

# Measuring Carceral Political Discussion and Its Political Consequences\*

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## Abstract

The traditional measure of political discussion in American politics represents one domain of political topics (government and elections). This domain is rooted in the liberal-democratic “first face” of the state and neglects the more controlling “second face” of the state that operates through coercion and surveillance (Soss and Weaver 2017). This article addresses this gap by exploring the role of *carceral political discussion* (i.e., discussion about policing and the criminal justice system). How does participation in liberal-democratic and carceral political discussion vary by race? Do liberal-democratic and carceral political discussion differently impact outcomes like political efficacy and engagement? In other words, what comprises relevant and important political discussion and for whom? The paper explores these questions with data from two original national surveys. **Study 1** shows that Black Americans are more likely to engage in carceral political discussion than whites and Latinos, but similarly likely to engage in liberal-democratic political discussion. **Study 2** shows that carceral political discussion has explanatory power on political attitudes and behaviors over and above measures of liberal-democratic political discussion. This study also shows that the political correlates of liberal-democratic and carceral discussion differ for white and Black Americans. Taken together, these studies demonstrate the importance of understanding the multiple ways in which different groups of citizens talk about the state and government.

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# 1 Introduction

Political discussion between citizens is central to research in political behavior. Decades of research demonstrate the impact of political discussion on important political behaviors and attitudes, including political knowledge (Eveland 2004; Eveland and Thomson 2006; Eveland and Hively 2009), candidate preferences (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004), policy positions (Sinclair 2012), political and civic engagement (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Sokhey and McClurg 2012; Klobstad 2007; Klobstad 2010; Searing et al. 2007), and tolerance and civic mindedness (Mutz 2006; Pattie and Johnston 2008).

In these and other survey-based studies of political discussion, respondents are usually asked if and with whom they discuss “politics,” “political matters,” or “government or elections.” Prominent examples include the American National Election Studies (ANES), which asks, “Do you ever discuss *politics* with your family or friends?” (ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File, 1948–2020, italics added), and Diana Mutz’s seminal study of cross-cutting political discourse, which asked, “From time to time, people discuss *government, elections, and politics* with other people. We’d like to know the first names or just the initials of people you talk with about these matters.” (Mutz 2002; Mutz 2006, italics added).<sup>1</sup>

This approach, however, is fundamentally limited in its understanding of political discussion. Specifically, these questions focus on what Soss and Weaver (2017) describe as the liberal-democratic or “first face” of the state—i.e., on a view of politics that focuses on electoral-representative processes, citizen opinion and participation, and the rules, people, and parties in national government. These questions, in other words, do not do a good job of capturing discussions of the carceral or “second face” of the state that focuses on surveillance, criminalization, and punishment (Soss and Weaver 2017), and that exercises power through the police and criminal justice institutions (e.g., Burch 2013; Lerman and Weaver 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> Some studies of political discussion ask about discussions of “important matters,” including the General Social Survey (GSS). Research suggests that “important matters” prompts generate similar responses to explicitly political prompts (Klobstad, McClurg, and Rolfe 2009).

This paper thus departs from previous research by focusing on what I term, *carceral political discussion*—i.e., informal discussions between citizens about policing and the criminal justice system. Specifically, this paper compares the prevalence and consequences of carceral political discussion and conventional (i.e., liberal-democratic) forms of political discussion across different racial groups.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on research on the liberal-democratic and carceral arms of the state, and on how different racial groups experience these faces of government, I argue that we have reasons to anticipate variation in these two domains of political discussion. First, contact with the criminal justice system is racially disparate and highest among Black Americans (Pettit and Western 2004; Goel, Rao, and Shroff 2016; Baumgartner, Epp, and Shoub 2018; Pierson et al. 2020). These disparities are salient even in the absence of direct contact with the criminal justice system, due in part to the spread of images of police violence against Black Americans and the response of movements like Black Lives Matter. Consequently, Black Americans may be more likely to engage in carceral political discussion than whites and possibly Latinos, thus reversing established patterns of whites talking more about politics than other racial groups (Leighley and Matsubayashi 2009; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 2003; Wong et al. 2011; Carlson, Abrajano, and Bedolla 2019).

Second, carceral political discussion may have important consequences for political attitudes and behaviors, even when we account for engagement in conventional political discussion. For instance, research shows that contact with the criminal justice system can depress political participation (White 2019; White 2022; Weaver and Lerman 2010; Hasel-swerdt 2009; Burch 2011; McDonough, Enamorado, and Mendelberg 2022). Even without direct contact, talking and knowing about the carceral state may yield a view of government

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<sup>2</sup> One notable exception to this focus on discussion about the “first face” of the state are Weaver, Prowse, and Piston (2020), who examine conversations between black residents of highly policed areas and find patterns of “collective autonomy”—i.e., of retreating from state institutions in the short term but building community power in the long term. This paper builds on this research by developing a survey-based measure of “carceral political discussion” and comparing its prevalence and impact across different racial groups.

as unfair and coercive and thus depress political efficacy and engagement. This impact may be particularly likely among Black Americans, for whom the exercise of carceral power is most repressive, and departs from the assumption that more political discussion is better and capable of generating tolerance, political knowledge, and political and civic engagement (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Sokhey and McClurg 2012; Klofstad 2007; Searing et al. 2007).

However, there are also reasons to expect that carceral discussion could lead to political mobilization. These expectations build on research that attributes a mobilizing effect to *proximal* carceral contact (i.e., contact with the criminal justice system via friends or family) and *community* carceral contact (i.e., contact via community incidents, word of mouth, or media), whereby individuals come to understand the carceral state as unjust and are mobilized to action (Lee, Porter, and Comfort 2014; Walker and García-Castañón 2017; Walker 2020; Anoll and Israel-Trummel 2019; Morris and Shoub 2024). Like proximal and community contact, carceral political discussion could provide opportunities for the identification of perceived injustices and catalyze political engagement.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I test these varied expectations with data from two original, nationally representative surveys in the United States. My first analysis focuses on differences in carceral and liberal-democratic political discussion across the three largest racial groups in the United States: whites, Blacks, and Latinos. Drawing on a survey of roughly 1,200 respondents, I find that Black Americans are indeed more likely to engage in carceral political discussion than whites and Latinos, but similarly likely to engage in liberal-democratic (i.e., conventional) forms of political discussion. This finding reverses established patterns of whites talking more about politics and suggests that racial group membership moderates engagement in different domains of political discussion.

Next, I draw on survey data from around 1,000 white and Black Americans to show that

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<sup>3</sup> This expectation makes no assumption about the direction or goal of mobilization: carceral political discussion could generate support for less punitive criminal justice policies or could yield a reactionary or conservative response (e.g., Engelhardt 2021; Drakulich and Denver 2022).

carceral discussion has explanatory power on political outcomes like political efficacy, voting, and protest activity, even when we account for participation in liberal-democratic political discussion. I show, for instance, that carceral political discussion positively correlates with internal political efficacy for both white and Black Americans. I also find racial variation in the correlates of carceral political discussion. For example, carceral political discussion depresses external efficacy and increases feelings of linked fate among Black but not white Americans. Moreover, carceral discussion increases the perceived importance of protesting for both white and Black Americans, but only increases the perceived importance of voting for whites. Together, these results suggest that racial group membership also moderates the attitudinal and behavioral *consequences* of carceral political discussion.

Overall, this paper suggests that scholars should expand their conception of political discussion to include the carceral or “second face” of the state. The American state is broader than liberal-democratic processes, and yet these processes are the focus of existing measures of political discussion in American politics. This paper aims to show that understanding the political experiences of citizens—particularly those of racial minorities—requires that we expand our concepts of political discussion to get at the multiple ways in which different citizens talk about the state and government.

## **2 Political Discussion and the Carceral 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).

This empirical research tradition defines political discussion as “spontaneous, unstructured face-to-face conversation between citizens that deals with political matters” (Conover and Miller 2018). Some survey-based measures of this concept ask if and with whom respondents discuss “politics” or “political matters.” For instance, the American National Election Studies (ANES) includes the question, “Do you ever discuss politics with your family or friends?” Other measures focus on a variant of “government or elections.” For example, Mutz’s study of cross-cutting political discourse asked, “From time to time, people discuss government, elections, and politics with other people. We’d like to know the first names or just the initials of people you talk with about these matters” (Mutz 2002; Mutz 2006).<sup>4</sup>

Alongside these general measures, scholars have also asked more targeted questions about political discussion. For instance, Huckfeldt and Sprague’s South Bend study asked, “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 scholars have asked 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 liberal-democratic or “first face” of the state that operates through elections and national branches of government. These measures, in other words, do not do a good job of capturing discussions about the carceral or “second face” of the state that exercises social control through coercion, repression, and violence (Soss and Weaver 2017). This face of the state operates through police and criminal justice institutions and, as many have shown, is important for understanding the political experiences of marginalized communities of color, who most often encounter the government through its “second face”—

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the measurement of political discussion, see Klofstad, McClurg, and Rolfe (2009).

i.e., through police, jails, courts, bail offices, parole agencies, and prisons (Roberts 2004; Western 2006; Lerman and Weaver 2014).

How might incorporating the carceral state into analyses of political discussion impact our understanding of discussion and its consequences? Here, I expect my focus on the carceral state to introduce at least two important differences. First, I expect that focusing on carceral discussion will change the assumed patterns of political discussion across racial groups. Most scholarship suggests that whites talk more about politics and have larger political discussion networks than other racial groups (Leighley and Matsubayashi 2009; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 2003; Wong et al. 2011; Carlson, Abrajano, and Bedolla 2019). However, contact with the criminal justice system is highest among Black Americans, as evidenced by racial disparities in outcomes like incarceration (Pettit and Western 2004), police killings (Streeter 2019), and traffic stops (Baumgartner, Epp, and Shoub 2018). Moreover, due to the spread of images of police violence against Black Americans and movements like Black Lives Matter, these disparities are apparent even in the absence of direct carceral contact. Consequently, I hypothesize that Black Americans will be more likely to engage in carceral discussion than whites and possibly Latinos (**H1**), thus reversing established patterns of whites talking about politics more than other racial groups.

Second, I expect that carceral political discussion will have explanatory power on a variety of important political attitudes and behaviors. For example, I hypothesize that the simple act of engaging in face-to-face deliberation could lead citizens to feel more competent in their ability to interpret political information, make informed choices, and develop views worth listening to (Gastil et al. 2008; Fishkin et al. 2024). Thus, I expect that both carceral and liberal-democratic discussion will increase feelings of internal political efficacy (**H2**), or the belief that one is well-qualified to participate in politics (Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991).

Moreover, I expect that some political correlates of carceral discussion will vary by racial group membership. For instance, because the carceral arm of the state is more salient and punitive for Black Americans, I expect that talking and gaining expertise about the re-

pressive arm of the state is more likely to yield a view of government as unfair and coercive for this group of respondents. Consequently, I hypothesize that carceral discussion will increase feelings of linked fate (**H3**) and reduce feelings of external efficacy (**H4**) among Black Americans. Moreover, I expect carceral discussion to reduce the perceived importance of voting (**H5a**) for Black Americans. This hypothesis builds on Lerman and Weaver’s (2014) theory of “custodial citizenship,” which describes how experiences with criminal justice authorities can discourage participation by creating the perception that the state is unresponsive.

However, I also expect carceral political discussion to mobilize nonvoting political activities among Black Americans. This expectation builds on research that attributes a mobilizing effect to proximal carceral contact (via friends or family) and community carceral contact (via community incidents, word of mouth, and media), whereby contact catalyzes participation by exposing individuals to injustice (Lee, Porter, and Comfort 2014; Walker 2020; Walker and García-Castañón 2017; Anoll and Israel-Trummel 2019; Morris and Shoub 2024). According to this research, indirect contact is more likely to mobilize nonvoting activities than voting because contact yields a view of government as unjust toward marginalized voters. Nonvoting activities like protesting and campaigning, on the other hand, are first steps to getting issues on the agenda and offer a more immediate outlet for frustrations (Lee, Porter, and Comfort 2014; Walker 2020; Gillion 2013). Like proximal and community contact, I expect carceral discussion to provide opportunities for the identification of injustices and hypothesize that carceral discussion will mobilize nonvoting activities like campaigning for political candidates (**H5b**) and protesting (**H5c**) among Black Americans.

For white Americans, on the other hand, I expect that talking about the carceral state is less likely to yield a view of government as unfair and coercive (at least toward white Americans). I thus expect carceral political discussion to have no effect on linked fate (**H6**) or external efficacy (**H7**). I also expect the behavioral correlates of carceral political discussion to resemble the correlates of conventional (i.e., liberal-democratic) political discussion, which tends to correlate with political engagement (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Sokhey and



McClurg 2012; Klofstad 2007; Klofstad 2010; Searing et al. 2007; Eveland and Hively 2009). As such, I expect carceral political discussion to positively correlate with voting (**H8a**), campaigning (**H8b**), and protesting (**H8c**) among white Americans. Importantly, these expectations make no assumptions about the direction of mobilization: carceral discussion could generate support for less punitive criminal justice policies but could also prompt a reactionary response (Engelhardt 2021; Drakulich and Denver 2022).

Together, these hypotheses have important implications for understanding who participates in political discussion and how these discussions matter for political outcomes. First, until recently, mainstream research on American politics has largely ignored the carceral or “second face” of the state (Soss and Weaver 2017). This imbalance is being corrected by a growing literature on how the carceral state impacts political participation (e.g., Burch 2011; White 2019; Lerman and Weaver 2014), political trust (Weaver and Lerman 2010), candidate preferences (Burch 2012), political knowledge (Cohen and Luttig 2020), and political socialization (Anoll, Engelhardt, and Israel-Trummel 2022). However, the carceral state has remained largely absent from the study of political discussion (cf. Weaver, Prowse, and Piston 2020). In countering this one-sided emphasis, this paper shows that paying attention to the carceral state stands to meaningfully shift our expectations about political discussion and its political consequences.

Second, my hypotheses add to a recent literature on how guiding concepts in the study of American politics may operate differently for racial and ethnic minorities. In particular, this literature shows how concepts like political knowledge (Cohen and Luttig 2020), political efficacy (Phoenix and Chan 2022), political trust (Chudy and Engelhardt 2023), norms of political participation (Anoll 2018), punitive attitudes (Jefferson 2023), and ideological identification (Jefferson 2024) can look and matter differently for racial minorities and whites. Rather than generalizing patterns of carceral discussion among whites to racial minorities, this paper explicitly anticipates and examines racial variation in this domain of political discussion. Taken together, then, my hypotheses suggest that if we are to more completely

understand political discussion in American politics, we need to not only (a) include measures that get at the multiple ways in which citizens talk about government, but also (b) consider how and why distinct measures might differently impact different racial groups.

### 3 Racial Variation in Carceral & Liberal-Democratic Discussion

I have argued that focusing on carceral political discussion will reverse the assumed pattern of whites talking more about politics because of the fundamental differences in how Black Americans experience the carceral state. To test this expectation, I begin by examining patterns of engagement in carceral and liberal-democratic political discussion across the three largest racial groups in the United States: whites, Blacks, and Latinos.

Drawing from existing measures of political discussion, I adapted a series of survey questions to measure different dimensions of carceral and liberal-democratic political discussion. These measures are a binary measure of discussion in the past year (coded 0 or 1),<sup>5</sup> a measure of frequency of discussion in the past year (coded from 1 to 5),<sup>6</sup> and a measure of number of discussion partners in the past year (coded from 1 to 5).<sup>7</sup>

I fielded these questions to a nationally diverse sample of 1,205 American adults in February 2024 on the online survey platform, Prolific. In addition to quota sampling on the front-end, I built and applied a survey weight using the American Community Survey to ensure representativeness on the back-end. I constructed this weight using population

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<sup>5</sup> For the binary measure, I asked: “During the past year, did you talk with anyone face-to-face, on the phone, by email, or in any other way about [policing or the criminal justice system/government or elections] or did you not do this with anyone during the past year?” Responses were coded 0 (No) or 1 (Yes).

<sup>6</sup> For the frequency measure, I asked: “During the past year, how often did you discuss [policing or the criminal justice system/government or elections]?” Responses were coded 1 (Never), 2 (Rarely), 3 (Sometimes), 4 (Often), or 5 (Very Often).

<sup>7</sup> For the number of discussion partners measure, I asked: “With roughly how many different people did you talk about [policing or the criminal justice system/government or elections] during the past year?” Responses were coded 1 (Zero), 2 (1-2), 3 (3-5), 4 (6-9), or 5 (10 or more).

estimates on dimensions of gender, age, education, income, and political affiliation. Because of some missing cases on weight dimensions, my final sample size is 1,172.

Turning first to the racial group differences in carceral political discussion, Table 1 reports the weighted means for the three measures of carceral political discussion for whites, Blacks, and Latinos. The significant differences were determined through a two-tailed t-test between Blacks and either whites or Latinos. Significant differences are indicated with an *a* in columns 2 and 3. There were no significant differences between whites and Latinos.<sup>8</sup>

Table 1: Racial Variation in Carceral Political Discussion

	Black	White	Latino
Carceral Discussion (Binary)	0.71	0.63 <sup>a</sup>	0.66
Carceral Discussion (Frequency)	2.77	2.35 <sup>a</sup>	2.33 <sup>a</sup>
Carceral Discussion (Count)	2.46	2.24 <sup>a</sup>	2.20 <sup>a</sup>
N	389	490	292

Notes: Significant differences ( $p < 0.01$ ) determined through a two-tailed t-test between Black and either whites or Latinos are indicated with an *a* in the second and third columns.

In line with **Hypothesis 1**, this table shows that Black Americans are significantly more likely to engage in carceral political discussion than whites and Latinos. Starting with the binary measure, Table 1 shows that Black respondents are (8%,  $p < 0.01$ ) more likely to have participated in a discussion about the carceral state in the past year than white

<sup>8</sup> I present means in Tables 1 and 2 because including demographic controls when interpreting racial coefficients arguably essentializes race and misses the constitutive elements that make race what it is (King and Zeng 2006; Sen and Wasow 2016). Tables A1 and A2 in the appendix also present these estimates in a regression model that includes gender, age, education, income, and political affiliation. The results are substantively and statistically similar to the results in Tables 1 and 2. In addition, Tables A3 and A4 present the results from a pilot survey conducted in October 2023 on a different survey platform (Lucid). These results are also similar to the results presented in the main paper.

respondents.<sup>9</sup> Turning to the frequency of discussion measure, the table shows that the differences in the frequency of discussion between Blacks and whites or Latinos are 0.4 ( $p < 0.01$ ) and 0.44 ( $p < 0.01$ ), respectively. These differences represent 0.4 and 0.42 standard deviation changes in the frequency measure. Finally, the differences in the number of discussion partners between Blacks and whites or Latinos are 0.22 ( $p < 0.01$ ) and 0.26 ( $p < 0.01$ ). These differences represent 0.21 and 0.25 standard deviation changes in the number of discussion partners measure. Together, these results indicate that Black Americans are, as expected, more likely to engage in political discussion about the carceral state than white and Latinos.

Turning next to liberal-democratic political discussion, Table 2 reports the weighted means for each measure of political discussion for the three racial groups. Significant differences were determined using a two-tailed t-test between Blacks and either whites or Latinos. These differences are indicated with an *a* in Columns 2 and 3. Significant differences between whites and Latinos are indicated with a *b* in Column 3. This table shows that unlike carceral political discussion, Black Americans are similarly likely to engage in liberal-democratic political discussion than white Americans for any measure of political discussion. Black respondents do engage in liberal-democratic political discussion more frequently (0.21,  $p < 0.01$ ) and with more discussion partners (0.26,  $p < 0.01$ ) than Latino respondents, but the difference between Blacks and Latinos for the binary measure of political discussion is negligible.

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<sup>9</sup> I am completing three significance t-tests per row which may require a Bonferroni correction. This correction divides the conventional significance level ( $p < 0.05$ ) by the number of tests. In this case, the correction produces a more demanding test of significance ( $p < 0.0167$ ). All significant results in Table 1 and 2 also hold at this more conservative significance level.

Table 2: Racial Variation in Liberal-Democratic Political Discussion

	Black	White	Latino
Political Discussion (Binary)	0.80	0.83	0.79
Political Discussion (Frequency)	3.05	2.96	2.84 <sup>a</sup>
Political Discussion (Count)	2.82	2.73	2.56 <sup>ab</sup>
N	389	490	292

Notes: Significant differences ( $p < 0.01$ ) determined through a two-tailed t-test between Black and either whites or Latinos are indicated with an *a* in the second and third columns. Significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between whites and Latinos are indicated with a *b* in the third column if present.

Overall, these results suggest that Americans of different racial groups engage in carceral and liberal-democratic political discussion somewhat differently. Rather than a racially uniform pattern of political discussion, racial group membership appears to moderate engagement in different domains of political discussion. Specifically, given that the carceral arm of the state is more pervasive and repressive for Black Americans, I hypothesized that Black Americans would be more likely to talk about policing and criminal justice (**H1**). The results support this hypothesis: Black Americans are indeed more likely than both whites and Latinos to engage in political discussion about the carceral state. Moreover, although this analysis is limited to conversations about “policing and criminal justice,” we might expect this racial gap to be larger if measuring discussion about explicitly punitive experiences of the carceral state, such as harassment, discrimination, and surveillance.

This first section of findings focuses on the measurement of carceral and liberal-democratic political discussion and on variation in discussion participation by racial group membership. In the next section, I examine the political consequences of these two kinds of political discussion for white and Black Americans.

## 4 Political Correlates of Carceral & Liberal-Democratic Discussion

I next analyze the political correlates of these two types of political discussion. Like liberal-democratic political discussion, I expect that carceral political discussion will have explanatory power on a variety of political attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, to the extent that talking about the carceral state yields a different perspective on the state and government for different racial groups, I expect to find important racial differences in the political correlates of carceral political discussion.

To examine the political correlates of carceral and liberal-democratic political discussion, I focus on six variables modeled as dependent variables: (1) internal political efficacy, or the belief that one is well-qualified to participate in politics (Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991);<sup>10</sup> (2) external political efficacy, or the belief that leaders in government care about “people like me” (Balch 1974);<sup>11</sup> (3) sense of linked fate, or the belief that one’s own life chances depend heavily on the status and fortunes of your racial group as a whole (Dawson 1994);<sup>12</sup> and the perceived importance of (4) voting, (5) campaigning for a political candidate, and (6) attending a protest.<sup>13</sup>

To measure these outcomes and the political discussion measures, I use survey data

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<sup>10</sup> To measure internal efficacy, I asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following standard statement: “I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics.” Responses were coded on a 1-5 scale from “Strongly disagree” (1) to “Strongly agree” (5).

<sup>11</sup> To measure external efficacy, I asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following standard statement: “The leaders in government care very little about people like me.” Responses were coded on a 1-5 scale from “Strongly agree” (1) to “Strongly disagree” (5).

<sup>12</sup> Although 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). To measure linked fate, I asked the two standard questions: Do you think what happens to [R’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 [R’s race/ethnicity] people in this country will affect you: A lot, some, not very much. Responses were coded 0 (No), 1 (Not very much), 2 (Some), or 3 (A lot).

<sup>13</sup> To measure these political engagement 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.

collected from 1,076 white and Black adults on Prolific in February 2024. Table 3 presents the results from multivariate models with these data for Black respondents. These models focus on the binary and frequency measures of carceral and liberal-democratic political discussion.<sup>14</sup> Table 4 presents the same models for white respondents. Additional variables are not shown for space considerations but include income, age, education, and gender.

Turning first to **Hypothesis 2**, I argued that the act of face-to-face deliberation could increase feelings of internal political efficacy, or the belief that one is well-qualified to participate in politics. In line with this hypothesis, Tables 3 and 4 show that like liberal-democratic political discussion, the binary and frequency measures of carceral political discussion strongly correlate with feelings of internal political efficacy for both Black ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and white respondents ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

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Responses were coded on a 1-5 scale from “Not at all important” (1) to “Extremely important” (5).

<sup>14</sup> I focus on the binary and frequency measures for space considerations. Tables A5 and A6 present multivariate models with the number of discussion partners measure of carceral and liberal-democratic discussion. The results are substantively and statistically similar to the results in the main paper.

Table 3: Carceral and Political Talk for Black Americans

	Int. Efficacy	Ext. Efficacy	Linked Fate	Vote	Campaign	Protest
Carceral (Binary)	0.395*** (0.125)	-0.474*** (0.120)	0.374*** (0.127)	0.199 (0.132)	0.104 (0.152)	0.382** (0.149)
Lib-Dem (Binary)	0.587*** (0.153)	-0.091 (0.147)	0.220 (0.155)	0.544*** (0.161)	0.327* (0.186)	0.456** (0.183)
Party ID	-0.057 (0.055)	-0.083 (0.053)	0.034 (0.055)	-0.380*** (0.058)	-0.378*** (0.066)	-0.271*** (0.065)
Constant	1.709*** (0.299)	2.492*** (0.287)	1.620*** (0.302)	3.057*** (0.314)	2.045*** (0.362)	1.546*** (0.356)
N	478	478	478	477	477	478
R <sup>2</sup>	0.172	0.068	0.050	0.203	0.147	0.167
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.160	0.054	0.035	0.191	0.134	0.155
Carceral (Freq)	0.154*** (0.052)	-0.155*** (0.054)	0.153*** (0.056)	0.035 (0.057)	0.137** (0.065)	0.353*** (0.063)
Lib-Dem (Freq)	0.358*** (0.053)	-0.046 (0.055)	0.109* (0.057)	0.349*** (0.057)	0.293*** (0.066)	0.163** (0.064)
Party ID	-0.009 (0.051)	-0.097* (0.053)	0.056 (0.055)	-0.344*** (0.056)	-0.329*** (0.064)	-0.219*** (0.062)
Constant	1.094*** (0.288)	2.573*** (0.297)	1.388*** (0.309)	2.595*** (0.311)	1.197*** (0.355)	0.799** (0.346)
N	478	478	478	477	477	478
R <sup>2</sup>	0.277	0.058	0.065	0.265	0.228	0.260
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.266	0.044	0.051	0.254	0.216	0.249

\*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Suppressed coefficients are income, age, education, and gender.



Turning next to the anticipated racial variation in the correlates of carceral discussion, I argued that talking about the carceral state may yield a view of government as unfair and coercive among Black Americans. As a result, I hypothesized that carceral discussion would increase feelings of linked fate (**H3**), reduce feelings of external efficacy (**H4**), and reduce the perceived importance of voting (**H5a**) among Black Americans. In line with **H3**, Table 3 shows that the binary and frequency measures of carceral discussion are positively associated with linked fate ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) for Black respondents. This relationship is considerably stronger than the impact of liberal-democratic political discussion on linked fate. In line with **H4**, Table 3 shows that both carceral discussion measures negatively correlate with external efficacy ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) for Black Americans. This relationship also differs from liberal-democratic discussion, which does not meaningfully correlate with external efficacy for Black respondents. Finally, the table provides mixed support for **H5a**: although carceral discussion does not negatively impact voting, the relationships between the carceral discussion measures and voting are not statistically significant. This finding suggests that carceral discussion at least does not increase the perceived importance of voting for Black respondents. This relationship, too, differs from liberal-democratic discussion: both the binary and frequency liberal-democratic measures positively correlate with voting ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Building on research on the mobilizing effects of indirect carceral contact, I also argued that carceral discussion should mobilize nonvoting activities like campaigning for political candidates (**H5b**) and protesting (**H5c**) among Black Americans. Table 3 provides suggestive support for **H5b**: the binary measure of carceral discussion substantively but not significantly increases the perceived importance of campaigning and the frequency measure positively correlates with this outcome ( $p < 0.05$ ). Table 3 also provides support for **H5c**: both measures of carceral discussion positively and strongly correlate with the perceived importance of protesting for Black Americans ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Turning now to white Americans (Table 4), I expected that talking about the carceral state is less likely to yield a view of government as unfair and coercive. As such, I hypothe-

Table 4: Carceral and Political Talk for White Americans

	Int. Efficacy	Ext. Efficacy	Linked Fate	Vote	Campaign	Protest
Carceral (Binary)	0.331*** (0.098)	-0.033 (0.098)	0.057 (0.106)	0.221** (0.105)	0.163* (0.095)	0.240*** (0.092)
Lib-Dem (Binary)	0.644*** (0.160)	-0.034 (0.159)	-0.032 (0.171)	0.424** (0.171)	0.069 (0.154)	0.014 (0.149)
Party ID	-0.065 (0.053)	-0.158*** (0.053)	-0.072 (0.057)	-0.315*** (0.057)	-0.164*** (0.052)	-0.179*** (0.050)
Constant	1.954*** (0.268)	2.029*** (0.266)	1.432*** (0.287)	2.574*** (0.287)	1.809*** (0.258)	1.947*** (0.250)
N	579	579	579	579	579	579
R <sup>2</sup>	0.136	0.041	0.014	0.169	0.036	0.079
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.125	0.029	0.002	0.158	0.024	0.067
Carceral (Freq)	0.108** (0.050)	0.009 (0.052)	0.125** (0.056)	0.005 (0.055)	0.186*** (0.049)	0.207*** (0.048)
Lib-Dem (Freq)	0.376*** (0.050)	-0.029 (0.053)	-0.002 (0.056)	0.307*** (0.055)	0.164*** (0.049)	0.076 (0.048)
Party ID	-0.052 (0.051)	-0.159*** (0.053)	-0.073 (0.057)	-0.298*** (0.056)	-0.151*** (0.049)	-0.179*** (0.049)
Constant	1.470*** (0.255)	2.031*** (0.268)	1.167*** (0.287)	2.254*** (0.282)	1.124*** (0.249)	1.470*** (0.245)
N	579	579	579	579	579	579
R <sup>2</sup>	0.225	0.041	0.025	0.207	0.116	0.128
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.216	0.029	0.014	0.198	0.105	0.117

\*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Suppressed coefficients are income, age, education, and gender.

sized that carceral discussion would have no effect on feelings of linked fate (**H6**) or external efficacy (**H7**) for white respondents. Table 4 provides partial support for **H6**: the binary carceral discussion measure has no impact on linked fate, although the frequency measure positively correlates with this outcome ( $p < 0.05$ ). In line with **H7**, the binary and frequency carceral discussion measures have no impact on external efficacy for white respondents.

I also hypothesized that carceral discussion would correlate with voting (**H8a**), campaigning (**H8b**), and protesting (**H8c**) for white Americans. In line with these hypotheses, Table 4 shows that the binary measure of carceral discussion correlates with the perceived importance of voting ( $p < 0.05$ ), campaigning ( $p < 0.1$ ), and protesting ( $p < 0.01$ ). Moreover, the frequency measure of carceral discussion correlates with campaigning ( $p < 0.01$ ) and protesting ( $p < 0.01$ ). Interestingly, liberal-democratic political discussion correlates with voting but not protesting for white Americans, which suggests that liberal-democratic and carceral discussion might motivate political behavior through different channels.

Overall, these results suggest that carceral political discussion has explanatory power on political attitudes and behaviors, and that the correlates of these two forms of political discussion are in some cases distinct. Moreover, the results show that carceral discussion has distinct relationships with political outcomes for white and Black Americans. Black Americans who engage in carceral political discussion have increased feelings of linked fate and internal efficacy (i.e., believing that one is well-qualified to participate in politics), but decreased feelings of external efficacy (i.e., believing that leaders in government care about “people like me”). Black Americans who engage in carceral political discussion also appear to assign more importance to campaigning and protesting. White Americans who engage in carceral political discussion, on the other hand, do not differ from other whites in their beliefs about the efficacy of government; instead, carceral discussion for whites correlates with voting, campaigning, and protesting. Taken together, these findings suggest that carceral discussion has the potential to shape views about government, sense of identity, and levels of political engagement, and that these impacts vary meaningfully by race.

## 4 Conclusion

What is political discussion? Mainstream research in American politics defines political discussion as “conversation between citizens that deals with political matters” (Conover and Miller 2018). Empirically, this concept has been measured by asking respondents if and with whom they discuss topics like politics or government and elections. These measures offer a valuable foundation for analyses of political outcomes and illuminate many aspects of what Soss and Weaver (2017) describe as the liberal-democratic “first face” of the state. However, this research does not capture political discussion about the carceral “second face” of the state that operates through policing and criminal justice institutions.

In this paper, I have argued that we should broaden our conception of what political discussion is to include the coercive side of the state. By adapting the standard political discussion measures to include policing and the criminal justice system, this paper shows, first, that the assumed group differences in political discussion are reversed for carceral discussion: Black Americans are consistently more likely than whites and Latinos to engage carceral political discussion. By contrast, Black Americans are no more likely to engage in liberal-democratic political discussion. As such, focusing only on the conventional measure of political discussion would lead to an incorrect conclusion about political discussion among Black Americans. Second, this paper shows that carceral discussion has explanatory power on political outcomes and that these relationships are distinct for Black and white Americans. Among Black Americans, carceral discussion correlates with linked fate, reduced external efficacy, and assigning importance to campaigning and protesting. Among white Americans, carceral discussion has no impact on linked fate or external efficacy, but positively correlates with voting, campaigning, and protesting.

These findings have important implications for understanding who participates in political discussion and how these discussions matter for political outcomes. First, these findings join research on the impact of the carceral state on outcomes from political participation (White 2019; Burch 2011) to political knowledge (Cohen and Luttig 2020). Specifically, this

study shows that the American carceral state also meaningfully shapes the attitudinal and behavioral correlates of political discussion. Second, these findings extend research on the limits of using white Americans to generalize about concepts like political knowledge (Cohen and Luttig 2020), political efficacy (Phoenix and Chan 2022), political trust (Chudy and Engelhardt 2023), ideological identification (Jefferson 2024), and norms of political participation (Anoll 2018). Building on this research, this paper finds consistent racial variation in the prevalence and impact of carceral discussion, and re-emphasizes the importance of considering how political behavior is shaped by race in American politics.

These findings thus offer several contributions to research on political discussion, the carceral state, and racial and ethnic politics. However, there are important limitations that suggest avenues for future work. First, my analysis focuses on one feature of the carceral state: policing and criminal justice institutions. However, the American carceral state also includes immigration enforcement (Harris, Walker, and Eckhouse 2020) and works alongside welfare agencies to enforce social control in marginalized communities (Roberts 2014; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Gustafson 2011; Wacquant 2009). Focusing on these aspects of the carceral state may illuminate additional group-based differences in political discussion. For instance, we might expect discussion about immigration enforcement to be more prevalent and linked to efficacy, linked fate, and engagement among Latinos (Walker, Roman, and Barreto 2020; Vargas, Sanchez, and Valdez 2017; Maltby et al. 2020). We might also expect discussion about punitive experiences of programs like Child Protective Services and other welfare agencies to be more salient among women (Roberts 2002; Roberts 2012; Roberts 2022; Katzenstein and Waller 2015).

Second, this paper does not analyze the *content* of carceral discussion. This means we know little about what citizens say during their discussions of policing and the criminal justice system. What political attitudes do these discussions reflect and for whom? What might the content of these discussions teach us about how different groups of citizens respond to the carceral state? Although analyses of the content of political discussion are relatively rare

(cf. Cramer 2004; Weaver, Prowse, and Piston 2020), inductive or content-focused analyses could reveal additional group differences in the prevalence and impact of carceral discussion. For instance, we might expect the racial gap in the prevalence of carceral discussion to be larger if measuring discussion about explicitly punitive experiences of the carceral state, like police harassment and surveillance. Moreover, analyzing the content of carceral discussion might help to illuminate the pathways between discussion and political engagement.

Overall, this paper suggests that carceral political discussion is a potentially important component of the political socialization of Americans, and that its prevalence and impact vary meaningfully by racial group. If we want to understand how political discussion shapes political outcomes, we should thus (a) more expansively examine how citizens talk about the government by including the carceral state, and (b) consider how and why different domains of political discussion vary by racial group membership. In other words, we must continue to ask *what comprises relevant and important political discussion and for whom?*

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