

Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood

Trust, Understanding, and Representation in the 2020 United States Election

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Felt Understanding in Psychology and Politics

- **Felt understanding**
 - The extent to which a person believes that another person/group/entity **knows them and their needs**
 - Broadly studied in a wide variety of dynamics in psychology

Felt Understanding in Psychology

- Feeling understood in social interactions yields **higher life satisfaction** among college students (Lun et al, 2008)
- Felt understanding yields better self-reported **romantic relationship outcomes** - trust, intimacy - among couples (Crockett et al, 2022)
- Feeling understood by other groups yields increased **willingness to forgive** even in high conflict settings: Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Sunni and Shia Muslims in Lebanon, BLM supporters and the police, UK citizens and refugees (Livingstone et al, 2020 & 2024)

Felt Understanding and Electoral Politics

- Even in electoral politics, we commonly think that *candidates* who project empathy and understanding are likely to do better electorally
 - Bill Clinton, 1992: “I feel your pain”
 - George W. Bush, 2000: Who would you rather have a beer with?
- Yet for all this evidence, there is a noted lack of systematic study of *felt understanding* in elections and political behavior



How does felt understanding relate to politics?

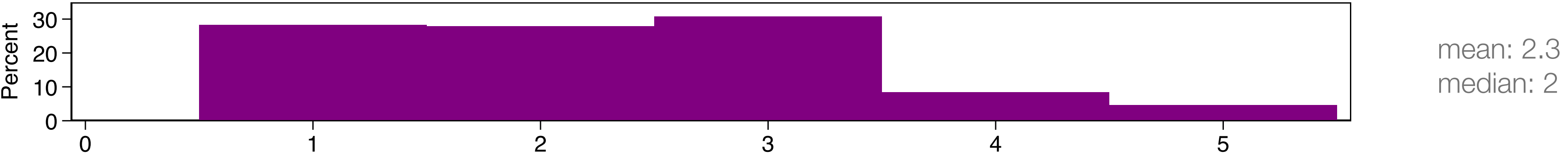
- If you feel that your government understands your needs, are you:
 - More likely to vote for an incumbent party?
 - More likely to be a Democrat or Republican?
 - More likely to be an urban or rural voter? A member of a marginalized community? Working class? Less educated?
- So we addressed this in the context of the 2020 election

Data

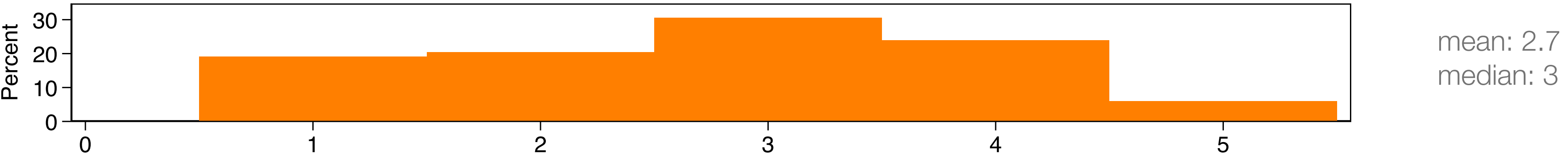
- The 2020 Cooperative Election Study
 - Nationally representative survey
 - Common content/team content design
- Common content: Vote choice, PID, demographics, attitudes, policy preferences
- Team module (N=1000)
 - Felt understanding questions
 - Trust & reform question batteries

Do you think officials in the *[federal/state/local]* government understand the needs of the people in your area?

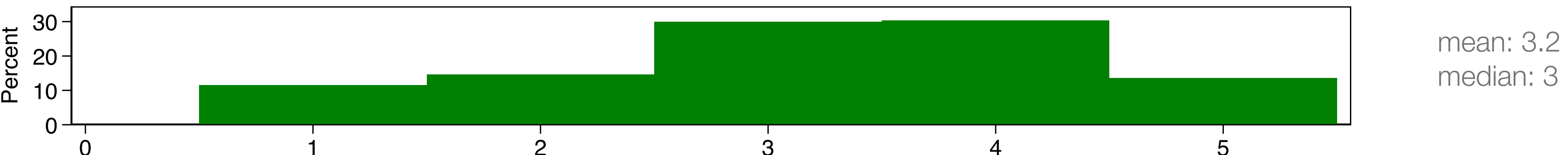
Federal



State

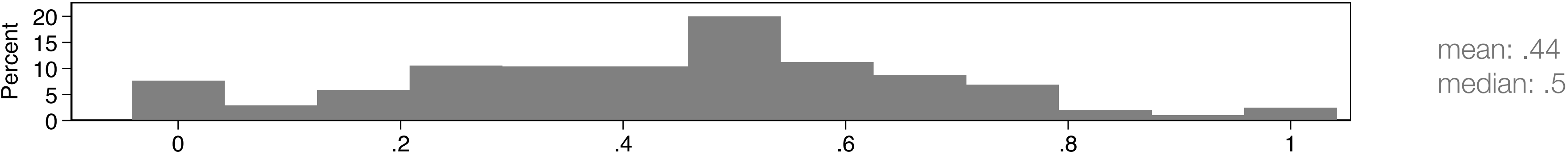


Local



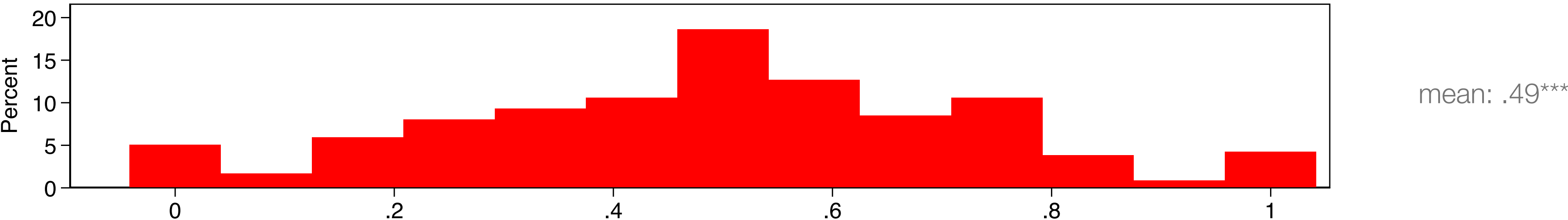
Overall

(rescaled additive index)

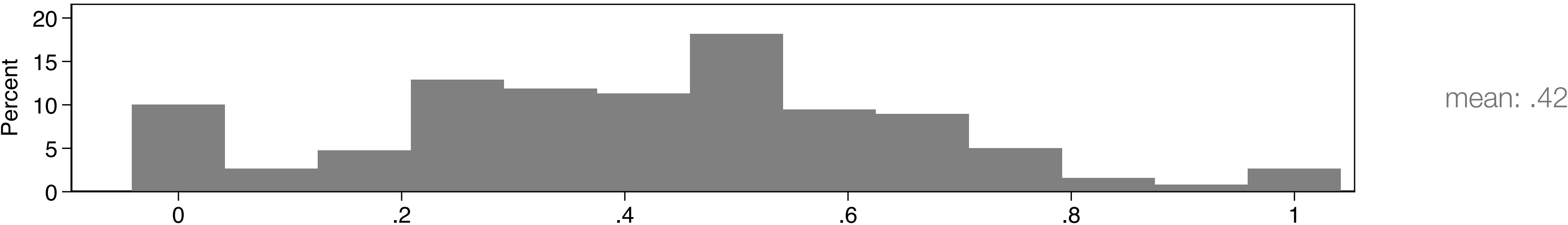


Do Democrats or Republicans feel more understood?

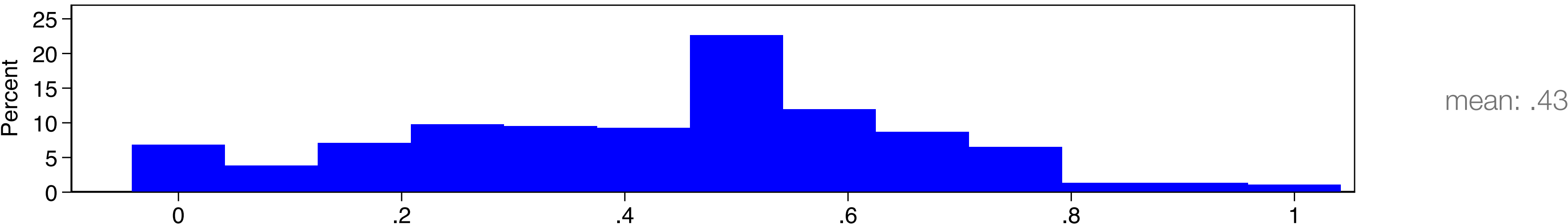
Republicans



Independents

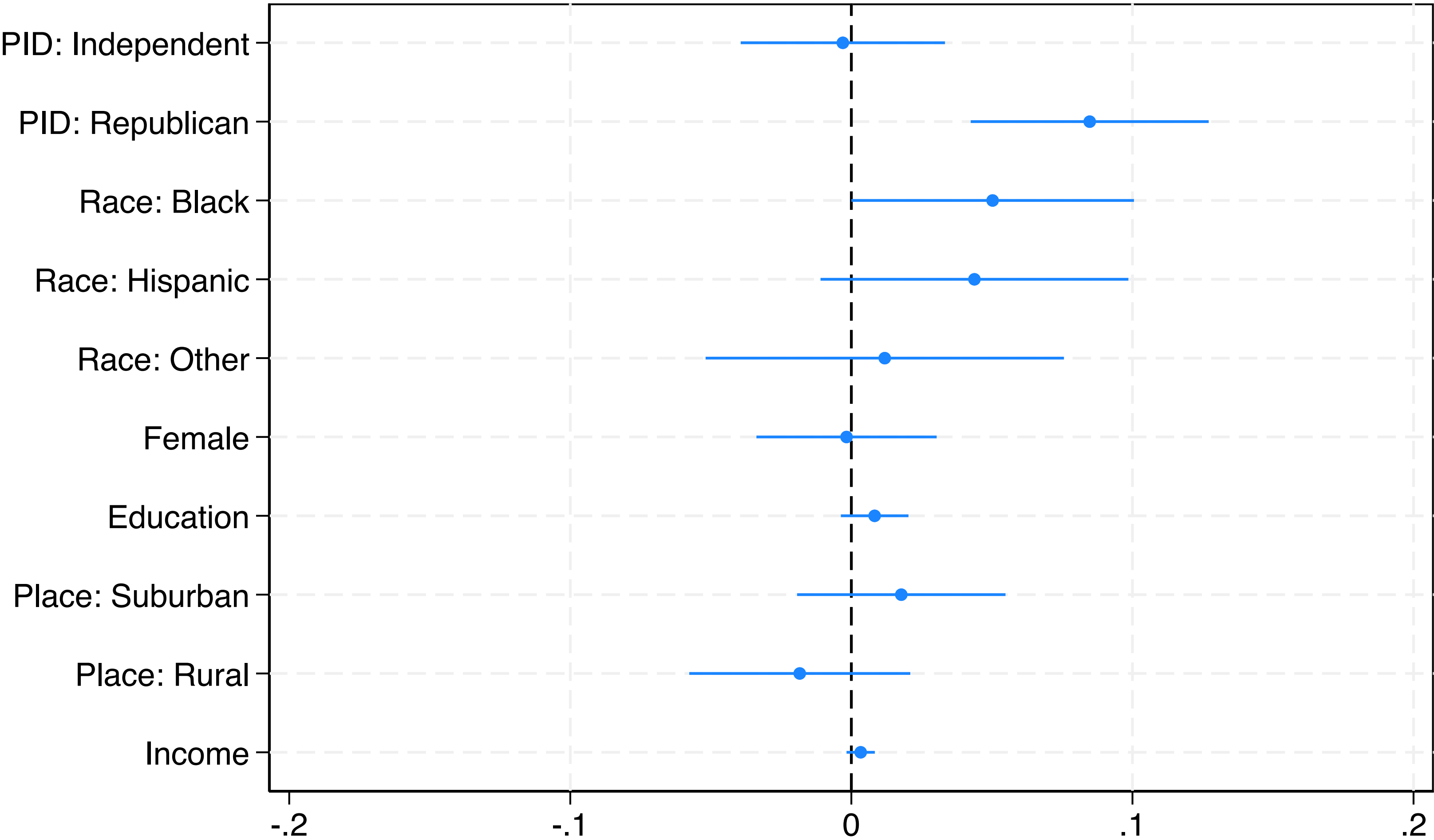


Democrats



*** $p < .005$

Are there other differences in felt understanding across demographic groups?



Understanding =
PID +
Race +
Gender +
Educ +
Place +
Income

R² = 0.03
n = 897

Were those with high levels of felt government understanding more likely to vote for Trump or Biden?

- **No:** a small bivariate relationship disappears with PID control (*logistic regression*)

	Vote for Biden	Vote for Biden
Felt Understanding	-0.91* (-2.64)	-0.63 (-1.11)
	-	(Controls)
Pseudo-R ²	0.01	0.54
N	707	647

- Controls: PID, Race, Gender, Place, Income, Education. Z in parentheses.

Felt understanding is largely independent of major demographics

- Aside from partisanship; partisans who share a party with the President feel more understood
- So is this construct useful for analyzing other parts of politics?
 - Confidence in equitability of government resource provision
 - Trust in government
 - Interest in governmental reform

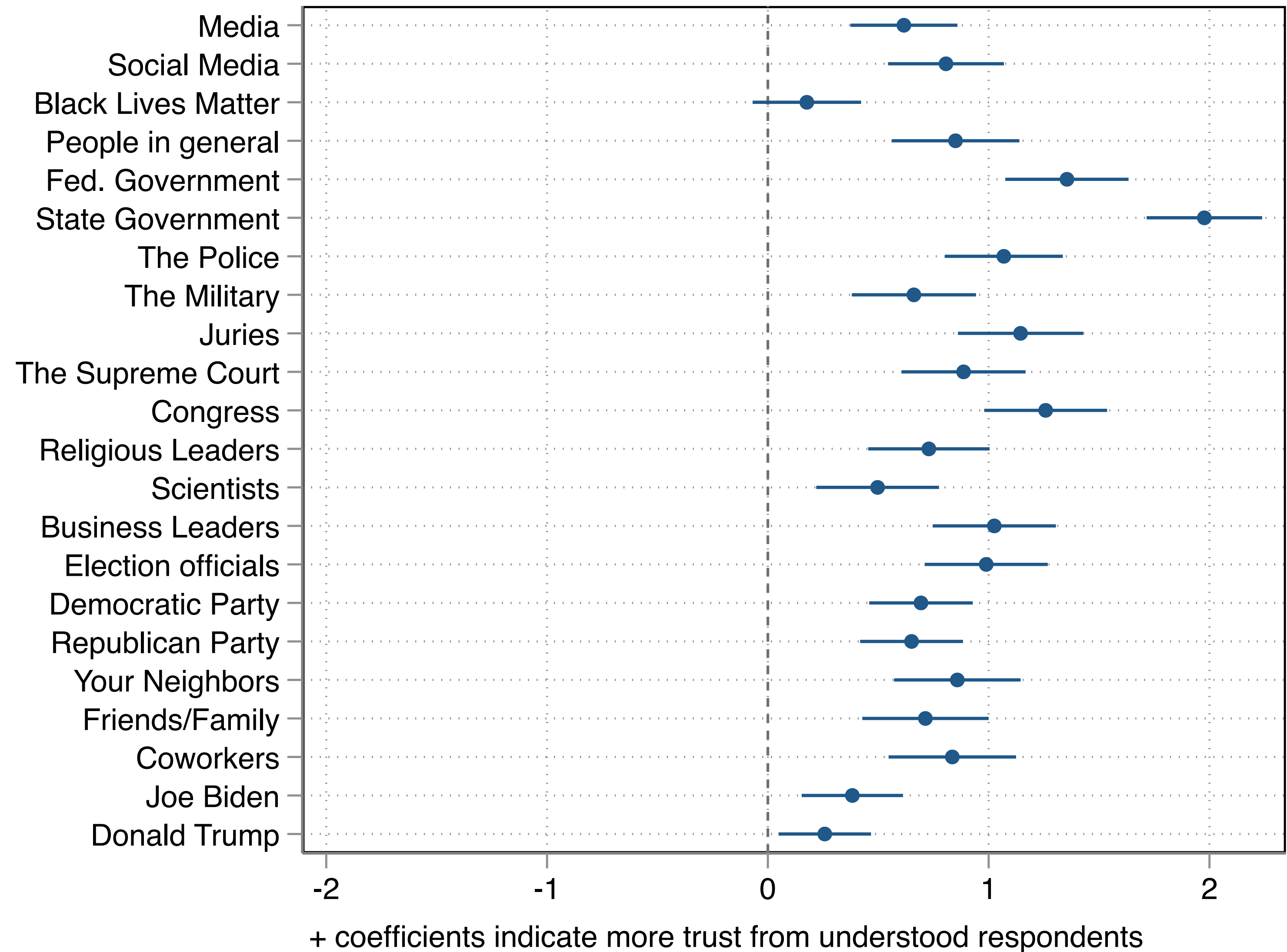
Do those who feel the government understands their needs also believe the government allocates resources fairly to them?

- DV: “People in my area get our fair share of resources from the *[federal/state]* government” (1-5 scale, “disagree strongly” to “agree strongly”)

	Federal Resources	State Resources	Federal Resources	State Resources
Felt Understanding	0.51*** (18.43)	0.52*** (19.08)	0.51*** (17.95)	0.52*** (18.23)
	-	-	(Controls)	(Controls)
R ²	0.26	0.27	0.31	0.30
N	978	978	893	893

• Controls: PID, Race, Gender, Place, Income, Education. Standardized coefficients. T-ratio in parentheses.

Felt understanding is strongly related to trust in government and others in society

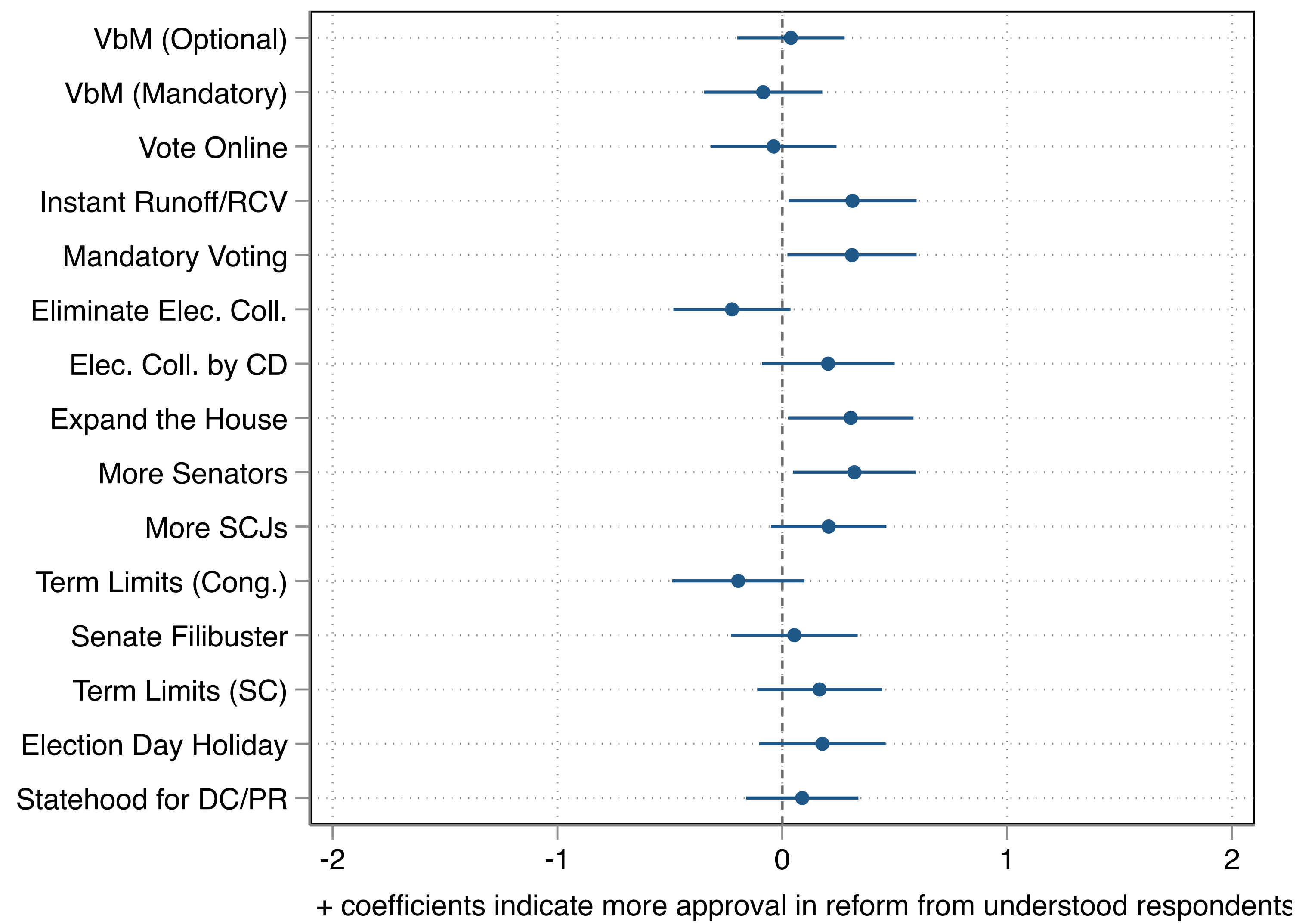


Felt understanding from state government is particularly strongly associated with trust in that level

	Federal Trust	State Trust	Federal Trust	State Trust
Federal Understanding	0.33*** (10.19)		0.38*** (10.90)	
State Understanding		0.51*** (17.11)		0.52*** (16.73)
	-	-	(Controls)	(Controls)
R ²	0.11	0.26	0.16	0.28
N	835	835	766	767

• Controls: PID, Race, Gender, Place, Income, Education. Standardized coefficients. T-ratio in parentheses.

Felt understanding largely unrelated to support for electoral and institutional reform



Wrapping up

- What about policy attitudes and public opinion?
 - Not part of our initial design - but we did look. (No particular relationship)
- Felt understanding is not just about partisanship - although people do feel slightly more understood when their party is in power, it is more than that
- As in social and personality psychology, felt understanding is an important predictor in the realm of political behavior
 - Especially for trust in government

Questions?

- Thanks for attending!
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