen, I think I should be corrected. You can’t hate them all, you’ve got to trust some of them. You can’t defund them all because then you have no police force.”
4. About how the police should be allowed to use force because policing is dangerous: “But I see the police car parked in front of the high school regularly when I drive past it. I’m like good on you, that’s a good policy to have that. Because the only way to stop somebody that has a gun is with a gun. At least in that kind of situation. That’s how I think of it anyways.”
5. About a positive interaction with the police or criminal justice system: “More recently my car broke down back in October and I was sitting on the side of the road waiting for the towing company to come and in the span of an hour so many people pulled over to see if I was okay, to see if I needed a ride. Three police officers pulled over to see if I was okay, to see if I needed a ride anywhere, and I just thought that was a good overall summary of the vibe that you get in Madison. Although we have our own set of problems I think as a community we really strive to help one another out and I hear all of the time especially from people who come from other places how welcoming people tend to be especially in the city and how open we are to each other. So I just thought “Wow so many people stopped to see if I was all right.” It just felt so great.”

S5 Adjusted Estimates for Discussion Prevalence

Table A3: Carceral Political Discussion

| | Carceral (Binary) | Carceral (Frequency) | Carceral (Count) |
|-------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| White | -0.029 (0.026) | -0.464*** (0.059) | -0.236*** (0.060) |
| Female | -0.011 (0.025) | 0.134** (0.055) | -0.151*** (0.056) |
| Age | 0.003 (0.009) | 0.004 (0.020) | -0.014 (0.021) |
| Income | 0.010** (0.004) | 0.026*** (0.009) | 0.017* (0.010) |
| Education | 0.022* (0.013) | 0.062** (0.030) | 0.094*** (0.030) |
| Republican | -0.072** (0.031) | -0.025 (0.070) | -0.035 (0.072) |
| Independent | -0.045 (0.030) | -0.087 (0.066) | -0.002 (0.068) |
| Constant | 0.665*** (0.061) | 2.472*** (0.136) | 2.288*** (0.139) |
| N | 1,227 | 1,227 | 1,227 |
| R ² | 0.021 | 0.077 | 0.044 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.015 | 0.072 | 0.039 |

Notes: OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses (unweighted sample). *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table A4: Conventional Political Discussion

| | Conventional (Binary) | Conventional (Frequency) | Conventional (Count) |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| White | 0.076*** (0.019) | 0.103* (0.059) | 0.289*** (0.060) |
| Female | 0.017 (0.018) | 0.063 (0.055) | -0.244*** (0.056) |
| Age | 0.007 (0.007) | 0.105*** (0.020) | 0.025 (0.021) |
| Income | 0.015*** (0.003) | 0.032*** (0.009) | 0.031*** (0.010) |
| Education | 0.007 (0.010) | 0.039 (0.030) | 0.108*** (0.030) |
| Republican | -0.029 (0.023) | -0.214*** (0.070) | -0.252*** (0.071) |
| Independent | -0.035 (0.021) | -0.346*** (0.066) | -0.256*** (0.067) |
| Constant | 0.698*** (0.044) | 2.451*** (0.136) | 2.328*** (0.138) |
| N | 1,227 | 1,227 | 1,227 |
| R ² | 0.047 | 0.070 | 0.083 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.041 | 0.065 | 0.078 |

Notes: OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses (unweighted sample). *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

S6 Correlations Between Discussion Domains

Table A5 presents coefficients from weighted Pearson’s r correlations between carceral and conventional discussion for Black and white respondents across three measures: binary, frequency, and number of discussion partners. These domains are moderately correlated. For the binary measure, the correlation is 0.35 for Black respondents and 0.34 for white respondents. The correlations are stronger for frequency and count: 0.51 for Black and 0.46 for white respondents for frequency, and 0.60 for Black and 0.59 for white respondents for count.

Table A6 presents coefficients from weighted Pearson’s r correlations between positive and negative carceral discussion for Black and white respondents. This measure is coded as positive/negative if respondents report discussing any positive/negative carceral topic at least once in the past year. Positive and negative discussion are moderately correlated: the correlation coefficients are 0.44 for Black respondents and 0.46 for white respondents.

Overall, these results indicate meaningful but incomplete overlap between conventional and carceral discussion, as well as between positive and negative carceral discussion. Individuals who discuss government and elections are somewhat more likely to discuss policing and criminal justice, but the relationship is far from one-to-one. Similarly, respondents who discuss positive aspects of the carceral state are also somewhat likely to discuss negative aspects, consistent with the fact that these categories are not mutually exclusive. Taken together, the correlations support the interpretation that these measures capture related but distinct dimensions of political discussion.

Table A5: Correlation Between Carceral and Conventional Discussion

| | Black | White |
|---------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Binary Discussion | 0.35 | 0.34 |
| Frequency of Discussion | 0.51 | 0.46 |
| Number of Discussion Partners (Count) | 0.60 | 0.59 |
| N | 555 | 677 |

Notes: Coefficients are weighted Pearson’s r correlations between carceral and conventional discussion.

Table A6: Correlation Between Positive and Negative Carceral Discussion

| | Black | White |
|-------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Positive–Negative Correlation | 0.44 | 0.46 |
| N | 555 | 677 |

Notes: Coefficients are weighted Pearson’s r correlations between positive and negative carceral discussion.

S7 Heterogeneity by Party and Gender

Tables A7 and A8 present weighted means for each measure of carceral and conventional discussion by race within partisan groups. The results largely mirror the main findings. First, Table A7 shows that Black Republicans and Democrats report higher levels of carceral discussion than their white counterparts, particularly in the frequency of discussion and number of discussion partners. These differences are consistent across parties, indicating that the racial pattern in carceral discussion is not driven by partisan composition.

Second, Table A8 shows a different pattern for conventional political discussion. Among Democrats, white respondents report higher levels of conventional discussion than Black respondents across all measures. Among Republicans, however, these racial differences are smaller and not statistically distinguishable from zero.

Taken together, these analyses reinforce the main results: Black respondents consistently report higher levels of carceral discussion than white respondents across partisan groups, while the familiar pattern of higher conventional political discussion among white respondents is concentrated among Democrats. These findings suggest that racial differences in political discussion reflect domain-specific engagement rather than simply differences in partisanship.

Table A7: Racial Variation in Carceral Discussion by Party

| | Black Reps | White Reps | Black Dems | White Dems |
|----------------------|------------|-------------------|------------|-------------------|
| Carceral (Binary) | 0.74 | 0.71 | 0.83 | 0.78 |
| Carceral (Frequency) | 2.99 | 2.42 ^a | 3.04 | 2.41 ^b |
| Carceral (Count) | 2.64 | 2.25 ^a | 2.63 | 2.33 ^b |
| N | 113 | 218 | 225 | 224 |

Notes: Entries are weighted means. Significant differences ($p < 0.01$) determined through two-tailed t-tests between Black and white Republicans are indicated with *a* in the second column. Significant differences ($p < 0.01$) between Black and white Democrats are indicated with *b* in the fourth column.

Table A8: Racial Variation in Conventional Discussion by Party

| | Black Reps | White Reps | Black Dems | White Dems |
|--------------------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------------|
| Conventional (Binary) | 0.85 | 0.91 | 0.87 | 0.94 ^b |
| Conventional (Frequency) | 3.13 | 3.18 | 3.18 | 3.46 ^b |
| Conventional (Count) | 2.81 | 2.85 | 2.83 | 3.24 ^b |
| N | 113 | 218 | 225 | 224 |

Notes: Entries are weighted means. Significant differences ($p < 0.01$) determined through two-tailed t-tests between Black and white Republicans are indicated with *a* in the second column. Significant differences ($p < 0.01$) between Black and white Democrats are indicated with *b* in the fourth column.

Tables A9 and A10 present weighted means for the carceral and conventional discussion measures by race and gender. The results broadly align with the patterns in the main text. First, Table A9 shows that Black men and women report higher levels of carceral discussion than their white counterparts, particularly in the frequency of discussion and number of discussion partners. These differences are evident for both groups but are more pronounced and consistently significant among men.

Second, Table A10 shows a less uniform pattern for conventional political discussion. White men report higher levels of conventional discussion than Black men across multiple measures, including both the likelihood of discussion and the number of discussion partners. Among women, however, racial differences are smaller and only statistically significant for the number of discussion partners.

Taken together, these analyses reinforce the main results: Black respondents report greater engagement in carceral discussion across gender groups, while the pattern of higher conventional political discussion among white respondents is more uneven and concentrated among men. This again suggests that differences in political discussion are driven by domain-specific engagement rather than overall propensity to discuss politics.

Table A9: Racial Variation in Carceral Discussion by Gender

| | Black Women | White Women | Black Men | White Men |
|----------------------|-------------|-------------------|-----------|-------------------|
| Carceral (Binary) | 0.75 | 0.74 | 0.81 | 0.74 |
| Carceral (Frequency) | 2.92 | 2.50 ^a | 2.88 | 2.35 ^b |
| Carceral (Count) | 2.45 | 2.25 ^a | 2.72 | 2.38 ^b |
| N | 272 | 338 | 279 | 332 |

Notes: Significant differences ($p < 0.01$) determined through a two-tailed t-test between Black and white women are indicated with an *a* in the second column. Significant differences ($p < 0.01$) determined through a two-tailed t-test between Black and white men are indicated with a *b* in the fourth column.

Table A10: Racial Variation in Conventional Discussion by Gender

| | Black Women | White Women | Black Men | White Men |
|--------------------------|-------------|-------------------|-----------|-------------------|
| Conventional (Binary) | 0.86 | 0.92 | 0.83 | 0.92 ^b |
| Conventional (Frequency) | 3.05 | 3.25 | 3.04 | 3.15 |
| Conventional (Count) | 2.58 | 2.84 ^a | 2.87 | 3.11 ^b |
| N | 272 | 338 | 279 | 332 |

Notes: Significant differences ($p < 0.01$) determined through a two-tailed t-test between Black and white women are indicated with an *a* in the second column. Significant differences ($p < 0.01$) determined through a two-tailed t-test between Black and white men are indicated with a *b* in the fourth column.

Table A11 presents weighted means for positive and negative carceral discussion by race within partisan groups. The results are broadly consistent with the main text but reveal important heterogeneity. Black Republicans are significantly more likely than white Republicans to engage in both positive and negative carceral discussion. Among Democrats, Black respondents are more likely than white respondents to engage in positive carceral discussion, but there is no statistically significant racial difference in negative discussion. These patterns clarify the findings in the main text: the higher prevalence of positive carceral discussion among Black respondents is observed across partisan groups, while racial differences in negative discussion are concentrated among Republicans. These results suggest that differences in carceral discussion content reflect racial and partisan dynamics, rather than a single underlying pattern.

Table A11: Racial Variation in Positive and Negative Carceral Discussion by Party

| | Black Reps | White Reps | Black Dems | White Dems |
|------------------------------|------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Positive Carceral Discussion | 0.93 | 0.82 ^{a†} | 0.85 | 0.71 ^{b†} |
| Negative Carceral Discussion | 0.90 | 0.67 ^a | 0.95 [†] | 0.94 [†] |
| N | 113 | 218 | 225 | 224 |

Notes: Entries are weighted means. *a* indicates significant differences ($p < 0.01$) between Black and white Republicans. *b* indicates significant differences ($p < 0.01$) between Black and white Democrats. † indicates significant within-group differences between positive and negative discussion (paired weighted t-tests, $p < 0.01$).

Table A12 presents weighted means for positive and negative carceral discussion by race and gender. Among men, Black respondents are significantly more likely than white respondents to engage in both positive and negative discussion. Among women, differences are limited to negative discussion: Black women are more likely than white women to engage in negative discussion, with no difference in positive discussion. Within-group comparisons further highlight these differences. Black women are significantly more likely to engage in negative than positive discussion, whereas Black men do not exhibit a statistically significant difference between the two. These patterns indicate that gender shapes the valence of carceral discussion, with racial differences among men spanning both positive and negative evaluations, and among women concentrated in negative discussion.

Table A12: Racial Variation in Positive and Negative Carceral Discussion by Gender

| | Black Women | White Women | Black Men | White Men |
|------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------|-------------------|
| Positive Carceral Discussion | 0.80 | 0.79 | 0.87 | 0.76 ^b |
| Negative Carceral Discussion | 0.91 [†] | 0.81 ^a | 0.92 | 0.75 ^b |
| N | 272 | 338 | 279 | 332 |

Notes: Entries are weighted means. *a* indicates significant differences ($p < 0.01$) between Black and white women. *b* indicates significant differences ($p < 0.01$) between Black and white men. † indicates significant within-group differences between positive and negative discussion (paired weighted t-tests, $p < 0.01$).

S8 Pilot Study (November 2023)

In November 2023, I ran a pilot on Lucid using similar survey questions to the main Prolific survey. I fielded these questions as part of an omnibus online study to a nationally diverse sample of 1,946 American adults (1,641 white respondents and 305 Black respondents). The questions are presented below. All respondents received both sets of political discussion questions. As in the main survey, I randomized the order of the blocks of discussion questions.

1. Binary measure of discussion: “During the last year, did you talk with anyone face-to-face, on the phone, by email, or in any other way about [government or elections/policing] or did you not do this with anyone during the last year?” 0 (No) or 1 (Yes).
2. Frequency of discussion: “During the last year, how often did you discuss [government or elections/policing]?” 1 (Never), 2 (Rarely), 3 (Sometimes), 4 (Often), 5 (Very Often).

Table A13 reports the means for the binary and frequency measures of carceral discussion for white and Black respondents. Significant differences between Black and white respondents were determined through a two-tailed t-test and indicated with an *a* in the second column. As in the main survey, Black respondents are significantly more likely to engage in carceral discussion than white respondents. Table A14 reports the corresponding means for conventional discussion and shows that Black respondents are substantively less likely to engage in conventional discussion than white respondents (although unlike the main survey, these differences do not reach conventional levels of statistical significance). These results are thus generally consistent with Table 2: Black Americans are more likely to discuss the carceral state but substantively less likely to discuss government and elections.

Table A13: Racial Variation in Carceral Discussion

| | Black | White |
|----------------------|-------|-------------------|
| Carceral (Binary) | 0.50 | 0.40 ^a |
| Carceral (Frequency) | 2.18 | 1.88 ^a |
| N | 305 | 1641 |

Notes: Significant differences ($p < 0.01$) determined through a two-tailed t-test between Black and white respondents indicated with an *a*.

Table A14: Racial Variation in Conventional Discussion

| | Black | White |
|--------------------------|-------|-------|
| Conventional (Binary) | 0.57 | 0.61 |
| Conventional (Frequency) | 2.36 | 2.42 |
| N | 305 | 1641 |

Notes: Significant differences ($p < 0.01$) determined through a two-tailed t-test between Black and white respondents are indicated with an *a*.

S9 Adjusted Estimates for Discussion Content

Table A15: Positive and Negative Carceral Discussion

| | Positive Carceral Discussion | Negative Carceral Discussion |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| White | -0.086*** (0.024) | -0.097*** (0.022) |
| Female | -0.008 (0.023) | 0.040* (0.021) |
| Age | 0.017** (0.008) | -0.018** (0.008) |
| Income | 0.009** (0.004) | 0.007** (0.004) |
| Education | 0.002 (0.012) | -0.007 (0.011) |
| Republican | 0.081*** (0.029) | -0.187*** (0.026) |
| Independent | 0.010 (0.027) | -0.119*** (0.025) |
| Constant | 0.689*** (0.056) | 1.020*** (0.051) |
| N | 1,227 | 1,227 |
| R ² | 0.023 | 0.085 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.017 | 0.080 |

Notes: OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses (unweighted sample). * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$

S10 Means for Individual Content Items

Table A16: Means for Content Items

| | White | Black |
|---|-------|-------------------|
| Police killings/brutality | 1.43 | 1.93 ^a |
| Police use more force than necessary | 1.25 | 1.88 ^a |
| Police treat Black people unfairly | 1.16 | 2.05 ^a |
| Negative interaction with police or criminal justice system | 0.91 | 1.45 ^a |
| Police are necessary for public safety | 1.44 | 1.47 |
| Police or criminal justice system usually treat people fairly | 0.89 | 1.14 ^a |
| Police should be allowed to use force | 0.85 | 0.85 |
| Police are often viewed unfairly | 1.06 | 0.96 |
| Positive interaction with the police or criminal justice system | 0.89 | 1.04 ^a |

Notes: Responses coded Never (0), Once (1), A few times (2-3) (2), or Several times (4+) (3). Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) determined through two-tailed t-test between Black and white respondents indicated with an *a*.

S11 Predictors of Political Discussion

Table A17 examines predictors of carceral and conventional discussion, including gender, age, income, political affiliation, education (5-point scale from less than high school to postgraduate degree), organizational membership (binary; e.g., professional, religious), and political news consumption across TV/radio, print, social media, blogs, and YouTube (scaled 0–1 by days per week). These measures are adapted from Cohen and Luttig (2020). The model also includes personal and proximal carceral contact. Personal contact is coded as 1 if respondents report having been arrested, charged, or questioned by police (excluding minor traffic stops). Proximal contact is coded as 1 if a close friend or family member has had such contact.

Several findings emerge. First, party identification does not correlate with either domain for white or Black respondents, suggesting that racial differences are not reducible to partisanship. Second, organizational membership correlates with carceral but not conventional discussion for both groups. Third, proximal carceral contact positively correlates with both forms of discussion for Black and white respondents, consistent with research on its mobilizing effects (e.g., Walker 2020). Personal contact does not correlate with carceral discussion for either group. Finally, relationships between news consumption and discussion vary by race: TV news consumption correlates with carceral discussion among Black respondents but with conventional discussion among white respondents.

Table A18 examines predictors of positive and negative carceral discussion. Age negatively predicts negative discussion for both groups, consistent with generational differences in attitudes toward the carceral state (Ekins 2016). Among white respondents, Democrats are more likely and Republicans less likely to engage in negative discussion; partisanship does not correlate with positive or negative discussion among Black respondents. Organizational membership correlates with both positive and negative discussion for both groups. Proximal contact correlates with negative, but not positive, discussion for Black and white respondents, consistent with the interpretation that exposure generates critical orientations that may mobilize participation (e.g., Walker 2020). Finally, there are racial differences in the relationship between news consumption and evaluative discussion: TV news correlates with positive discussion for both groups, while TV, social media, and print news correlate with negative discussion among white but not Black respondents.

Table A17: Predictors of Carceral and Conventional Discussion

| | Carceral (White) | Carceral (Black) | Conventional (White) | Conventional (Black) |
|-------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Female | 0.059* (0.033) | -0.009 (0.035) | 0.018 (0.020) | 0.050 (0.031) |
| Age | 0.007 (0.013) | -0.014 (0.017) | -0.003 (0.008) | 0.009 (0.015) |
| Income | 0.004 (0.006) | 0.012** (0.006) | 0.010*** (0.003) | 0.016*** (0.005) |
| Education | 0.039** (0.019) | -0.009 (0.021) | 0.027** (0.011) | -0.003 (0.019) |
| Democrat | 0.035 (0.039) | 0.032 (0.040) | 0.034 (0.023) | 0.030 (0.035) |
| Republican | -0.064 (0.040) | -0.063 (0.049) | 0.002 (0.024) | -0.009 (0.044) |
| TV | 0.044 (0.048) | 0.173*** (0.062) | 0.079*** (0.029) | 0.038 (0.055) |
| Print | -0.022 (0.081) | -0.042 (0.072) | -0.083* (0.048) | -0.023 (0.064) |
| Social Media | 0.080* (0.049) | 0.014 (0.059) | 0.014 (0.029) | 0.061 (0.053) |
| Blogs | 0.078 (0.056) | 0.030 (0.059) | 0.061* (0.033) | 0.114** (0.052) |
| Organization | 0.078** (0.038) | 0.114** (0.047) | -0.019 (0.023) | 0.019 (0.041) |
| Personal | 0.028 (0.040) | 0.029 (0.042) | -0.035 (0.024) | -0.061 (0.037) |
| Proximal | 0.093** (0.036) | 0.125*** (0.037) | 0.065*** (0.021) | 0.141*** (0.033) |
| Constant | 0.377*** (0.096) | 0.521*** (0.090) | 0.700*** (0.057) | 0.485*** (0.080) |
| N | 681 | 557 | 681 | 557 |
| R ² | 0.050 | 0.084 | 0.068 | 0.086 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.031 | 0.062 | 0.050 | 0.064 |

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table A18: Predictors of Positive and Negative Carceral Discussion

| | Positive (White) | Positive (Black) | Negative (White) | Negative (Black) |
|-------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Female | 0.042 (0.032) | -0.040 (0.030) | 0.090*** (0.029) | 0.014 (0.022) |
| Age | 0.008 (0.013) | -0.009 (0.014) | -0.026** (0.012) | -0.023** (0.011) |
| Income | 0.011* (0.005) | 0.001 (0.005) | -0.001 (0.005) | -0.001 (0.004) |
| Education | -0.005 (0.018) | -0.005 (0.018) | -0.010 (0.017) | 0.011 (0.014) |
| Democrat | -0.079** (0.038) | -0.008 (0.035) | 0.128*** (0.035) | 0.036 (0.025) |
| Republican | 0.017 (0.039) | 0.059 (0.043) | -0.125*** (0.036) | -0.025 (0.031) |
| TV | 0.173*** (0.046) | 0.174*** (0.054) | 0.106** (0.043) | 0.028 (0.039) |
| Print | 0.091 (0.078) | 0.104* (0.063) | 0.127* (0.072) | 0.046 (0.046) |
| Social Media | 0.081* (0.047) | -0.016 (0.052) | 0.117*** (0.043) | 0.026 (0.038) |
| Blogs | 0.090 (0.054) | 0.051 (0.051) | 0.056 (0.050) | 0.036 (0.037) |
| Organization | 0.140*** (0.037) | 0.169*** (0.041) | 0.130*** (0.034) | 0.078*** (0.030) |
| Personal | -0.020 (0.039) | -0.027 (0.037) | -0.010 (0.036) | 0.016 (0.027) |
| Proximal | 0.043 (0.035) | 0.010 (0.033) | 0.110*** (0.032) | 0.101*** (0.024) |
| Constant | 0.438*** (0.093) | 0.649*** (0.078) | 0.641*** (0.086) | 0.776*** (0.057) |
| N | 681 | 557 | 681 | 557 |
| R ² | 0.108 | 0.130 | 0.141 | 0.087 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.090 | 0.109 | 0.124 | 0.065 |

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

S12 Correlates Using Alternative Discussion Measures

Table A19: Correlates of Binary Political Discussion for White Respondents

| | Internal | External | Linked Fate | Vote | Campaign | Protest |
|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Carceral | 0.243** (0.098) | -0.070 (0.092) | 0.202** (0.102) | 0.122 (0.102) | 0.133 (0.095) | 0.286*** (0.098) |
| Conventional | 0.457*** (0.164) | -0.174 (0.155) | 0.213 (0.172) | 0.635*** (0.172) | 0.126 (0.159) | 0.241 (0.164) |
| Party ID | -0.177*** (0.048) | -0.206*** (0.046) | -0.087* (0.051) | -0.333*** (0.051) | -0.247*** (0.047) | -0.302*** (0.048) |
| Female | -0.300*** (0.080) | -0.123 (0.075) | 0.127 (0.083) | 0.147* (0.083) | 0.011 (0.077) | -0.059 (0.079) |
| Age | 0.034 (0.031) | -0.002 (0.029) | -0.036 (0.032) | 0.152*** (0.032) | -0.038 (0.030) | -0.159*** (0.031) |
| Income | 0.008 (0.013) | 0.020 (0.013) | -0.002 (0.014) | 0.040*** (0.014) | 0.010 (0.013) | -0.019 (0.013) |
| Education | 0.198*** (0.045) | 0.144*** (0.043) | 0.085* (0.047) | 0.179*** (0.048) | 0.071 (0.044) | 0.060 (0.045) |
| Constant | 2.337*** (0.266) | 2.292*** (0.252) | 1.173*** (0.278) | 2.441*** (0.279) | 1.993*** (0.258) | 2.547*** (0.266) |
| N | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 |
| R ² | 0.117 | 0.069 | 0.030 | 0.171 | 0.063 | 0.120 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.108 | 0.060 | 0.020 | 0.162 | 0.053 | 0.111 |

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table A20: Correlates of Political Discussion Partners for White Respondents

| | Internal | External | Linked Fate | Vote | Campaign | Protest |
|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Carceral | 0.021 (0.049) | 0.028 (0.047) | 0.140*** (0.051) | 0.015 (0.051) | 0.063 (0.047) | 0.141*** (0.048) |
| Conventional | 0.240*** (0.049) | -0.040 (0.047) | 0.035 (0.052) | 0.254*** (0.051) | 0.130*** (0.048) | 0.135*** (0.049) |
| Party ID | -0.151*** (0.048) | -0.207*** (0.046) | -0.086* (0.051) | -0.306*** (0.050) | -0.229*** (0.047) | -0.288*** (0.048) |
| Female | -0.247*** (0.079) | -0.134* (0.075) | 0.147* (0.083) | 0.199** (0.082) | 0.040 (0.076) | -0.020 (0.078) |
| Age | 0.031 (0.031) | -0.001 (0.029) | -0.033 (0.032) | 0.148*** (0.032) | -0.039 (0.030) | -0.158*** (0.030) |
| Income | 0.007 (0.013) | 0.019 (0.013) | -0.001 (0.014) | 0.040*** (0.014) | 0.008 (0.013) | -0.020 (0.013) |
| Education | 0.188*** (0.045) | 0.140*** (0.043) | 0.083* (0.047) | 0.168*** (0.047) | 0.060 (0.043) | 0.052 (0.045) |
| Constant | 2.150*** (0.256) | 2.157*** (0.246) | 1.063*** (0.270) | 2.300*** (0.268) | 1.680*** (0.248) | 2.236*** (0.255) |
| N | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 |
| R ² | 0.142 | 0.067 | 0.040 | 0.194 | 0.085 | 0.149 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.133 | 0.057 | 0.030 | 0.185 | 0.075 | 0.140 |

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table A21: Correlates of Binary Political Discussion for Black Respondents

| | Internal | External | Linked Fate | Vote | Campaign | Protest |
|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Carceral | 0.166 (0.114) | -0.094 (0.107) | 0.395*** (0.121) | -0.061 (0.123) | 0.076 (0.136) | 0.244* (0.135) |
| Conventional | 0.475*** (0.128) | -0.053 (0.120) | 0.165 (0.135) | 0.535*** (0.137) | 0.188 (0.152) | 0.304** (0.151) |
| Party ID | -0.130*** (0.050) | -0.241*** (0.047) | 0.037 (0.053) | -0.465*** (0.054) | -0.367*** (0.059) | -0.287*** (0.059) |
| Female | -0.186** (0.088) | -0.169** (0.082) | -0.063 (0.093) | -0.042 (0.094) | -0.149 (0.104) | -0.113 (0.103) |
| Age | 0.069* (0.039) | 0.097*** (0.037) | -0.051 (0.042) | -0.021 (0.042) | -0.071 (0.047) | -0.146*** (0.046) |
| Income | 0.038** (0.016) | 0.041*** (0.015) | -0.018 (0.017) | -0.004 (0.017) | 0.049*** (0.019) | 0.048** (0.019) |
| Education | 0.235*** (0.054) | 0.184*** (0.050) | 0.078 (0.057) | 0.237*** (0.058) | 0.102 (0.064) | 0.240*** (0.063) |
| Constant | 1.915*** (0.264) | 1.824*** (0.248) | 1.539*** (0.279) | 3.614*** (0.283) | 2.637*** (0.313) | 1.890*** (0.311) |
| N | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 |
| R ² | 0.174 | 0.167 | 0.035 | 0.198 | 0.122 | 0.149 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.164 | 0.157 | 0.023 | 0.188 | 0.111 | 0.138 |

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table A22: Correlates of Political Discussion Partners for Black Respondents

| | Internal | External | Linked Fate | Vote | Campaign | Protest |
|-------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Carceral | 0.144*** (0.054) | -0.018 (0.051) | 0.091 (0.057) | -0.067 (0.058) | 0.109* (0.063) | 0.291*** (0.063) |
| Conventional | 0.179*** (0.052) | 0.052 (0.050) | 0.176*** (0.056) | 0.311*** (0.056) | 0.213*** (0.062) | 0.077 (0.061) |
| Party ID | -0.125** (0.049) | -0.234*** (0.047) | 0.040 (0.052) | -0.452*** (0.053) | -0.353*** (0.058) | -0.285*** (0.057) |
| Female | -0.091 (0.087) | -0.160* (0.083) | 0.002 (0.092) | 0.045 (0.093) | -0.064 (0.102) | -0.020 (0.101) |
| Age | 0.068* (0.039) | 0.095** (0.037) | -0.053 (0.041) | -0.023 (0.042) | -0.076* (0.045) | -0.148*** (0.045) |
| Income | 0.031** (0.016) | 0.037** (0.015) | -0.024 (0.017) | -0.012 (0.017) | 0.036* (0.018) | 0.038** (0.018) |
| Education | 0.205*** (0.053) | 0.182*** (0.051) | 0.052 (0.056) | 0.213*** (0.057) | 0.073 (0.062) | 0.208*** (0.062) |
| Constant | 1.671*** (0.261) | 1.635*** (0.250) | 1.363*** (0.279) | 3.400*** (0.280) | 2.116*** (0.307) | 1.496*** (0.304) |
| N | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 |
| R ² | 0.206 | 0.167 | 0.053 | 0.227 | 0.168 | 0.198 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.196 | 0.156 | 0.041 | 0.217 | 0.157 | 0.188 |

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

S13 Full Regression Models (All Covariates)

Table A23: Correlates of Frequent Political Discussion for White Respondents

| | Internal | External | Linked Fate | Vote | Campaign | Protest |
|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Carceral | 0.070 (0.047) | -0.049 (0.046) | 0.178*** (0.050) | -0.052 (0.050) | 0.081* (0.045) | 0.200*** (0.047) |
| Conventional | 0.262*** (0.047) | -0.024 (0.045) | 0.019 (0.050) | 0.287*** (0.050) | 0.259*** (0.045) | 0.166*** (0.047) |
| Party ID | -0.155*** (0.048) | -0.204*** (0.046) | -0.096* (0.051) | -0.305*** (0.051) | -0.217*** (0.045) | -0.294*** (0.047) |
| Female | -0.320*** (0.078) | -0.117 (0.076) | 0.102 (0.083) | 0.146* (0.083) | -0.020 (0.074) | -0.097 (0.077) |
| Age | 0.008 (0.031) | 0.0002 (0.030) | -0.036 (0.033) | 0.122*** (0.033) | -0.065** (0.029) | -0.175*** (0.030) |
| Income | 0.008 (0.013) | 0.019 (0.013) | -0.001 (0.014) | 0.042*** (0.014) | 0.007 (0.012) | -0.019 (0.013) |
| Education | 0.205*** (0.044) | 0.140*** (0.043) | 0.092** (0.047) | 0.188*** (0.047) | 0.068 (0.042) | 0.066 (0.044) |
| Constant | 1.986*** (0.258) | 2.284*** (0.250) | 1.018*** (0.274) | 2.366*** (0.273) | 1.289*** (0.246) | 2.015*** (0.256) |
| N | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 |
| R ² | 0.156 | 0.069 | 0.044 | 0.191 | 0.133 | 0.172 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.147 | 0.060 | 0.034 | 0.183 | 0.124 | 0.163 |

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table A24: Correlates of Frequent Political Discussion for Black Respondents

| | Internal | External | Linked Fate | Vote | Campaign | Protest |
|-------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Carceral | 0.092* (0.049) | -0.022 (0.048) | 0.154*** (0.054) | -0.056 (0.053) | 0.143** (0.057) | 0.246*** (0.058) |
| Conventional | 0.281*** (0.052) | 0.065 (0.050) | 0.059 (0.057) | 0.348*** (0.056) | 0.324*** (0.060) | 0.174*** (0.061) |
| Party ID | -0.099** (0.049) | -0.232*** (0.047) | 0.048 (0.053) | -0.438*** (0.053) | -0.318*** (0.056) | -0.251*** (0.057) |
| Female | -0.162* (0.085) | -0.167** (0.082) | -0.064 (0.093) | -0.009 (0.092) | -0.135 (0.098) | -0.102 (0.100) |
| Age | 0.056 (0.038) | 0.093** (0.037) | -0.057 (0.042) | -0.033 (0.041) | -0.092** (0.044) | -0.161*** (0.045) |
| Income | 0.035** (0.015) | 0.037** (0.015) | -0.018 (0.017) | -0.007 (0.016) | 0.037** (0.018) | 0.041** (0.018) |
| Education | 0.192*** (0.052) | 0.179*** (0.051) | 0.057 (0.057) | 0.199*** (0.057) | 0.053 (0.061) | 0.199*** (0.061) |
| Constant | 1.454*** (0.268) | 1.608*** (0.259) | 1.424*** (0.292) | 3.229*** (0.289) | 1.665*** (0.311) | 1.247*** (0.314) |
| N | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 |
| R ² | 0.221 | 0.168 | 0.034 | 0.235 | 0.209 | 0.205 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.211 | 0.157 | 0.022 | 0.226 | 0.199 | 0.195 |

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table A25: Correlates of Positive and Negative Carceral Discussion for White Respondents

| | Internal | External | Linked Fate | Vote | Campaign | Protest |
|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Positive | -0.027 (0.106) | 0.235** (0.100) | 0.242** (0.110) | 0.045 (0.112) | 0.227** (0.101) | -0.101 (0.105) |
| Negative | 0.317*** (0.114) | -0.096 (0.106) | 0.049 (0.118) | 0.227* (0.119) | 0.232** (0.108) | 0.444*** (0.113) |
| Party ID | -0.167*** (0.050) | -0.216*** (0.047) | -0.099* (0.052) | -0.332*** (0.052) | -0.243*** (0.047) | -0.278*** (0.049) |
| Female | -0.306*** (0.080) | -0.126* (0.075) | 0.130 (0.083) | 0.143* (0.084) | -0.003 (0.076) | -0.074 (0.080) |
| Age | 0.044 (0.032) | -0.011 (0.030) | -0.039 (0.033) | 0.157*** (0.033) | -0.038 (0.030) | -0.144*** (0.031) |
| Income | 0.013 (0.013) | 0.014 (0.013) | -0.004 (0.014) | 0.046*** (0.014) | 0.008 (0.013) | -0.015 (0.013) |
| Education | 0.216*** (0.046) | 0.141*** (0.043) | 0.100** (0.047) | 0.198*** (0.048) | 0.082* (0.043) | 0.075* (0.045) |
| Constant | 2.553*** (0.255) | 2.082*** (0.239) | 1.292*** (0.265) | 2.780*** (0.268) | 1.826*** (0.243) | 2.526*** (0.253) |
| N | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 |
| R ² | 0.103 | 0.074 | 0.029 | 0.154 | 0.081 | 0.123 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.094 | 0.064 | 0.019 | 0.145 | 0.072 | 0.114 |

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table A26: Correlates of Positive and Negative Carceral Discussion for Black Respondents

| | Internal | External | Linked Fate | Vote | Campaign | Protest |
|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Positive | 0.320** (0.132) | 0.809*** (0.117) | -0.196 (0.137) | 0.381*** (0.141) | 0.764*** (0.151) | 0.503*** (0.152) |
| Negative | 0.166 (0.183) | -0.653*** (0.163) | 0.851*** (0.191) | -0.0002 (0.195) | -0.007 (0.210) | 0.387* (0.211) |
| Party ID | -0.134*** (0.050) | -0.239*** (0.045) | 0.040 (0.053) | -0.467*** (0.054) | -0.359*** (0.058) | -0.281*** (0.058) |
| Female | -0.150* (0.089) | -0.117 (0.079) | -0.077 (0.093) | 0.005 (0.095) | -0.095 (0.102) | -0.074 (0.103) |
| Age | 0.074* (0.040) | 0.077** (0.036) | -0.032 (0.042) | -0.020 (0.043) | -0.078* (0.046) | -0.142*** (0.046) |
| Income | 0.045*** (0.016) | 0.034** (0.014) | -0.009 (0.016) | 0.001 (0.017) | 0.048*** (0.018) | 0.052*** (0.018) |
| Education | 0.223*** (0.054) | 0.178*** (0.048) | 0.066 (0.057) | 0.228*** (0.058) | 0.086 (0.062) | 0.221*** (0.063) |
| Constant | 1.985*** (0.298) | 1.742*** (0.265) | 1.279*** (0.311) | 3.671*** (0.318) | 2.267*** (0.341) | 1.545*** (0.344) |
| N | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 | 560 |
| R ² | 0.156 | 0.235 | 0.041 | 0.188 | 0.162 | 0.165 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.145 | 0.225 | 0.028 | 0.177 | 0.152 | 0.154 |

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

S14 Pooled Interaction Models

Table A27 reports pooled regression models that include interactions between race and discussion measures. These models provide a formal test of whether the associations between political discussion and political correlates differ across Black and white respondents.

For conventional and carceral discussion, there is little evidence of systematic racial heterogeneity. The interaction between carceral discussion and white respondent status is not statistically significant for any outcome. Similarly, the interaction between conventional discussion and white respondent status is not statistically significant for most outcomes, with the exception of a marginal association for external efficacy. Taken together, these results provide little evidence of systematic racial differences in the associations between discussion domains and political attitudes or behaviors. Accordingly, the split-sample models in the main text are presented for ease of interpretation and should be understood as descriptive.

Table A27: Pooled Interaction Models: Discussion Domains

| | Internal | External | Linked | Vote | Camp. | Protest |
|--------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Carceral | 0.095* | -0.016 | 0.145*** | -0.062 | 0.150*** | 0.259*** |
| | (0.049) | (0.048) | (0.053) | (0.053) | (0.052) | (0.053) |
| White | 0.061 | 0.230 | -0.391* | 0.271 | -0.118 | -0.140 |
| | (0.213) | (0.206) | (0.229) | (0.229) | (0.224) | (0.231) |
| Conventional | 0.285*** | 0.080 | 0.045 | 0.336*** | 0.335*** | 0.200*** |
| | (0.052) | (0.050) | (0.056) | (0.056) | (0.055) | (0.056) |
| Party ID | -0.132*** | -0.227*** | -0.023 | -0.355*** | -0.267*** | -0.280*** |
| | (0.034) | (0.033) | (0.036) | (0.036) | (0.036) | (0.037) |
| Carceral×White | -0.029 | -0.025 | 0.029 | 0.011 | -0.061 | -0.056 |
| | (0.068) | (0.066) | (0.073) | (0.073) | (0.071) | (0.074) |
| Conventional×White | -0.027 | -0.121* | -0.008 | -0.036 | -0.084 | -0.046 |
| | (0.069) | (0.067) | (0.074) | (0.074) | (0.072) | (0.075) |
| N | 1,237 | 1,237 | 1,237 | 1,237 | 1,237 | 1,237 |
| R^2 | 0.186 | 0.119 | 0.072 | 0.207 | 0.229 | 0.227 |

In contrast, the pooled models for positive and negative carceral discussion (Table A28) indicate clearer evidence of racial heterogeneity. Several interaction terms are statistically significant and substantively meaningful. Positive carceral discussion is more strongly associated with external efficacy and multiple forms of political participation among Black respondents, while these associations are weaker among white respondents. Negative carceral discussion is associated with lower external efficacy and higher linked fate among Black respondents, whereas these relationships are attenuated among white respondents. By comparison, the association between negative discussion and protest is similar across groups. These results suggest that evaluative orientations toward the carceral state are linked to political attitudes and behaviors in ways that differ across racial groups.

Table A28: Pooled Interaction Models: Positive and Negative Discussion

| | Internal | External | Linked | Vote | Camp. | Protest |
|----------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Positive | 0.326** (0.131) | 0.835*** (0.120) | -0.191 (0.136) | 0.356** (0.139) | 0.791*** (0.137) | 0.554*** (0.141) |
| White | 0.065 (0.198) | -0.203 (0.182) | -0.060 (0.206) | 0.344 (0.211) | -0.268 (0.207) | 0.024 (0.213) |
| Negative | 0.163 (0.182) | -0.665*** (0.167) | 0.822*** (0.190) | 0.049 (0.194) | 0.014 (0.191) | 0.399** (0.196) |
| Party ID | -0.155*** (0.035) | -0.235*** (0.032) | -0.030 (0.037) | -0.385*** (0.037) | -0.302*** (0.037) | -0.287*** (0.038) |
| Positive×White | -0.374** (0.167) | -0.619*** (0.153) | 0.415** (0.174) | -0.250 (0.178) | -0.561*** (0.175) | -0.687*** (0.180) |
| Negative×White | 0.161 (0.213) | 0.579*** (0.195) | -0.734*** (0.222) | 0.127 (0.227) | 0.200 (0.222) | 0.056 (0.229) |
| N | 1,237 | 1,237 | 1,237 | 1,237 | 1,237 | 1,237 |
| R^2 | 0.128 | 0.154 | 0.067 | 0.165 | 0.181 | 0.183 |

S15 Combined Discussion Measure Across Domains

A related question is whether observed differences across domains reflect variation in overall propensity to talk rather than domain-specific patterns of discussion. If differences were driven by general talkativeness, then a measure capturing whether respondents discuss politics in any domain should still show a gap between groups.

To assess this possibility, I construct a combined measure that codes respondents as having discussed politics if they report discussing either conventional political topics or the carceral state in the past year. This measure captures whether respondents engaged in political discussion in at least one domain, rather than the frequency or intensity of discussion.

Table A29 reports weighted means for Black and white respondents using this measure. When both domains are considered together, the Black–white gap in political discussion narrows substantially—from 7 percentage points in conventional discussion to approximately 2 percentage points—and is not statistically distinguishable from zero. This pattern reflects the high prevalence of discussion in at least one domain for both groups. At the same time, it obscures meaningful differences in where political discussion occurs: Black respondents are more engaged in carceral discussion, while white respondents are more engaged in conventional political discussion. The combined measure therefore compresses variation across domains and masks domain-specific patterns of political engagement.

Table A29: Combined Political Discussion Across Domains

| | Black | White |
|--------------------------------|-------|-------------------|
| Conventional (Binary) | 0.84 | 0.92 ^a |
| Carceral (Binary) | 0.78 | 0.74 ^b |
| Any Discussion (Either Domain) | 0.91 | 0.94 |

Notes: Entries are weighted means. Any discussion is coded as 1 if respondents report discussing either conventional or carceral topics in the past year. Differences between Black and white respondents are statistically significant for conventional discussion ($p < 0.05$), marginally significant for carceral discussion ($p < 0.10$), and not statistically significant for the combined measure (two-tailed weighted t-tests). *a* indicates $p < 0.05$; *b* indicates $p < 0.10$.

S16 Ethical Considerations

Survey participants were recruited from Prolific, a platform for opt-in survey research. Before the survey, I used the following text to inform participants about the research study and ask for their voluntary and informed consent: “I agree to participate in a research study conducted by researchers from REDACTED. Findings from this study may be reported in scholarly journals, at academic seminars, and at research association meetings. The data will be stored at a secured location and retained indefinitely. No identifying information about me will be made public and any views I express will be kept completely confidential. My participation is voluntary. I am free to stop the survey at any time. If I have questions, I can contact REDACTED. By checking the box below I understand my rights and give my consent to participate in the survey. If I choose not to participate, the survey will end.” Participants were compensated at \$16.88/hour (above the average state minimum of \$10.69 in 2024). The study did not intervene in political processes or harm participants and presented minimal risks to participants.