In Party We Trust? Voter Support for Party-Backed Candidates in Primary Elections

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Abstract

When parties decide, do voters listen? We argue the answer is yes, but it depends on voters' trust in the institutions of American politics. Using a conjoint experiment with 1,195 subjects each "voting" in five congressional primary elections with randomly assigned candidate pairings, we find that both Democratic and Republican respondents are indeed more likely to support a candidate in a congressional primary election when that candidate is endorsed by a member of the party or when the candidate has previously served in elected office. However, these findings are conditional on trust. We find that the effect of party endorsements is smaller among Republicans, whom we show are significantly less trusting in political institutions than Democrats. For Democrats, we find that support for party-backed candidates erodes among low-trust respondents. Low-trust Democrats are particularly resistant to candidates endorsed by traditional party elites such as Speaker Pelosi, President Obama, and the DCCC. Our findings support party-centric theories of primaries but suggest that voter distrust in the political system threatens parties' control over their nominations.

Introduction

When parties decide, do voters listen? Scholars of primary elections have argued that political parties shape electoral outcomes by boosting their preferred candidates (Cohen et al. 2008; Bawn et al. 2012). In an age of popular primary elections, for party organizations to see their preferred candidates nominated, the voters must act in accordance with the wishes of party elites. Yet it is not clear that voters always follow the cues of the party.

In the special U.S. Senate election in Alabama in 2017, for example, Republican primary voters elected Roy Moore, a former state supreme court judge who had been removed from office for judicial misconduct on two separate occasions. Moore handily defeated the appointed incumbent U.S. Senator Luther Strange in the primary runoff on September 26, 2017. Strange was the clear choice of the Republican establishment. Not only had Strange been appointed earlier that year by the governor of Alabama to fill Senator Jeff Sessions's vacant seat, Strange also had received enthusiastic endorsements from President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (along with $7 Million from the McConnell-led Senate Leadership Fund) (Rogin et al. 2017). Shortly after Moore defeated Strange in the primary, multiple women came forward to accuse Moore of sexual assault and misconduct. The allegations included credible accusations of misconduct perpetrated against minors. Moore went on to narrowly lose the general election to Democrat Doug Jones, marking the first time a Democrat won a U.S. Senate election in Alabama since 1992. Republican voters' rejection of the establishment choice in the primary in favor of a candidate who already had serious red flags almost certainly cost Republicans a Senate seat in a deep-red state.

In this paper, we seek to understand why primary voters sometimes reject the party establishment's preferred candidate. We use an original conjoint survey experiment designed to allow subjects to indicate which hypothetical U.S. House primary candidates

they prefer when presented with head-to-head pairings of randomly-varying sets of candidate attributes. Overall, we find that respondents from both parties are much more likely to prefer candidates who have been endorsed by prominent members of the party or by the party organization itself than candidates who did not receive any endorsement. Subjects also preferred candidates who have had some previous political experience – another indication of ties to the party establishment.[1] However, Republicans were less likely than Democrats to support party-backed candidates. We also find that support for party-backed candidates decreases considerably among Democrats exhibiting less trust in political institutions. Republicans, who were less trusting in institutions than Democrats overall, supported establishment-style candidates at about the same rate regardless of trust. To the extent that the parties and party leaders themselves are feeding into voter cynicism toward the political system, they may be undercutting their own effectiveness at nominating preferred candidates.

We also test additional theories of voting in primary elections, including whether candidates' gender and race affect vote choice, whether candidate ideology affects vote choice, and whether voters approach primary elections with an eye toward winning the general election. We find some moderate support for each of these hypotheses, with some party differences.

We begin by highlighting this paper's contributions to research on primary elections and voter distrust. Next, we describe the design of the experiment and the characteristics of the sample. Third, we present the results of the survey and discuss our statistical analyses. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings and paths for future research.

[1] As the Roy Moore example shows, a candidate certainly can have previous political experience without being the party's preference in a primary.

Party Nominations and Voter Distrust

Many scholars have argued that political parties exert significant control over which candidates win party nominations (Hassell 2018: Bawn et al. 2012; Koger et al. 2009; Masket 2009). In their study of presidential nominations, Cohen et al. (2008) argue that endorsements from major party players, rather than polling, news coverage, fundraising capacity, or any other factor, are the best predictors of a candidate's delegate share in presidential primaries. From this vantage point, presidential primary voters take cues from party elites and vote along with what they perceive to be the elites' consensus. Parties will thus concentrate their resources, including money, staff, information, and endorsements in order to endow preferred candidates with an advantage (Masket 2009; Hassell 2016).

Though recent scholarship has shown that party-backed candidates still win much of the time, especially in congressional elections (Hassell 2018; Kamarck and Podkul 2018; Conroy et al. 2018), the idea that "the party decides" has come under scrutiny after some high-profile cases of the party apparatus failing to nominate its preferred candidates or being forced to deploy significant resources in a primary that had been previously reserved for general elections. The nominations of Donald Trump in 2016, David Brat (R-VA) in 2014, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) in 2018, and Roy Moore in 2017, to name a few examples, have either harmed general election electability, created headaches for party leaders in governing, or both. Some scholars (La Raja and Schaffner 2015; Manento 2019) have pointed to changes in the campaign finance system, including the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act's ban on unlimited soft money contributions to parties and the Supreme Court paving the way for super PACs in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010), as reasons why the parties have become somewhat weaker players in recent primary election cycles. Though these campaign finance changes matter, the voters still have the ultimate say on Election Day. Which voters are more likely to reject the party establishment's preferred candidate? We argue that voters who are less trusting of government institutions and party leaders

are less receptive to cues from party elites about which candidate to support in a primary election.

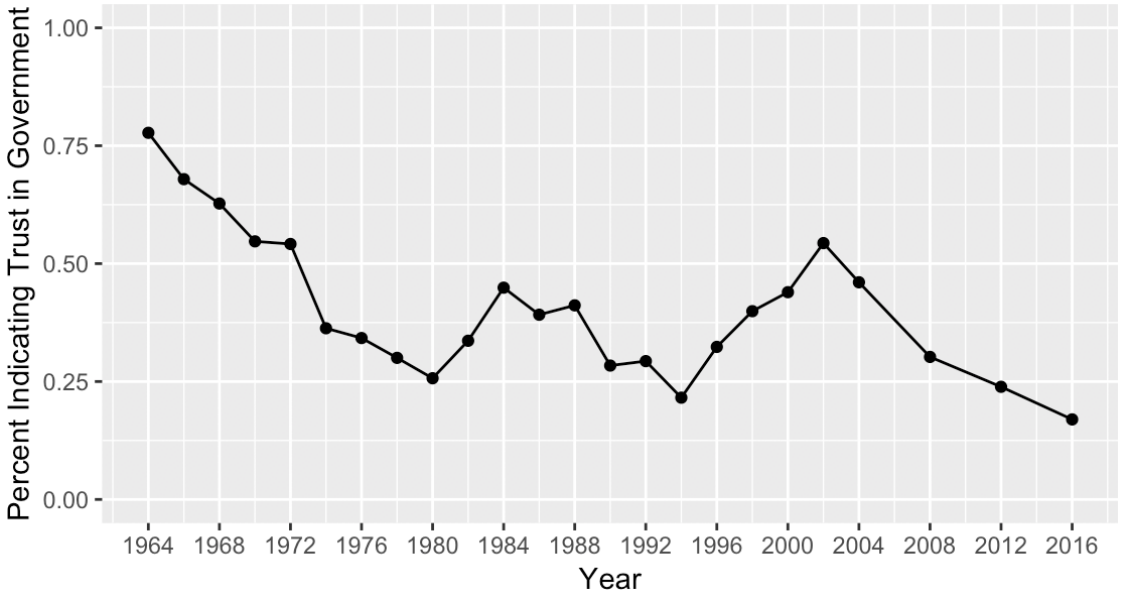
Ignoring the cues: voter distrust and outsider candidates

In low-information environments voters utilize heuristics, including elite cues, in order to more easily process information and form political opinions (Sniderman et al. 1991; Downs 1957). Previous research on elite cues suggests that voters respond more positively to persuasive appeals from elites with whom they deem to be like-minded. Gilens and Murakawa (2002, 26) write that "Effective cue givers are often taken to be political elites that share the same ideological or partisan orientation as the member of the public." This sentiment is supported by John Zaller's (1992) elite cues model, which suggests that voters with higher levels of political awareness will be more likely to develop a "resistance" to cues from elites with whom they disagree. It is not controversial to suggest that congressional primary voters are more likely to be higher in political awareness than nonvoters. If those voters find themselves with less of a reason to identify with the elites giving cues in primary elections, they will be more likely to resist cues from those elites. As Page and Shapiro (1992, 365) write, citizens "can learn enough to form intelligent preferences simply by knowing whom to trust for a reliable conclusion. If the public lacks like-minded and trustworthy cue givers . . . collective deliberation breaks down."

Using American National Election Studies (ANES) data, Figure 1 shows that citizen trust in the American political system has fallen in recent years.[2] We argue that this erosion of trust affects to which elites voters listen in primary elections, ultimately undermining the effectiveness of the political parties as members of an entrenched system in which voters no longer trust.

[2]Respondents from 1964 to 2012 were counted as trusting of the federal government if they indicated they trusted the federal government to "do what is right" most or all of the time, and distrustful if they trust the federal government some or none of the time. This version of the question was not fielded in 2016. The 2016 version of the question asked respondents whether they believed the federal government was run by few interests (which we coded as distrustful) or for the benefit of all (trustful).

Figure 1: Percent of ANES Survey Respondents Indicating Trust in the Federal Government, 1964-2016



There is evidence that distrust in government can have a significant effect on voting behavior and attitudes more broadly. Distrust has been associated with a decrease in support for liberal economic policies, especially redistributive programs (Hetherington 2005), and a decrease in support for centrist policies (Miller 1974). Previous research has also shown that voters who express less trust in the federal government are more likely to vote for a third-party candidate (Chressanthis and Shaffer 1993; Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1996; Peterson and Wrighton 1998).

This body of research is supported by a recent study conducted by Dyck, Pearson-Merkowitz, and Coates (2018). The authors conduct a survey in which they ask voters how often they trust the federal government to do what is right. They find that respondents from both parties who are less trusting of the federal government were more likely to support their party's insurgent candidates in the 2016 presidential primaries: either Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders. We extend the spirit of this study and the ANES question in three ways. First, we create a more comprehensive measure of trust that includes respondents' views of several government and party institutions beyond solely the federal government. Because views of the federal government can be heavily

influenced by which party holds power (Marien 2013), we combine additional measures into a composite measure of trust described more fully in the next section. Second, we utilize a conjoint analysis experimental design to more directly test exactly what it is that appeals to low-trust voters. By assessing the effect of several candidate attributes on the probability of respondents voting for that candidate, we can disentangle various factors that can lead to vote choice rather than relying on well-known candidates about whom voters may have strong feelings for possibly idiosyncratic reasons. Third, we focus our study on primary elections for the U.S. House in order to further disassociate from established figures in presidential politics and to better allow scholars to apply these findings to a larger sample size of primary elections.

Hibbing and Theiss Morse (2002) convincingly contend that citizens' trust is driven by attitudes about the process and functioning of government rather than by the policies it produces. With intense partisan polarization and gridlock among political elites combined with gerrymandering and geographic sorting driving down general election competition, voters are often left without a way to manifest any process- and institutional-related frustrations through their vote. As a result, primary elections have emerged as a venue for citizens distrustful of political parties and institutions to express their frustrations through their vote choices and thus provide fertile ground for studying the effects of distrust on voting behavior. We argue that the combination of distrust in the functioning of various aspects of the political system and the increased salience of primary elections manifest in distrustful partisans increasingly preferring outsider candidates in primaries.

An outsider candidate may be considered an outsider for many different reasons but we are primarily referring to candidates with fewer ties to established political institutions, especially the political parties themselves, in seeking a nomination. We expect that being perceived by voters as an outsider candidate in a primary election is conditional on the candidate possessing some combination of the following attributes, with the idea being that a low-trust voter will view a vote for this candidate as a vote to

change the system that she distrusts: 1) fewer expressions of support (endorsements) from members of the party establishment; 2) a lack of previous political experience; 3) ideological deviation from the party's mainstream; and/or 4) for Democratic respondents, women, minority, and younger candidates. Our survey design, which we detail in the next section, allows these attributes to vary randomly across several permutations of candidate profiles. A candidate with endorsements from key members of the party organization, including members of Congress and party leaders, can signal to primary voters that he or she is will be a "team player" for the party if elected. Candidates with endorsements from fringe members of the party coalition (e.g. someone like Bernie Sanders), or no endorsements at all, can signal a lack of ties to the establishment. Previous political experience can work in the same way; House candidates who have already held public office in some capacity signal to voters that they have existing connections to the party. A candidate's lack of political experience can indicate both party outsider and Washington outsider status, perhaps lending credence for some voters to the common campaign refrain of "fixing" Congress from the outside. Ideological deviation from the party's mainstream is a bit more difficult to pin down because voters may have idiosyncratic views about the parties' prevailing ideology, but voters nonetheless may use ideology as a heuristic by which to vote for a candidate who will push back on what they view as the party's establishment. And in the case of candidates' gender, race, and age, Democratic voters in particular may view a candidate who is not an older white male as an outsider representing change to an exclusionary establishment. The results of the 2018 congressional primaries suggest that Democrats are more motivated than ever in particular to support women candidates while Republicans nominated women at similar levels that they have in previous elections.

Data and Research Design

We use an conjoint experiment in order to evaluate voters' support for outsider candidates in congressional primary elections. Conjoint analysis is an experimental technique for "handling situations in which a decision maker has to deal with options that simultaneously vary across two or more attributes" (Green et al. 2001, S57). By allowing for the experimental manipulation of multiple factors, the conjoint design can assess the relative influence of several factors on one observed outcome: vote choice. Following Hainmueller et al. (2014), conjoint analysis offers distinct advantages including that we can better approximate real-world decision making than a standard survey experiment while testing the plausibility of multiple theories of voting in primaries. This design is particularly well-suited to assessing voter attitudes in primary elections (see Henderson et al. 2019). As we discussed in the previous section, there are various ways in which a candidate might come across as an "outsider" to a primary voter. By varying candidate attributes including party endorsements, previous political experience, and ideological ratings, we can assess the effect of multiple signals that a candidate is more or less of an outsider in the same study rather than fielding several survey experiments in which only one attribute varies.

Our data consists of 1,195 subjects recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) survey platform.[3] The survey was administered in February 2019. Public opinion scholars such as Berinsky et al. (2012) note that MTurk samples tend to be less representative than national probability samples (though more representative than convenience samples), usually because they tend to be younger and more liberal (Huff and Tingley 2015). Descriptive characteristics of our MTurk sample are presented in Table 1. The average age of the sample is 38, with a plurality of subjects identifying as Democrats. Strong partisans were assigned to the branch of the survey matching their party identification. For those identifying as independent or third party, we asked

[3]The MTurk HIT was described as a survey on voting in primary elections. In order to qualify for the study, the respondents needed to have at least a 99% HIT approval rate.

Table 1: MTurk Sample

Variable	N	Mean/Percentage
Female	557	0.47
Male	630	0.53
Age	1,195	38.35
White	986	0.83
African American	93	0.08
Asian American	87	0.07
Latinx	75	0.06
Other Race	23	0.02
Democrat	577	0.48
Republican	252	0.21
Independent/Other	366	0.31
Voted in 2018 Primary	908	0.76
All Respondents	1,195	—
Total Choices	5,975	—

a follow-up that forced subjects to indicate with which of the two major parties they more closely identify. Those respondents were placed in the survey branch more closely matching their party identification.

We include several data cleaning measures in order to test the quality of the sample. First, we removed any instances in which the JavaScript failed to populate the subject's screen with our survey questions or if the subject failed to complete the survey. The remaining 1,195 survey respondents comprise our full sample. Next, though we required MTurk users to reside in the United States in order to take the survey, we used the "rgeolocate" R package to flag as problematic any users with IP addresses originating outside of the U.S. Responses were also flagged as problematic if they failed at least three of these five data checks:

- Completion time (<1 percentile or >99 percentile)
- Total time on conjoint profile pages (<1 percentile or >99 percentile)
- Attention check: "Regarding primary elections, for this question, please just mark 'somewhat agree' and proceed to the next screen."
- Age validation (same age entered at the beginning and end of the survey)
- Country of origin unable to be determined by IP address

These data checks produced 35 respondents flagged as problematic. We do not

observe any significant differences in the data with and without these responses.

After filling out a demographic questionnaire, we asked respondents to indicate on a scale from one (never) to five (always) how often they trust the following to represent the best interests of the public:

- Congress
- The Supreme Court
- The news media
- The federal government
- Democratic Party leaders
- Republican Party leaders
- President Trump

We created a *composite trust score* for each respondent equal to the mean of their trust ratings for all of the categories except for President Trump and the opposing party's leaders. We exclude these trust ratings because in the case of Republicans' feelings towards Trump, trust in the president may actually indicate *distrust* in political institutions, given the president's own professed attitudes toward the media, the court system, the justice department, and other institutions. And measuring partisans' attitudes toward leaders in the opposing party (and Democrats' attitudes toward Trump) is more closely measuring negative partisanship than trust in government institutions and party leadership. Separately for each party we coded respondents below the median composite trust score as low trust, and high trust otherwise. As a robustness check measuring other ways in which distrust can manifest in vote choice, we also included a "wildcard" category in which respondents were randomly assigned to either Special Counsel Robert Mueller, federal law enforcement, corporations/business leaders, local government, or executive branch staff.[4] These additional results are included

[4]This additional test allows for additional plausible ways in which distrust can affect vote choice without keeping subjects on this section for an extended period of time. For example, a far-right respondent may distrust what they think of as agents of the so-called "deep state," perhaps including Special Counsel Robert Mueller or federal law enforcement; or a respondent who is further to the left ideologically may trust the political system but harbor distrust toward corporations and business leaders.

in the Appendix.

After the demographic questionnaire and trust ratings, respondents began "voting" in congressional primary elections matching their own party. Each respondent was presented with five pairings of hypothetical candidates, about whom they know the randomly assigned attributes of age, gender, race, occupation, previous political experience, an ideological rating, who has endorsed the candidate, and the competitiveness of the district in general elections. The five primary elections per respondent produces a total of 5,795 votes in elections containing 11,590 candidates. Regardless of which candidate they voted for, subjects rated the candidates on a scale from one, "this candidate would never represent my interests in Washington," to seven, "this candidate would always represent my interests in Washington."

The layout and possible attributes of the candidates are presented in Table 2. Each of the values are randomly assigned to apply to each of the candidates, with the caveats that the district must be the same and that both candidates may not be endorsed by the same endorser.[5] A screenshot of an example Democratic primary election is presented in the appendix in Figure 8. Democratic and Republican candidate profiles differed only in the endorsements and ideological ratings categories. Though imperfect, we used as endorsers members and organizations of the Democratic and Republican parties that are comparable to one another; for example, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) and the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC), or Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. The ideological ratings used the same scale that ranged from six out of ten (moderately liberal/conservative) to nine out of ten (extremely liberal/conservative); the Republican ratings were given by the fictional "Conservative Candidates Association" while the Democratic ratings were given by the fictional "Progressive Candidates Association." Altogether, we designed the elections to approximate a reasonable amount of information that a voter might know or perceive about

[5]Candidate race probabilities were weighted to match nationwide demographic characteristics.

Table 2: Possible Candidate Attribute Values in Conjoint Experiment

Attribute	Possible Values (Democratic Candidates)	Possible Values (Republican Candidates)
Age	37; 46; 52; 60; 68; 75	37; 46; 52; 60; 68; 75
Gender	Male; Female	Male; Female
Race	African American; Asian; Hispanic; White	African American; Asian; Hispanic; White
District Competitiveness	General election is likely to be a toss-up; Leans towards Democrats in general elections; Solidly favors Democrats in general elections	General election is likely to be a toss-up; Leans towards Republicans in general elections; Solidly favors Republicans in general elections
Occupation	Businessperson; Teacher; Doctor; Lawyer; Military	Businessperson; Teacher; Doctor; Lawyer; Military
Previous Political Experience	None; State senator; Mayor; City council member	None; State senator; Mayor; City council member
Ideology	Rated 6 (moderately liberal); 7 (solidly liberal); 8 (solidly liberal); 9 (extremely liberal) by the Progressive Candidates Association	Rated 6 (moderately conservative); 7 (solidly conservative); 8 (solidly conservative); 9 (extremely conservative) by the Conservative Candidates Association
Endorsements	None; DCCC; Senator Bernie Sanders; House Speaker Nancy Pelosi; President Obama; The state Democratic Party; The local Democratic Town Committee	None; NRCC; Senator Ted Cruz; Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell; President Trump; The state Republican Party; The local Republican Town Committee

the candidates without having the benefit of party differentiation.

Hypotheses

In this section we describe our pre-registered hypotheses (H_1 and H_2).[6] Our hypotheses are related to the effects of trust on the types of candidates partisans support in primaries. Additionally, we describe hypotheses derived from other theories of primary voting behavior, which we also outline in our pre-analysis plan.

> H_1: Democratic respondents are more trusting in institutions and are more supportive of establishment-style candidates than Republicans.

Though there was a lot of media speculation about the rise of a "Democratic Tea Party" in 2018, establishment-friendly candidates mostly fared well in Democratic congressional primaries (Kamarck and Podkul 2018; Conroy et al. 2018). We expect Democrats to respond more positively than Republicans to cues that suggest a primary candidate has ties to or is supported by the party establishment.

> H_2: Voters with lower composite trust scores are more likely to support outsider candidates.

As we described previously, we expect high levels of distrust to translate into more support for candidates who have never held elected office, candidates who are not endorsed by party elites or who are endorsed by outsider elites (e.g. Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, or Ted Cruz), candidates who are more ideological, and among Democrats, women, minority, and younger candidates.

We also test four alternative theories for voters' decisions in primary elections. First (H_3), some scholars argue that gender shapes perceptions of ideology and candidate quality. Aside from the potential for voters to oppose women candidates for outright misogynistic reasons, previous research has shown that women are perceived to be more liberal than they actually are (Kitchens and Swers 2016; King and Matland 2003; McDermott 1998; Koch 2000), which can have a significant effect on the voting calculus in a primary election. On this view, we might expect Democrats to be more

[6]EGAP identification number: 20190205AB.

supportive of women regardless of their trust in government and Republicans to be less supportive of women regardless of trust. Second (H_4), many scholars have argued that political viability can matter to voters nearly as much as candidate characteristics or issues (Bartels 1988; Brady and Johnston 1987; Abramowitz 1989; Abramson et al. 1992). Perhaps voters value quality and electability indicators like endorsements, ideology, and political experience to a greater extent in primary elections if they want to maximize the chance of winning the seat in the general election. To account for this possibility, we present results conditional on whether the district is listed as a "toss-up," "leans towards [respondent's party] in general elections," and "solidly favors [respondent's party] in general elections." Third (H_5), perhaps voters who turn out to vote in primary elections (especially open seat races) seek to elect the most liberal or the most conservative candidate possible, regardless of their feelings towards institutions. We include the ideological ratings for this reason. Fourth, scholars of political parties have argued that in low-information elections, endorsements form party elites can serve as a quality signal for voters (Cohen et al. 2008; Hassell 2018; McNitt 1980; Kunkel 1988; Masket 2009). On this view (H_6), voters should be more likely to support a candidate if they see that their party's campaign committee or a high-ranking elected official has endorsed that candidate. This should be true regardless of individuals' trust in institutions.

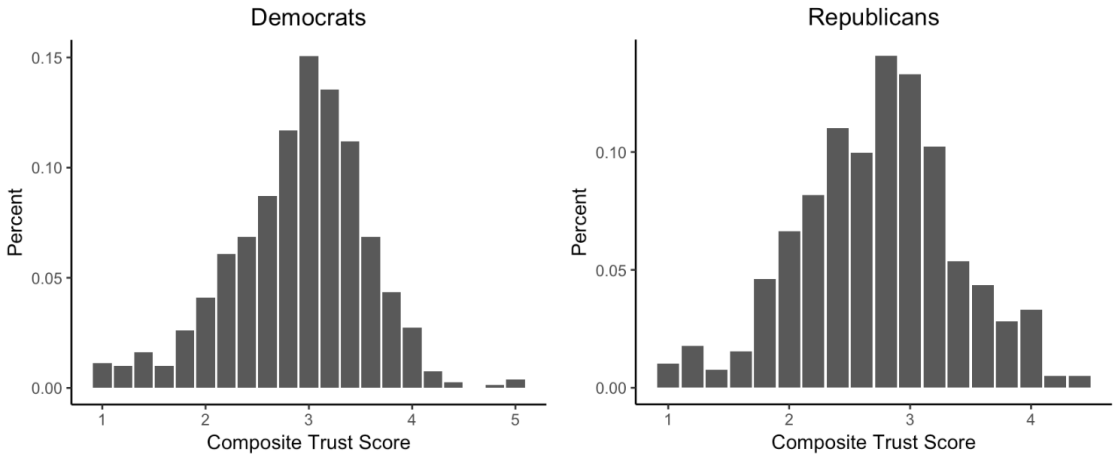
Results and Discussion

Democrats and Republicans

Part one of H_1 states that Democrats will exhibit more trust in government and party institutions than their Republican counterparts. The distributions of composite trust scores for Republicans and Democrats are presented in Figure 2. Democratic respondents indeed tend to have a slightly higher composite trust score than Republican respondents. The average composite trust score for Democratic respondents is 2.9

with a median of 3, and Republican respondents have a mean of 2.73 with a median of 2.8. We conducted a difference of means t-test and determined that the means are statistically significantly different ($p < .0001$).

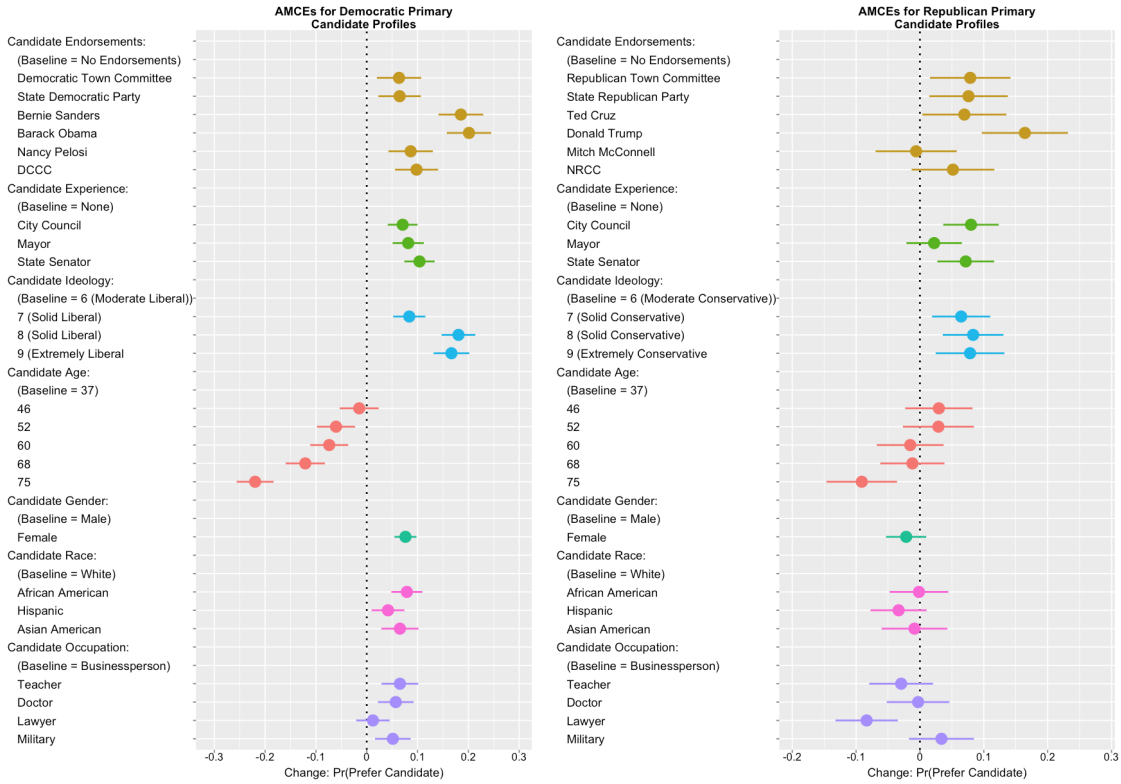
Figure 2: Distribution of Trust Among Democrats and Republicans



The second part of H_1 is that Democrats should be more likely to vote for establishment candidates than Republicans. In this section we present average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for candidate attributes, with results separated by party. AMCEs reflect the increase in the population probability of the candidate's profile being chosen if the value of its lth component were changed from X_0 to X_1, averaged over all the possible values of the other components given the joint distribution of the profile attributes (Hainmueller et al. 2014).

Figure 3 displays the AMCEs of our unconditional models for Democrats and Republicans in the full sample. Keeping in mind that the Democratic and Republican samples represent separate experiments, Democrats are indeed more likely than Republicans to support candidates endorsed by party elites and are more likely to support candidates who have had some previous political experience. Democrats, for example, were about nine percentage points more likely to support a candidate endorsed by Speaker Pelosi than a candidate with no endorsements. Republicans were no more likely to support a candidate endorsed by Majority Leader McConnell than a candidate with no endorsements. These party differences in support of establishment-style

Figure 3: AMCE Estimates for Democratic and Republican Samples



candidates support H_1.

Republicans, however, were less apt than Democrats to support candidates with more "extreme" ideological ratings. Though Democrats were indeed more likely to respond to establishment cues, they did prefer ideological outliers. Respondents from both parties preferred candidates described as either "solidly" or "extremely" liberal/conservative to those described as "moderately" liberal/conservative. This lends some support to H_5, though the effect is more acute on the Democratic side.

The demographic characteristics of the candidates were of clear importance to Democratic respondents. The probability of Democrats voting for a candidate decreased as the candidates' age deviated further from the baseline of 37. Democrats were about 23 percent less likely to support a 75-year-old candidate than they were a 37-year-old. Democrats were also more likely to support female and minority candidates than male and white candidates. For Republicans, there were no statistically

significant differences when it came to the race and gender of the candidates. Age did not make much of a difference for Republicans either, except that Republican subjects also preferred not to support 75-year-old candidates. The gender results for both parties provide some support for H_3.

Democrats also responded positively to endorsements, especially preferring candidates endorsed by President Obama and Bernie Sanders. Republicans also generally preferred candidates who were endorsed by someone to candidates who were not, but the effects were less pronounced. Overall, the AMCEs for endorsements tend to support H_6. For the party to successfully coalesce around a candidate in a primary, voters need to be receptive to the choice of the coalition. These results show that voters do indeed value such signals from the party, on balance.

Voter Distrust

We hypothesized that voters who indicate less trust toward party and government institutions should be less likely to respond to cues from party elites and more likely to support candidates with outsider traits. The left panel of Figures 4 and 5 show the conditional AMCE estimates by level of trust, comparing subjects at or above the median in their composite trust score (high trust) with subjects below the composite trust score median (low-trust).[7] Because, as Leeper et al. (2019) show, using only conditional AMCEs to compare subgroups can produce misleading results, we also present marginal mean estimates in the middle column of Figures 4 and 5 and marginal mean differences (low trust - high trust) in the right column. Marginal means describe the level of favorability toward a profile attribute, ignoring all other attributes. As opposed to AMCEs, which restrict the AMCE for the reference category to zero, marginal means convey information about the preferences of respondents for all attribute levels. The results for Democrats and Republicans are presented in Figures 4 and 5, respectively.

[7]As a robustness check, we tested whether adding a "medium trust" categorization (thus breaking our sample into low-, medium-, and high-trust respondents) changes our results, but the differences between low and high-trust respondents were very similar to these main results.

Figure 4: Democratic Support for Party Outsiders by Level of Trust

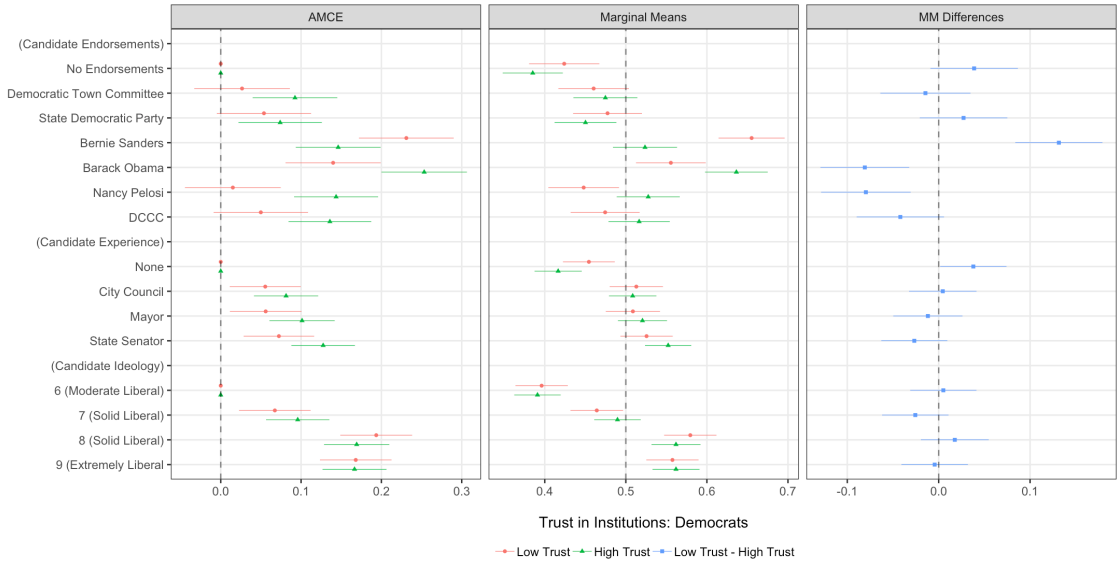
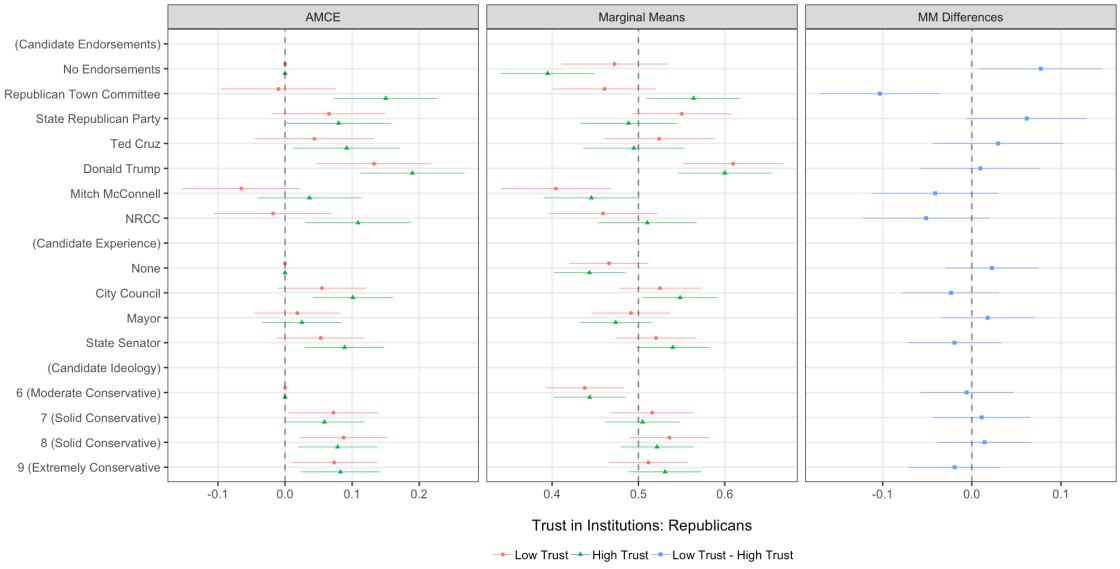


Figure 5: Republican Support for Party Outsiders by Level of Trust



The results suggest that high and low-trust voters in both parties prefer candidates who have an endorsement, some prior experience, and ideological congruence. High-trust voters appear to punish candidates without any endorsements or prior experience more than low-trust voters. Alternatively, low-trust voters are more open to outsider candidates, supporting H_2. This is particularly true among Democrats: low-trust voters reward candidates with an endorsement from Bernie Sanders, while high-trust

voters reward candidates with any endorsement, but especially those with support from "traditional" party elite sources like President Obama, Speaker Pelosi, and the DCCC. We conducted an F-test which determined that the overall relationship between composite trust score levels and endorsements is statistically significant ($p < .0001$). This finding holds for each constituent measure of trust. Low-trust Democrats were also significantly more likely to prefer candidates with no previous political experience.

Although similar, the results are more muted among Republicans, perhaps because of the smaller sample size. Prior experience does not seem to matter much for either high- or low-trust Republicans. Low-trust Republicans were significantly more likely to support candidates with no endorsements than high-trust Republicans, and significantly less likely to support candidates endorsed by the Republican Town Committee. For Republicans, the only statistically significant overall interactions according to our F-tests were for the trust in party leader/endorsements and the trust in Trump/endorsements relationships. These results, along with results using all of the constituent measures of trust, are presented in the Appendix. Republicans with low trust in party leaders hold an endorsement from Mitch McConnell in very low esteem. These Republicans also do not prioritize ideological purity, as they are significantly less likely than subjects with high trust in Republican party leaders to support candidates described as extreme conservatives. Republicans with low trust in President Trump also appear to dislike Trump endorsements, especially in contrast to Republicans with high trust in Trump. Interestingly, these low-trust Republicans also seem to prefer candidates described as moderates and dislike extremely conservative candidates.

Using our trust results, we also estimated predicted values of candidates that high and low-trust respondents are most and least likely to support. These values are presented in Table 3. These values emphasize the finding that Democratic voters are prioritizing candidate diversity regardless of trust in government. For both high and low-trust Democrats, the predicted least preferred candidate is a 75 year-old, white, male, moderately liberal businessman with no endorsements or previous political

Table 3: Least and Most Preferred Candidates by Trust Level (Predicted Values)

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Least Preferred	Most Preferred	Least Preferred	Most Preferred
Low Trust	Age: 75 Gender: Male Race: White Occupation: Business Experience: None Ideology: Moderate liberal Endorsement: None	Age: 46 Gender: Female Race: Asian American Occupation: Teacher Experience: State senator Ideology: Solid liberal Endorsement: Sanders	Age: 75 Gender: Female Race: Hispanic Occupation: Lawyer Experience: None Ideology: Moderate conservative Endorsement: McConnell	Age: 46 Gender: Male Race: White Occupation: Military Experience: Mayor Ideology: Solid Conservative Endorsement: Trump
High Trust	Age: 75 Gender: Male Race: White Occupation: Business Experience: None Ideology: Moderate liberal Endorsement: None	Age: 37 Gender: Female Race: African American Occupation: Military Experience: State senator Ideology: Solid liberal Endorsement: Obama	Age: 75 Gender: Female Race: Hispanic Occupation: Lawyer Experience: None Ideology: Moderate conservative Endorsement: None	Age: 52 Gender: Male Race: Asian American Occupation: Military Experience: Mayor Ideology: Extreme Conservative Endorsement: Trump

experience. Although low-trust Democrats prefer a Sanders endorsement to an Obama endorsement, the predicted most preferred candidate in both cases is a young woman who is a racial minority, is a solid liberal, and who has served as a state senator.

For both high- and low-trust respondents, Republicans' predicted most preferred candidates are conservative, middle-aged, males with a military background and and an endorsement from President Trump. Their predicted least preferred candidates are older, Hispanic, women who are moderately conservative lawyers. One notable difference is that the high-trust Republicans' least preferred candidate does not have any endorsements, while low-trust Republicans' least preferred candidate is endorsed by Mitch McConnell.

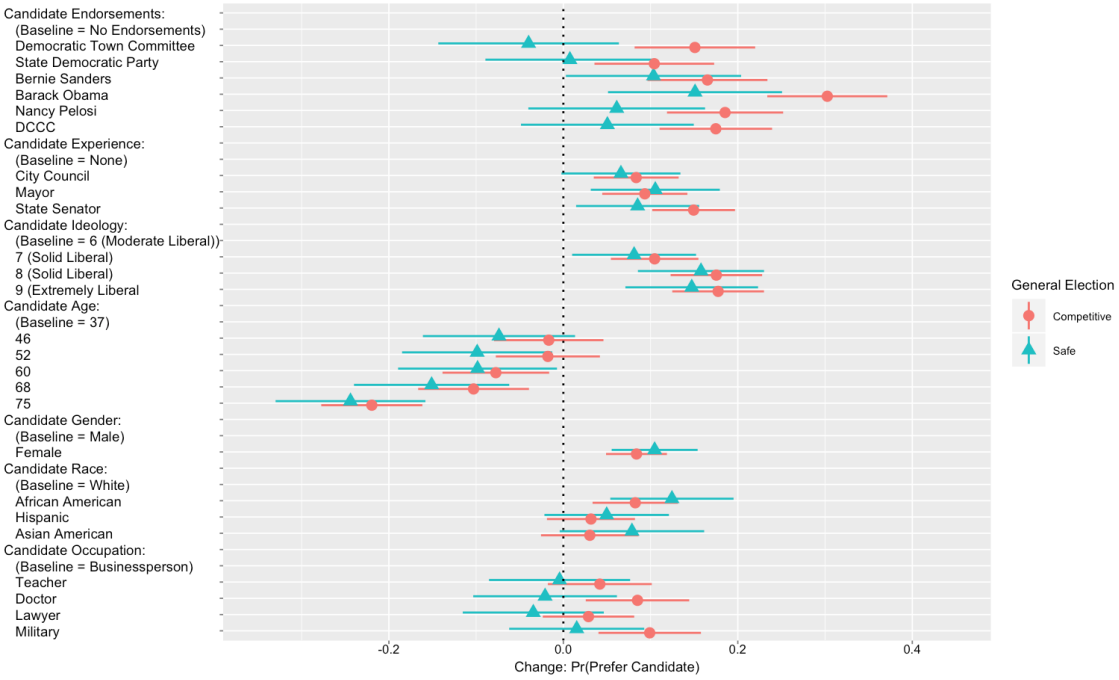
Part of our definition of party outsiders, and by extension our hypothesis about the effect of trust on support for outsiders, included that low-trust Democrats would be more likely to support women, minority, and younger candidates. We did not find strong statistical evidence to suggest that Democratic respondents' composite trust scores are related to support for such candidates. The unconditional AMCEs presented in Figure 3 suggest that Democrats support candidates from underrepresented groups at higher rates in congressional primaries, and this does not appear to vary significantly among high- and low-trust respondents. The overall evidence presented in this section supports the notion that lower trust voters, especially on the Democratic side, are less

likely to heed the cues of the party establishment in primary elections.

Other voter considerations

H_4 posits that voters take general election viability into consideration when voting in primary elections. Figure 6 presents AMCE estimates for Democrats and Figure 7 presents AMCE estimates for Republicans, with separate estimates presented for competitive and safe general elections. We randomly assigned the congressional districts in our study to be holding primary elections in districts described as likely to be a tossup in the general election, leaning toward the respondent's party in general elections, and solidly favoring the respondent's party in general elections. For this model, we classified "lean" and "tossup" districts as competitive, and "solid" districts as safe.[8]

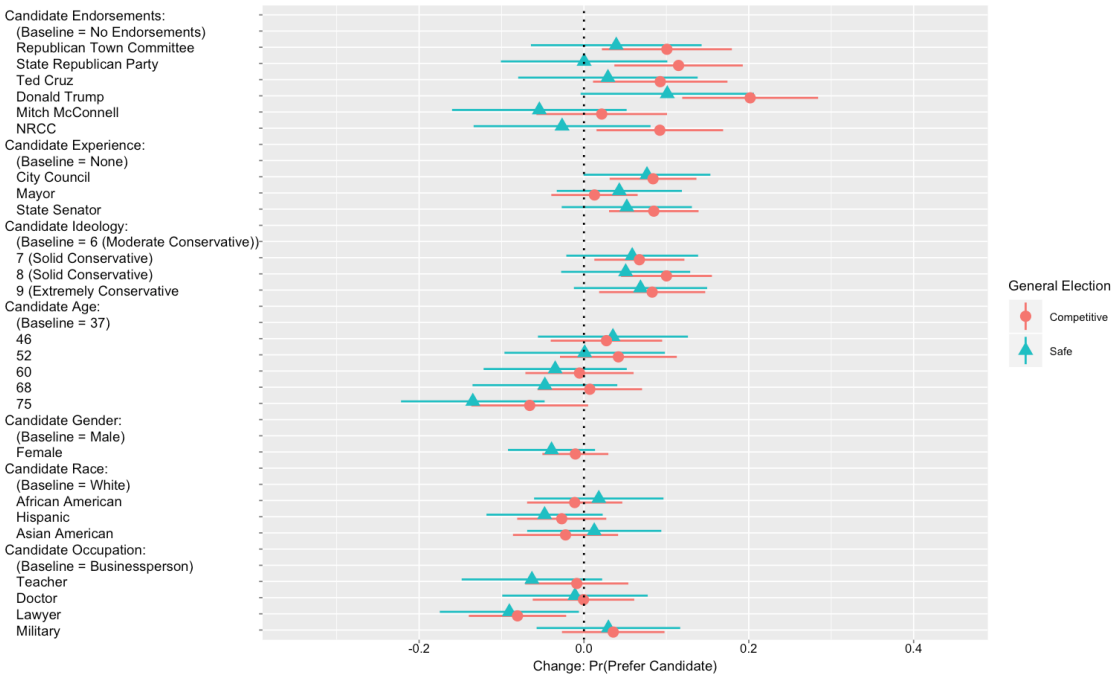
Figure 6: Democratic Support by Competitiveness of the General Election



In general, there was not a large difference in the types of candidates Democrats supported when presented with information suggesting the general election is likely to be competitive rather than safe. However, Democrats do place a greater importance

[8]Classifying "lean" districts as safe did not change these results.

Figure 7: Republican Support by Competitiveness of the General Election



on endorsements in competitive districts. Compared with a candidate with no endorsements, an endorsement from President Obama in a competitive district increased the odds of respondents voting for that candidate by over 30 percent. An Obama endorsement in a safe district increased the candidate's chances of winning by only 15 percentage points, by comparison. Other endorsers also had more clout in competitive elections, suggesting that Democratic voters take endorsements into account when assessing candidate quality and general election electability. The relationship between district competitiveness and endorsements in Democratic primaries is particularly strong among high-trust Democrats.[9]

Republicans' voting patterns did not change much at all when comparing how respondents voted in competitive versus safe districts. Though we can say with more confidence that Republicans preferred endorsed candidates over non-endorsed candidates more often in competitive districts, we cannot reject the null hypothesis for any individual endorsers that their endorsements are worth more in competitive districts.

[9]High-trust Democrats were significantly more likely to support endorsed candidates in competitive districts, which is supported by an F test ($p < .05$).

If Republicans vote strategically in primary elections to nominate the candidate most likely to win the general election, we did not find much evidence of that here.

Conclusion

In general, our hypotheses about voter behavior in primary elections are confirmed. Democrats, who exhibit more trust in institutions than their Republican counterparts, are also broadly more supportive of candidates who have ties to and support from the party organization. Democratic respondents with lower levels of trust in government and party institutions are less likely to adhere to the preferences of the party organizations, especially if those preferences come from traditionally powerful positions within the party. We did not find the differences between high and low trust Republicans to be as stark, but there were noteworthy contrasts in endorsement preferences.

An unexpected finding was that Democrats were just as likely to support women, minority, and younger candidates whether they were high or low in trust. We had expected low-trust Democrats to be more likely to prioritize voting for primary candidates from underrepresented groups, but all Democrats were likely to do so regardless of trust in institutions. This suggests that Democrats views' of the descriptive representativeness of Congress and the party are not necessarily entangled with their feelings of trust in political institutions.

We tested four additional hypotheses of voting in primary elections and found at least moderate support for each of them. Scholars have argued that gender plays a role in candidate evaluation and vote choice, and that evaluation differs by party. We find that Democrats were more likely to vote for women candidates than men candidates, while Republicans were less likely to support women candidates (though that result was not statistically significant). Additionally, some scholars have argued that voters mostly care about electability when choosing which candidate to vote for in a primary. The only evidence we find that voters prioritize electability is that Democrats,

especially high trust Democrats who already buy into the party and the political system, give more deference to party leaders' preferences in determining candidate quality in competitive districts. This suggests that party leaders' appeals in primaries may be more effective if they can convince voters that the general election is likely to be competitive. We also tested whether respondents prefer to elect the most liberal or conservative candidate possible. We find, with some interesting subgroup differences, that voters from both parties are less likely to support candidates described as ideologically "moderate" but are about equally likely to support "solid" and "extreme" liberals/conservatives. Finally, we find evidence in our unconditional models that voters from both parties do indeed prefer candidates who apparently have the support of the party.

Republican voters, whom we show are less trusting than Democrats, are less likely to heed party cues than their Democratic counterparts. This can and does cause headaches and electoral casualties for the party and its leaders. And while important cues like endorsements and (to a lesser extent) previous political experience still do matter to low trust Democratic primary voters, they matter less, which could cause problems for the electoral success of party-backed candidates over a large sample size of primaries. And if trust among the electorate is tied to attitudes about the process of government (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), then the party may only find more success if citizens feel more positively about things like the state of polarization or gridlock in Congress. Ironically, the very types of candidates who benefit from the voting behavior of low trust voters in both parties may themselves be agents of polarization and gridlock, as they have less of an incentive to toe the party line.

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Appendix

Candidate Profiles

The candidate profile pages in our survey were designed to create a simple and easily readable comparison between Candidate A and Candidate B. Figure 8 shows an example screenshot of a Democratic primary contest with two side-by-side candidate profiles. This screenshot is from the desktop version of the survey.

In anticipation of a large group of respondents taking the survey on a mobile device, we also created a mobile version of the survey which the attribute comparisons are stacked on top of each other in order to accommodate narrower screens. This, of course, could cause subjects to process the comparisons differently and potentially bias our results. However, only 53 of our 1,195 respondents took the survey on a mobile device. We also tested whether using a mobile device increased the probability of the respondent choosing either Candidate A or B more often regardless of the displayed attributes, and found no evidence that this was the case.

Figure 8: Example Screenshot of Democratic Candidate Profiles

Individualized Trust Indicators

In this section we present AMCEs for the individualized trust indicators that make up the composite trust score, along with the "wild card" estimates. Unsurprisingly, the individualized indicators mostly align with the estimates derived from the composite trust scores. Figures 9 through 18 show AMCEs for support for party outsiders for both Democrats and Republicans by level of trust in party leaders, Congress, the federal government, the media, and President Trump. Respondents with trust below the median were again coded as low trust, and high trust otherwise.

For Democrats, the strongest differences between high and low trust respondents are (as in the main results) with endorsements. Interestingly, the Congress results show the largest differences of all of the trust variables between high and low trust respondents. For example, Democratic respondents with high trust in Congress were about 16 percentage points more likely than low trust respondents to support a candidate endorsed by Nancy Pelosi. For all endorsers except for Bernie Sanders and Barack Obama, respondents with low trust in Congress were no more likely to support an endorsed candidate than a non-endorsed candidate.

Another notable result is the ideological preferences among Democrats with high and low trust in President Trump (of course, "high" is a relative term here). Democrats with lower trust in President Trump consistently preferred more liberal candidates. Low trust Democrats were about 20 percentage points more likely to support "extremely" liberal candidates than Democrats with higher trust in Trump.

There are few differences among high and low trust Republicans across all of these variables. However, the most notable differences are in Republican respondents' preferences for candidate ideology, particularly when examining trust toward Republican party leaders and toward President Trump.[10] In both cases, high trust Republicans were significantly more likely to support candidates described as more conservative.

[10]We should be careful in interpreting these Trump results because very few Republican respondents indicated low trust in Trump (and very few Democrats indicated high trust in Trump).

Figure 9: Democratic Support for Party Outsiders by Level of Trust in Party Leaders

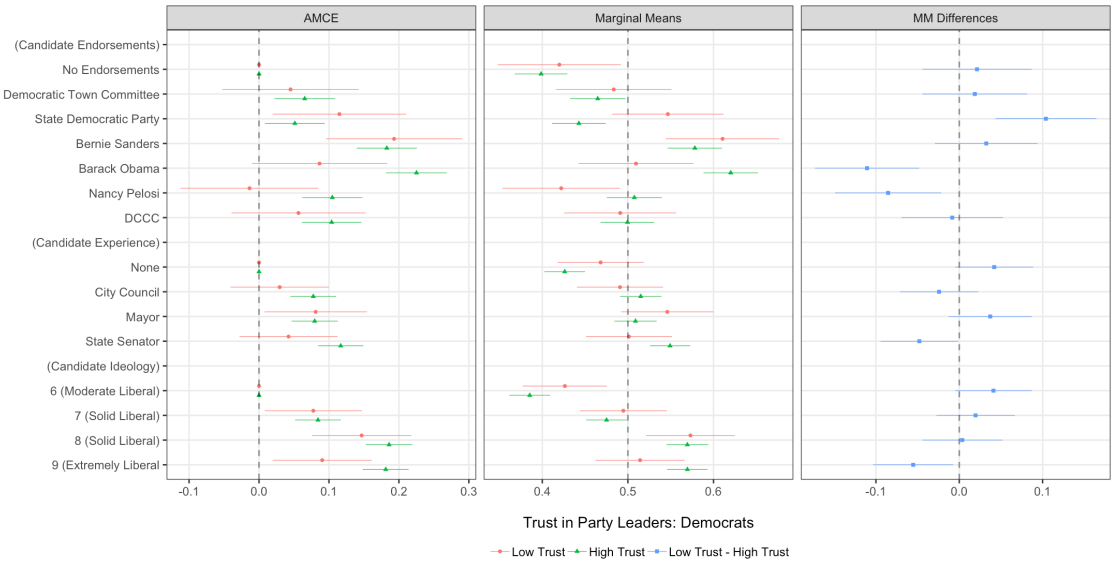


Figure 10: Republican Support for Party Outsiders by Level of Trust in Party Leaders

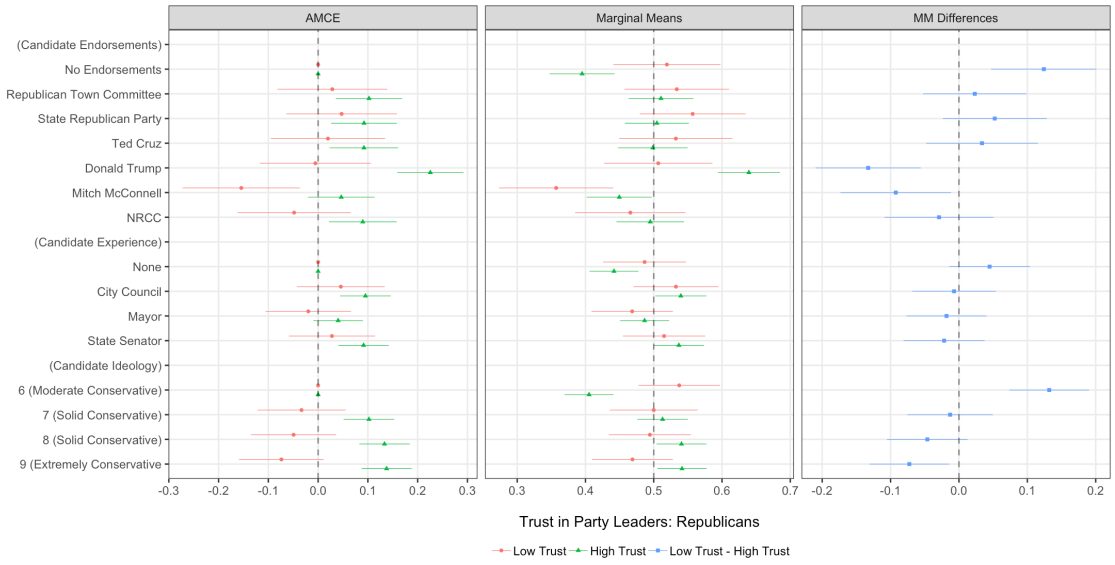


Figure 11: Democratic Support for Party Outsiders by Level of Trust in Congress

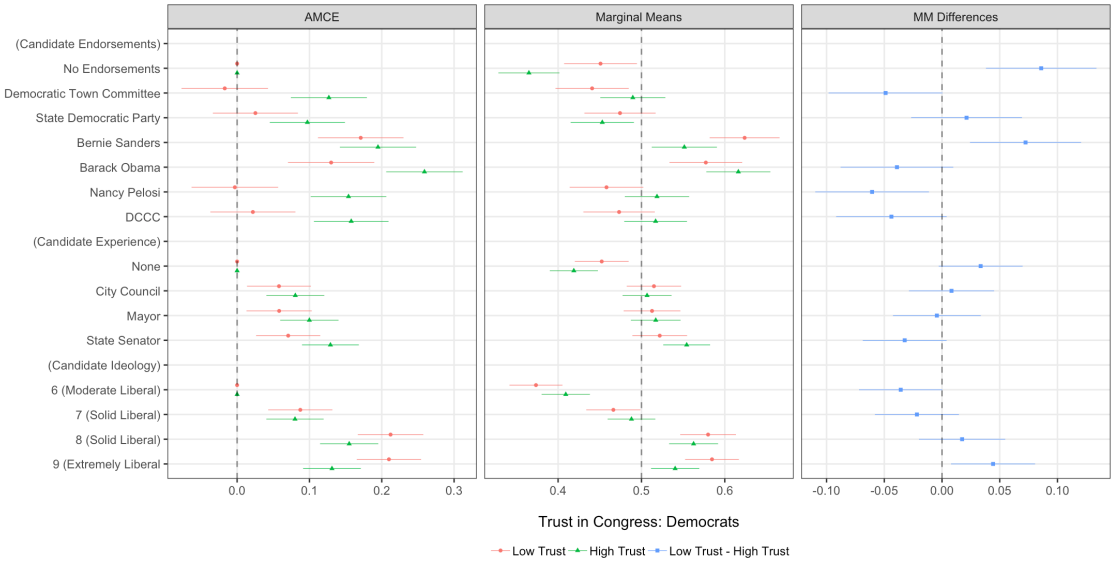


Figure 12: Republican Support for Party Outsiders by Level of Trust in Congress

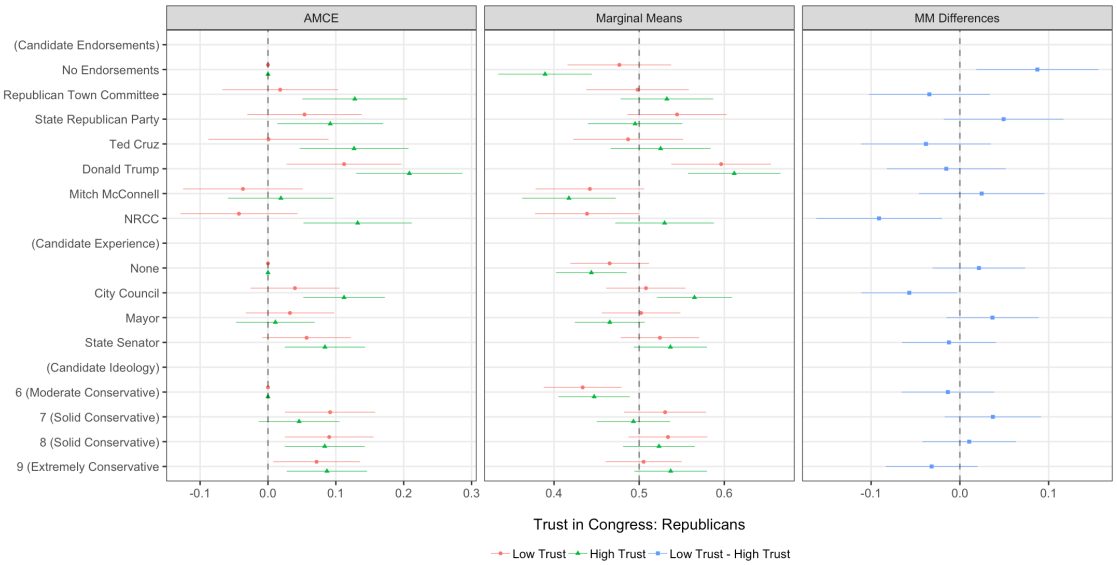


Figure 13: Democratic Support for Party Outsiders by Level of Trust in the Federal Government

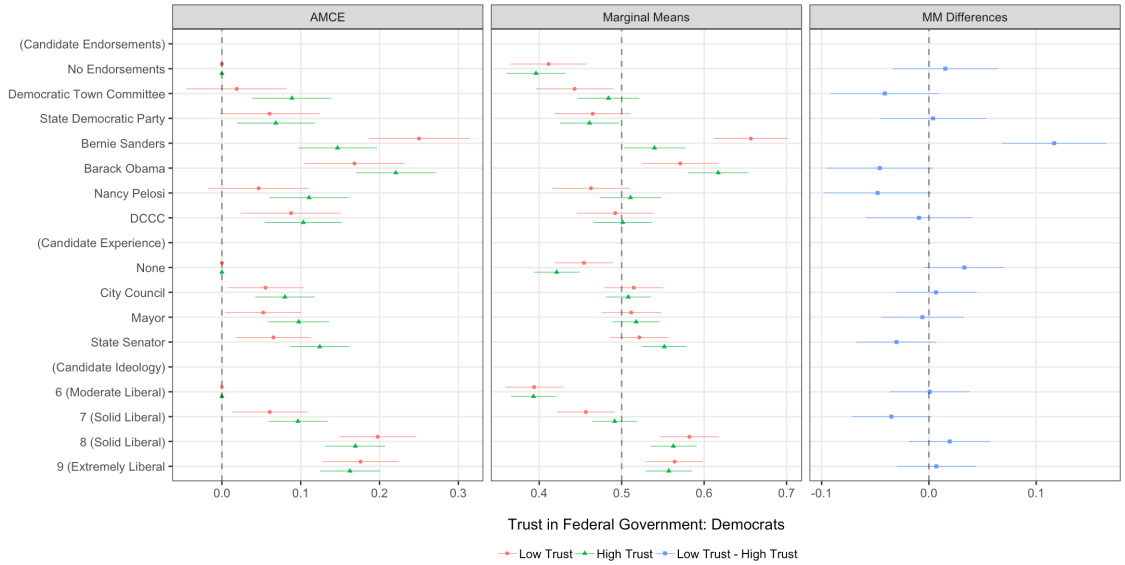


Figure 14: Republican Support for Party Outsiders by Level of Trust in the Federal Government

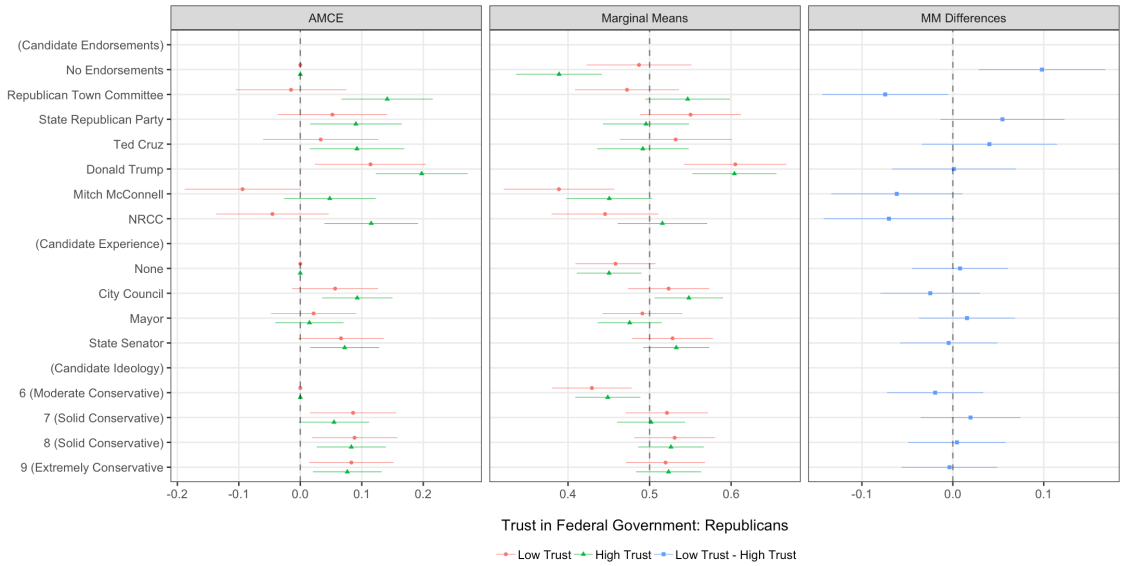


Figure 15: Democratic Support for Party Outsiders by Level of Trust in Media

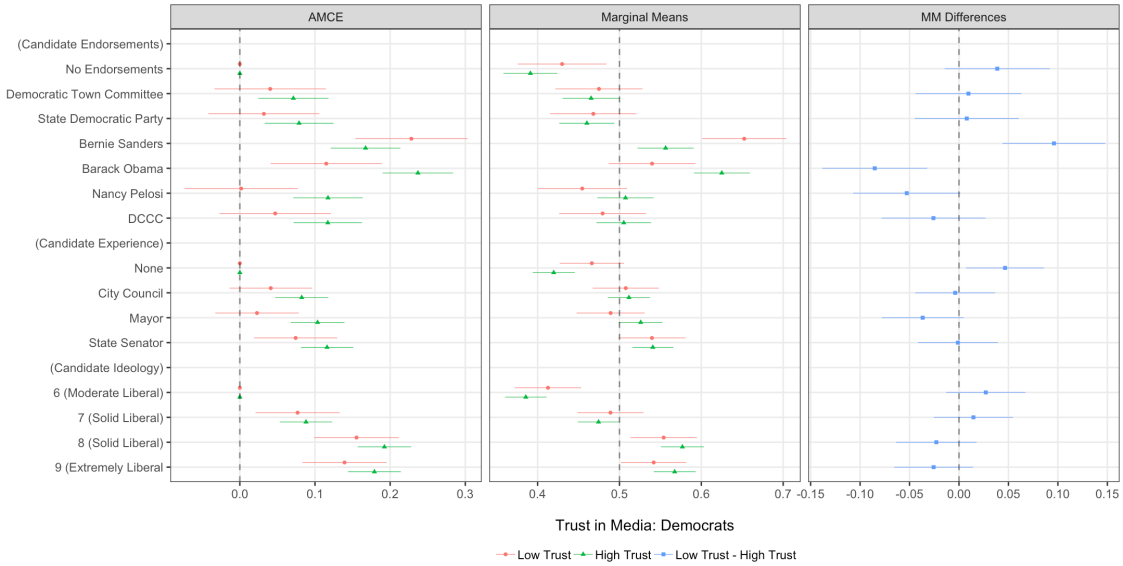


Figure 16: Republican Support for Party Outsiders by Level of Trust in Media

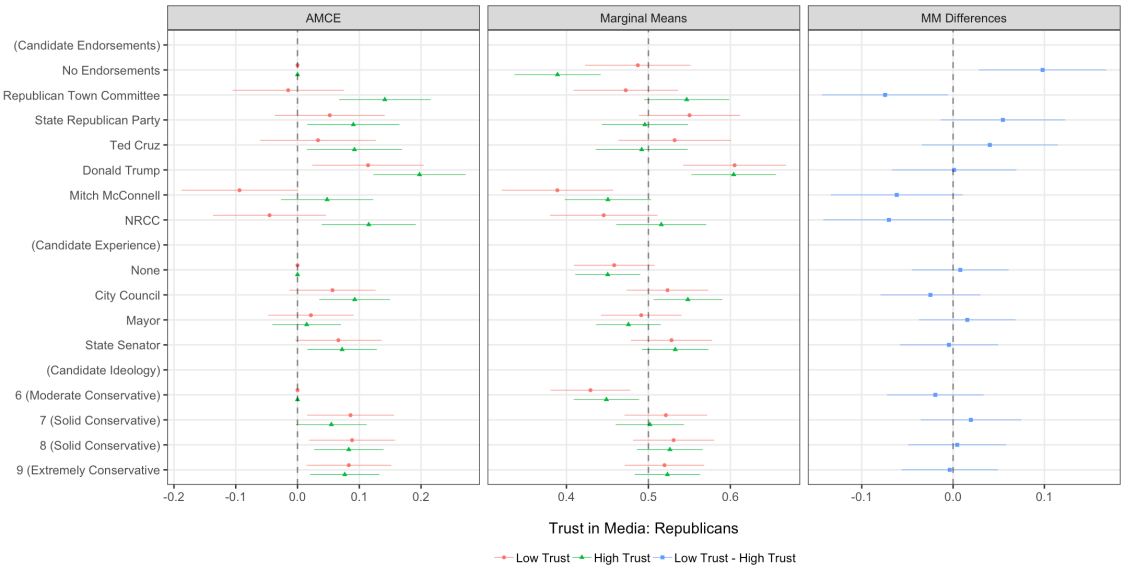


Figure 17: Democratic Support for Party Outsiders by Level of Trust in President Trump

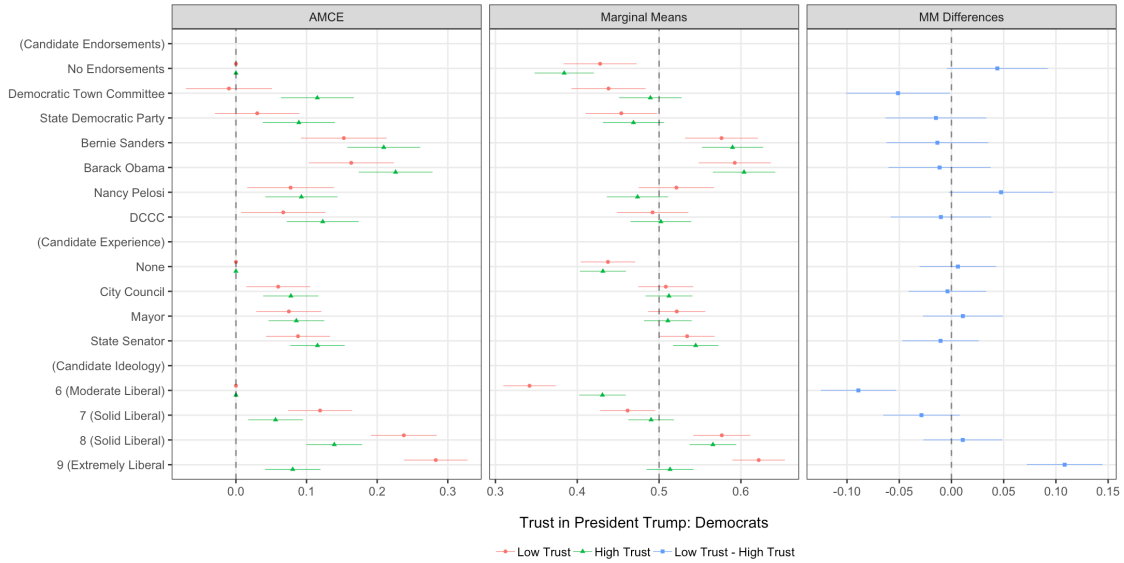
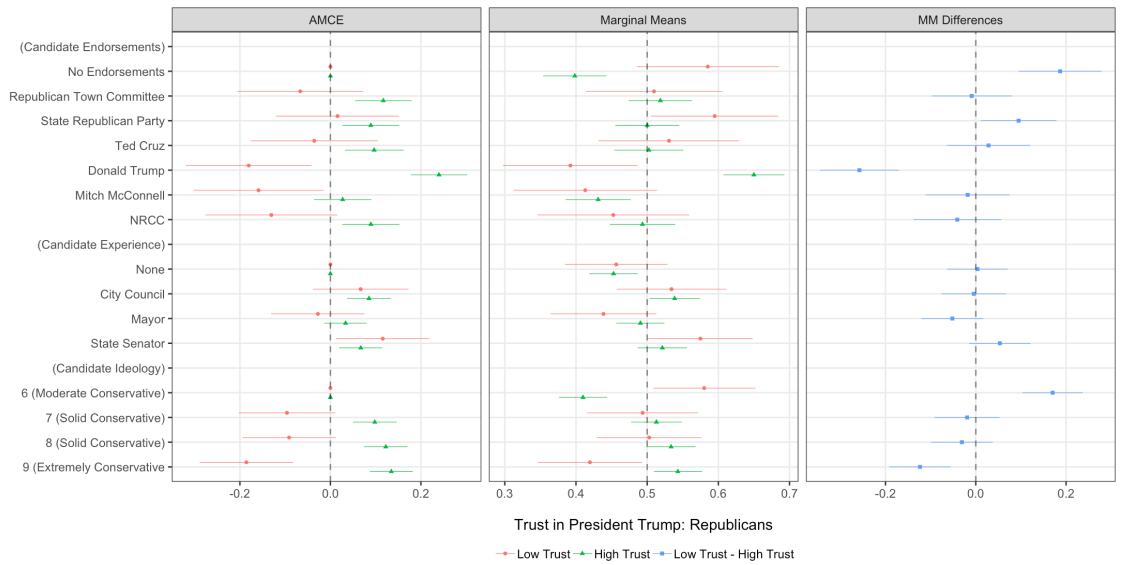


Figure 18: Republican Support for Party Outsiders by Level of Trust in President Trump



As described in the data section, we randomly assigned respondents to answer a trust question regarding Special Counsel Robert Mueller, federal law enforcement, corporations/business leaders, local government, or executive branch staff. Unfortunately, because this method of data collection produced missing values for each respondent, we were unable to produce AMCEs clustered by respondent. Instead, we collapsed the wildcard variables together and compared high and low trust respondents on the collapsed measure.

Figures 19 and 20 show the AMCE results using these randomized trust indicators. Though we are comparing variables that are not exactly apples to apples (e.g. putting respondents' trust in corporations and respondents' trust in local government on the same scale) results are mostly null regardless.

Figure 19: Democratic Support for Party Outsiders Using Randomized Trust Indicators

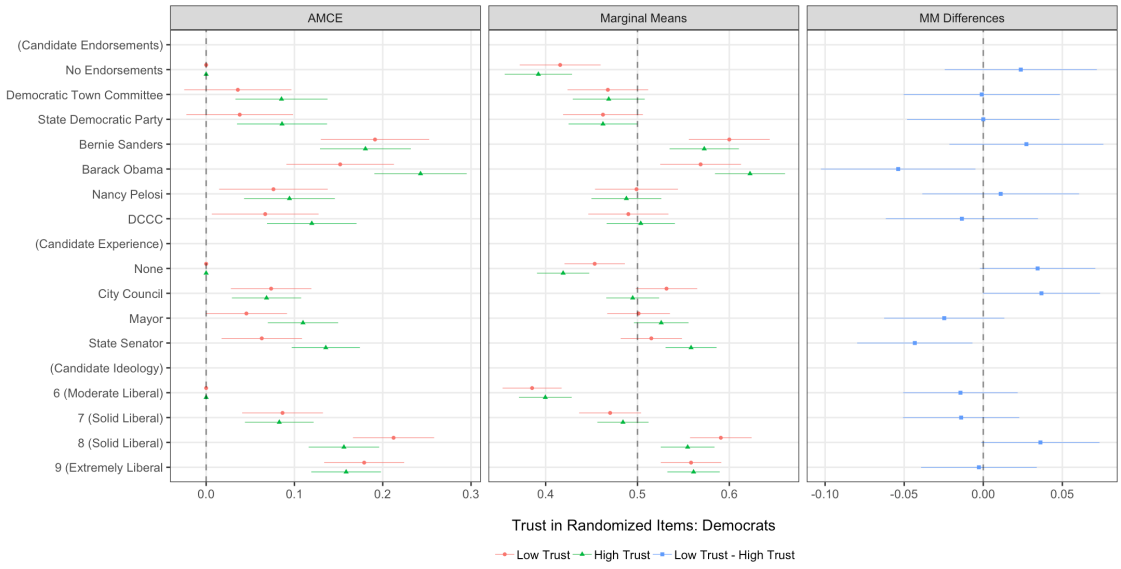


Figure 20: Republican Support for Party Outsiders Using Randomized Trust Indicators