



The Relationship Between Governmental Trust and Political Behavior in the U.S.



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Introduction

- Researchers have identified a negative association between political trust and extra-institutional action as well as a positive association between trust and participation within European political institutions (Kaase, 1999; Hooghe & Marien, 2013).
- Additional work has tied political trust to party affiliation (Belanger, & Nadeau, 2005) or non-incumbent candidates (Hetherington, 1999), but little of this literature has focused on the United States
- Trust of US citizens is related to which party controls the executive branch of the federal government (Bell, 2024; Anderson & LoTempio, 2002)

Research Questions

- Are Americans who have greater levels of trust in the government more likely to participate in political discourse than those who distrust the government?
- Does this relationship differ between direct governmental participation and extra-institutional engagement?

Methods

Sample

- Respondents (n=6909) were drawn from the American National Election Survey (ANES) of 2020, a nationally representative sample of eligible voters in the United States.

Measures

- Three main types of political participation were explored, each related to a different level of utilization of existing governmental institutions. Respondents reported whether they had contacted their representatives, attended a protest, or engaged in community organizing in the past year. An additional aggregated variable was created which measured whether a respondent had engaged in at least one of these behaviors in the past year.
- Participants' trust in government was measured with the question "How often can you trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right?" Possible responses ranged from 0 (never) to 4 (always).
- Income and political party affiliation were utilized as potential moderating variables. Participant income was recorded by which of 5 percentiles their household earnings fell into, and participants could report their political party as Democrat, Republican, Independent, Unaffiliated, or Other.

Results

Univariate

- Americans have very low levels of trust in political institutions, with a majority rarely or only sometimes trusting the federal government to do what is right.

Bivariate

- Chi-Square analysis showed that trust in government was significantly associated with protesting ($p < .0001$), contacting representatives ($p < .0001$), and community organizing ($p = .0001$). This is also true of aggregate participation ($p < .0001$)

Multivariate

- Logistic regression analyses showed a significant negative association in all three cases, demonstrating that political participation decreases as trust increases (OR: 0.857; $p < .0001$).
- Income percentile significantly moderates the relationship between government trust and political participation in each case, but the direction of the association doesn't change.

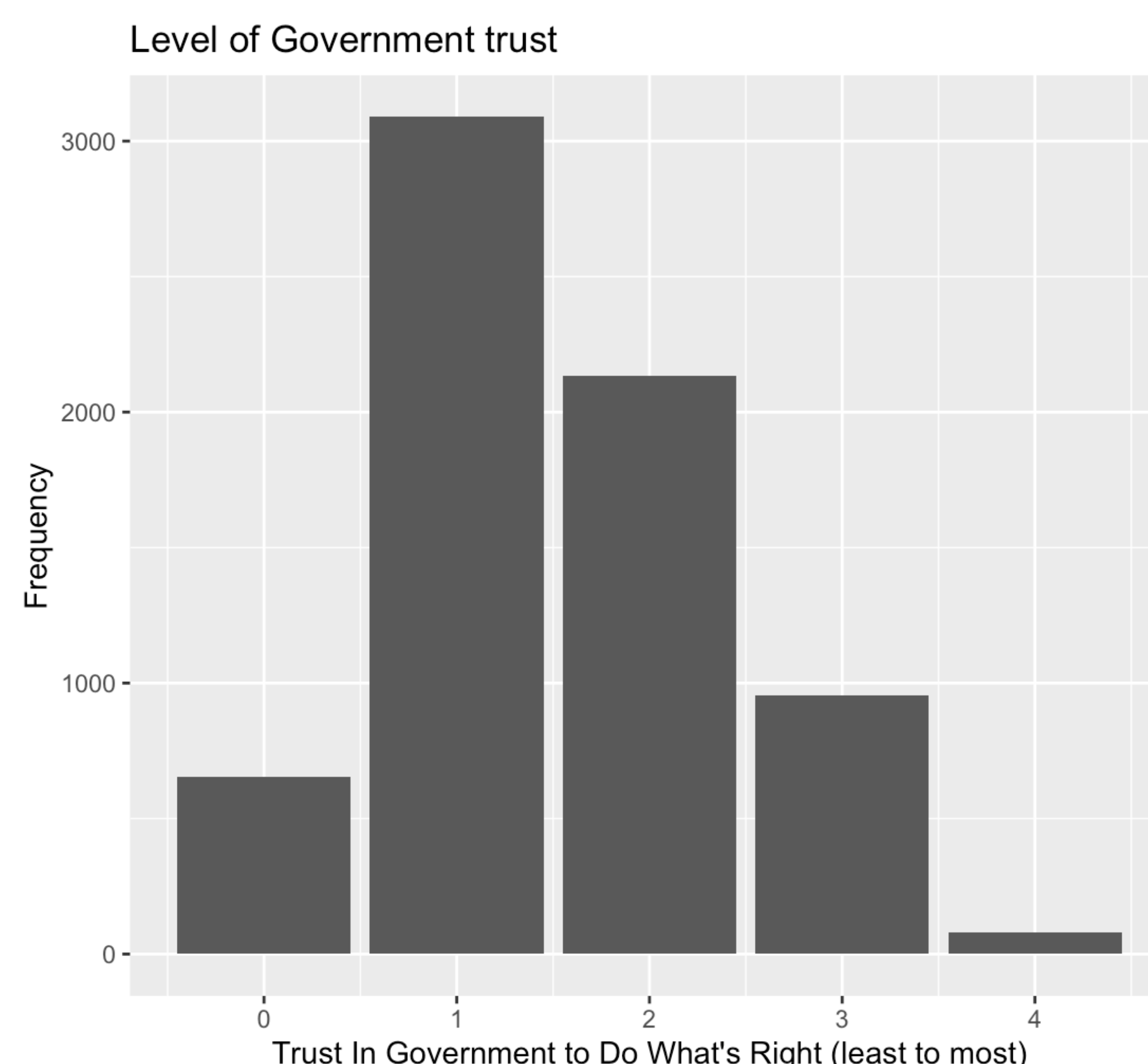


Figure 1: American Governmental Trust

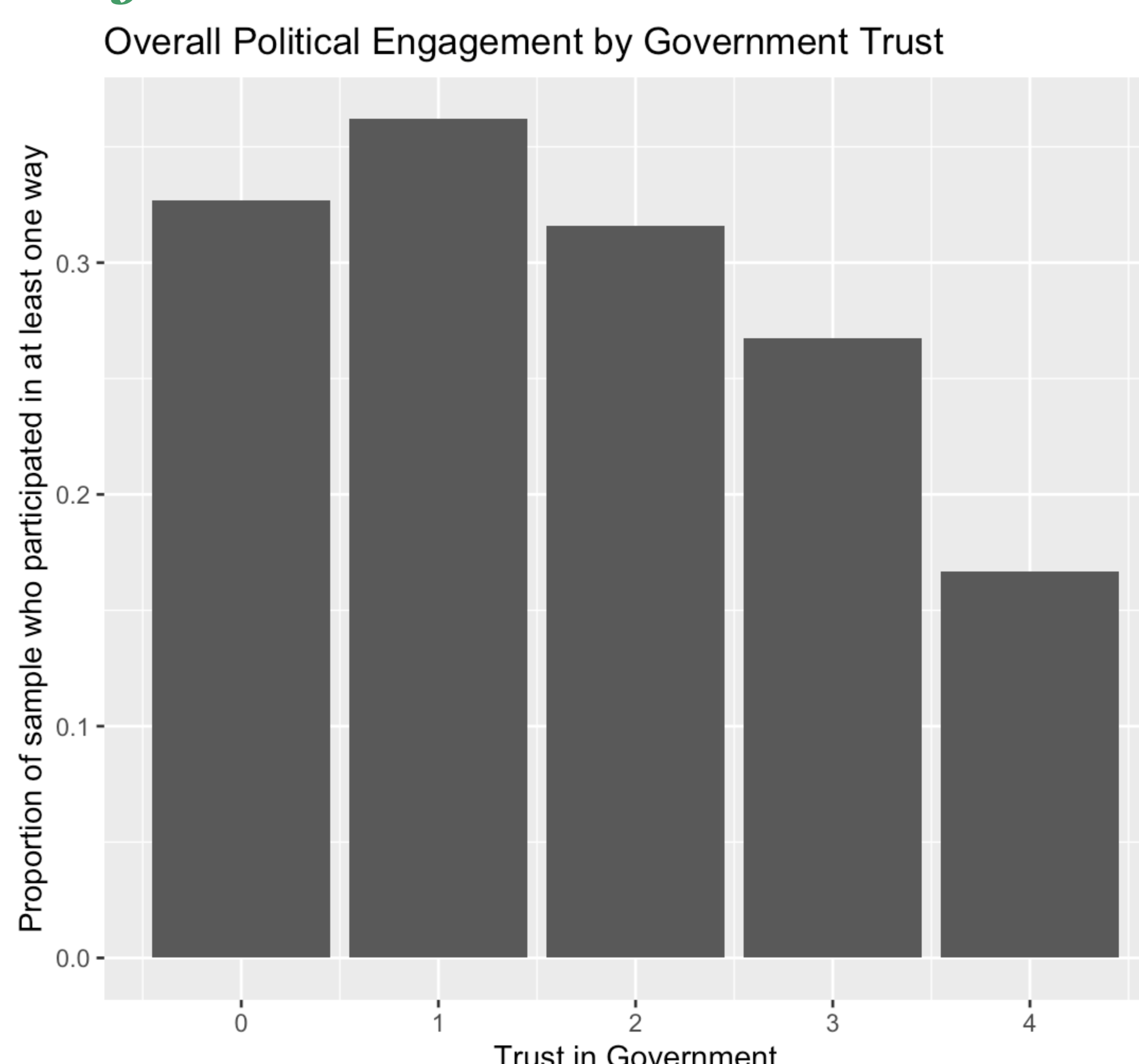


Figure 1: The Proportion of Respondents Engaging in at Least 1 Political Behavior by Trust

Discussion

- As trust increases, political participation of each type studied significantly decreases.
- These findings may contribute to political science research regarding American political trust and behavior.
- Future research is needed to determine the nature of the role of household income and whether this trend applies to other forms of political engagement not explored in this study.

References

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