Political Discussion Networks and Political Engagement among Voters of Color

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Abstract

Despite a large and growing literature documenting the powerful and positive role that political discussion networks exert on the political behavior among whites, we know little about how political discussion networks affect political behavior among voters of color. To fill this void in the existing literature, we conducted an original survey in California to gather information on a diverse group of registered voters' political discussion networks and political engagement. The social positioning of ethnoracial groups in society, we contend, will affect how network characteristics explain their levels of political engagement. Our results support this contention. While we find that network characteristics, including network size, partisan homogeneity, and discussion frequency are positively associated with validated voter turnout and nonelectoral political participation, the effects are not uniform across black, Latino, Asian American, and white respondents. This is the first study that examines the relationship between political discussion network characteristics and political engagement among voters of color. Our analysis demonstrates that the opportunities for political integration and engagement offered by political discussion networks are not afforded equally across the U.S. electorate, which has important implications for broader patterns of engagement.

Keywords

political discussion, networks, race, ethnicity, political participation

Conversation theory tells us that individuals arrive at meaning through conversation (Pask 1980). Conversation is defined as "the kind of speech that happens informally, symmetrically, and for the purposes of establishing and maintaining social ties" (Thornbury and Slade 2006, 25). We understand intuitively that people might find themselves in conversations about politics or current events. We discuss what is happening in the world with friends. We discuss the latest news with colleagues in the workplace. Growing up, we depend on our family members, teachers, and others to educate us, through conversation, about how the political system works and what our role is within it. What is so critical about these informal conversations, and one of the reasons why they are so powerful, is that they are casual and impromptu—they are typically the byproducts of people going about their daily activities and routines (Downs 1957; Klofstad, McClurg, and Rolfe 2009; Walsh 2004).

Yet we also know that these conversations are happening within very different community contexts; people's social environments are not all the same, particularly along the lines of ethnorace. In this article, we explore the importance of engaging in *political* conversation and

talk within political discussion networks for developing connections that foster political engagement. Importantly, these are informal discussions "of politics and current events that occurs within a social network of peers: friends, colleagues, family members, and other individuals who are present in our social environment" (Klofstad 2011, 9). The social networks within which those political discussions occur are *political discussion networks.*

Decades of research on political discussion networks has shown their influence in virtually all aspects of our political behaviors and attitudes. Turning out to vote (Bond et al. 2012), participating in political and nonpolitical civic activities, levels of political knowledge (Eveland and Hively 2009), policy positions (Sinclair 2012), and candidate preferences (Huckfeldt, Johnson,

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and Sprague 2004) can all be affected by our political conversations with others. However, the vast majority of this research relies on survey data from predominantly white Americans, making it difficult to draw conclusions about whether—and in what ways—political discussion networks operate among the most rapidly growing share of the electorate (for the exception, see Leighley and Matsubayashi 2009).

Given that the social positioning of ethnoracial groups is different relative to that of whites, we expect political discussion networks to play an important role in their political engagement, but perhaps not in entirely the same way as whites. At minimum, it is worth exploring whether the previous findings regarding the relationship between discussion network characteristics and political engagement generalize from whites to ethnoracial minorities. This in and of itself is an important contribution. But, there are also theoretical reasons why we might expect discussion network characteristics to operate differently for ethnoracial minorities vis-à-vis whites.

In this paper, we theorize that the differences in political discussion networks between ethnoracial groups are rooted in variation in how members of these ethnoracial groups are socially situated in U.S. society (Eveland and Kleinman 2013). To empirically test this theory, we use original survey data to examine (1) how the network size, discussion frequency, and partisan composition of political discussion networks differ among ethnoracial groups and (2) how these three different network characteristics impact political engagement differently across ethnoracial groups. We partnered with four community organizations that work with communities of color in California to conduct a survey of approximately 3,500 African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and whites. In the survey, we used a name generator to obtain information about respondents' political discussion networks as well as information about their discussion partners.

The Importance of Social Position

Ethnoracial group membership in the United States is important because of its impact on the social position that a particular individual possesses within U.S. society. That positioning is not under the person's individual-level control. In addition, we are not making an essentialist argument that all group members are "naturally" the same (Beltrán 2013). Rather, we contend that the contexts within which people are often similarly situated and the opportunity structures attached to those contexts can affect their political attitudes and engagement. Those contexts, in turn, are shaped by an individual's social position, which, for political and historical reasons, is strongly affected by their ethnoracial group membership.

We define a social group as "a collective of persons differentiated from others by cultural forms, practices, special needs or capacities, structure of power, or privilege" (Young 1990). According to Young (1990), what makes a collection of people into a group is "less some set of attributes its members share than the relation in which they stand to others." In other words, defining a particular population as a social group does not mean that we need to assume that all group members are the same, share the same experiences, or have the same goals or aspirations. What is similar (but not necessarily always the same) about the ethnoracial group members are where they are placed in the U.S. racial hierarchy and how that placement has affected their social, political, and economic opportunity structures. As Eveland and Kleinman (2013, 84) point out, "political discussion networks are heavily influenced by the opportunity structure of the social settings in which we are embedded." We would add that those opportunity structures also are influenced by a particular person's social position. Thus, it is important to explore the ways in which political discussion networks vary among groups who hold different social positions.

These opportunity structures, and the constraints they may place on political behavior, are especially important when considering the target voters in this study—mostly low-income ethnoracial voters. These target voters belong to social groups that historically have been excluded from the polity, which has extended to the present day. Numerous scholars, including Rogers Smith (1997, 2003), have shown how citizenship and inclusion in the U.S. polity was defined ascriptively in terms of both race and gender classifications (see also Gardner 2005; Goldberg 2002; Jacobson 1998; King 2000; Ngai 2004). These studies demonstrate the many ways that discourses of political inclusion and exclusion were the product of explicit public policies, particularly U.S. immigration policies, which were designed to maintain the United States as a white Protestant nation and to materially privilege the white population (Haney-López 1996; King 2000; Lipsitz 1998). These ascriptive understandings, in turn, have been found to affect the development of political thought within ethnoracial communities, as well as approaches to and engagement with political and collective action (Cohen 1999; Dawson 2001; García Bedolla 2005, 2014; Gutierrez 1995; Jones-Correa 1998; Kim 2000; Parker 2009; Tate 1993). All these factors derive from individuals' relative social position and, we contend, play an important role in the structure and function of their political discussion networks.

Social position also carries numerous implications for an individual's ability to exercise individual-level agency. As Masuoka and Junn (2013, 25) point out, "the notion that there is uniformity in political agency—in one's ability to participate, to be mobilized by political parties and elites, to consider political alternatives, to seek and consume political information, to form positions on political

phenomena" is widely held by public opinion scholars, but "agency at the individual level is constrained by relative group position." They ably demonstrate that what results is a systematic variation on a vast array of public opinions and topics. This seems a simple and obvious point, but the fact of the matter is that scholars often interpret group-level differences as a reflection of individual identification with an ethnoracial group rather than a product of their structural position (as a group member) within U.S. society. As Hancock (2016, 33) explains, "relational power structures lived experiences, the shape of social locations within which people function and interact, and the discursive norms that shape how they understand and interpret the stimuli they encounter." Therefore, an approach to political discussion network analysis that overlooks the role of ethnoracial group membership and social position, we contend, is incomplete.

In light of the social position of ethnoracial groups in the United States, political discussion networks of ethnoracial group members could very well be composed differently than those of white Americans. As discussed above, blacks, Latinos, and Asians historically have had different relationships to the two main political parties, with blacks having strong levels of Democratic partisanship and Latinos and Asians less likely to identify with any political party (Frymer 2010; Hajnal and Lee 2011). In addition, we know that political knowledge varies across ethnoracial groups (Abrajano 2015; Perez 2015). That suggests that the amount and quality of political information available within political discussion networks could vary as well. In terms of political engagement, we know that voting rates vary significantly across ethnoracial groups in the United States (Michelson and Garcia Bedolla 2014). Even within a group, substantial variation exists in the levels of political engagement, and in the case of Asians, this is particularly true based on their incorporation status and national origin (Dobard et al. 2018; Masuoka, Ramanathan, and Junn 2019). Those differences could also be reflected in the political discussions that individuals have (or not) with their network members.

Political Discussion Networks

Political scientists have long been interested in the influence of social networks on political attitudes and behavior. Researchers have even argued that politics is inherently social (Settle, Bond, and Levitt 2011; Zuckerman 2005) as they explore the implications of social networks on political participation (e.g., Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Putnam 2000). However, nearly all of this important research has relied predominantly on white respondents. Leighley and Matsubayashi (2009) present one of the few

studies examining political discussion networks among ethnoracial group members.[1] We build on their important contribution by examining the *partisan* composition of discussion networks among ethnoracial minorities, given Leighley and Matsubayashi (2009) focused more on the ethnoracial composition of discussion networks. We also focus on two other network characteristics: network size and frequency of political discussion. Moreover, our analysis pushes the existing research forward by examining the impact of discussion network characteristics on political engagement.

Network Size

While there is no standard "average network size" in the literature, research suggests that a typical network size is three to four political discussants (Klofstad et al. 2009). In one of the few social network studies that use a diverse sample, Leighley and Matsubayashi (2009) find that whites tend to be in larger networks than are blacks, Latinos, and Asians, with Latinos and Asians having particularly small networks. The authors argue that much of this variation pertains to the supply of possible political discussants being constrained by socioeconomic factors. Ethnoracial group members, for instance, may prefer to discuss politics with coethnics, but those discussants, for a variety of reasons, may be less politically engaged. We expect to find a similar pattern in our data; however, we are able to explore more variation in network size because our name generator was capped at five discussants, whereas theirs was capped at three.

Based on their findings, our expectation is that black, Latino, and Asian American social networks will be smaller than whites.' The proportion of individuals' political discussion networks that is made up of coethnics will depend on the size of the coethnic population and the levels of ethnoracial segregation in their neighborhood. This would lead us to assume that white and Latino networks should contain the highest percentage of coethnics, simply due to the relative size of those populations and levels of ethnoracial neighborhood segregation in California. Blacks should be next in terms of proportion of coethnics in their networks because their high levels of residential segregation are mediated by the relatively small size of the black population in California. Asian American networks should contain the smallest number of coethnics given the relatively small size of the Asian American population and their lower levels of residential segregation.

Discussion Frequency

Individuals who engage in regular and daily conversations about current events and other important matters should

be more positively inclined to participate in politics and be more politically efficacious (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). In addition, having these everyday discussions should also be correlated with higher levels of political knowledge Eveland (2004). Given that whites tend to be more interested and engaged in politics, compared with Latinos, Asians, and blacks, we expect that whites report discussing politics more frequently with their network members. With larger discussion networks, as we anticipate whites will have, comes the opportunity for more frequent discussion.

Partisan Homogeneity

Social networks, broadly speaking, are generally composed of people who are more similar to each other than they are different. The primary explanation for this is homophily—the idea that individuals self-select into social relationships with people who are similar to them. When it comes to politics, this means that we should expect political discussion networks to be largely homogeneous. Even among predominantly white samples, however, there is still substantial disagreement in the literature about how much partisan heterogeneity (what the literature calls "disagreement") exists in political discussion networks (Klofstad, Sokhey, and McClurg 2013). While the different conclusions about the degree of partisan homogeneity in discussion networks is likely due to different operationalizations of disagreement, we currently do not know anything about the partisan composition of discussion networks among ethnoracial group members.

We expect discussion networks to be more homogeneous than they are heterogeneous among ethnoracial groups because some of the factors that drive this homogeneity should be universal. For instance, geographic and structural factors can constrain the range of options in choosing political discussants (Huckfeldt 1983). Leighley and Matsubayashi (2009) show that ethnoracial group members' political discussion networks are often composed of coethnics. To the extent that individuals within an ethnoracial group tend to identify with the same political party, if individuals' political discussion networks are composed of coethnics, we should also expect them to be politically homogeneous (see Note 1). Beyond homogeneity based on structural factors, other researchers suggest that political discussion networks are homogeneous due to psychological factors that lead individuals to avoid disagreement (Ulbig and Funk 1999).

Because we do not expect an individual's psychological sensitivity to disagreement to vary by ethnorace, our respondents should be similarly motivated to seek out like-minded discussants. On the contrary, we do expect the partisan composition of ethnoracial group members'

political discussion networks to differ from those of whites for several reasons. First, we know that partisan allegiances vary across ethnoracial groups. For example, blacks tend to overwhelmingly support the Democratic Party (Dawson 1994; Frymer 2010), whereas the partisan allegiances Latinos and Asian Americans are not as firmly rooted with one political party (Abrajano and Alvarez 2011; Alvarez and García Bedolla 2003). To the extent that individuals of the same ethnorace tend to find themselves sorted—intentionally or otherwise—into ethnoracially homogeneous communities (Leighley and Matsubayashi 2009), we should expect blacks' political discussion networks to be more Democratic when compared with Latinos' and Asian Americans' discussion networks. Given that a large proportion of Asian and Latino immigrants do not identify with a political party (Hajnal and Lee 2011), we expect there will be more partisan diversity, meaning the presence of nonpartisans, in their political discussion networks than those of blacks.

Research Design and Data

To test our hypotheses, we analyze an original survey of a diverse sample of individuals residing in California. Our survey included a social network battery including a name generator in which respondents listed up to five people with whom they discussed "important matters." Respondents then answered several questions about each person they listed, followed by a host of demographic, political attitude, and political engagement questions. We then merged our survey results with the California voter file to obtain respondents' actual vote histories, party registration, and other demographic information.

Data Collection

Given our theory and hypotheses, we had no intention of collecting a sample of respondents that was nationally representative. Rather, our intent was to collect unique network data on groups who hold a social position that differs from the white majority—ethnoracial group members who have been, by and large, overlooked in most political discussion network research. The state of California enables us to collect a sizable number of respondents from the four major ethnoracial groups in the United States, given that the state's population is majority-minority (meaning that ethnoracial groups make up a majority of the population).

To conduct our survey, we partnered with nonprofit community-based organizations that work primarily with voters of color. Our partner organizations provided us with the voter identification numbers of all individuals whom they had targeted for contact in the November 2016 election. We then obtained the email addresses on

file for these individuals from Political Data, Inc. (PDI), a private data vendor, which yielded about 250,000 email addresses.[2] We then randomly sampled respondents, proportional to the number of contacts provided by each organization to be surveyed.[3] As discussed, our sample is not representative. Table 3 in Supplemental Appendix B compares the demographics of our sample to the California and U.S. population demographics.

Individuals who were selected to participate in the survey were sent an invitation email and compensated with a $5.00 Amazon gift card.[4] Table 1 in Supplemental Appendix B shows the response rates (about 3%–4%) and invitation email schedules for the first round of data collection, which ran from December 1, 2016, until January 1, 2017.[5] The first reminder email was sent one week after the initial invitation, and the second reminder email was sent three days after the first reminder. Because we have voter file information on all individuals invited to the survey, we can check to see how our survey respondents differed from those who declined to participate on several observable dimensions, including age, race, income, gender, vote history, and party registration. Table 3 in Supplemental Appendix B shows these differences. Overall, those who completed our survey were more likely to have voted in November 2016, be registered with the Democratic Party, be renters, females, and younger than those who were invited to participate, but chose not to complete the survey, and those in our initial sampling frame.

About 60% of the respondents in our first survey were Asian, leaving relatively small sample sizes for black, Latino, and white respondents. To remedy this problem, we conducted an oversample of the black and Latino respondents who had not been randomly selected to be invited to complete the first survey. We invited about 48,378 Latino and 46,297 black individuals to participate in the survey on April 27, 2017.[6] Reminder emails were sent on May 2, 2017, and May 8, 2017. We sent Latinos an invitation email and survey that was available in both English and Spanish. We ended up with a response rate of about 0.9% for both Latinos and blacks, as shown in Table 2 in Supplemental Appendix B.

Sample Characteristics

A total of 3,668 individuals responded to our survey. Of these respondents, 50.9% identified themselves as Asian American, 18.3% as black, 22.9% as Latino, 6.3% as white, and the remaining 1.7% as "other." About 57.1% of our sample is female, while about 42.9% is male. About 16.6% of our respondents were foreign born.[7] Nearly all of our foreign-born respondents were Asian (78%) or Latino (18%). While we cannot be certain of the specific national origin breakdowns within each of

these panethnic groups, the ethnicity estimates from PDI suggest that our Asian respondents were primarily Chinese.[8] PDI does not provide country-of-origin estimates for Latino/Hispanic surnames, so we cannot describe the national origin groups that make up our Latino sample to the same degree as we can for our Asian sample. However, on our survey, we asked respondents to indicate the country in which they were born, if they were born outside of the United States. While not everyone chose to report their country of origin, we can get a sense for the countries from which our foreign-born Latino respondents originated. These self-reported data suggest that a plurality of our foreign-born Latino respondents was born in Mexico (40.2%), with a large percentage also coming from El Salvador (22.6%).[9] The median household income of the census blocks in which our respondents reside varied by ethnorace. Consistent with state and national trends, Asian respondents resided in census blocks with the highest median income of about $65,611, relative to white respondents at $53,664. Black respondents lived in census blocks with a median income of approximately $39,033, and Latino respondents $39,433.[10]

Official party registration data suggest that our sample was composed primarily of Democrats (63.9%) and those who decline to state their party (28.2%), with only about 7.9% of our sample being registered Republicans. This Democratic skew is likely due to a combination of (1) the sample being drawn in California, (2) the sample focusing on ethnoracial minorities who tend to register and vote Democratic, and (3) the sample being drawn from individuals who were previously contacted by organizations who work to engage voters in communities of color. Those registered voters in our sampling frame were somewhat more politically active than the California and U.S. public overall. For example, 78% of individuals in our initial sampling frame turned out to vote in November 2016, while 75.3% of registered voters and 58.4% of the voting eligible population in California turned out to vote. Those who actually completed the survey were even more engaged, with about 84.5% turning out to vote in November 2016.

Again, given that our main research question and hypotheses focus on ethnoracial group members, our sample was not intended to be nationally representative. We therefore realize that these findings may not be generalizable at the national level, but we believe the results from our study are substantively instructive given our ability to explore the composition and impact of political discussion networks within a very diverse sample, one that reflects the demographic projections of what the U.S. population will look like in the next 25 to 50 years. Table 5 also shows how our results compare with other social network surveys.

We measure the size of one's political discussion network by summing the number of political discussants each respondent listed on the survey. Thus, an individual's political discussion network size can range from zero to five. One limitation of this measurement is that networks are capped at a maximum of five discussants, but individuals could certainly be in networks larger than that. Most respondents who completed this question listed five discussants. This is a challenge faced in all name generator research, but our name generator being capped at five is an improvement on previous research that was capped at three (e.g., Leighley and Matsubayashi 2009).

The partisan composition of political discussion networks is measured by calculating the percentage of the discussion networks that have the same partisanship as the respondent. For each person named in the name generator, participants were asked to indicate how they would describe each person's political party identification. The response options were Strong Republican, Republican, Weak Republican, Independent, Weak Democrat, Democrat, Strong Democrat, Don't Know, or Refused.

We first created a dichotomous variable for whether each named person was a copartisan with the respondent. We determined the respondent's partisanship using estimates created by PDI; this variable is constructed based on a registered voter's party registration, political contributions, and primary ballot requests.[11] For example, respondents might decline to state their party in their formal voter registration, but they contribute to Republican or conservative causes or regularly request a Republican Party primary ballot. For the purposes of our analysis, this respondent would be considered a Republican. We operationalize copartisanship in two ways. In general, respondents are considered to be copartisans with their social tie if the respondent perceives them to identify with the same party.

Our more inclusive conceptualization of copartisanship is consistent with Hajnal and Lee's (2011) operationalization. We consider those who decline to state their partisanship as Independents. Thus, those who decline to state their partisanship are considered copartisans with Independents. We also consider those who decline to state their partisanship to be copartisans with those discussants whose partisanship is unknown.[12]

After determining whether each respondent's political discussant was a copartisan, we calculated the percentage of each respondent's network that consisted of copartisans. To do so, we simply totaled the number of copartisans a respondent named and divided by the total number of people the respondent named. For example, if someone named five people with whom he or she discussed important matters, three of whom were

copartisans, the percent copartisan in this respondent's political discussion network would be 60% (3 divided by 5). This variable captures how much partisan agreement the respondent perceives to be in his or her political discussion network.

Our measure discussion frequency asks respondents to reflect upon how often they discuss politics with each of the discussants they named. Respondents were given the following set of response options: never, rarely, occasionally, and a great deal. We created a continuous scale of these responses, where a "1" indicates that they never discuss politics to a "5" indicating that they discuss these matters frequently with their discussion partner. We then calculated the average discussion frequency within the network by summing the scores across each discussant and dividing by the number of discussants.

Our dependent variables of interest involve political engagement. We measure political engagement using self-reported data from our original survey in which respondents reported the civic and political activities in which they have engaged over the past 12 months. Because self-reported data can be susceptible to social desirability bias that could systematically distort our results, we also measure political engagement using validated voter turnout data from the California voter file. Since we can match our survey respondents with the California voter file, we are able to objectively measure each respondent's vote history. Our measure calculates the total number of times in last five statewide elections in which the respondent turned out to vote. This captures the November 2012 presidential election, June 2014 primary, November 2014 general election, June 2016 primary, and November 2016 presidential election. Our measure of vote history, thus, ranges from 0 (the respondent did not vote in any of the last five elections) to 5 (the respondent voted in all five elections).[13] Our measure of political engagement draws on the survey items used in the 2016 American National Election Studies (ANES). Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate whether they have done any of ten different political activities over the past twelve months.[14]

Results

We begin by presenting descriptive evidence of similarities and differences across ethnoracial minority groups in network size and partisan composition.

Network Size

Figure 1 shows the distribution of network size in each ethnoracial group. We determined network size based on the number of political discussants each respondent listed on the name generator portion of the survey. Ethnoracial
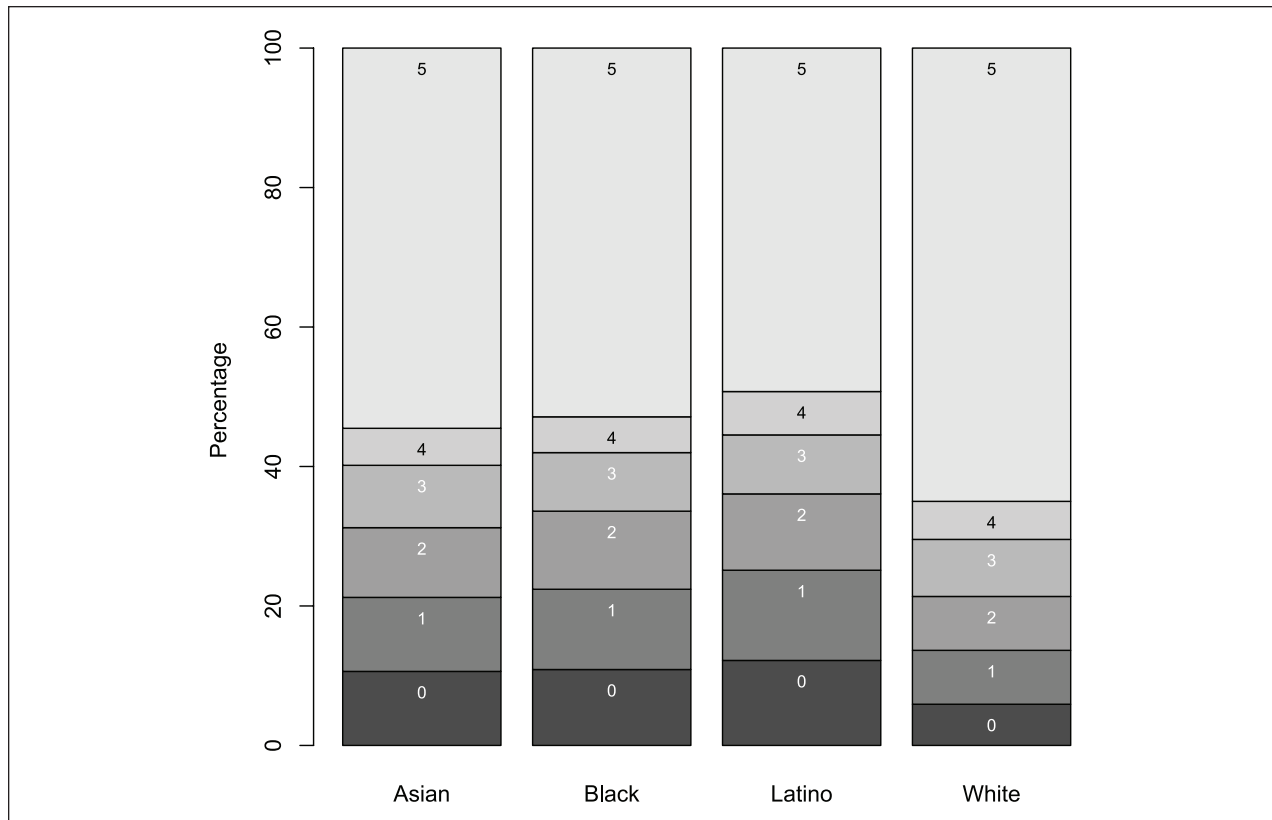
Figure 1. Network size by ethnoracial group.
This figure shows the percent of respondents who had each possible network size. Network size was determined by the number of political discussants each respondent listed in the name generator on the survey.

group members had smaller discussion networks than whites ($p < .05$). As we hypothesized, Latinos had smaller networks than Asians ($p < .05$), but Latinos' networks were statistically indistinguishable from blacks' networks. While these differences are statistically significant, the substantive differences between groups are relatively small. Only about 49% of Latino respondents listed five political discussants, whereas about 55% of Asians and 53% of blacks listed five political discussants, the maximum size. About 65% of white respondents listed five discussants. These results are similar to those presented by Leighley and Matsubayashi (2009), although we are able to explore more variation because their name generator was capped at three instead of five.

Partisan Composition

Figure 2 shows the perceived partisan composition of political discussion networks in each ethnoracial group.[15] Again, our sample is not nationally representative of these groups, so the dominance of Democrats is likely to be exaggerated based on the characteristics of our sample. However, the patterns are generally consistent with

our hypotheses and theoretical expectations. Asians' networks consisted of a greater percentage of Republicans (16.9%) than did those of blacks (11.18) ($p < .001$) and Latinos (10.3%) ($p < .001$). Blacks (65%) and Latinos (62%) had more Democrats in their networks than did Asians (56.7%) ($p < .01$ and $p < .05$). Consistent with our expectations, Latinos were the least certain of their discussants' partisanship. Latinos reported that they did not know the partisanship of a greater percentage of their political discussants (15.1%) than Asians (10.8%) ($p < .01$). Latinos reported that they did not know the partisanship of a greater proportion of their discussants than blacks (11.5%) ($p < .05$) and whites (8%) ($p < .05$). There were no statistically significant differences in refusing to report partisanship between ethnoracial groups. Similar to our results for network size, we note that the differences reported are statistically significant, but substantively small.

Pushing beyond analyzing the partisan diversity of political discussion networks, we next analyze the percent of political discussion network members that are *copartisans* with the respondent. While there is an ongoing debate in the political discussion networks literature
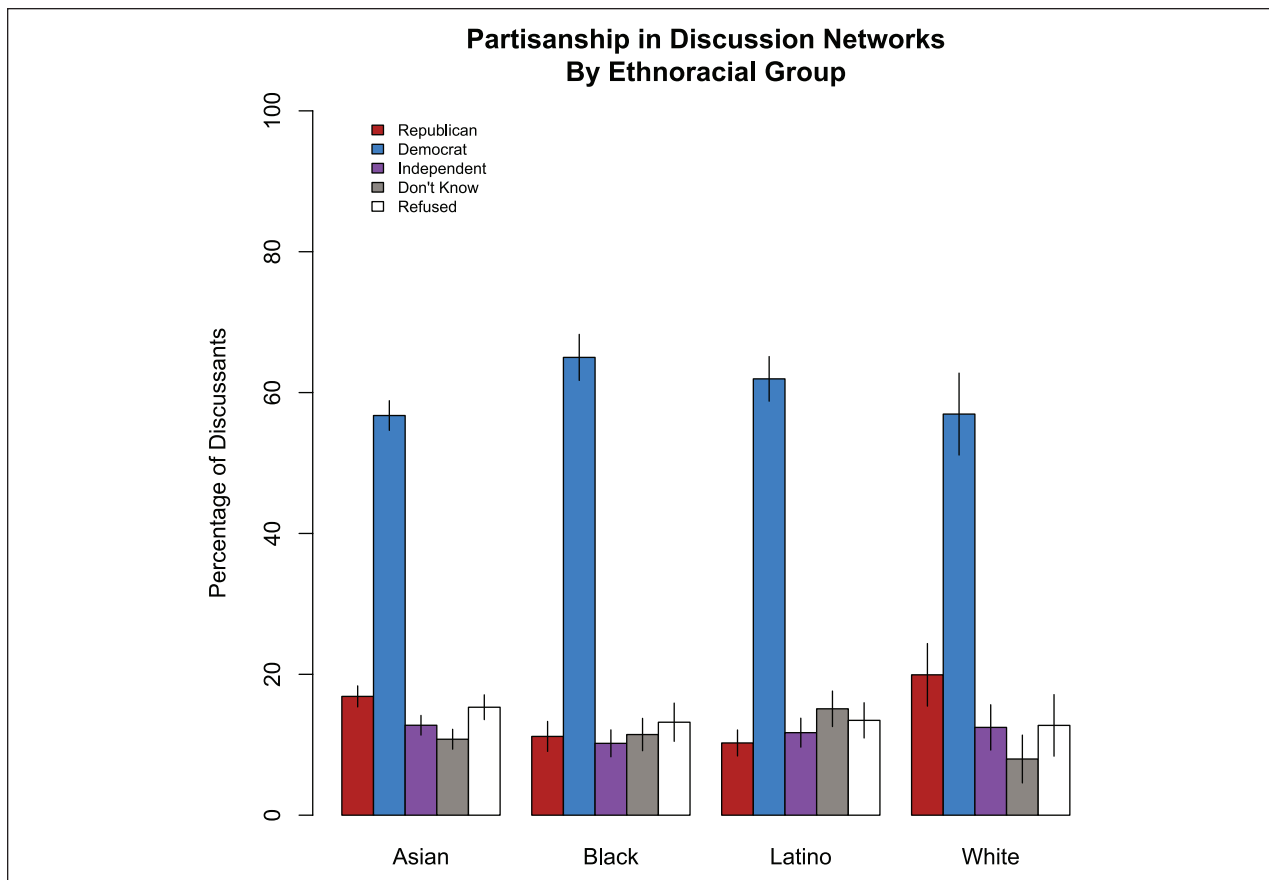
Figure 2. Partisanship by ethnoracial group.
This figure shows the average percentage of each network's discussants that were perceived to identify with each political party.

about the degree of disagreement in discussion networks, making it difficult to find an appropriate baseline comparison, there is no work to date that identifies the percentage of political discussion networks that are copartisans in ethnoracial minority groups. Figure 3 shows two important visualizations of copartisanship in political discussion networks by ethnoracial group. The left-hand panel shows the distribution of the percentage of copartisans in a respondent's discussion network by ethnoracial group. The right-hand panel shows the average percentage of copartisans in a discussion network for each ethnoracial group.

Overall, the patterns of copartisanship are similar between the ethnoracial groups, such that most individuals find themselves in political discussion networks with copartisans. Looking at the distribution of copartisanship, we see that all four groups follow a similar bimodal pattern. Most of the density for all groups falls around 100% copartisan. However, we also see that a nontrivial portion of our respondents did not have any copartisans in their networks.[16] However, there is important variation. As expected, blacks' discussion networks are the most homogeneous, with 61.8% of their discussants being copartisans on average, whereas Asians' (53.7%) and whites' (53.3%) discussion networks are the least homogeneous along party lines. Latinos' networks are somewhere in between, with 57% of their discussants being copartisans on average. Blacks have a greater percentage of copartisans in their networks than Asians ($p < .01$), but there is only suggestive evidence that blacks' networks are larger than whites' ($p = .06$) and Latinos ($p = .10$).

Network Characteristics and Political Engagement

We now turn our attention to the results examining the relationship between political discussion network properties and political engagement. We begin by showing the relationship between network characteristics and political engagement for each ethnoracial group and then we show these relationships, controlling for individual-level factors that have previously been shown to affect political engagement. Specifically, we control for demographic characteristics such as whether one was born in the
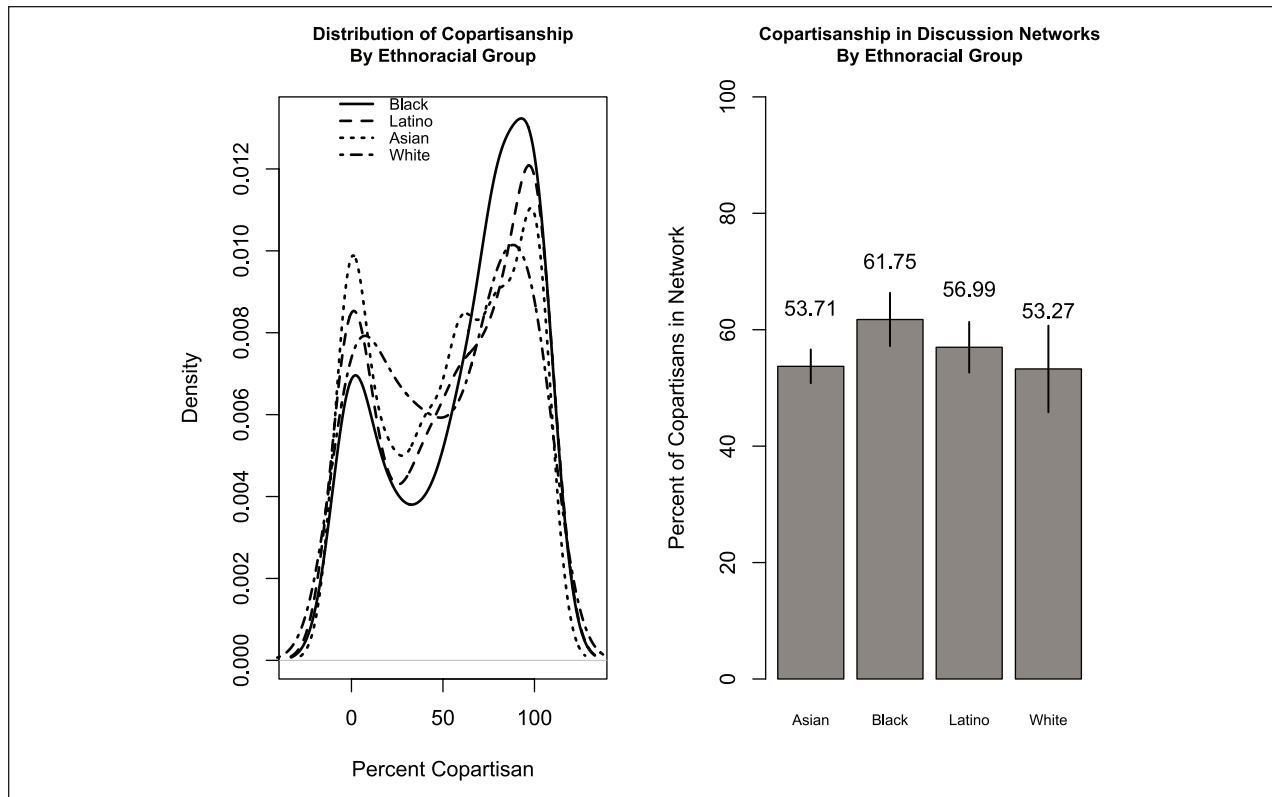
Figure 3. The left-hand panel shows the distribution of the percent of discussants in a network who are copartisans with the respondent. The right-hand panel shows the average percent of discussants who are copartisans with the respondent. Lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.

United States, age, gender, and education as well as for other precursors to engagement, such as political knowledge and involvement in secular and/or religious community groups.[17]

Table 1 presents the multivariate analysis investigating the relationship between discussion network characteristics (network size, percentage of copartisans in one's network, and discussion frequency) and self-reported political engagement. The results indicate that network size has a statistically significant, positive association with political engagement for Asian and Latino respondents. Partisan homogeneity is only associated with political engagement among Asians and whites. A one percentage point increase in the percentage of copartisans in one's discussion network is associated with an increase of about .01 political activities. Thus, while there is a positive and statistically significant association between partisan homogeneity and political engagement, this relationship lacks substantive significance. The frequency of discussions within political discussion networks is positively and significantly associated with political engagement.

Next, we examine the extent to which network characteristics explain political engagement above and beyond the various individual-level factors that have previously

been shown to influence political engagement. As the results in Table 2 highlight, substantial variation exists in the network effects across groups after these controls are introduced. Network size remains an influential characteristic among Asians. The relationship between partisan homogeneity and political engagement only remains among Asians, but the coefficient again is very small, making it difficult to interpret the substantive significance. The frequency of discussion in networks remains a significant factor in explaining political engagement among all ethnoracial groups examined. Even after controlling for several individual-level predictors of political engagement, some network characteristics still remain important. However, the impact between network characteristics and engagement is not the same across all ethnoracial groups.

Building on the results presented in Tables 1 and 2, we explore the relationship between discussion network characteristics and validated voter turnout. Table 3 presents the results examining the relationship between network characteristics and the number of the last five elections in which the respondents voted. Unlike self-reported engagement, neither network size nor partisan homogeneity in one's network were associated

Table 1. Relationship between Network Characteristics and Political Engagement.

	Dependent variable: Number of engagement activities selected			
	Asian	Black	Latino	White
Network size	0.413***	−0.068	0.394**	0.465
	(0.143)	(0.299)	(0.158)	(0.365)
Percent copartisans	0.008***	0.004	0.0002	0.010*
	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.006)
Discussion frequency	1.137***	1.451***	1.314***	1.312***
	(0.106)	(0.187)	(0.141)	(0.279)
Constant	−2.838***	−0.599***	−2.770***	−3.216
	(0.746)	(1.467)	(0.874)	(2.144)
Observations	598	240	290	96
R^2	.214	.224	.253	.227
Adjusted R^2	.210	.214	.245	.202
Residual SE	2.134 (df = 594)	2.304 (df = 236)	2.234 (df = 286)	2.038 (df = 92)
F statistic	53.889*** (df = 3; 594)	22.684*** (df = 3; 236)	32.310*** (df = 3; 286)	9.031*** (df = 3; 92)

*$p < .10.$ **$p < .05.$ ***$p < .01.$

Table 2. Relationship between Network Characteristic and Political Engagement with Controls.

	Dependent variable: Number of political engagement activities selected			
	Asian	Black	Latino	White
Network size	0.348*	−0.343	0.274	0.251
	(0.177)	(0.345)	(0.172)	(0.546)
Percent copartisan	0.008***	0.001	0.003	0.007
	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.007)
Discussion frequency	0.904***	1.230***	1.216***	1.039**
	(0.120)	(0.211)	(0.167)	(0.394)
Political knowledge	0.840***	0.635**	0.212	0.745
	(0.163)	(0.285)	(0.238)	(0.458)
Foreign born	0.048	−0.319	−0.005	−1.892
	(0.247)	(1.657)	(0.484)	(1.581)
Age	−0.024***	−0.005	−0.020*	−0.023
	(0.008)	(0.013)	(0.011)	(0.018)
Female	0.243	0.052	−0.140	0.418
	(0.196)	(0.367)	(0.298)	(0.531)
College	−0.131	0.596	0.162	0.027
	(0.237)	(0.363)	(0.326)	(0.583)
Secular group member	1.171***	1.634***	1.615***	0.339
	(0.237)	(0.465)	(0.328)	(0.751)
Religious group member	0.204	−0.174	0.142	−0.383
	(0.238)	(0.374)	(0.357)	(0.596)
Constant	−3.840***	−1.095	−2.636**	−2.281
	(1.000)	(1.660)	(1.120)	(3.276)
Observations	424	186	221	76
R^2	.360	.304	.393	.298
Adjusted R^2	.345	.264	.364	.190
Residual SE	1.954 (df = 413)	2.261 (df = 175)	2.120 (df = 210)	2.059 (df = 65)
F statistic	23.237*** (df = 10; 413)	7.648*** (df = 10; 175)	13.569*** (df = 10; 210)	2.755*** (df = 10; 65)

*$p < .1.$ **$p < .05.$ ***$p < .01.$

Table 3. Relationship between Network Characteristics and Validated Turnout.

	Dependent variable: Number of last five elections voted in			
	Asian	Black	Latino	White
Network size	0.073	0.279	0.044	0.028
	(0.080)	(0.193)	(0.086)	(0.251)
Percent copartisans	0.0002	0.002	0.001	0.004
	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.004)
Discussion frequency	0.275***	0.481***	0.371***	0.544***
	(0.060)	(0.120)	(0.075)	(0.201)
Constant	1.205***	−0.195	0.529	0.207
	(0.420)	(0.947)	(0.476)	(1.498)
Observations	625	243	299	98
R^2	.037	.094	.084	.080
Adjusted R^2	.032	.082	.074	.051
Residual *SE*	1.239 (*df* = 621)	1.487 (*df* = 239)	1.228 (*df* = 295)	1.482 (*df* = 94)
F statistic	7.879*** (*df* = 3; 621)	8.250*** (*df* = 3; 239)	8.977*** (*df* = 3; 295)	2.741** (*df* = 3; 94)

*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

with validated voter turnout among any of the groups examined. However, similar to self-reported engagement, the frequency of political discussion within one's network is positively, statistically significantly associated with validated voter turnout. Together, these results suggest that network characteristics explain turnout in nearly the same direction for all ethnoracial groups examined, yet the magnitude does vary by group.

Finally, we build on the results presented in Table 3 by controlling for the same individual-level variables as in our previous models. The results in Table 4 suggest that after introducing controls that have previously been shown to explain turnout, the relationship between network characteristics and turnout does not always remain. Even discussion frequency fails to explain turnout among most ethnoracial groups after including demographic and other controls. It appears that discussion network characteristics are only consistently associated with turnout before controlling for other factors that have been found to explain political behavior.

Data Limitations and Robustness Checks

The results of this analysis are quite informative, but we fully recognize that they are not without limitations. Because our sample came from individuals whom community organizations had in their contact lists, it is likely that our sampling is different from the average Asian, black, or Latino. In addition, those who had valid email addresses on file, spam filters that did not screen out our survey invitation email, and who ultimately completed the survey are likely different from those who did not complete the survey. Finally, although the characteristics

that make someone more or less willing to complete an online survey might not be related to our outcomes of interest, we cannot know for certain. For all these reasons, it is important to acknowledge that we are not able to make broad generalizations from this analysis.

To address the primary concern about the nonrepresentative nature of our respondent population, we analyzed three nationally representative surveys that include a name generator and, to the best extent possible, a large enough sample size of ethnoracial individuals. Three surveys fit these criteria: (1) the 1992–1994 Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI) was conducted in Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles[18]; (2) the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS), which is conducted by the National Opinion Research Center[19]; and (3) the 2008–2009 American National Election Panel Study.[20] By far, MCSUI contained the largest number of ethnoracial minorities; the study interviewed 1,390 Latinos, 2,179 blacks, 2,953 whites, and 1,128 Asian Americans. Both the GSS and ANES contain fewer ethnoracial group members relative to our survey; for instance, our survey contained 804 Latino respondents, relative to 75 Latino respondents in the GSS and 275 Latinos in the ANES. The discrepancies in the number of Asian American respondents also vary by survey. While our survey interviewed 1790 Asians, only 90 Asian American respondents were in the ANES and 101 in the GSS. Thus, just in terms of sheer sample size, our survey comes closer to the respondent demographics of the MSCUI than the GSS or ANES.

Across these different surveys, variations also exist in terms of exact question wording of the name generator, the types of network characteristics asked, and the number of discussants that respondents were asked to provide (it ranged from a minimum of three in the MCSUI to a

Table 4. Relationship between Network Characteristics and Validated Turnout with Controls.

	Dependent variable: Number of last five elections voted in			
	Asian	Black	Latino	White
Network size	0.008	0.224	0.064	−0.447
	(0.097)	(0.194)	(0.095)	(0.367)
Percent copartisan	0.001	0.00001	0.00003	0.004
	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.005)
Discussion frequency	0.181***	0.087	0.237**	0.362
	(0.068)	(0.119)	(0.092)	(0.265)
Political knowledge	0.309***	0.373**	0.340***	−0.022
	(0.093)	(0.160)	(0.130)	(0.308)
Foreign born	−0.472***	−0.684	0.038	−1.007
	(0.141)	(0.931)	(0.264)	(1.062)
Age	0.028***	0.047***	0.022***	0.025**
	(0.004)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.012)
Female	0.033	0.170	0.015	−0.103
	(0.111)	(0.206)	(0.164)	(0.357)
College	0.396***	0.200	0.498***	0.683*
	(0.135)	(0.204)	(0.179)	(0.392)
Secular group member	0.271**	0.279	0.087	−0.037
	(0.134)	(0.261)	(0.181)	(0.505)
Religious group member	0.007	−0.096	−0.194	−0.285
	(0.132)	(0.210)	(0.196)	(0.401)
Constant	−0.217	−1.661*	−0.691	2.202
	(0.547)	(0.932)	(0.618)	(2.201)
Observations	438	186	223	76
R^2	.209	.336	.229	.240
Adjusted R^2	.191	.298	.192	.123
Residual SE	1.128 (df = 427)	1.270 (df = 175)	1.171 (df = 212)	1.384 (df = 65)
F statistic	11.315*** (df = 10; 427)	8.868*** (df = 10; 175)	6.292*** (df = 10; 212)	2.054** (df = 10; 65)

$*p < .1. **p < .05. ***p < .01.$

maximum of eight in the 2008–2009 ANES). Despite these differences, we recognize the importance of validating our study with existing ones. Moreover, our ability to measure copartisanship in one's discussion network is limited to the ANES, given that the other two surveys did not ask this particular survey item.

From a broader standpoint, it is also important to recall that the seminal works that document the important relationship between discussion networks and political engagement were conducted on nonrepresentative samples as well. Huckfeldt and Sprague's (1995) study focused on respondents from South Bend, Indiana and Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee's (1954) research analyzed data from individuals living in Elmira, New York.

In terms of the copartisanship in one's networks, we can only compare our distributions with those from 2008–2009 ANES. As the results in Table 5 indicate, similar to our survey, the ANES survey reveals that blacks have the largest percentage of copartisans in their discussion networks, relative to other ethnoracial groups. In our survey, 61.75% of blacks had discussion networks with other copartisans, and in the ANES, it was 80.1%. In contrast, Asian

Americans reported the lowest percentage of copartisans in the ANES, 58.1%. We also saw a similar pattern emerge in our survey; Asians Americans and whites reported the lowest percentage of copartisans when compared with other ethnoracial groups. Once again, these comparisons offer us with some reassurance that the patterns we observe in our survey data are not anomalous to ethnoracial groups in California, nor does there appear to be any systematic biases in our data collection process and efforts.

We do our best to compare the average network size across the different surveys, though we note that the number of discussants that respondents were asked to provide varied greatly from survey to survey. In the MCSUI, respondents were able to list up to 3 discussants, whereas GSS respondents were asked to provide up to six discussants. The ANES provides respondents with an even greater number of named discussant—up to eight. Our survey asked respondents to provide five discussants. Despite these variations, two notable patterns emerge. First, whites tend to have the largest networks in our survey, MCSUI and the GSS. Second, in both our survey and the ANES survey, Asians report the smallest network,

Table 5. Comparison of Network Characteristics across Different Surveys.

	Latino	Black	White	Asian
Network size				
MSCUI (0–3)	1.42	1.74	2.13	1.08
GSS (0–6)	1.56	1.40	2.21	1.61
ANES (0–8)	6.09	6.03	5.77	4.89
Original survey (0–5)	3.32	3.44	3.94	3.22
Copartisanship				
ANES	60.5%	80.1%	64.6%	58.1%
Original Survey	56.99%	61.8%	53.3%	53.7%

MSCUI = Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality; GSS = General Social Survey; ANES = American National Election Studies.

when compared with other ethnoracial groups. That being the case, the sample sizes are particularly small for Asian American respondents in the ANES survey ($N = 90$), thus making us cautious about the inferences we can draw from these comparisons.

Conclusion

Our study presents a much needed and comprehensive analysis of the political discussion networks of ethnoracial group members. The results suggest that the standard beliefs about what political discussion networks look like and how they affect political behavior may not apply uniformly across Americans. We also find that the relationships between network size and discussion frequency and levels of political engagement vary across ethnoracial groups. Consistent with the research by Leighley and Matsubayashi (2009), we find that ethnoracial group members reported having significantly smaller political discussion networks than whites. Importantly, ethnoracial group members discuss politics with individuals in their networks less frequently than do whites. This pattern is consistent with the research by Leighley (2001) and Verba, Burns, and Schlozman (2003), who find that ethnoracial group members tend to talk about politics less than whites do. What is especially notable about our findings is that we see that the amount of political conversation that occurs in their discussion networks is also lower, vis-à-vis the discussion networks of whites (Wong et al. 2011).

We find that the partisan composition of political discussion networks is relatively stable across ethnoracial groups, with the exception of blacks having the most homogeneous networks, primarily dominated by Democrats. This finding supports previous work by both Dawson (1994) and Frymer (2010), both of whom contend that the allegiances of blacks are firmly rooted with the Democratic Party. Importantly, Latinos are the least certain about their discussants' political party affiliations, which is in line with the existing research documenting the unique political socialization process that

occurs for immigrant-origin groups, thereby leading them to identify more as Independents than as partisans (Abrajano and Alvarez 2011; Hajnal and Lee 2011). We also demonstrate that the relationship between partisan composition and political engagement varies across groups. Specifically, Asian Americans and whites engage in more political activities and are more likely to turn out to vote when they are in more politically homogeneous discussion networks, but we find no evidence of a relationship between partisan composition and political engagement for Latinos or African Americans.

We contend that the relative social positing of ethnoracial groups in U.S. society helps us understand why their political discussion networks look different from those of white Americans. More specifically, the empirical results reveal that the composition of political discussion networks varies across ethnoracial groups and due to these differences, its explanatory power on political engagement differs among blacks, Latinos, Asians, and whites. Our findings indicate that the frequency of political discussion within one's network was one of the most consistent predictors of political engagement. Yet, at the same time, we found that nonwhites discuss politics less frequently than their white counterparts. Thus, future research could consider possible interventions to increase the frequency of political discussion among nonwhites.

As for which of these network characteristics best explains political engagement, we find discussion frequency to be the most consistent predictor of turnout and nonelectoral participation. Partisan homogeneity seems to have little explanatory power on the political engagement of Latinos and blacks. Among Asians and whites, however, they are positively associated with rates of nonelectoral political engagement. In light of these findings, it is important to at least discuss the generalizability of political discussion network findings that cannot explicitly be compared across groups. At a minimum, our findings suggest that we need to know more about how political discussion networks influence attitudes and behavior among nonwhite voters.

Our research, consistent with the existing research on political discussion networks, analyzes networks as they exist at the time of data collection. But, considering how and when individuals develop their networks could be important for explaining the genesis of the patterns observed in our analysis. It will be especially important to consider when and how immigrants form their political discussion networks relative to those born in the United States.

Another research path worth exploring is a network-based approach to mobilizing nonwhite voters. Extant research on mobilization indicates that social pressure and network effects can powerfully increase turnout (e.g., Bond et al. 2012; Gerber, Green, & Larimer 2008), but this research does not explore the extent to which the results are the same across ethnoracial groups. As García Bedolla and Michelson (2012) demonstrate, not all mobilization strategies operate in the same manner for all target voters. Together with the results presented here, it stands to reason that mobilization efforts could take on a network-based approach in mobilizing voters that occupy more marginal social positions, potentially increasing engagement across numerous types of civic and political activities.

Our research only begins to scratch the surface on the role that discussion networks play in attitudes and political behavior among voters of color. Despite its limitations, we believe our study provides important insights and demonstrates fruitful directions for future research. We encourage scholars to conduct network studies across different regional, social, and political contexts in the United States and beyond, and to consider the many factors that might affect how networks develop, the impact they may have on political attitudes and engagement, and how those processes are influenced by voters' relative levels of marginalization and/or privilege.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental materials for this article are available with the manuscript on the *Political Research Quarterly* (PRQ) website.

Notes

1. Their research focus was on the relationship between network characteristics and individuals' policy preferences.
2. Our groups provided us with a total of 1,110,019 individuals. PDI was able to provide email addresses for roughly 20% of this sample.
3. We acknowledge that our sampling could have been improved had we used stratified listing or density quota sampling and multilingual surveys, as advocated by Barreto et al. (2018). We did seek to collect large samples of ethnoracial group members as the authors suggest, but our surveys were only available in English and Spanish.
4. The full invitation email and survey instrument are available in Supplemental Appendix A.
5. We started by only inviting about 10,000 respondents to participate in the survey because we did not know exactly what our response rate would be and we did not want to go over budget. We were also limited to only sending about 50,000 emails per week from our Qualtrics account, including reminder emails, so we had to start with a smaller sample. Once we got a better sense for our response rate, we started inviting larger numbers of individuals to participate.
6. Because this survey was fielded farther away from the election than the first survey, some survey questions were omitted or modified. A list detailing differences between the two surveys is available in Supplemental Appendix A, as well as the full survey instruments.
7. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 27% of California's population is foreign born.
8. Approximately 25% of our respondents are estimated to be Chinese (47.8% of Asian respondents). The other dominant Asian ethnicities were Vietnamese (17.1% of Asian respondents, 9% of the whole sample), Filipino (7.5% of

Asian respondents, 4% of the whole sample), East Indian (6.5% of Asian respondents, 3.4% of the whole sample), Japanese (5.4% of Asian respondents, 2.8% of the whole sample), Chinese/Korean (5.4% of Asian respondents, 2.8% of the whole sample), Chinese/Vietnamese (4.3% of Asian respondents, 2.3% of the whole sample), Chinese/Korean/Vietnamese (2.7% of Asian respondents, 1.4% of the whole sample), Korean (1.7% of Asian respondents, 0.9% of the whole sample), and Southeast Asian (Cambodian, Thai, Hmong) (1.4% of Asian respondents, 0.7% of the whole sample).

9. The self-reported data indicate that 0.98% of the foreign-born Latino respondents reported being from Uruguay, 1.96% were from Argentina, 1.96% were from Bolivia, 0.98% were from Costa Rica, 1.96% were from Cuba, 0.98% were from the Dominican Republic, 2.94% were from Ecuador, 8.82% were from Guatemala, 1.96% were from Honduras, 5.88% were from Nicaragua, and 2.94% were from Peru.

10. The PDI data include information about the median household income of an individual's census block based on their registration address. They do not provide individual-level income information.

11. Using party registration and contribution data to estimate party identification offers an advantage over self-reported party identification because we avoid any social desirability bias that individuals might experience reporting their partisanship on a survey.

12. In our analysis below, we use the inclusive operationalization of copartisanship, but our results remain robust if the strict operationalization is used, as shown in Supplemental Appendix C.

13. We also considered calculating vote propensity as the proportion of elections voted in since a person's registration date. However, PDI continually updates registration date (e.g., whenever someone moves) so we don't actually have the date when they first registered.

14. The specific activities were as follows: signed a paper or online petition; shared, reblogged, or retweeted news articles or petitions on social media; attended a political speech, march, rally, or demonstration; talked about politics on social media; given money to a political candidate; given money to an organization or cause; volunteered for a political campaign or political cause; contacted a government official either in person, by phone, email, social media, or with a letter; talked to anyone and try to show them why they would vote for or against one of the ballot initiatives or candidates; or joined a local community organization.

15. To view the full distributions of partisanship in each ethnoracial group studied, please see Supplemental Appendix C.

16. This analysis excludes those who did not list any discussants. About 20% of our respondents did not have any copartisans in their network. This does not appear to be an artifact of small network sizes: 85.5% of these respondents had five discussants in their networks, 5.3% had four discussants, 1.1% had three discussants, 2.5% had two discussants, and 5.7% listed only one discussant.

17. Our results are robust to controlling for contextual-level factors, such as median household income and the percentage of coethnics in the respondent's census bloc. Because these characteristics are not measured at the individual level, we exclude them from the analyses in the paper, but our results are robust to including them.

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