

An Empirical Study of Trust in the Current and Past U.S. Administrations

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Abstract

This study conducted a survey to determine the level of trust among registered voters with the Biden and Trump Administrations. The results indicate that the level of trust depends on the respondent's political party. The study also determined that the level of trust, even among partisan and independent voters, was not extremely high.

Key words: trust, politics, political marketing the U.S. Presidency

Introduction

A national election study began in 1958, and at that time, about three-quarters of respondents indicated that the federal government could be counted on to do the right thing. The 1960s saw an erosion of this trust. Major events, such as the Vietnam War, were thought to be the cause of this decline. In the past decades, the percentage of people who say that they trust the government always or a good part of the time has not surpassed 30%. (Pew Research)

Recent developments such as the spread of COVID 19 and the controversial 2016 and 2020 elections, have raised more questions of trust in the government. The following study appears in a report sponsored by the Rand Corporation "Decline in Trust in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention During the COVID-19 Pandemic." This report demonstrates that trust in governmental institutions has been declining. Moreover public opinion caused the Justice Department to appoint a special prosecutor to determine if the Trump Campaign colluded with Russia to steal the 2016 election (Mueller et al., 2019). The POLITICO/Morning Consult Poll conducted after the 2020 election, among 1,987 registered voters, found that 70% of Republicans did not think that the elections were legitimate. For the above reasons, the author conducted a survey to determine the degree of trust that the American electorate has in the federal government, specifically the current and past administrations.

Literature Review

There is no consistent measure that defines and measures trust. Because trust is a complex construct, it is difficult to define and measure (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). There has been a great deal of literature on trust; for example, (Rotter, 1967; Driscoll, 1978; Swan, Trawick, Rink, & Roberts, 1988; McCallister, 1995), covering trusting personality traits, and (Schurr & Ozanne, 1985; McKnight, Choudhury & Kacmar, 2002), exploring trust as a behavior in exchange relationships.

There are also a number of dimensions that make up the way it has been defined and measured. One dimension would be an individual's disposition to trust others, the first attempt at measuring (Rotter's, 1967). Another dimension is the ability of a person to open themselves up to others (Zand, 1971; Morrow, Hansen, and Pearson, 2004). Relationships where one entity has a great deal of power and the dependent entity has little, creates a sense of vulnerability. (Rousseau et al., 1998) described trust as the willingness to accept this vulnerability "based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another" (p. 35).

After an extensive literature of trust research in the social sciences, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) found that the variables used the most in measuring the trustworthiness of another party were benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness. This led them to the following definition: "Trust is one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter is (a) benevolent, (b) reliable, (c) competent, (d) honest, and (e) open." These trusting relationships are especially important in organization-public relationships. From an organizational perspective, trust is often a collective judgment of one group that another group will be honest, meet commitments, and will not take advantage of others (Bradach & Eccles, 1989; Cummings & Bromily, 1996).

Research Instrument

A survey was conducted in 2008 by Brad Rawlins of Brigham Young University, which made use of 12 statements to identify trust. It utilized agree/disagree statements. Respondents were asked to use a scale of 1 to 7 to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. The statements were followed by which dimension of trust they measure, for instance, integrity. This organization treats people like me fairly and justly. (Integrity). In the research instrument, the word organization was changed to the Trump or Biden Administration. The author found this survey to be the most useful in determining voter trust in a U.S. administration, and the questions are as follows:

- 1) I am willing to let the _____ Administration make decisions for people like me.
- 2) I trust the _____ administration to take care of people like me.
- 3) I feel very confident about the skills of the _____ Administration. (1 to 3 Overall Trust)
- 4) The _____ Administration has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.
- 5) The _____ Administration is known to be successful at the things it tries to do.
- 6) The _____ Administration treats people like me fairly and justly. (4–6 4 to 6 Competence)
- 7) The _____ Administration can be relied on to maintain its promises.
- 8) Sound principles seem to guide the behavior of the _____ Administration
- 9) The _____ Administration does not mislead people like me.
- 10) Whenever the _____ Administration makes a decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me. (7 to 10 Integrity)
- 11) I believe the _____ Administration takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.
- 12) The _____ Administration is interested in the well-being of people like me, not just itself. (11 and 12 Goodwill)

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to measure the degree of trust held by registered voters for the Biden Administration and the Trump Administration.

Methodology

This study used survey results from a sample of registered voters to assess the degree of trust held by them for the current Biden and past Trump Administration. Respondents were registered voters who were recruited from various parts of the country. They were given a series of statements from the 12 statements, previously outlined, and asked to indicate their agreement on a seven-point Likert scale.

Sample

Of the 710 surveys sent out, 519 valid responses were obtained. There were 288 responses for the Biden administration and 231 responses for the Trump administration.

The sample was split into 244 men and 275 women. It included 208 Democrats, 132 Republicans, 156 independents, and 23 members from other parties. The ages of the respondents ranged from 18 to over 65; there were 126 respondents aged 18-30, 206 aged 31–50, 103 aged 51–65, and 84 aged over 65.

The education of the respondents ranged from high school graduates to postgraduates and higher degrees. There were 82 high school graduates, 139 respondents with some college, 158 college graduates, 38 with postgraduate education, and 102 with postgraduate or higher degrees.

The annual family income of the sample ranged from less than \$20,000 to over \$120,000 per annum. A total of 41 respondents earned less than \$20,000, 86 earned between \$21,000 and \$40,000, 88 earned between \$41,000 and \$60,000, 73 earned between \$61,000 and \$80,000, 104 earned between \$81,000 and \$120,000, 83 respondents earned over \$120,000, and 44 respondents preferred not to answer.

There were 57 respondents from New England, 52 from the Middle Atlantic States, 90 from the South Atlantic States, 70 from East North Central States, 23 from West North Central States, 51 from East South Central States, 71 from West South Central States, 33 from Mountain States, and 72 from Pacific States.

In terms of the most important issue facing the United States, 228 respondents thought that the economy was the most important issue; 97 saw immigration as the most important; 84 thought that race relations was the most important issue, 67 saw terrorism as the most important issue, and 43 indicated crime as being the most important.

Results

Table 1 shows the total trust scores for the President Biden administration and the trust scores for the Trump administration. This score represents the average score of all 12 trust factors in the survey instrument. In this metric, Biden scored higher.

Table 1
Biden

Total		
Mean	N	Std. Deviation
3.8163	288	2.14381

Trump

Mean	N	Std. Deviation
3.3146	231	2.11733

Table 2 shows the total trust scores for each administration by party affiliations. In both cases, it is clear that the degree of trust is dependent on the political party of the administration. Democrats were more trusting of the Biden administration than the Republicans.

Table 2

Biden

Party	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Democrat	5.3349	124	1.37538
Independent	3.4910	78	1.97175
Republican	1.8476	76	1.39312
Other party	2.4840	10	1.96972
Total	3.8163	288	2.14381

Trump

Party	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Democrat	2.4315	84	1.88224
Republican	5.0817	54	1.73007
Independent	3.0609	80	1.94995
Other Party	3.2423	13	1.79586
Total	3.3146	231	2.11733

Table 3 shows the total trust scores for each administration by gender. It is clear that the level of trust for both administrations does not vary by gender. This is also the case for other demographic divisions. There was no significant difference in trust in terms of age, income, region of the country, and issue.

Table 3

Biden

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Men	3.7589	134	2.13638
Women	3.8662	154	2.15598
Total	3.8163	288	2.14381

Trump

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Men	3.3890	110	2.07550
Women	3.2470	121	2.16104
Total	3.3146	231	2.11733

Discussion

It is obvious that the degree of trust depends on party affiliation. Democrats trust the administration more when there is a Democrat administration, and the reverse is true with a Republican administration. Initially, it appears that people were more trusting of the Biden administration than the Trump administration. Since the sample is heavily weighted with Democrats (208 Democrats, 132 Republicans), the comparison is not quite fair. I performed an independent t-test comparing the amount of trust between both administrations solely among independent voters. The results of this test demonstrated that there was no statistically significant difference in the trust metric between the Trump and Biden administrations among independent voters.

There was no significant difference among any other demographic entities, that is, gender, income, region, or issue.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the voter's degree of trust in an administration depends on the party in power in the White House. Democrats have more trust in the government when a Democrat is president and vice versa. It should also be noted that the highest total ratings of trust for any group does not exceed 5.3 which is equivalent of "slightly agree" to "moderately agree." The total numbers for both administrations do not get past 3.8 between (slightly disagree) and (neither agree nor disagree). In general, this study indicates that there is a considerable trust gap between the average American voter and the administration.

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