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## Political Trust: Nature or Nurture

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## Political Trust: Nature or Nurture

### Abstract

This paper looked into the relationship between political trust, demographics (race and gender), and presidential election votes for 2012 and 2016. The purpose of this research was to see the baseline feelings of political trust in different demographics, as well as how those feelings of political trust changed depending on if they voted for in the winning candidate in the presidential election. Preliminary research has already been conducted on both of these topics; however, in this paper I sought to examine if an individual's race or gender affected the extent of a person's loss or gain in political trust when voting for the winning candidate in a presidential election. Using the NES dataset, political trust by gender, race, and 2012 and 2016 presidential votes were compiled. Then model estimations were put together using control variables for common confounding variable, such as age, religious attendance, and education. Overall, the findings showed a strong correlation between race and political trust. However, the paper failed to reject the null hypothesis in regards to whether or not race and gender affect the amount of political trust lost or gained when voting for the winning candidate in a presidential election. Meaning that race and gender have no statistically significant effect on political trust when voting for the winning candidate in a presidential election. This may have been due, in part, because of the small number of presidential election years used and more research should be conducted into this research topic.

### Keywords

Political Trust, Demographics, Race, Gender, Presidential Vote

### Disciplines

American Politics | Gender and Sexuality | Race and Ethnicity

### Comments

Written for POL 215: Methods of Political Science.

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# Political Trust: Nature or Nurture

## Research Question

My current research question asks: under what conditions do individuals trust their government? I would be splitting trust up into two categories: political trust and social trust. I believe that these categories are important to the question, because political and social trust are factors that effect the government's ability to garner public support, engage in civic activities, and generally participate in the political system. Political trust has a more direct link to our government and its political institutions, with political trust fluctuating depending on the state of the government and politics, especially around election. Despite these fluctuations in political trust, overall political trust has significantly decreased in these past decades with it recently hitting a historical low, which makes understanding what affects political trust all the more relevant and urgent today than ever because political trust affects the legitimacy of the government and if the citizens don't believe in the government's legitimacy, then why would they contribute to or follow the government. On the other hand, social trust is more affected by the political system than it is able to affect it. However, social trust should still be considered as an important factor because during times of crisis the government relies on citizen's trust in each other which is fundamental to them working together to solve the problem. With current events like Covid-19 and the January 6<sup>th</sup> riot, being able to trust others and our government are crucial to understanding and solving these types of issues now and into the future.

In terms of the paper's structure, I first want to give demographics an examination to look at their differences in trust, political and social, and see how being part of a certain demographic

changes your base level of political, this will be done by looking at groups categorized by race, gender, education, etc.. Then, I will take a look at if race and gender are differently effected by voting for the winning or losing candidate. Next, I will take a look at of social trust is effected by the same demographics as political trust and if they are effected in the same way that they effect political trust, as a way to check social trusts relevance and relation to political trust. Lastly, I'll have a conclusion that summarizes my findings and determines whether or not my hypothesis was correct or if a null hypothesis fits my findings better. Perhaps, I shall also attempt to connect the findings of the research to current events.

### Literature Review

Government plays an important role in people's lives whether they want it to or not. Trust in the government creates different political and social environments depending on the level of trust in the government in general and trust in governmental institutions. Namely, political trust is what is measured to understand the public's general level of trust in the government.

Meanwhile, social trust, another factor that can affect how well government runs, is used to measure how much a person trusts other people, which affects social cohesion and government projects that require the public to work together. Each group, whether that be political party or company, has its own level of political and social trust that is affected by the demographics that make up the group. Together, the concepts of social trust, political trust, and their effect on government efficiency make up the topics of literature that are applicable to my research.

Research into this connection between topics is relevant because public trust in government is at historic lows which impedes government efficiency, while troubling events have been happening worldwide that require the government to be competent at solving problems quickly and effectively.

## Demographics Effect on Government Trust

Although the research covers a wide variety of subjects, from elections to Covid-19, from countries all around the world, most studies show division between public opinions through what political party they associate with. When studies do not solely focus on party affiliation, they explore other demographics that also see a political party split. While this shows that general party affiliation affects trust, other studies look at subdivisions that make up political parties and analyze how their trust affects the general trust of the political party they are associated with. From the Pew Research Center's statistics, certain political party's trust seems to align well with the different races that are looked at. In 2022, with a Democrat president we can see that Democrats trust in the government to do what is right is at 29%, while Republicans trust in the government to do what is right is only at 9%. From more Pew Research Center statistics, we can see that 67% of African Americans are registered Democrats and 84% identify as or lean towards Democrats, while only 3% of African Americans are registered Republicans and 8% identify as or lean Republican. It's a bit less cut and dry with whites, 33% are registered Republicans and 51% identifying as or leaning Republican, while 26% are registered Democrats and 43% identify as or lean towards Democrats ("Trends in Party Affiliation" 2020). From connecting these statistics, it appears to corroborate with later Pew Research findings from 2022 that shows whites who say they trust the government to do what is right is at about 16%, while African Americans are at 24%. We can see an inverse with both political party trust and racial trust in 2017 with a Republican president. In 2017, Democrats trust in government was at 15%, while Republicans were at 28%. Whites trust in government was at 20%, while African Americans trust in government was at 13% ("Public Trust in Government" 2022). These statistics support other studies, like Ulbig's, that focus on other demographics than simply party affiliation. It confirms that these smaller subdivisions' feelings affect politics and that while

generic use of party affiliation can be similar when conducting a study, smaller demographic groups, like race, provide a clearer picture for how political trust is spread across demographic groups. While race is a good starting point for examining the trust of different groups, other studies look at gender and female representation in government's effects on political trust. Ulbig's study not only shows a new angle to view political trust and what affects it, but also cited studies that told us what doesn't affect political trust, such as attitudinal factors and interpersonal trust (Ulbig 2007, 1107). According to Ulbig, which demographics make up the legislature and how that affects political trust has been a long-ignored topic in the political science community. Using political awareness as a mediating factor, Ulbig, in a municipal government with no female representation, found that among citizens with low and high awareness there seemed to be no significant difference between men and women's trust in their municipal government. However, among moderately aware men and women, men were more trusting of their municipal government with them sitting at a probability of trusting them around .90, while women were only at a probability of .71. Although when the average female representation in the municipal government increased to the mean of 20.3%, then men's trust in government decreases from .90 to .86 and women's trust in government increases from .70 to .74 (Ulbig 2007, 1117). Although it contributes to the literature, this study only looks at the effects of women in a local municipal government, rather than a state legislature, and how those effects political trust. However, a larger scale study on, perhaps, a federal or state government would be able show that these results can be applied outside of a small setting. This study demonstrates the importance of smaller demographics being studied and how these seemingly small changes to government can affect how much the public trusts government to do what is right.

Events and Conditions that Effect Political Trust

While studies continue to use smaller demographics that carry their political trust with them into their analysis, current studies have moved away from what affects political trust into how political trust has affected elections, specifically the 2016 election. In the case of political trust, the Pew Research Center provides an in-depth analysis from 1958 to 2022 of which demographic's, including political party and race, political trust has fluctuated over the decades. These statistics showed an interesting trend that the party the who controls the presidency has higher trust in government than the party that does not ("Public Trust in Government" 2022). These statistics seem to support Anderson and LoTempio's study on feelings of political trust based on if a voter's presidential candidate won or lost, found that in 1972 and 1996 pre and post-election feelings of trust showed a significant increase when the voter voted for the winning presidential candidate (Anderson and LoTempio 2002, 341). Banducci and Karp had a similar study which cited Anderson and LoTempio's study but went beyond their conclusion to study winners and losers' level of support for the political system after their election wins or losses. Banducci and Karp's study concluded similar findings on system support that Anderson and LoTempio's study found for political trust, with winners showing more support for the political system and losers showing about 3.9% less support for the system (Banducci and Karp 2003, 454). Both Banducci and Karp and Anderson and LoTempio's studies seem to support Kern and Kölln's five-year examination of repeatedly losing elections and how it effects political trust and beliefs in the legitimacy of the government and its institutions through the analysis of several indicators of legitimacy beliefs. From the study, the repeated loss of elections seemed to show a decrease in political trust, but does not appear to affect political satisfaction. It also appears that the order changes how much your political trust decreases. If someone loses multiple times in a row they'll see about a 4.5% decrease in political trust the first loss and a 2.1% political trust loss

the second election loss. However, when comparing winning an election then losing an election to losing an election then winning an election has results that show that losing an election then winning an election show consistently decreased political trust in voters (Kern and Kölln 2022, 1006). Kern and Kölln's study agrees with Banducci and Karp as well as Anderson and LoTempio's earlier studies on political trust and support for the political system increases or decreases based on whether or not they voted for the winning candidate. Because democracies rely on voters accepting the results of the election and losers should have no incentive to change or question these results or else it could put the democracy at risk through their lack of faith in the government and its processes. This sentiment from Anderson and LoTempio, Banducci and Karp, and Kern and Kölln agree with Hetherington's essay on the relevance and importance of political trust. While most articles assume that we know how important political trust is, Hetherington's essay reminds us that the public's trust in the government is a driving factor in how efficient the government is, which affects how quickly policy can be made and support can be rallied for causes (Hetherington 1998, 792). It also reminds us that political trust is just one factor attributing to government efficiency and efficacy, social trust also presents itself as a prominent factor in government efficiency and efficacy in troubles times.

#### Events and Conditions that Effect Social Trust

Political and social trust don't seem to be included together in many, if any, of the studies that have been reviewed. Although political trust affects politics and government, social trust is affected by politics and government. This can be seen through Lee's study on how social trust has been affected as the perception of political polarization has changed in the view of the public. Lee's study, Pew Research Center, and Utych's study all seem to agree that political polarization, or at least perceptions of it, have recently increased in the US, but Lee's and



Utych's studies focus on different effects of this polarization. From Lee's study, they found that while adopting extreme opinions and beliefs had a statistically insignificant affect on social trust, perceiving greater political polarization showed to have a negative affect on social trust, almost down 8.7 to 9.6 percentage points (Lee 2022, 1547). While Utych's study on Covid-19 responses based on political ideology studies a different topic's than Lee's, they both seem to agree that political polarization effects society and the government's ability to have success convincing the public to do something. Utych's study specifically focuses on mask wearing during Covid-19 and how ideological differences between Democrats and Republicans affected social cohesion to conform with mask mandates. From the study, it appeared that Republicans were less likely overall to wear masks, due in part to their lower political trust (Utych 2021, 92). Not only might it be due to right-wing parties lower political trust, but also because, according to Berning's study on social trust and support of right-wing parties, that those who have low social trust are more likely to vote for right wing party's than those with higher social trust (Berning 2017, 200). Together, these studies show that political and social trust go hand in hand and that social trust should be considered more in the sphere of political science. Although social trust doesn't have as much of a direct connection and effect on politics, it does affect politics and the public's perception of government.

Overall, it seems that trust in the government is a far more important topic than I had previously considered. There seemed to be a plethora of studies concerned with the public's trust in government and how they perceived the legitimacy of government institutions. However, there did appear to be a gap with regards to social trust not being examined to the same extent or with the same value as political trust and other political variables. As well as a gap with regards to smaller more indirect variables and how they affect political trust, as was mentioned by Ulbig.

Banducci and Karp's study also had the limitation of data for the three countries they studied, New Zealand, US, and Britain, not all overlapping in years, which may have affected the comparisons drawn between the countries in the study. Bernings study also had a similar problem with missing or unavailable data. Hopefully, in the future the literature will move to close these gaps in the literature, especially the gap with social trust due to recent events, such as Covid-19 and January 6<sup>th</sup> that seemed to have eroded our trust in others.

### Hypothesis

The tentative answer to my research question would be that individuals are most likely to trust their government when they feel it is working well. For demographic groups, I think what demographic group a person is a part of can affect political trust significantly and that is likely due to previous government oppression of minority groups, which is why they might have lower political trust than majority demographic groups. Then from what we can see from individuals who elect the winning candidate in an election, they have increased political trust and support for the political system, because, for them, the system is working well if their candidate was elected.

Due to the two different dependent variables I will be analyzing, I will need two hypotheses that look at what conditions most affect political and how demographics effect political trust. For demographic groups, I want to focus on minority demographic groups versus majority demographic groups to see if being a part of a certain group affects political trust. For political trust, due to extensive studies on the topic, I will have the main condition that effects people's government trust be focused around elections.

### Hypothesis 1:

- In a comparison of individuals, those who are black or women will be more likely to have lower political trust, than those who are white or male.

Hypothesis 2:

- In a comparison of individuals, those who are white or male that vote for the winning presidential candidate are more likely to have greater political trust in the government, than those who are black or women vote for the winning presidential candidate.

## Research Design

### Introduction

In order to test these hypotheses, I examined the data from the National Election Survey (NES) dataset from both the years 2012 and 2016. This data was collected in The United States of America from eligible voters and had 5,914 respondents to the survey in 2012 and 4,270 respondents for 2016.

These datasets were selected due to their relevance to American presidential elections and demographics in America. These surveys asked respondents their race and gender. As well as, asked respondents a number of questions about who they voted for, their feelings about government officials, and their feelings of trust in the government. I selected NES datasets from 2012 and 2016 because they have two different party winners with one being a Republican and one being a Democrat, which is necessary for analyzing the differences in political trust and feelings about government officials when a voter elects a candidate who wins the presidential election. While previous data does show that there is correlation between voting for the winning presidential candidate is linked to increased political trust, this paper also seeks to look at more variables close to the topic and compare that to demographics. By comparing it to demographics, this paper looks the extent to which the losing or winning party's political trust is affected changes by demographics. For example, if a hypothetical white man in the Democratic party who

voted for the losing candidate in 2016 experiences as much of a lose in political trust as a hypothetical black woman in the same position. Some constraints on these datasets are the fact that the NES datasets don't explore direct feelings about presidential candidates.

### Variable Measurements

In order to operationalize political trust I used the 'trustgov\_trustgrev' variable. The question that the 'trustgov\_trustgrev' variable asks is "How Often the Government can be Trusted to do What is Right?" While the wording of the question, specifically the 'what is right' portion can lead to more subjective answers about what is 'right,' it still fits the notion of how often the government can be trusted. This is an ordinal variable with five categories: 1 "Always," 2 "Most of the Time," 3 "About Half the Time," 4 "Some of the Time," and 5 "Never." The mode of this data was 4 "Some of the Time," with the mean being 3.6. Race was operationalized through I used the 'demraceeth2' variable. The question that the 'dem raceeth2' variable asks is "White/Black?" With 77.48% of respondents being White and 22.52% being Black. This variable is very similar to the nominal variable 'female' that asks the respondent "Is R female?" with 47.1% Male and 52.9% Female. In In Table 1, we can see the mean of white and black, male and female and their level of political trust. A higher mean equaling a higher level of political trust, from the 'trustgov\_trustgrev' variable 5 = "Always Trust the Government to do What is Right," while 1 = "Never Trust the Government to do What is Right."

DATA FOR female VARIABLE 2012

**Table 1 : Mean Political Trust Levels Using Race**

	Mean Level of Political Trust	Standard Error	n
White Men	2.27	.804	869
White Women	2.35	.783	833
Black Men	2.59	.939	539
Black Women	2.62	.928	618

From this chart we can clearly see that black men and women have higher levels of political trust than their white counterparts, with women having a marginally higher level of political trust than their male counterparts no matter the race. Black Women show a mean of 2.62, which is three points higher than Black Males who have a political trust mean of 2.59. Both of these figures are higher than either White Men or White Women, with White Women sitting higher than White Men at a mean of 2.35, while White Men are at a mean of 2.27 on the political trust scale. The following Figure 1 shows this relationship with confidence intervals to help identify if the relationship has any statistical significance.

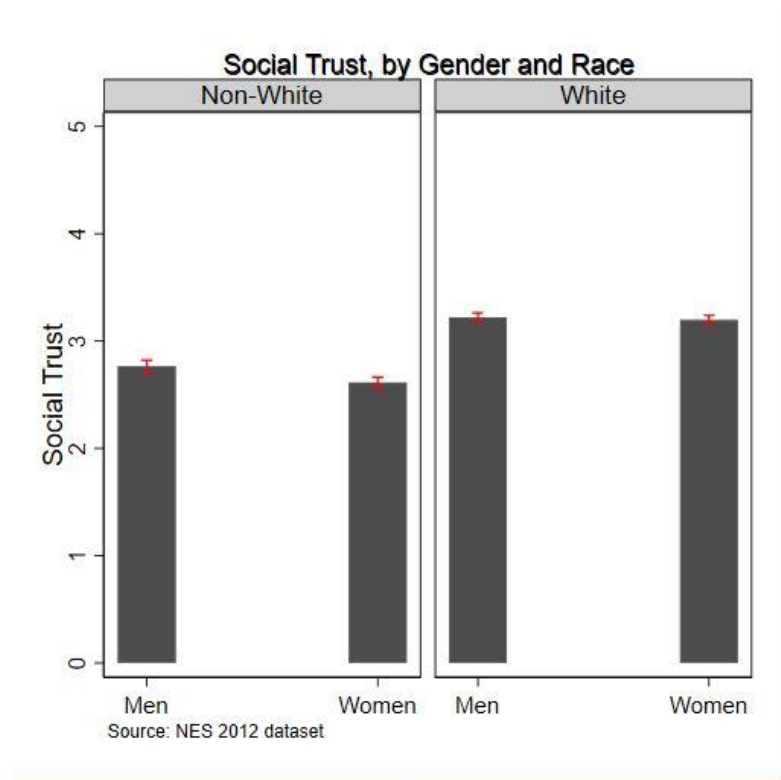
**Figure 1:**

**BASIC GRAPH OH RACE + GENDER POLITCAL TRUST**

This process was repeated with the variable ‘trust\_social,’ which is an ordinal variable that asks respondents “How Often Can People Be Trusted?” The answers contain five categories: 1 “Always,” 2 “Most of the Time,” 3 “About Half the Time,” 4 “Some of the Time,” and 5 “Never.” The mode of this data was 4 “Some of the Time,” with the mean of this variable being

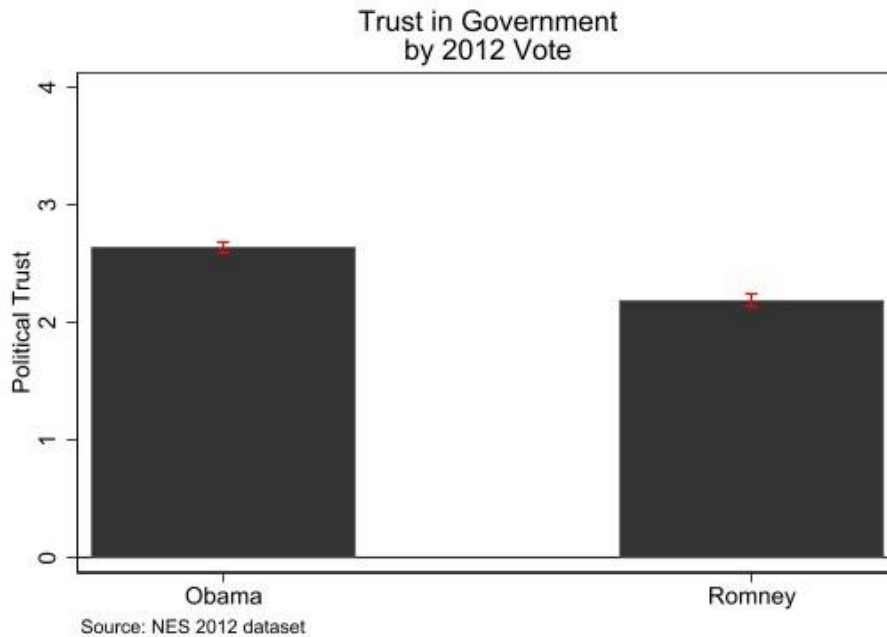
3.004. We can see the relationship with confidence intervals between social trust, gender, and race in Figure 2.

**Figure 2:**



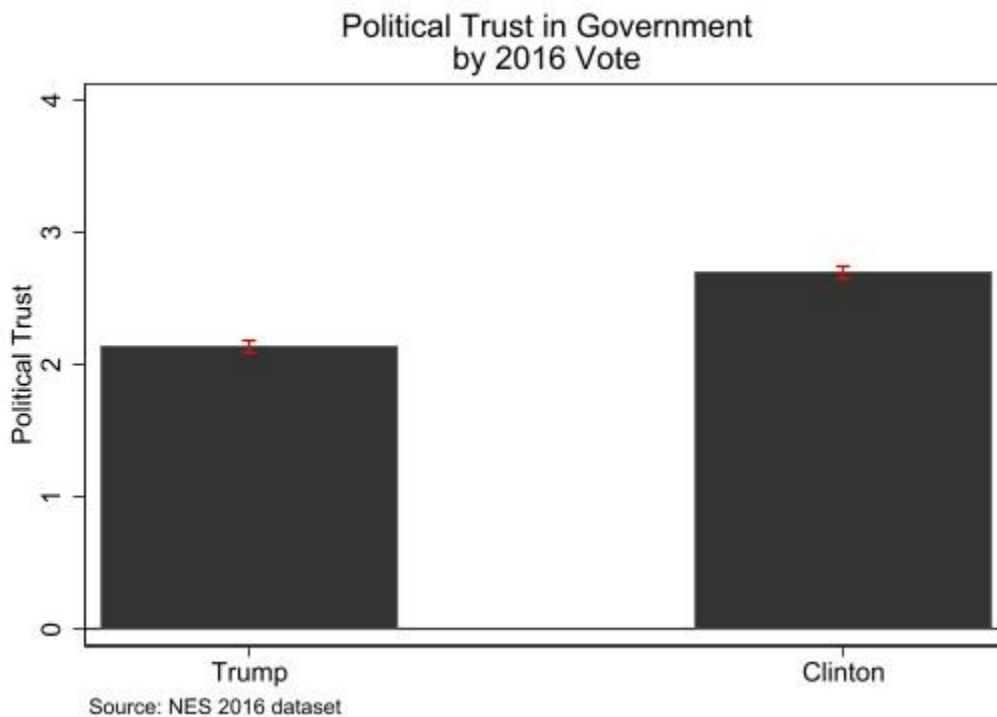
Although previous research looked at the relationship between voting for the winning candidate and an increased level of political trust, We can see this relationship for 2012, but in 2016 Trump voter’s political trust did not surpass the political trust of Clinton voters. From 2012, we use the variable ‘postvote\_presvtwho,’ which asks respondents “For Whom Did R Vote for President?” 58.01% of respondents answered Obama, while 39.29% answered Romney. We can see this relationship with confidence intervals in the following Figure 3.

**Figure 3:**



In 2016 we use the NES 2016 dataset, with similar variables. The variable for operationalizing political trust being ‘political\_trust’ that has the same exact question, answers, and order for the answers as the NES 2012 variable. The next variable being ‘Clinton\_vote,’ which asks respondents if they voted for “Clinton or Trump?” 47.72% responded with Trump and 52.28% responded with Clinton. We can see the relationship with confidence intervals that was mentioned earlier with Trump voter’s political trust not surpassing the political trust of Clinton voters after the election in Figure 4.

**Figure 4:**

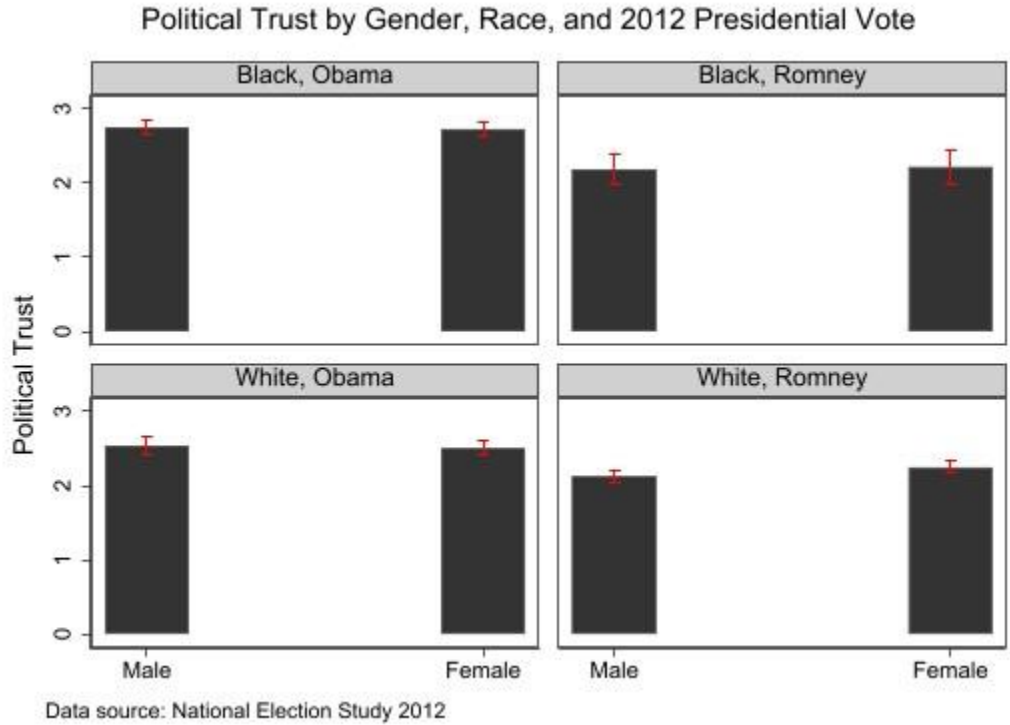


Later in the paper variables from the NES 2016 dataset will be used to determine gender and race of the respondents, both of which are nearly identical in question and available answers to their NES 2012 counterparts. To operationalize gender for the 2016 dataset the variable ‘Female’ will be used, which asks respondents “Is R female?” with 47.1% answering Male and 52.9% answering Female. To operationalize race for the 2016 dataset the variable ‘Race2’ was used, which asks the respondents “White/Black?” With 88.42% of respondents being White and 11.58% being Black.

When the respondent’s race, gender, and vote for the presidential 2012 and 2016 election is considered, we get the following graphs with confidence intervals with them being 2012 and 2016 respectively.



**Figure 5:**



**Figure 6:**

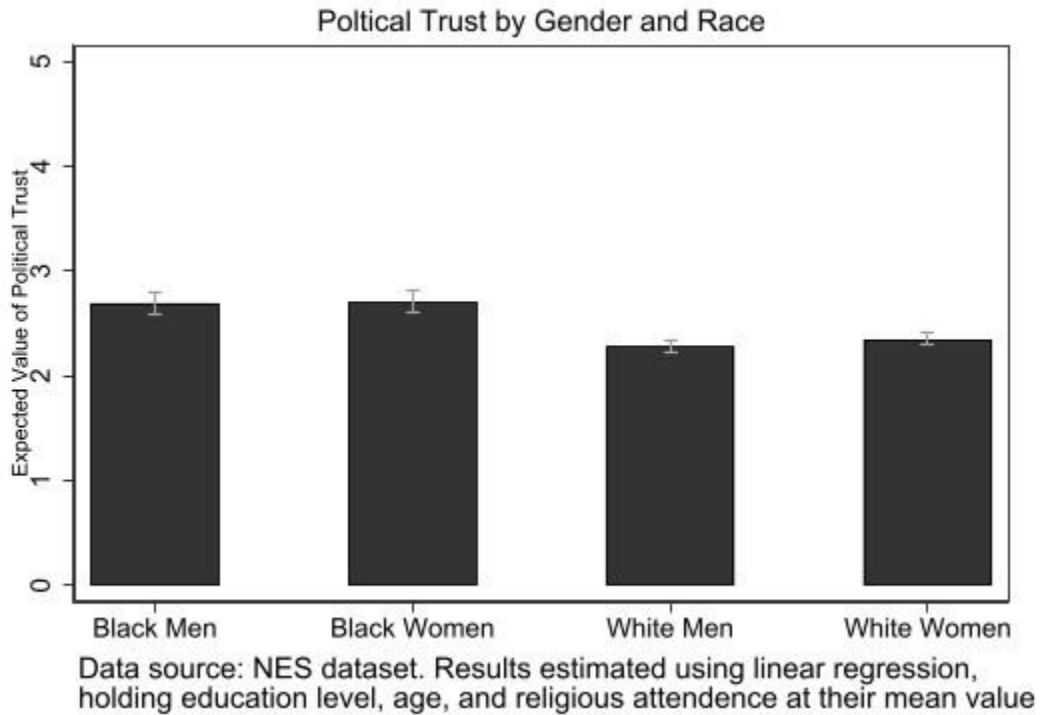
PAGE 2016 VERSION OF ABOVE GRAPH

### Model Estimation

The dependent variable, how often does one trust the government to do what is right, is an ordinal variable which is why I decided to do a linear regression to approximate each demographic's political trust, as well as any demographic differences in levels of political trust after voting for the winning/losing candidate in a presidential election. The first regression, shown in Figure 7, demonstrates differences in how often the government can be trusted to do

what is right by gender and race, while holding education levels, age, and religious attendance at their means. Black Men are held as the constant in the regression table.

**Figure 7:**



ADD 2012 POLICAL TRUST DEMOGRAPHICS REGRESSION TABLE HERE

**Model 1: Expected Value of Political Trust by Gender and Race**

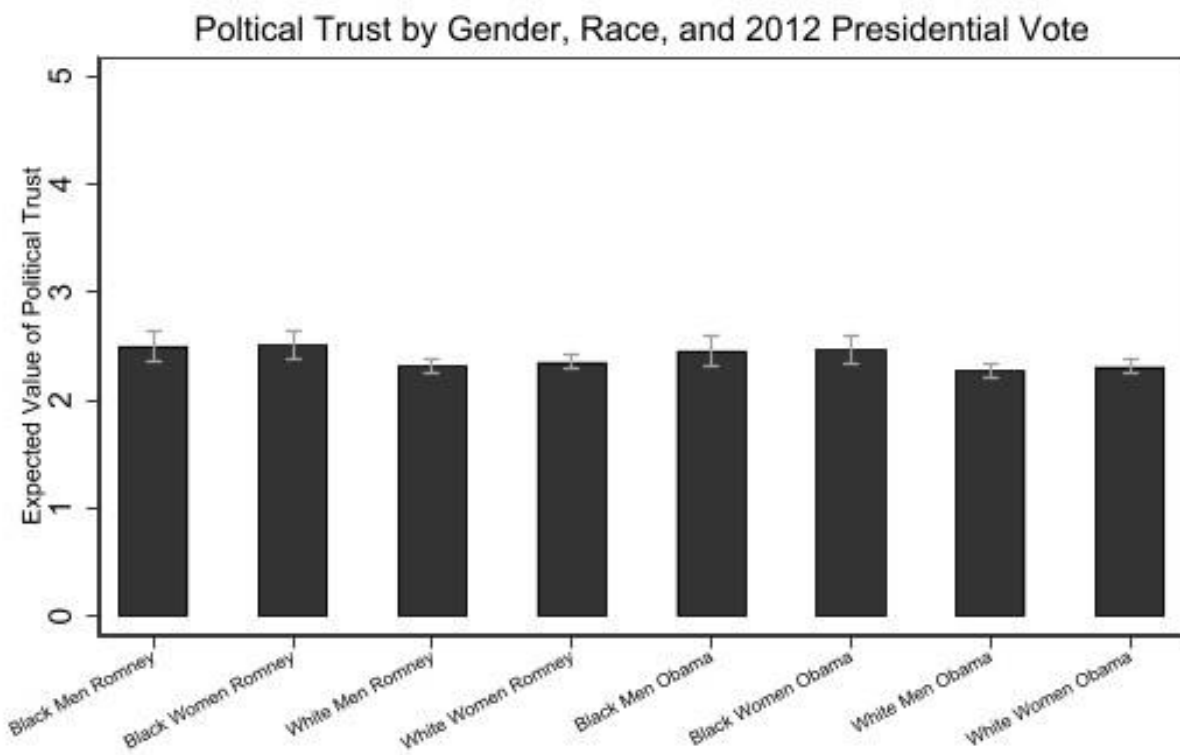
This model supports the earlier observation that Black Men and Black Women have higher levels of political trust than White Men and White Women.

LOOK AT EXAMPLE PAPER FOR WHAT TO SAY ABOUT REGRESSION TABLE

ADD REGRESSION TABLE FOR POLITICAL TRUST + RACE + GENDER

Next, the second regression, shown in Figure 8, demonstrates differences in how often the government can be trusted to do what is right by gender, race, and who the respondent voted for in 2012 either Obama or Romney, while holding education levels, age, and religious attendance at their means. In this regression Black Men and Voting for Obama is held as the constant.

**Figure 8:**



Data source: NES dataset. Results estimated using linear regression, holding Education Level, Age, and Religious Attendance at their mean values

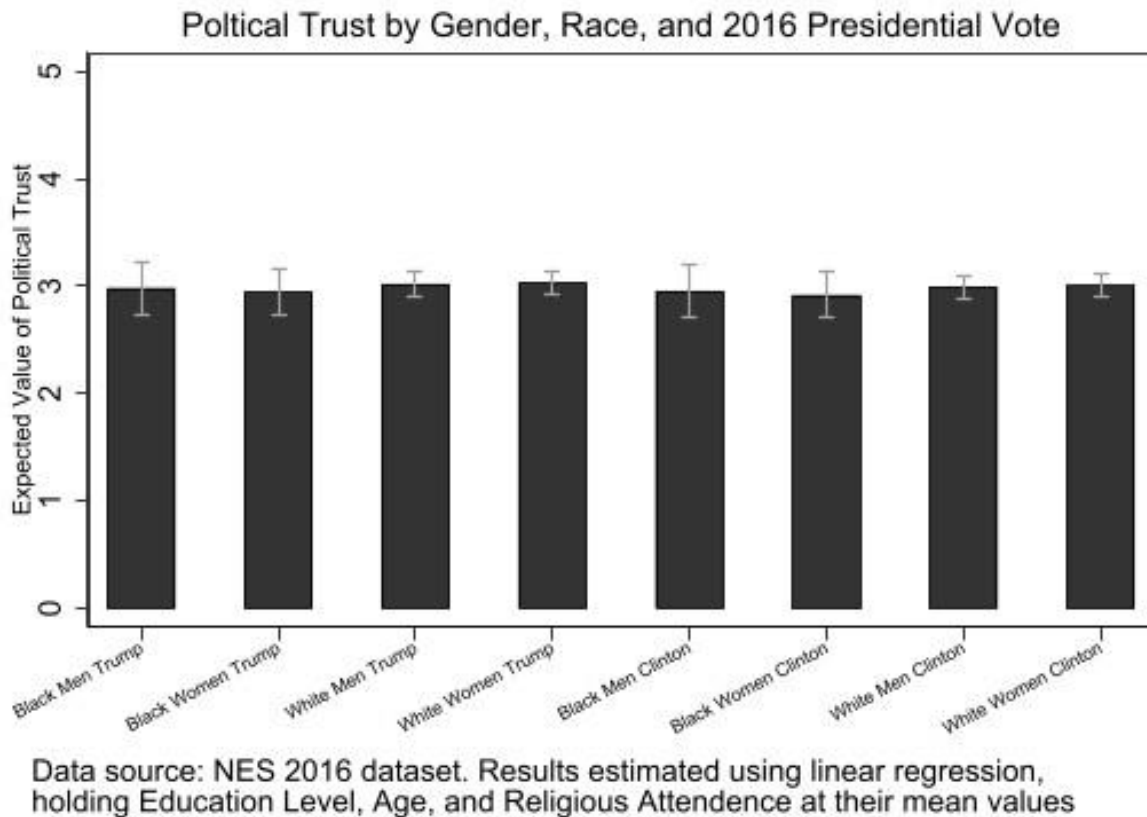
**Model 2: Expected Value of Political Trust by Gender, Race, and 2012 Presidential Election Vote**

LOOK AT EXAMPLE PAPER FOR WHAT TO SAY ABOUT REGRESSION TABLE

ADD REGRESSION TABLE FOR 2012 PRES VOTE + RACE + GENDER

Lastly, the third regression, shown in Figure 9, demonstrates differences in how often the government can be trusted to do what is right by gender, race, and who the respondent voted for in 2016 either Trump or Clinton, while holding education levels, age, and religious attendance at their means. In this regression Black Men and Voting for Clinton is held as the constant.

**Figure 9**



**Model 2: Expected Value of Political Trust by Gender, Race, and 2012 Presidential Election Vote**

LOOK AT EXAMPLE PAPER FOR WHAT TO SAY ABOUT REGRESSION TABLE

ADD REGRESSION TABLE FOR 2016 PRES VOTE + RACE + GENDER

## Discussions and Conclusions

Overall,

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