

Depression and Political Ideology

Research Report: PADS-006 | July 19, 2023

Research Question

Is life in America hopeless? In a peer-reviewed article entitled “Fuck the patriarchy: Towards an intersectional politics of irreverent rage,” sociologist Helen Wood suggests that, “with climate change [and] widening inequality... we are truly fucked” (Wood, 2019). In 2020, Chad Wolf, acting U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary, declared white supremacy to be the most persistent and lethal domestic threat to the United States (Behrmann, 2020). A recent New York Times feature article described one professor’s struggle to remove “whiteness” from universities given that the study of classic literature, “has been instrumental to the invention of ‘whiteness’ and its continued domination” (Poser, 2021). Some popular academic theories even doubt the possibility of moral progress (Seamster & Ray, 2018). But in 2021, a Manhattan Institute report found, among other things, that reading social justice scholarship significantly reduced Black Americans’ hopefulness and motivation (Kaufmann, 2021). The author of the report speculated that, though intended to empower women and racial minorities, misleading characterizations of America as a white supremacist patriarchy may do the exact opposite. In light of this possibility, in this report we asked: “How is mental health related to believing this popular political rhetoric?”

Methodology

Data Source

- Political Accuracy and Divisions Study (“PADS,” collected August 2022 - October 2022)

Data Quality Control

- All participants in this dataset passed attention, response time, fraud, duplication, and bot checks.

Participants

- 2938 adults in the United States (51.2% Female)
- Average Age = 43.47 years (SD = 16.66 years)
- 45.2% White; 33.1% Hispanic; 21.7% Black

Measures

- Depression:** Respondents were asked seven questions that gauged how often they experience symptoms associated with depression (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).
- Cynicism:** Respondents were asked their degree of agreement (or disagreement) with the following statements:
 - “Women in the United States have no hope for success because of sexism.”
 - “Racial minorities in the United States have no hope for success because of racism.”
- Political Orientation:** Respondents were asked, “When thinking about social issues, where would you place yourself on the political continuum?”

Summary of Findings

- Cynical beliefs about life in America for racial minorities are more common than cynical beliefs about life for women (Fig. 1).
 - Cynical beliefs about life in America for women and racial minorities were most common amongst liberal respondents (Fig. 1).
- Those who “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” that racial minorities in the U.S. have no hope for success because of racism were moderately depressed (Fig. 2).
- Those who “Agreed” that women in the U.S. have no hope for success because of sexism were moderately depressed. Those who “Strongly Agreed” were severely depressed (Fig. 3).
- GenZ participants identifying as “Very Liberal,” “Liberal” or “Very Conservative” were moderately depressed as were “Very Liberal” Millennials (Fig. 4).

Take-Home Messages

- Cynical political rhetoric about racial minorities and women is associated with poor mental health, in particular, moderate to severe depression.
- This is a correlational study. We cannot statistically determine whether cynical rhetoric causes mental distress or if it is the other way around. As with many social psychological phenomena, it may be a feedback loop where one reinforces the other and vice versa.
- Have an interpretation? Share it here: research@skeptic.com

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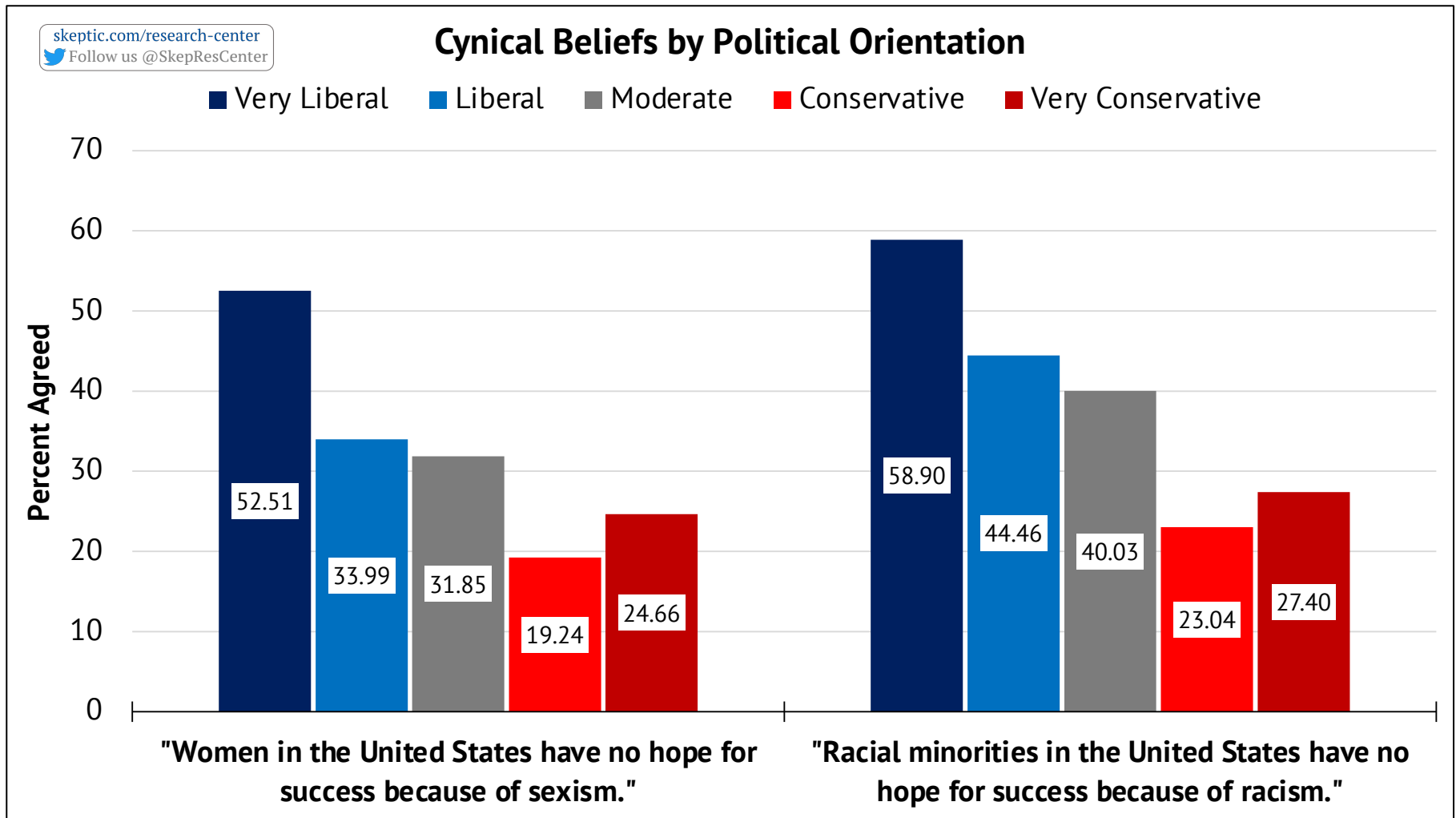
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Figure 1



Note: Percent agreed includes people that “somewhat agreed,” “agreed,” and “strongly agreed.”

Figure 2

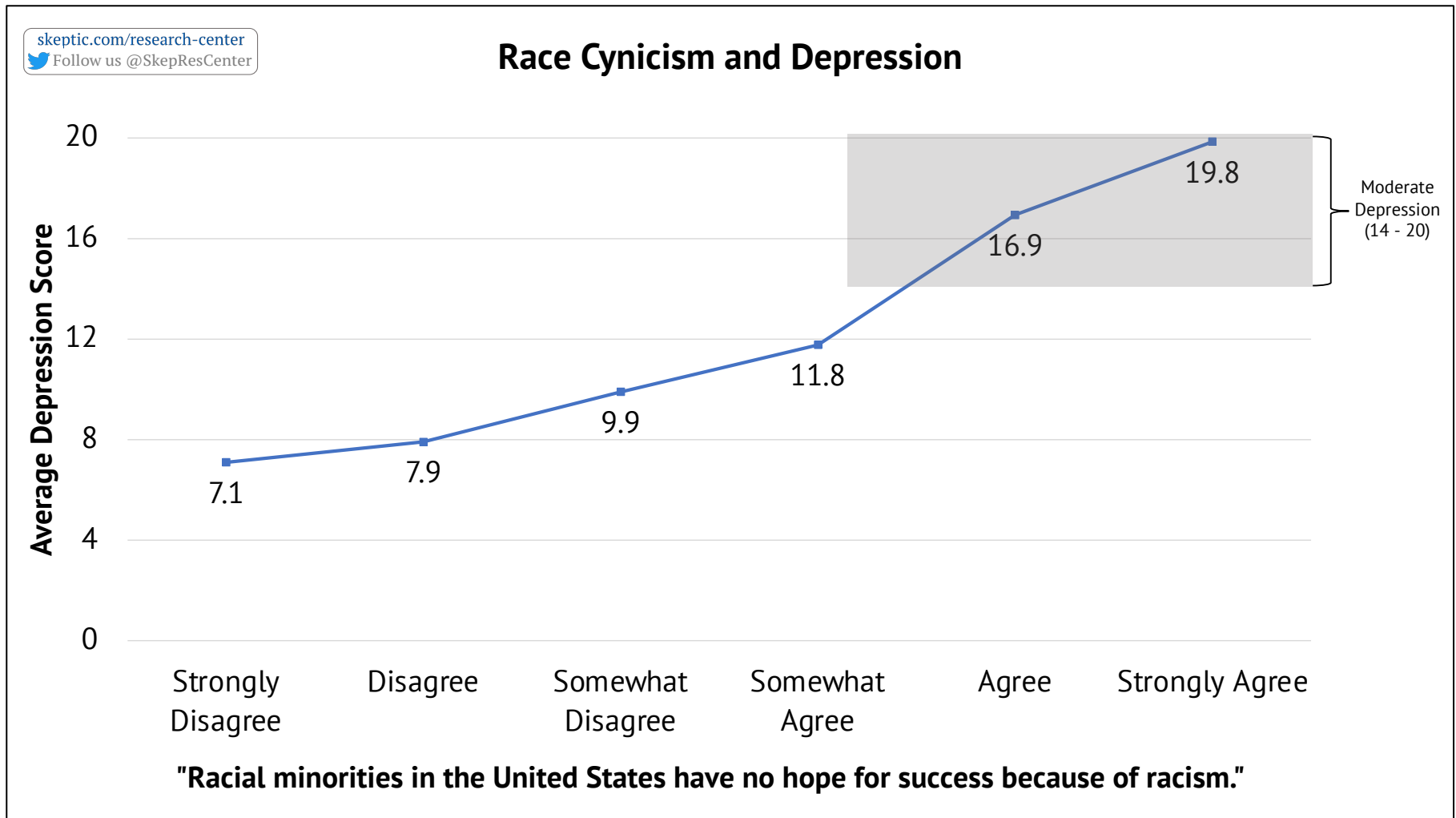


Figure 3

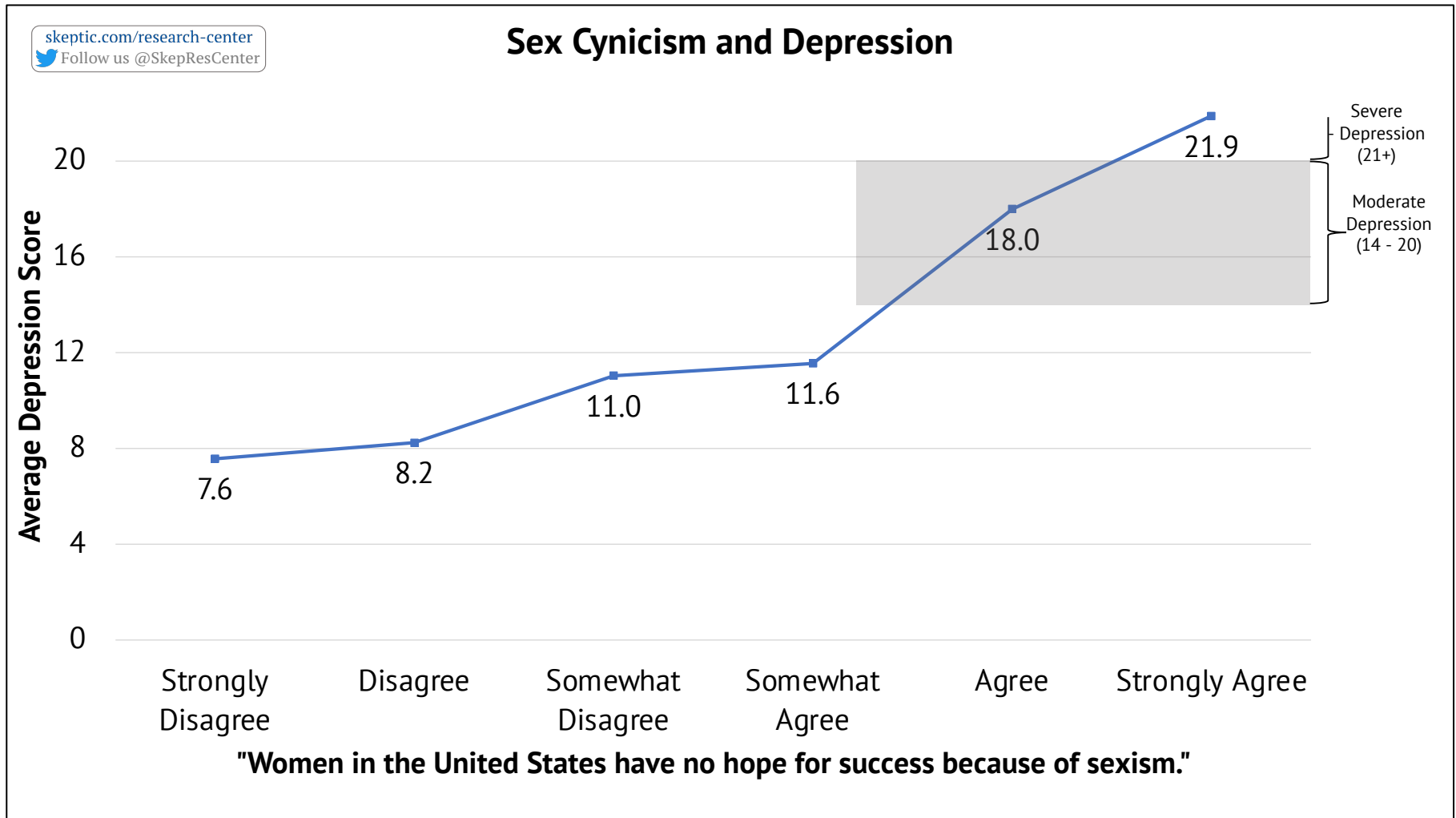
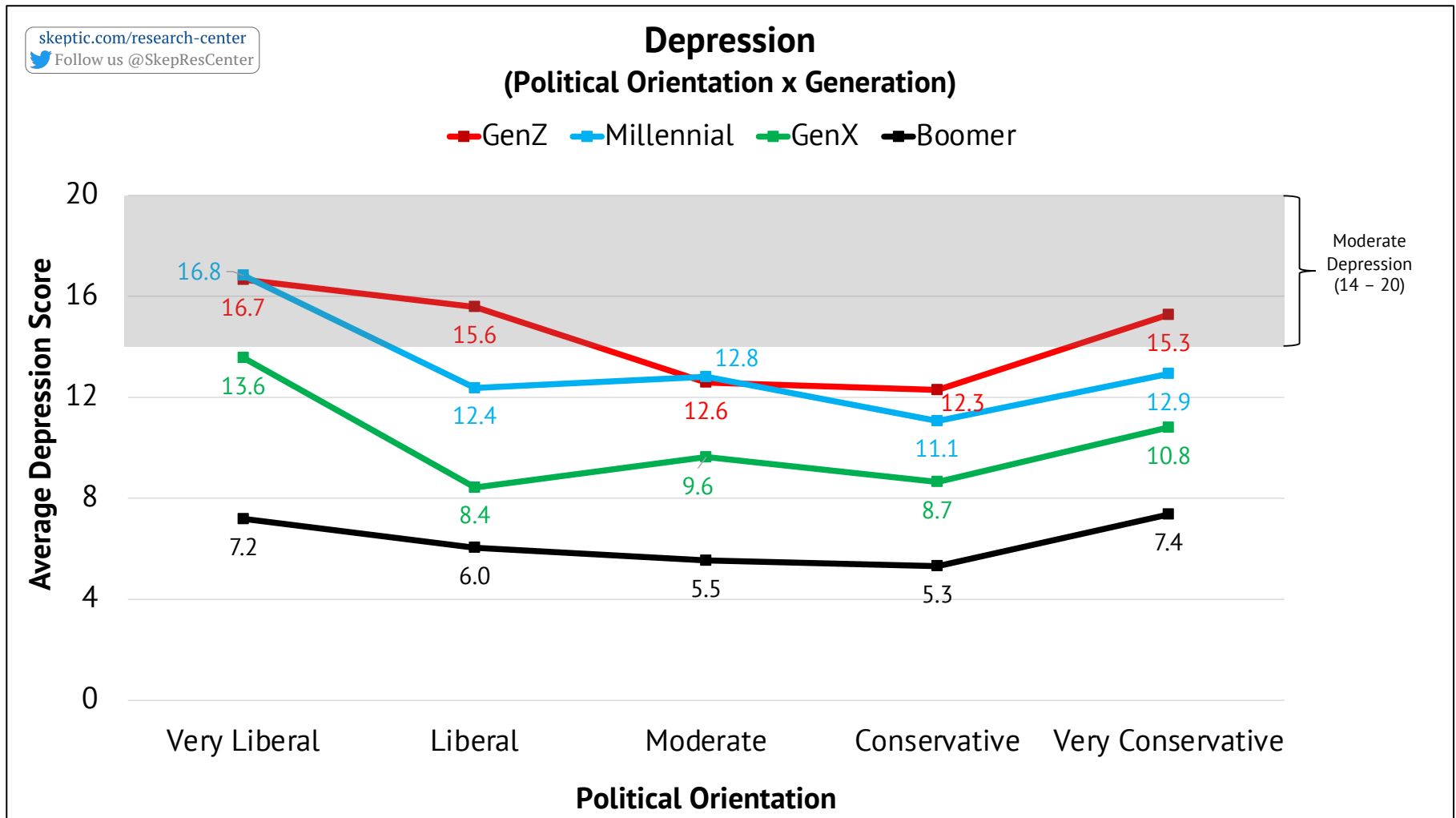


Figure 4



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Appendix

Information about the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21) used in this study is below.

Answer Options:

Please indicate how often the following applies to you

0 = "Never"

1 = "Some of the time"

2 = "A good part of the time"

3 = "Most of the time"

Items that are part of the "depression" subscale are below.

1. I can't seem to experience any positive feeling at all
2. I find it difficult to work up the initiative to do things
3. I feel that I have nothing to look forward to
4. I feel down-hearted and blue
5. I am unable to become enthusiastic about anything
6. I feel that I am not worth much as a person
7. I feel that life is meaningless

Scores were summed and multiplied by two (per guidelines for shortened scale).