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Public Support for the Department of Homeland Security

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Abstract

The creation of the Department of Homeland Security was a landmark in the history of the U.S. federal government. With the largest reorganization of the federal executive branch in decades, policymakers sought to group agencies with missions related to homeland security under one cabinet level official. It is natural to ask whether this reorganization has succeeded. One measure of that success would be public confidence in the competency of the department. In this paper, we report the results of a national poll which asked a variety of questions related to individuals' perceptions of the Department of Homeland Security. The results illustrate that the level of confidence in the competency of the Department of Homeland Security is generally high—though there are divisions among people's evaluations based on party, religiosity, attention to terrorism, and education level.

KEYWORDS: homeland security, public opinion, trust in government

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1 Introduction

We live in an era of vocal criticism of public institutions. Protests of policies ranging from the deployment of troops overseas to health care reform have involved fundamental attacks on the credibility and competency of government institutions. The Pew Center conducts a periodic survey of public support for government agencies (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1998, 2010). The results of the survey shed some light on the evolution of the public's trust in government across time as well as comparisons of the perception of different agencies at a given time. The most recent poll, conducted in April 2010, found that trust in government in general had fallen to levels not seen since the early 1990s and the middle 1970s. Soon after the beginning of polls asking about trust in government, there was a precipitous decline in trust through the mid-1970s. Since that time we have seen two cycles with trust levels rising to around 50% before falling back to around 20% - the point where we find ourselves today.

The previous summary of trust in government reveals a general pattern. This general pattern, though, conceals considerable variability in the public's assessment of specific agencies. In the most recent survey, the public reported widely varying assessments of particular agencies. Some agencies, particularly the Postal Service, receive favorability ratings in the 80 percentiles. Other agencies routinely receive low favorability ratings. The most obvious of these poorly rated agencies is, predictably, the IRS with ratings in the 30s and 40s in the previous two decades. Interestingly, the lowest favorability in the 2010 survey was actually the Department of Education - taking that spot from the IRS (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2010). What these results indicate is that there is considerable variability in the favorability ratings of different agencies. Even in an era of low trust in government, some agencies get high ratings (and vice versa).

Given this variation, we are interested in the factors related to reported assessments of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). At a time when the general approval of government is quite low, how do people assess a single component of that government? Furthermore, DHS is a relatively recent addition and still a politically controversial one. Given this position, we feel it is important that we investigate the factors that predispose individuals to have positive (or negative) assessments of DHS - in particular, ratings of the individual's trust in the agency. This article represents an initial investigation of these factors based on various candidate variables commonly associated with assessments of government or of particular note in contemporary politics.

2 Sources of Variation in Trust in Government

Section 1 illustrated that public trust in government has varied considerably over time. At any given time, there is also variation in levels of favorability for specific agencies. This raises a number of important questions. Who is it that trusts government more (or less) than others? These factors will be appropriate starting points for an analysis of individual reports of trust in DHS.

This initial exploration will consider three basic types of explanations: political preferences, demographic characteristics, and policy domain specific beliefs.

The obvious first candidates are ideology and party identification. Much of the work within political science seeking to explain variations in trust in government have linked general trust to approval in major components such as the president and Congress (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn, 2000, Hibbing, 2002). Needless to say, one's approval for Congress or the president will depend a great deal on one's ideology and party identification. If you share a party identity with the president, you are more likely to report that you support the president. If the Congress is controlled by members of a party other than your own, you are not likely to approve of their actions. If these component measures are components of trust in the undifferentiated "government," then one would expect that party identification would also play a role in the individual's trust in other components of the government.

It is also common to control for a variety of demographic characteristics. The most common control variables in this regard include such factors as age, class, income, gender, rurality, race, and education (Vigoda-Gadot, 2007, etc.).¹ We will focus on just one of these control variables for illustrative purposes: education level. Since our purpose is not to explain levels of support, but to illustrate variation in that support, this selective approach to variables selection is appropriate. While previous studies have not included religiosity, we have included it in this exploratory analysis. This has become an increasingly important element of public opinion and contemporary politics. There is some reason to believe that the current Tea Party movement voicing dissatisfaction with government has a strong religious element.

In addition to these basic demographic variables, we are interested in the extent to which attention to matters of homeland security affects one's trust in the DHS. Apart from predispositions related to demographic charac-

¹For an example of a study that uses all of these controls, see Welch, Hinnant, and Moon (2005).

teristics, the respondents who report that they pay a great deal of attention to matters of homeland security and terrorism may have quite different assessments of the department than those who do not report such attention. The respondent's level of attention to homeland security and terrorism also represents a factor specific to the policy domain of DHS.

3 Data

To compare how different groups of individuals evaluate DHS differently, we analyzed data from a recent national telephone survey of adults in the United States. This public opinion survey was designed by the Institute for Science, Technology and Public Policy in collaboration with other scholars at Texas A&M University. Respondents were selected through a random digit sampling of all telephone households in the United States provided by Survey Sampling International.

The focus of the survey was to evaluate the public's concern of terrorism/homeland security issues; their risk assessment of nuclear security; their trust in government agencies in handling nuclear terrorism and national security; their support for various policy options and willingness to accept costs/expenditures for policy decisions. Standard social demographic information and respondents' political affiliations were also gathered during the telephone interviews.

The survey was conducted in August 2009 by the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University. The telephone survey averaged about 35 minutes each and 924 interviews were completed.²

²Following American Association for Public Opinion Research conventions and algorithms, the response rate was 5.4%, the cooperation rate was 16.8% and the completion rate was 78.4%. The declining trend of response rates in recent polls has been carefully examined by survey scientists. Contrary to the conventional presumption that a lower response rate leads to poorer survey quality, recent empirical studies indicate there are little statistical differences between survey results with high response rate and low response rate. In a comprehensive study using data drawn from exit polls, Merkle and Edelman (2002) found no relationship between response rate and survey accuracy. Keeter, Kennedy, Dimock, Best, and Craighill (2006) found that results from survey with lower responses rate were generally statistically indistinguishable from those with much higher response rates. In another study comparing 81 national surveys with response rates varying from 5% to 54%, Holbrook, Krosnick, and Pfent (2007) found that RDD telephone surveys with low response rates "do not notably reduce the quality of survey demographic estimates."

All of the results reported below were calculated in STATA version 11 (Stata Corp, 2009)³.

4 Support for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)

We evaluated individual support for DHS using a survey question asking respondents about their assessments of various federal government and other social institutions. We will focus specifically on reported “trust” in DHS ⁴. Figure 1 illustrates the raw distributions of the answers.

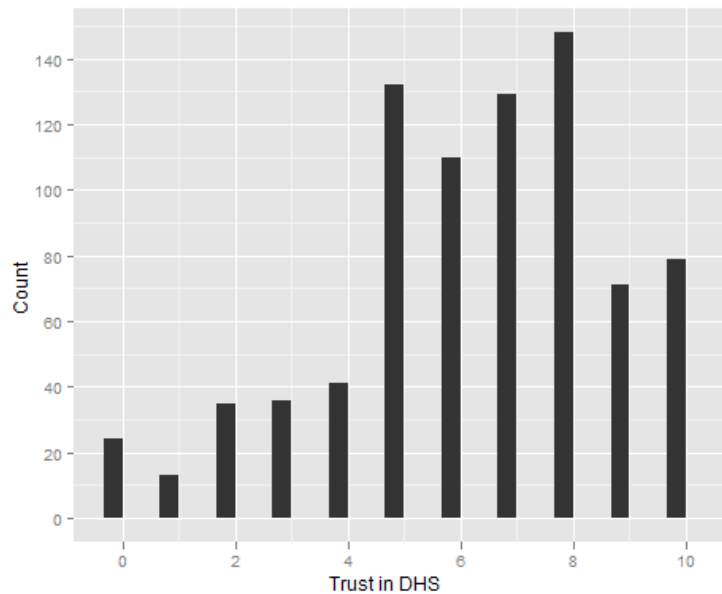


Figure 1: The Distribution of Reported Assessments of DHS - Full Scale

It is important to note that the central tendency of the responses is skewed towards the positive end of the scale. The median rating was seven

³We replicated the results in R Version 2.12.2 (R Development Core Team, 2010) with plots produced using `ggplot2` (Wickham, 2009).

⁴Specifically, the question was “I am going to read a list of possible sources of information in nuclear security and terrorist threats. I would like you to tell me how trustworthy each one is. Please use a scale from 0 to 10 with 0 meaning the source is not trustworthy at all and 10 meaning the source is extremely trustworthy.” One of the sources listed was the “Department of Homeland Security.” The result is an 11 point scale from “not trustworthy at all” to “extremely trustworthy”.

out of ten with the average being slightly smaller at 6.7. Analysis of the raw data would encounter a number of problems since so few respondents gave low ratings of trust. To avoid the problems related to such sparse categories, we collapsed the responses into six relatively similarly populated categories. Responses in the original scale from zero to four were combined; as were responses of nine and ten. The recoded version of the competency assessments are illustrated in Figure 2.

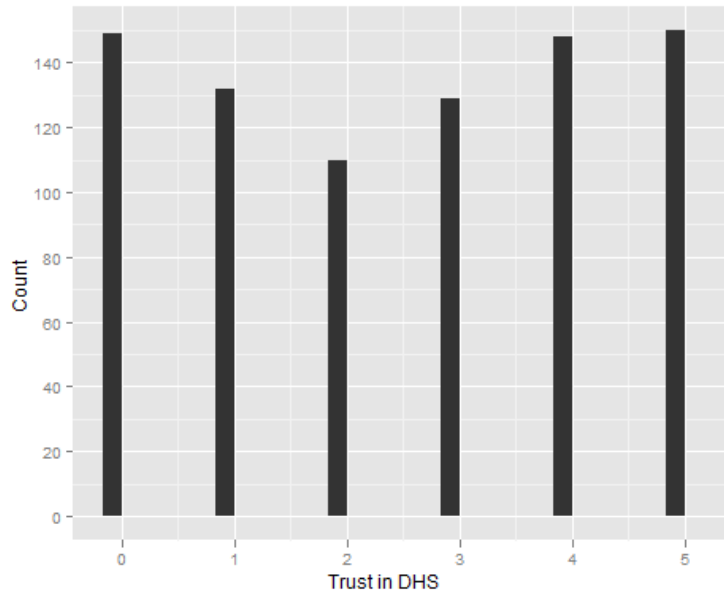


Figure 2: The Distribution of Reported Assessments of DHS - Reduced Scale

With this more balanced variable, we can actually compare whether individuals with different values of party ID, homeland security policy salience, education, and religiosity report different levels of trust in DHS ⁵.

⁵We also replicated the analysis using a different question involving respondent assessments of the “competence” of DHS. The results are nearly identical to those reported here for “trust”. The same relationships are significant and patterns of correlation are largely the same.

5 Differences in Support for DHS based on Ideology and Party Identification

The natural factor to explore first is ideology. DHS was championed by a conservative president and affiliated with the security policies of many conservatives. One might then expect that liberals will be less likely to have a positive evaluation of an agency affiliated with conservative security values. Otherwise, one might expect that liberals are more likely to trust an agency headed by a liberal president at the time. It turns out that both simple predictions are wrong.

Table 1 reports the levels of support broken down by ideology. The original question involved a seven-point scale that would be difficult to analyze using cross-tabulations. We collapsed the responses into three categories for clarity. All of those that reported they were liberal or conservative (whether they reported they were “strong” or “slightly” so) were labeled so and only those that reported they were “middle of the road” are reported as moderate.⁶ Respondents who reported other ideologies were omitted from this analysis, of whom there were only 9.

Level of Trust in DHS						
Ideology	0	1	2	3	4	5
Liberal (0)	21%	13%	16%	14%	18%	18%
Moderate (1)	15%	19%	11%	17%	20%	18%
Conservative (2)	18%	16%	14%	16%	18%	19%
$Chi^2 = 7.30$ (p=.697) $\tau_C = .0079$						

Table 1: Trust in DHS by Ideology

The result of Table 1 may surprise some. Ideology is unrelated to reported assessment of DHS. Specifically, the Chi^2 value suggests that this array of responses is indistinguishable from random. To assist in understanding the data, Figure 3 illustrates the data. This primary predictor variable in much of the public opinion (on matters of politics) literature is not influential here. Why this is the case may be revealed by looking specifically at party identification rather than ideology.

⁶We replicated the analysis using a data reduction strategy that instead included “slightly” affiliated respondents as moderates. The results were consistent with those reported here.

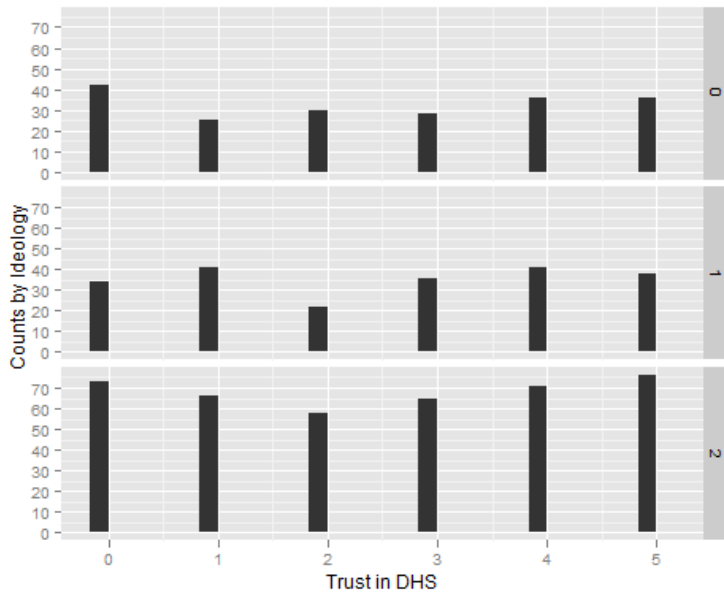


Figure 3: Trust in DHS by Ideology

The research reviewed in section 2 suggested also that one’s party identification may affect how much one expresses trust in government. It is reasonable to expect similar patterns in individual assessments of agencies. Typically, one expects that people will report greater trust in government when there is a co-partisan president or their party controls Congress. Analogously, one would imagine that a person is more likely to report more trust in an agency overseen by a co-partisan president. The survey was conducted during a Democratic administration and one would expect Democrats to report higher assessments than non-Democrats.

Table 2 reports the results.

Level of Trust in DHS						
Party ID	0	1	2	3	4	5
Democrat (1)	16%	14%	12%	16%	17%	25%
Independent (2)	23%	17%	15%	14%	17%	14%
Republican (3)	14%	17%	13%	18%	20%	18%
$Chi^2 = 21.58$ (p=.017) $\tau_C = -.025$						

Table 2: Trust in DHS by Party Identification

Party identification matters, though in a surprising way. Both Republicans and Democrats support DHS more than Independents. This may indicate the cross-pressured nature of assessments for an agency recently created by a Republican but currently overseen by a Democratic president. The respondents most likely to report the lowest level of assessment are self-identified independents. The respondents least likely to report the highest level of assessment are similarly self-reported independents. The formal test for the equivalence of the groups (the Chi^2 Test) easily rejects equivalence. It is clear from the Chi^2 that reports of trust relative to party identification are not what you would expect from random responses. Figure 4 illustrates the relationship.

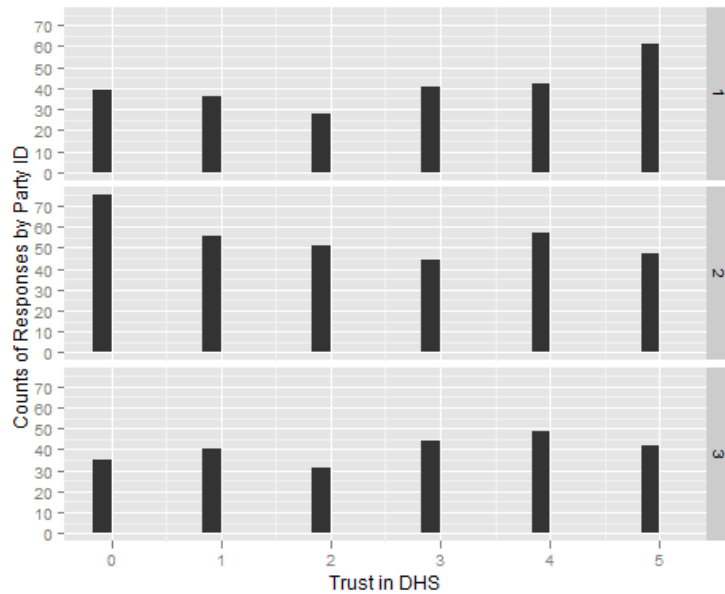


Figure 4: Trust in DHS by Party Identification

It is clear from this brief treatment that simple ideological explanations do not explain the variation we observe in trust in DHS. Just knowing a person's ideological disposition or party identification does not tell you much about that person's level of trust in DHS. For explanatory patterns, we will have to look elsewhere.

6 Differences in Support for DHS based on Education

It may also be the case that trust in DHS vary by levels of education. The expectations here are not as clear to state. It has become traditional to include education level in models of general trust in government, so we explore its impact on the specific assessments of DHS.

Education levels are measured at four levels.⁷ We compare respondents who reported completing high school or less to those who reported post-high school training (including an associate's degree or vocational training/certification), to those who reported graduating from college, and to those that reported post-graduate education. The comparisons of these groups reported trust assessments are included in Table 3.

Education	Level of Trust in DHS					
	0	1	2	3	4	5
High School (0)	16%	15%	14%	11%	19%	25%
Associates or Voc. Certification (1)	16%	18%	11%	16%	16%	22%
College Graduate (2)	19%	14%	14%	17%	21%	15%
Post-graduate Degree (3)	22%	16%	15%	18%	15%	14%
$Chi^2 = 22.21$ (p=.102) $\tau_C = -.077$						

Table 3: Trust in DHS by Education Level

Figure 5 illustrates the pattern. Respondents of different education levels do have different trust assessments of DHS - though the effect is only significant at the .10 level. As levels of education rise, the reported assessments drop. Those who reported completing only high school (or less) were the least likely to report the lowest level of trust and the most likely to report the highest level of trust. Similarly, those who reported post-graduate education were the least likely to report the highest level of trust and the most likely to report the lowest level of assessment. While the pattern is weak, again the the Chi^2 Test suggests that the reports of trust are not random relative to

⁷This is again a case where we needed to collapse categories to ease analysis and reporting. We combined separate categories for those who had not completed high school and those that had completed high school but had not more education. We then combined categories for those reporting an associate or vocational certification or some college. The result was the four level measure reported on Table 3.

education level. Here the τ_C has a more natural interpretation. There is a weak negative relationship between education and trust in DHS.

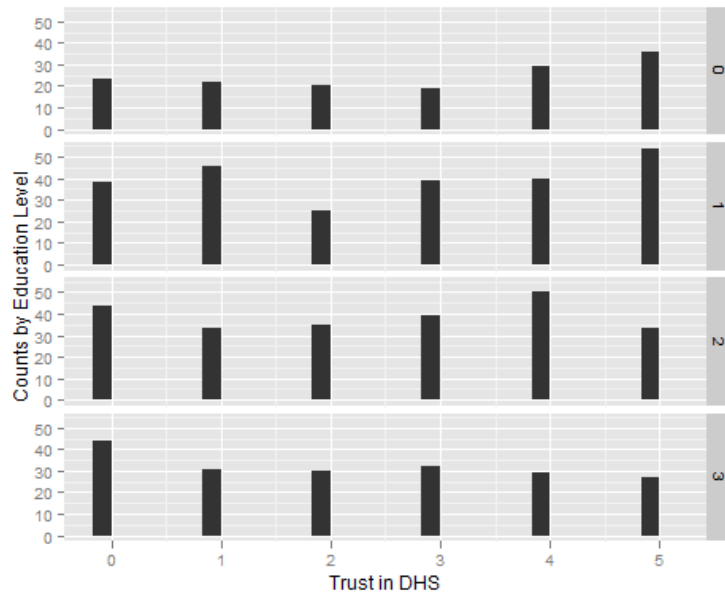


Figure 5: Trust in DHS by Education Level

7 Differences in Support for DHS based on Religiosity

Our second demographic comparison is for a respondent characteristic that has only recently become central to the discussion of public opinion - religiosity. We have elected not to compare respondents based on their specific reported religion. We do not have strong expectations about whether Catholics or Hindus are more likely to have a positive assessment of DHS. Instead, our interests are with the salience of religion in the lives of the respondents. We have adopted, then, a simple measure of whether the respondent reported attending religious services on a weekly basis. Table 4 reports the comparison of reported trust in DHS by religiosity.

People who report attending religious services weekly have higher levels of reported trust in DHS. The differences are not extraordinary at the highest levels of evaluation, but people who report weekly religious attendance are much less likely to report the lowest level of trust. In this comparison, the Chi^2

Level of Trust in DHS						
Weekly Attendance at Relig. Service	0	1	2	3	4	5
No (0)	22%	16%	14%	14%	18%	16%
Yes (1)	14%	16%	13%	17%	18%	22%
$Chi^2 = 13.39$ (p=.020) $\tau_C = .09$						

Table 4: Trust in DHS by Religiosity

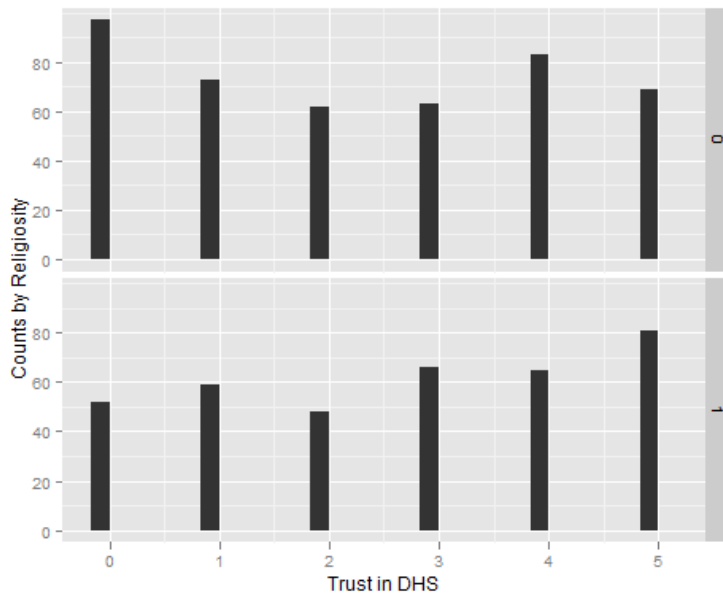


Figure 6: Trust in DHS by Religiosity

Test again suggests that levels of trust are not random between people based on religiosity. The τ_C suggests that there is a positive correlation between reported weekly attendance at religious services and reported trust in DHS. Figure 6 makes this relationship clear by comparing counts of trust responses across various levels of religiosity.

8 Differences in Support for DHS based on Policy Salience

In addition to these policy preference and demographic variables used to explain trust in government, we have selected to explore a variable that is specific to the domain of homeland security or newly important to the study of public opinion. We focus on the respondent's reported level of attention to matters of homeland security and terrorism. As with the assessments of the department, the respondents were allowed to rate their concern on a scale of zero to ten. We have collapsed the categories here as we did with the trust variable to avoid sparsely populated groups. The result is four levels of increasing reported attention to homeland security matters. The comparison of these four groups is presented in Table 5.

Level of Trust in DHS						
Level of Concern	0	1	2	3	4	5
0	27%	17%	17%	17%	11%	11%
1	23%	15%	14%	17%	16%	15%
2	13%	18%	17%	16%	22%	15%
3	14%	14%	7%	13%	20%	32%
$Chi^2 = 66.94$ ($p < .001$) $\tau_C = .168$						

Table 5: Trust in DHS by Level of Attention to Matters of Homeland Security

In what may be good news for DHS, people who pay the most attention to issues of homeland security have the highest trust in their agency. It is probably a good sign that the most attentive are the most trusting of the department. As with the other comparisons, respondents with the lowest level of attentiveness are the most likely to report the lowest level of trust and the least likely to report the highest level of trust. The difference between the highest level of attention and the other levels is remarkable – with respondents reporting the highest level of attention giving the highest level of trust in twice the proportions of the other groups. Figure 7 provides an illustration to reinforce this point. The Chi^2 Test strongly rejects the hypothesis that reports of trust are random across groups of differing levels of attentiveness. The τ_C value suggests a positive correlation of attentiveness to matters of homeland security and trust in DHS - which is clear from the marginals.

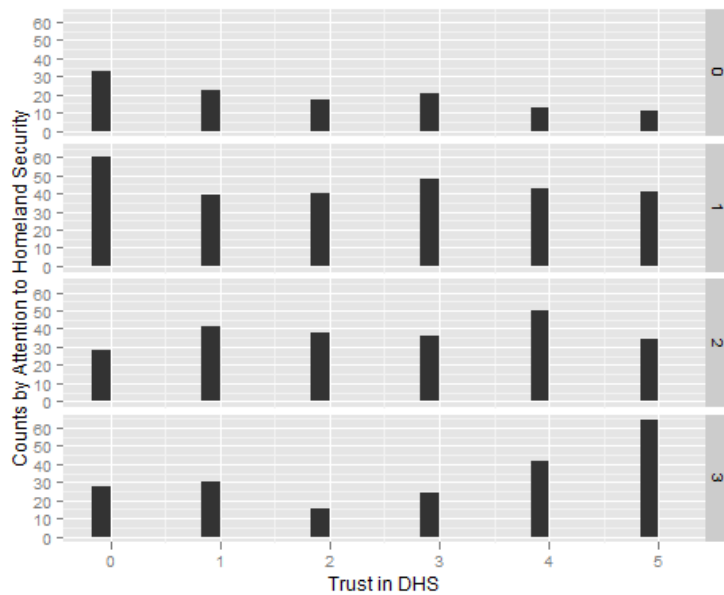


Figure 7: Trust in DHS by Attention Level to Homeland Security

9 Conclusions

The results reported in the previous sections are clearly preliminary and descriptive. We do not purport to explain all (or most) of the variation in assessments of DHS. Our intentions are exploratory. With very little work available to explain public assessments of specific agencies, and none of which we are aware focusing on DHS, we are exploring whether the “usual suspects” variables of social cleavages are also cleavages in the evaluation of the DHS. The evidence here is that trust assessments of DHS are affected by the primary social cleavages. The primary dividing lines such as party identification, education, and religion are lines that divide people over their assessments of the DHS – though sometimes in surprising ways. It is also the case that assessments depend on how concerned people are with the general policy area - suggesting one reason that assessments of specific agencies may not depend entirely on general political conditions.

Of course, there is a lot that this exploratory study does not tell us about the dynamics of support for DHS. We can’t, for example, identify the magnitude of the various differences reported. The Chi^2 and τ_C tests only indicate whether the various groups are equivalent and a vague sense of the

direction of the relationship.⁸ More complicated methods could assess the specific magnitude of the increased probability of a high assessment of, say, moving from a high school graduate to a college graduate level of education. Moving to these methods would be a natural extension of this exploratory analysis.

Maybe more importantly, this exploratory study does not provide evidence of the comparative importance of each of the variables explored. It is well known that some of these variables are related. Religiosity and party identification, for example, are related. These simple analyses can not account for the joint effects of multiple influences or account for the overlapping influence of some variables. That would require a move to a multivariate model of assessment. This is possible but is outside the bounds of this exploratory study. This next step would, conveniently, also allow for estimation of the specific magnitudes of the effect of each component explanation.

We are also quite interested in the relationship between general “trust in government” and assessments of DHS. To what extent does one’s general assessment of trust in government affect the specific trust assessment of DHS? Does the general attitude affect the assessment of some agencies more than others or play a bigger role for some people than others? We simply do not know. This would be an interesting question to investigate in follow-up research.

Finally, the exploratory results reported here do not tell us about the relative assessments of other agencies. It may be the case that assessment of specific agencies are correlated (even controlling for the factors considered here). It could be that individuals have similar evaluations of agencies related to the military and homeland defense - including DHS as well as the FBI, CIA, and Defense Department. People may evaluate this cluster of agencies in quite different ways than other agencies with little relation to security issues including the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Education. Understanding the public evaluation of agencies will need to consider these potential clusters of agencies.

Substantively, understanding assessments of DHS may be essential to understanding a variety of compliance behaviors among the public. Recent efforts to involve the public in such campaigns as “see something say something” or even travel guidances depend on public compliance with DHS recommendations. It is plausible that compliance behaviors are related to individual

⁸The τ_C does provide a sense of magnitude but interpreting specific values is difficult. There is no direct interpretation of a .2, for example. From such a value we can only see that the correlation is positive and greater than some other correlation that is less than .2.

assessments of DHS. While we do not evaluate compliance behaviors in this article, it is certainly an important area of study where individuals assessments (including trust and competency assessments) could play a vital role. If we better understand who trusts DHS, we may have a better idea of how to design policy instruments to promote compliance crucial for policy success.

In conclusion, there are clear patterns in public support for the DHS. This department is not removed from the general political trends that drive elections and other political phenomena. It will be important for leaders of the department, and those who follow it closely, to consider carefully the path the DHS will chart through these complicated political waters.

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