

# Trust in Institutions

Research Report: CUPES-004 | January 8, 2021

## Research Question

This is the fourth report from the *Civil Unrest and Presidential Election Study* (CUPES). Here, we examine Americans' level of trust in institutions, as well as how trust levels vary by political party affiliation and gender. Prior work (e.g., Twenge et al., 2014) suggests that institutional trust is dropping, and has been dropping, since the early 2000s. In order to add to this research, we asked the question: "how much do Americans trust news media, political officials, hospitals/doctors and educational institutions?"

## Methodology

### Data Source

- Civil Unrest and Presidential Election Study ("CUPES," collected in September/October 2020)

### Participants

- Drawn from 1401 adults in the United States
- $M_{age} = 45.64$  Years ( $SD = 17.24$  Years), 54% Female

### Measures

- *Trust in Institutions*
  1. *News Media*: measured with the question of, "How trustworthy would you say news media is in general?" Answers ranged from "0" to "4."
  2. *Educational Institutions*: measured with the question of, "How much do you trust educational institutions to act in the best interest of your community?" Answers ranged from "0" to "4."
  3. *Hospitals and Doctors*: measured with the question of, "How much do you trust hospitals and doctors to act in the best interest of your community?" Answers ranged from "0" to "4."
  4. *Political Officials*: measured with the question of, "How much do you trust elected political officials to act in the best interest of your community?" Answers ranged from "0" to "4."
- For additional information (e.g., statistical output, citations) not included in this document, view the supplemental page for this report located at [skeptical.com/research-center/civil-unrest-presidential-election-study/](https://skeptical.com/research-center/civil-unrest-presidential-election-study/)

## Summary of Findings

Our results suggest that

- a. peoples' trust is *highest* in hospitals and doctors, with nearly 78% of participants reporting high trust and less than 5% reporting low trust.
- b. peoples' trust is *lowest* in political officials, with only about 52% of respondents reporting high trust and nearly 17% reporting low trust.
- c. trust levels, for both Republicans and Democrats, are lower among females compared to males. This effect was particularly pronounced for Republican females, who reported the lowest overall trust in institutions.

### Take-home Messages

1. Periods of political polarization tend to be associated with declining trust in political institutions (Citrin and Stoker, 2018), though work on the impact of polarization on institutional trust remains understudied.
2. Only about half (51.7%) of the people in our sample reported high trust in political officials, while far more reported high trust for news media (72.2%) and for hospitals and doctors (77.9%).
3. Republican women reported the lowest levels of trust in institutions. Whether this was an effect of how Trump handled the end of his presidency or some other reason, remains open to further investigation and interpretation.

- Have an interpretation of this you want to share? Email it to [research@skeptical.com](mailto:research@skeptical.com)

# SKEPTIC

This report was brought to you by the **Skeptic Research Center** and the Worldview Foundations Research Team.

## Become Involved

[skeptical.com/research-center/become-involved](https://skeptical.com/research-center/become-involved)

## Researchers

Anondah Saide, PhD  
Kevin McCaffree, PhD  
[research@skeptical.com](mailto:research@skeptical.com)

## Suggested Citation

Saide, A., & McCaffree, K. (2021). Trust in Institutions. Skeptic Research Center, CUPES-004.

This report was brought to you by the **Skeptic Research Center** and the Worldview Foundations Research Team.

## Become Involved

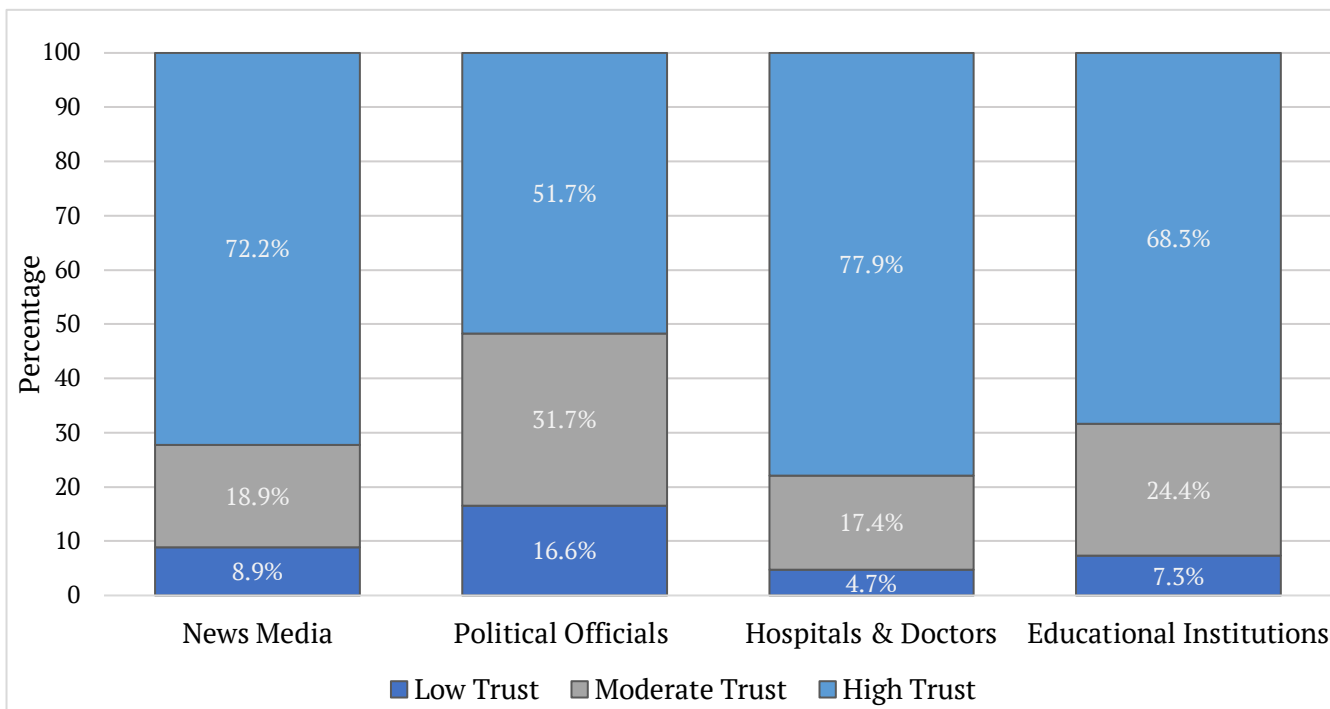
[skeptical.com/research-center/become-involved](https://skeptical.com/research-center/become-involved)

## Researchers

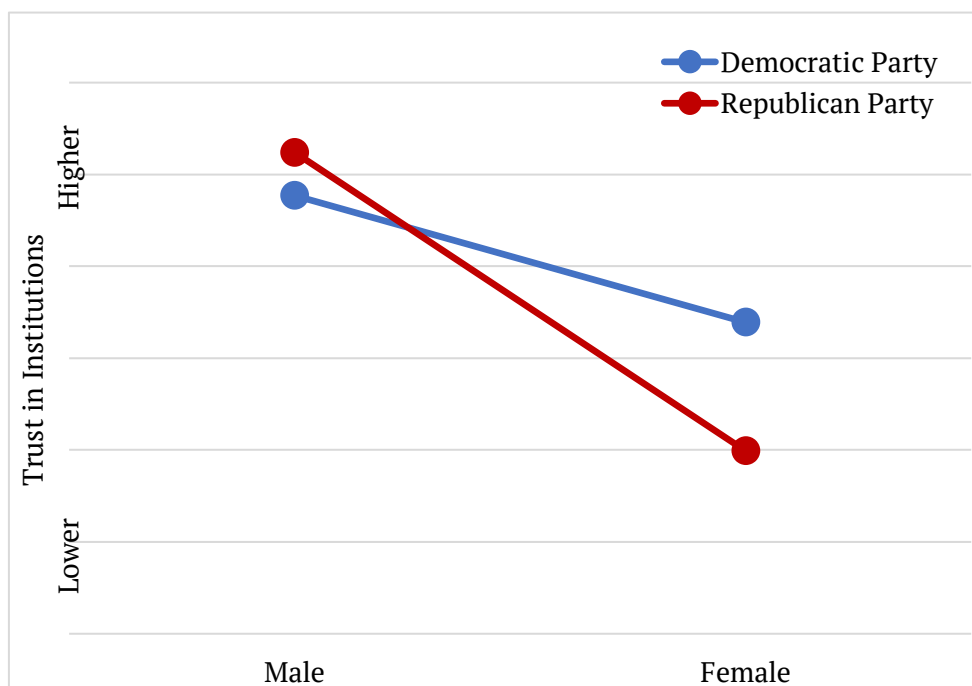
Anondah Saide, PhD  
Kevin McCaffree, PhD  
[research@skeptical.com](mailto:research@skeptical.com)

## Suggested Citation

Saide, A., & McCaffree, K. (2021). Trust in Institutions. Skeptic Research Center, CUPES-004.



**Figure 1:** Percentage of those that reported low, moderate, and high trust by institution type



**Figure 2:** Mean differences in trust by gender and political affiliation