

Arrested Development:  
The effects of criminal justice supervision on political efficacy

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Key Words: Arrest, Incarceration, Political Efficacy

### Abstract

Although sociology and criminology literature examines the effects of incarceration on individuals' psychological well-being, social capital, employment prospects, and other facets of life, very little attention has been paid to the effects of arrest and incarceration on people as *citizens*, presumably because of a lack of sufficient data. This study takes a step in this direction, using a new and unique dataset—the Black Youth Project (Cohen 2005)—to examine the effects of arrest and incarceration on people's attitudes about government. Bivariate results indicate that increased contact with the criminal justice system is associated with lower political efficacy; multivariate results (controlling for income, age, race, and education) suggest that even the simple act of being arrested leads to these decreases. Though an absence of data makes it impossible to control for certain omitted variables (such as the proclivity to commit a crime), these results nevertheless lend credence to the hypothesis that criminal justice supervision hinders, rather than promotes, both individuals' trust in the political system and their perceived ability to influence it.

## **I. Introduction**

This study uses a new and unique dataset to answer a question that has, until recently, been largely unanswerable due to insufficient data: how does arrest and incarceration affect people's attitudes about government? The salience of this issue is one that has grown over time and continues to grow as an increasing proportion of individuals move through the penal system. If current trends continue, for example, one in nine American men born in 2001 will serve time in prison during his life (Bureau of Justice 2003). Given the alarming (and growing) rate of individuals moving through America's penal system, and given that justice supervision serves as these Americans' most frequent exposure to government institutions (Simon 1993), questions concerning whether and how arrest and incarceration influence individuals' politics should no longer be ignored. This paper begins to shed light on this question by testing the hypothesis that those who have been arrested and incarcerated will express lower levels of political efficacy (i.e. trust in the political system) than those who have not.

Though a lack of data has precluded work that examines the effects of criminal justice supervision on people's politics, many have written about the effects of incarceration on *other* aspects of human life that are likely related to or affect people's views about government and their relation to it. First, the effect of incarceration on employment prospects later in life are well-documented. While more than half of state prisoners are employed before going to jail, only about one-fifth of those on parole are employed after imprisonment (Irwin and Austin 1994). Freeman (1992) finds in his analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth that men who had been imprisoned suffered from massive long-term effects on employment. Insofar

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The author would like to thank Cathy Cohen for use of the data necessary to conduct this study, as well as John Brehm and Betsy Sinclair for their helpful comments.

as employment prospects affect beliefs about government, the difficulty of finding a job after incarceration is something that may affect one's sense of political efficacy.

Another effect of incarceration that may influence people's politics is the documented effect on individuals' mental health. Correctional institutions have been shown to promote mental distress (Gibbs 1991), and prisoners exhibit higher levels of depression, loneliness, nervousness, and anxiety than those who have not been imprisoned (Colsher et al. 1992; Fogel and Martin 1992; Hurley and Dunne 1991). To the extent that these qualities carry over into individuals' post-incarceration life, they may affect their sense of political efficacy and political attitudes more generally.

Finally, the cultural effects of incarceration constitute another documented way in which prison influences people's lives and may also influence their politics. For example, scholars have begun alluding to the tendency of "prison inmate culture" to strengthen connections to gangs and the criminal underworld (Hunt et al. 1993). Researches have also noted that incarceration affects attitudes toward authority. Moore (1996) argues that the "prisonization" of life outside of prison translates into citizens who are "intensely hostile to established authority." It is not inconceivable that such effects are related to individuals' sense of political efficacy.

Thus while little has been done to research the effects of state supervision on people's politics directly, much has been written on its effects on various *other* aspects of people's lives. Incarceration and contact with the law more generally has been shown to change people as workers, as members of society, and as psychological beings. It is not inconceivable that it changes them as citizens as well. More specifically, because arrest and incarceration is categorically a negative and sometimes violent confrontation with law and order (and because, as

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discussed above, contact with the law has a negative effect on people's mental health, social capital, and employment prospects), I hypothesize that those who have been arrested and incarcerated will express lower levels of political efficacy than those who have not.

## **II. Data**

### **A. Sample**

The most formidable obstacle to determining whether contact with the criminal justice system influences people's politics is the dearth of existing datasets containing both "political" variables and respondents' arrest/incarceration history. Many contain the former, a few contain the latter, but almost no existing data set contains both.

The exception to this rule is the dataset afforded by the recently conducted Black Youth Project analysis (Cohen 2005). The Black Youth Project is a study that seeks to describe the attitudes, resources, and culture of American youth ages 15 to 25. Importantly, for the purposes of the present study, the questionnaire also contains questions concerning arrests, convictions, and felony history.

The sample consists of a combination of a standard nationally representative sample and a supplemental sample obtained from areas that are 15 percent or higher density of Hispanic and non-Hispanic African American population. These areas cover over 89 percent of the Hispanic population and about 89 percent of the non-Hispanic African American population. It consists of nearly 1600 respondents, including an over-sample of African American respondents and a small over-sample of Latinos.

## B. Independent Variables of Interest

There are three questions in particular that compose this study's independent variables. Each variable is dichotomous and values are coded 0 for "no" and 1 for "yes." The first of the three questions asks, "Have you ever been arrested?" Of respondents who answered positively to this question, a second was asked: "Have you ever been convicted of a crime?" Finally, those who answered positively to both of these questions were asked a third: "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?"

To examine how contact with the criminal justice system is associated with political efficacy and civic engagement, this study uses the aforementioned three variables to divide respondents into four groups: (1) those who have not been arrested, (2) respondents who have been arrested but not convicted, (3) respondents who have been convicted but not of a felony, and (4) respondents who have been convicted of a felony. The assumption made in this study is that interaction with the criminal justice system increases across these four groups. In other words, these three variables are used as proxies for frequency (and intensity) of supervision by the criminal justice system. Thus, for example, those who have been both arrested and convicted are assumed to have undergone more supervision than those who have only been arrested.

## C. Dependent Variables

The Black Youth Project includes a series of political questions that seek to tap into respondents' sense of political efficacy. These include questions concerning *internal* political efficacy (e.g. I can make a difference by participating in politics; I have the skills and knowledge necessary to participate in politics; I feel like a full and equal citizen), *external* political efficacy

(e.g. Leaders in government care very little about people like me; The government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves and their friends, If more whites had AIDS; the government would do more) and their feelings towards the parties and president (e.g. feeling thermometer scores for George W. Bush, the Republican Party, and the Democratic Party). Most of these questions include statements with which respondents are asked to strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly disagree.

### **III. Results**

#### **A. Bivariate Results**

Deferring a causal analysis until the subsequent section, some bivariate trends are notable. There is a clear tendency to be both less politically efficacious as well as to disapprove of government more generally as contact with the criminal justice system increases. Figure 1, for example, illustrates this point with feeling thermometer results for George W. Bush across the four groups.

[Figure 1 Here]

While feelings toward the former president are clearly “cold” for all groups (<40), they become notably less favorable for groups that have had more interaction with the criminal justice system. The same trend is evident with respect to both Republicans (Figure 2) and Democrats, though less so for the latter (data available from author upon request).

[Figure 2 Here]

Contact with the criminal justice system is also associated with a respondent's tendency to disagree that they can make a difference by participating in politics (Figure 3). It is also negatively associated with respondents' belief that the people in their neighborhood are able to prompt the government to respond to their needs (Figure 4) and is positively associated with the belief that "members of government do not care about people like me" (Figure 5).

[Figures 3 and 4 Here]

Unfortunately, power analysis (data available from author upon request) reveals that there are too few respondents who have been convicted of crime, much less of a felony, to conduct a meaningful multivariate analysis involving these individuals.<sup>1</sup> This translates into a restriction of this paper's multivariate analysis to one that compares only those who have been arrested to those who have not. However, as shown below, focusing only on whether an individual has been arrested still tells us much about that individual's feelings toward the government as well as her perceived ability to participate and influence it.

## B. Multivariate Results

It may be argued that correlations between criminal justice supervision and this study's dependent variables are spurious. It is possible, that is, that other factors (which happen to be

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<sup>1</sup> Statistical power is the probability that a test will reject a false null hypothesis or, in other words, that it will not make a Type II error. As power increases, the chance of committing a Type II error decreases. The number of felons in the sample is notably small (N=44), providing a good reason to believe that the statistical power of the tests may not be high enough. If they are not, differences between convicted felons and convicted non-felons will not be statistically significant unless the differences are extremely pronounced. Very few of the t-tests involving respondents who have been convicted of a crime (felony or otherwise) have enough statistical power to obviate Type II error concerns.

correlated with both arrest history and the dependent variables) actually account for such differences. Below, I use ordinary least squares regression analysis to control for potentially confounding variables (specifically: age, race, education, and income) that may account for the aforementioned relationship between interaction with the criminal justice system and the political variables used in this study. (See Appendix for descriptions and operationalization of these variables). The model used is:

$$Y = \beta_1 + \beta_2 \text{Arrested} + \beta_3 \text{Race} + \beta_4 \text{Education} + \beta_5 \text{Income} + \beta_6 \text{Age}$$

After controlling for age, race, education, and income, the act of being arrested has a negative and statistically significant impact on almost all indicators of political efficacy measured in this study. Figure 5 displays the coefficient for each dependent variable along with its respective 95% confidence interval.

[Figure 5 Here]

As Figure 5 shows, people who have been arrested are more likely to believe there are no good jobs for them, that leaders in government care very little about them, and that the government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves and their friends. They are less likely to report feeling like a full and equal citizen, that everyone has an equal chance to succeed, to believe they make a difference by participating in politics, to believe that the people working together in their neighborhood can solve many of their problems, and to believe that

people in their neighborhood are able to get the government to respond to their needs. People who have been arrested are also more likely to believe that the police discriminate much more against Black kids than White kids, and that the government would do more if more Whites had AIDS. Importantly, these effects do not wash out after controlling for whether the respondent is Black (though they are admittedly smaller than racial effects).

The feeling thermometer scores are perhaps the most telling. After controlling for age, race, education, and income, being arrested precipitates an average nine point decrease in respondents' feeling thermometer rating of the Republican Party and an 8.8 decrease for George W. Bush specifically. The effect on feeling thermometer scores for the Democratic Party is small and statistically insignificant. Perhaps unsurprisingly, being arrested causes a decrease of 22 feeling thermometer points for the police. In sum, even though this study confirms the well-known predictive power of race, age, education, and income, it also suggests that, after controlling for these factors, those who have been arrested exhibit lower levels of political efficacy and trust in government than those who have not.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The preceding multivariate analysis has sought to shed light on how contact with and supervision by the criminal justice system affects people's politics. First, it was noted that, the more justice supervision one has undergone, the less politically efficacious they are. Then, due to the possibility that other confounding variables might account for this relationship, age, race, income, and education were controlled for. After controlling for these influential factors, the fact of having been arrested was still associated with lower levels of political efficacy, tolerance, and civic engagement. Unfortunately, the low number of respondents who had been convicted and

even lower number of respondents who had been convicted of a felony precluded a multivariate analysis using “conviction” and “conviction of a felony” in the multivariate analysis. Still, these results give reason to believe that supervision by the justice system may make for more disheartened, less efficacious citizens.

It should be stressed, however, that the preceding analysis is merely a first attempt to answer this question and suffers from many shortcomings that necessitate further research and data more consciously centered on uncovering the politics of individuals who have been arrested and incarcerated. In addition to the inability to conduct a multivariate analysis using the “convicted” and “convicted of a felony” variables, this study’s results are plagued by sample bias. Because the Black Youth Project (by its own definition) narrows its interest to individuals between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, it is impossible to know the extent to which this study’s results are generalizable to the population at large.

Second, very different types of contact with the law may have very different results. Rather than conceptualizing this study’s independent variables of interest (arrested, convicted, convicted of a felony) as reflecting differences in *degree*, it may make more sense to treat them as differences in *kind*. This would certainly necessitate a more complex research design than that employed here.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the results of this study may suffer from omitted variable bias. It is impossible to tell from the Black Youth Project data whether it is actually being arrested (or being convicted, or being convicted of a felony) that accounts for variation in this study’s dependent variables, rather than the propensity to commit a crime, or the propensity to be caught committing a crime, or some other omitted predictor that is correlated with both being supervised by the state and this study’s political variables. In other words, although

political efficacy tends to decrease across each group of respondents according to their contact with the criminal justice system, it could be the case that those who tend to commit felonies differ systematically in their political beliefs from those who tend to commit lesser crimes or no crimes at all, well *before* they have come into contact with the law. Accounting for variables such as “the propensity to commit a crime” would be difficult, likely necessitating a longitudinal study that tracks ex-prisoners’ political beliefs over time. This data would certainly not be easy to come by. Whatever methods are employed, it is clear that more must be done in the way of data-gathering to assess the effects of arrest and incarceration on people’s politics.

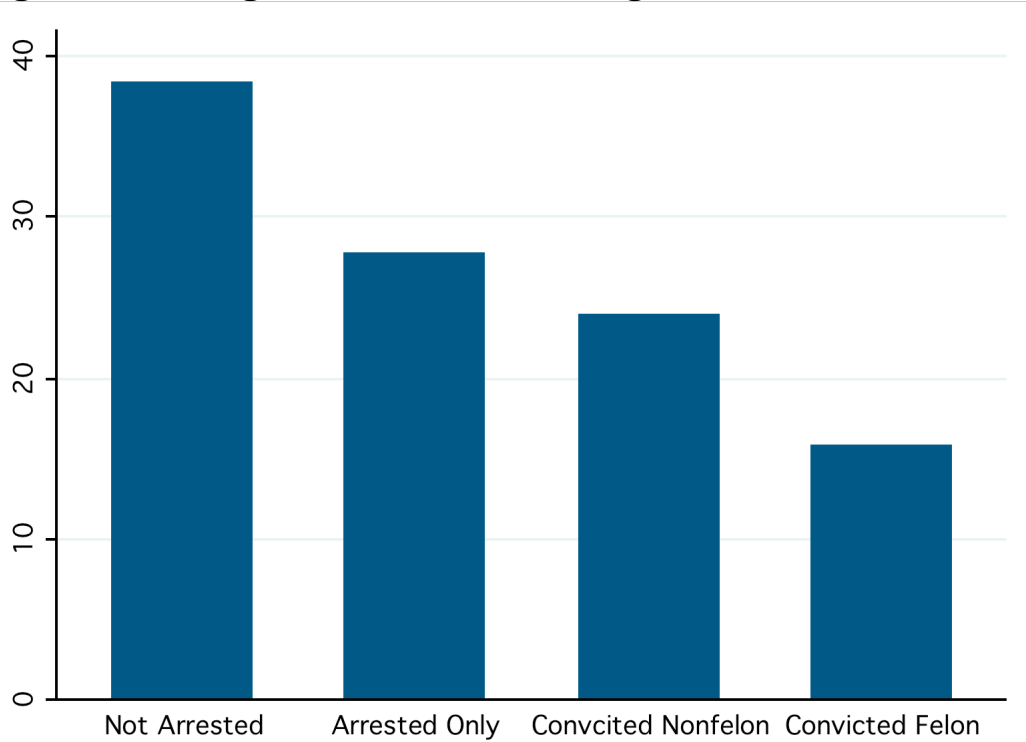
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## Tables and Figures

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

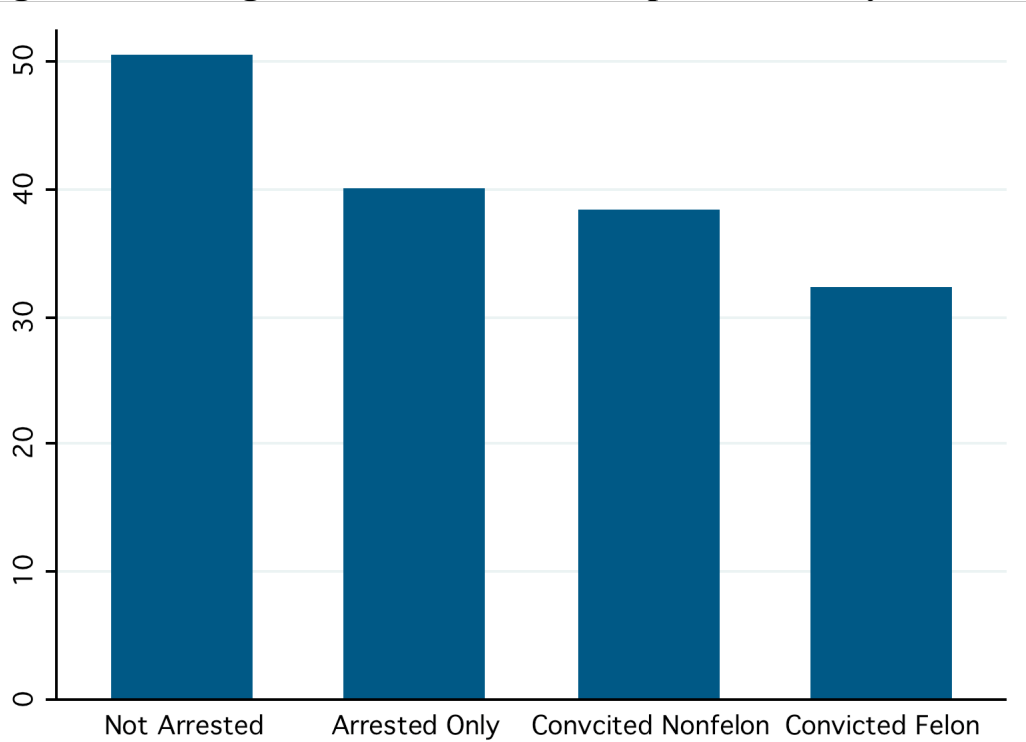
Category	Variable	Observations	Mean	Min	Max
<b>INCARCERATION STATUS</b>	Were you ever arrested?	1590	0.235	0	1
	Were you ever convicted of a crime?	374	0.419	0	1
	Were you ever convicted of a felony?	157	0.28	0	1
<b>CONTROL VARIABLES</b>	Age	1590	19.25	15	25
	Latino	1590	.197	0	1
	Black	1590	.197	0	1
	Highest Degree earned thus far	1590	3.08	1	9
	Income	1491	2.67	1	10

**Figure 1: Feeling thermometer for George W. Bush**



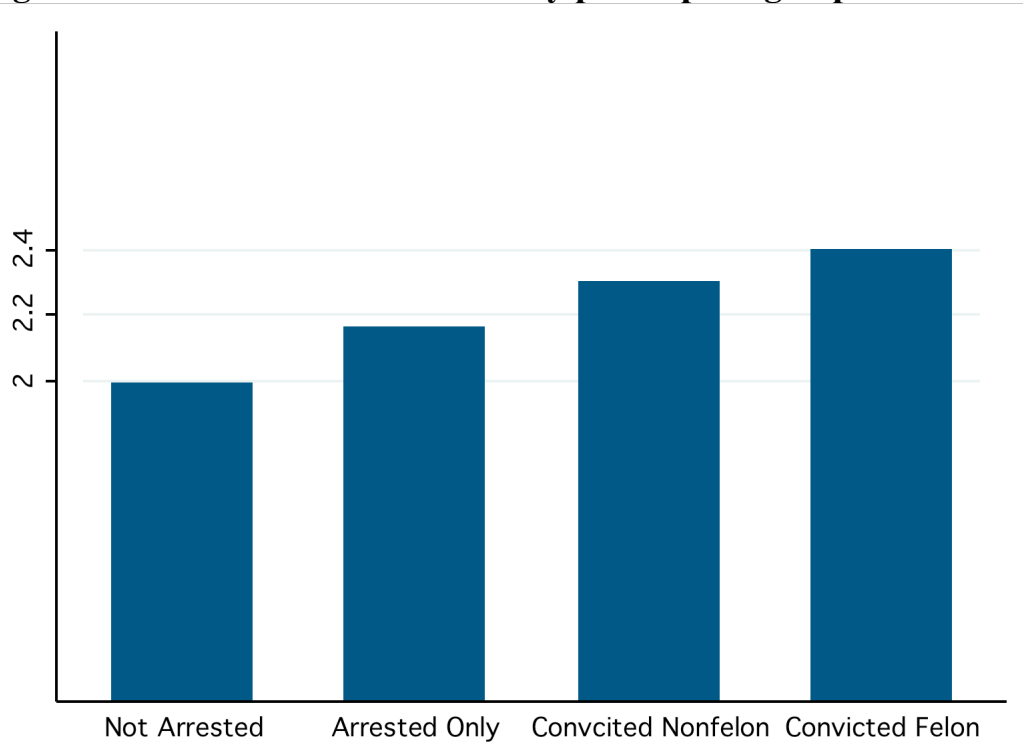
\*\*Respondents were asked to pick a number between 0 and 100. “Zero is cool or negative. One hundred is warm or favorable.”

**Figure 2: Feeling thermometer for the Republican Party**



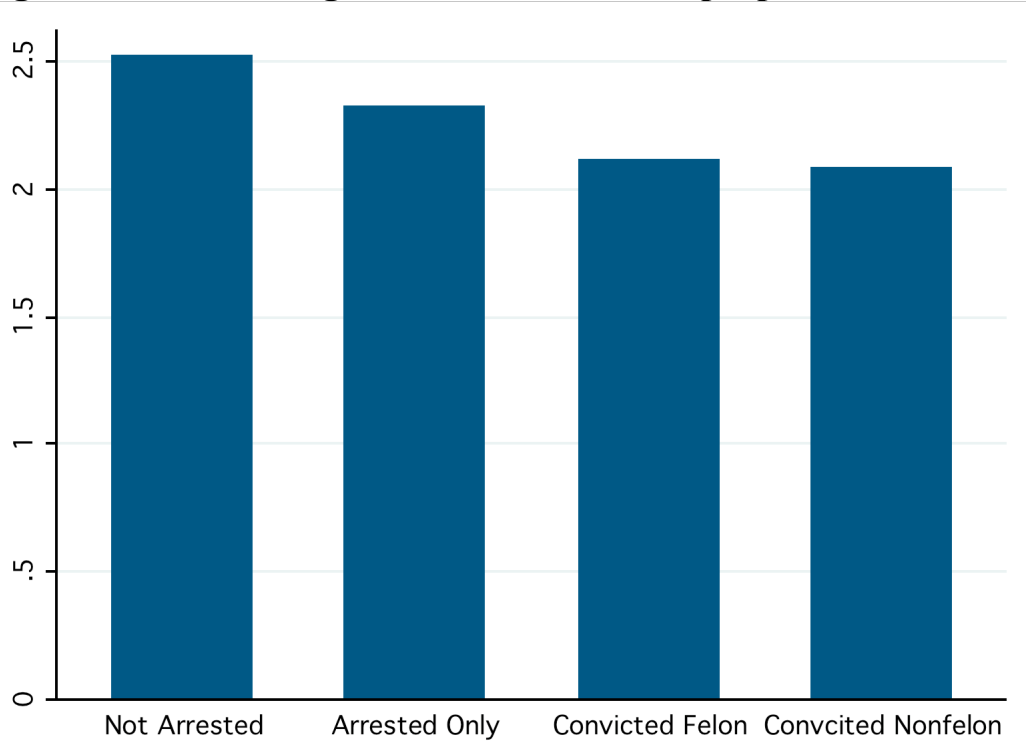
\*\*Respondents were asked to pick a number between 0 and 100. “Zero is cool or negative. One hundred is warm or favorable.”

**Figure 3: I can make a difference by participating in politics**



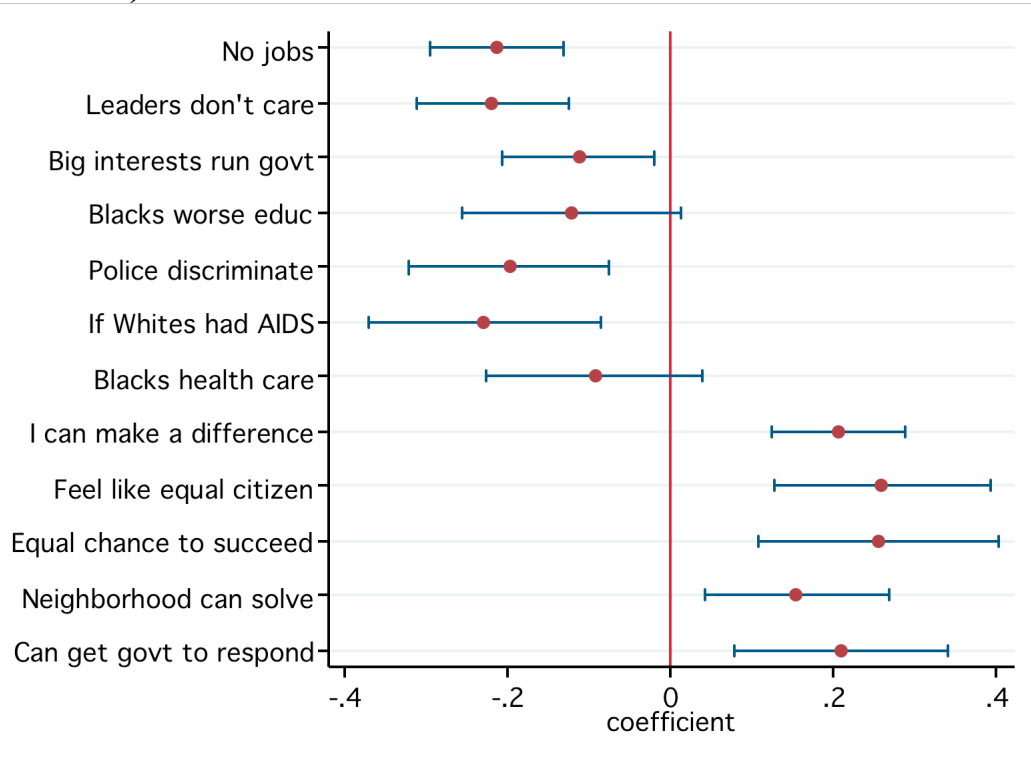
\*\* "I believe that by participating in politics I can make a difference. Would you say you: strongly agree (1), agree (2), disagree (3), strongly disagree (4)?"

**Figure 4: Leaders in government care about people like me**



\*\* “The leaders in government care very little about people like me. Do you strongly agree (1), agree (2), disagree (3), strongly disagree (4)?”

**Figure 5: OLS: Effects of arrest on political efficacy (95% Confidence Intervals)**



\*Controls include: race, income, education, and age

\* Because survey items range from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” in ascending order, positive change indicates an increase in *disagreement*.

## APPENDIX: Control Variable Operationalization

### Age

Age is coded in the dataset as a continuous variable and has a mean of 19.25 and a standard deviation of 3.17.

### Race

The Black Youth Project questionnaire divides respondents into three categories: “white” (n=567), “black” (n=635), and “Hispanic” (n=314). Respondents falling into the “other” category (n=74) are removed from the analysis. This study then transforms each category into a dummy variable (for example, “Black” is coded 0 if not Black and 1 if Black). The category “White” serves as the reference category and is thus not included in the regression analysis.

### Income

The Black Youth Project operationalizes income categorically. Respondents are divided into 10 groups: \$0-\$999 (n=631), \$1000-\$4999 (n=293), \$5000-\$9999 (n=160), \$10000-\$14999 (n=112), \$15000-\$19,999 (n=76), \$20000-\$29999 (n=124), \$30000-\$49999 (n=63), \$50000-\$74999 (n=19), \$75000-\$99999 (n=7), and 100000 and over (n=6).

### Education

In the Black Youth Project dataset, education is operationalized as “highest degree earned” and is divided into 9 categories: no degree (n=861), GED (n=63), High School Degree of Diploma (n=474), Post high school vocational certificate (n=37), a bachelor’s degree (n=81), an associates degree (n=67), a masters degree (n=6), and Ph.D. (n=1).

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