

Are Americans Losing Their Trust?

Research Report: PADS-010 | March 4, 2024

Research Question

Public opinion polling has revealed unprecedented drops in Americans' institutional trust for several years now, and institutional trust reached a new low in 2023 (Jones, 2022; Saad, 2023). Americans' trust in government, for example, is hovering at its lowest point since Pew polling began measuring it in 1958 (Pew Research Center, 2023). In 1973, 58% of Americans had "a great deal"/"quite a lot" of confidence in public schools—by 2023, this had fallen to 26%. Also in 1973, 42% of Americans had "a great deal"/"quite a lot" of confidence in Congress—by 2023, this had fallen to 8%. In 1975, 80% of people had "a great deal"/"quite a lot" of confidence in the medical system, but by 2023, this number had fallen to 33% (the decline began long before COVID). And also across many other American institutions (see Gallup Polling, 2023). Some polling also suggests Americans have been losing trust in *each other* (not just in abstract institutional "systems"). For example, Pew polling found that 64% of Americans felt that trust in one another has "been shrinking," (Rainie et al., 2019). In light of these concerning trends, we looked back through two of our own polls (one conducted in 2021, the other in 2022) and asked: how have Americans' trust in institutions and each other changed?

Methodology

Data Source

- Paranormal and Conspiratorial Ideation Study ("PCIS," collected in July-August 2021; n = 2,898)
- Political Accuracy and Divisions Study ("PADS," collected in August-October 2022; n = 2,938)

Data Quality Control

- Used Qualtrics Panel Services and quota sampling.
- All participants in this dataset passed attention, response time, fraud, duplication, and bot checks.

Measures

- **Generation:** based on age at time of data collection. Gen Z (18 to 25 years), Millennial (26 to 41 years), Gen X (42 to 57 years), and Boomer (58 to 76 years).
- **Trust in Institutions:** measured by asking respondents to rate the extent to which they strongly disagreed (1) to strongly agreed (7) with the following statements.
 1. "I trust educators to act in the best interests of students."
 2. "I trust journalists to accurately report on current events."
 3. "I trust police to act in the best interests of citizens."
 4. "I trust politicians to act in the best interests of citizens."
 5. "In general, I would say people are trustworthy."

Summary of Findings

1. Trust dropped between 2021 and 2022 across all institutions we measured (see Fig. 1).
2. Millennials reported outlier levels of trust in educators and were the only generation group to report above-midpoint levels of trust in journalists (see Figs. 2 and 3).
3. Trust in police dropped steadily across generation groups, with GenZ reporting the lowest levels of trust in police (see Fig. 4).
4. Of the institutions we measured (education, journalism, police and politicians), politicians were the least trusted across generation groups (see Fig. 5).
5. GenZ is the only generation with below-midpoint levels of trust in other people (though trust levels for other generations are not much higher) (Fig. 6).

Take-Home Messages

- Overall, Americans' trust in institutions and in other people seems to be dropping yearly and generationally.
- Have an interpretation? Share it here: research@skeptic.com

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Figure 1

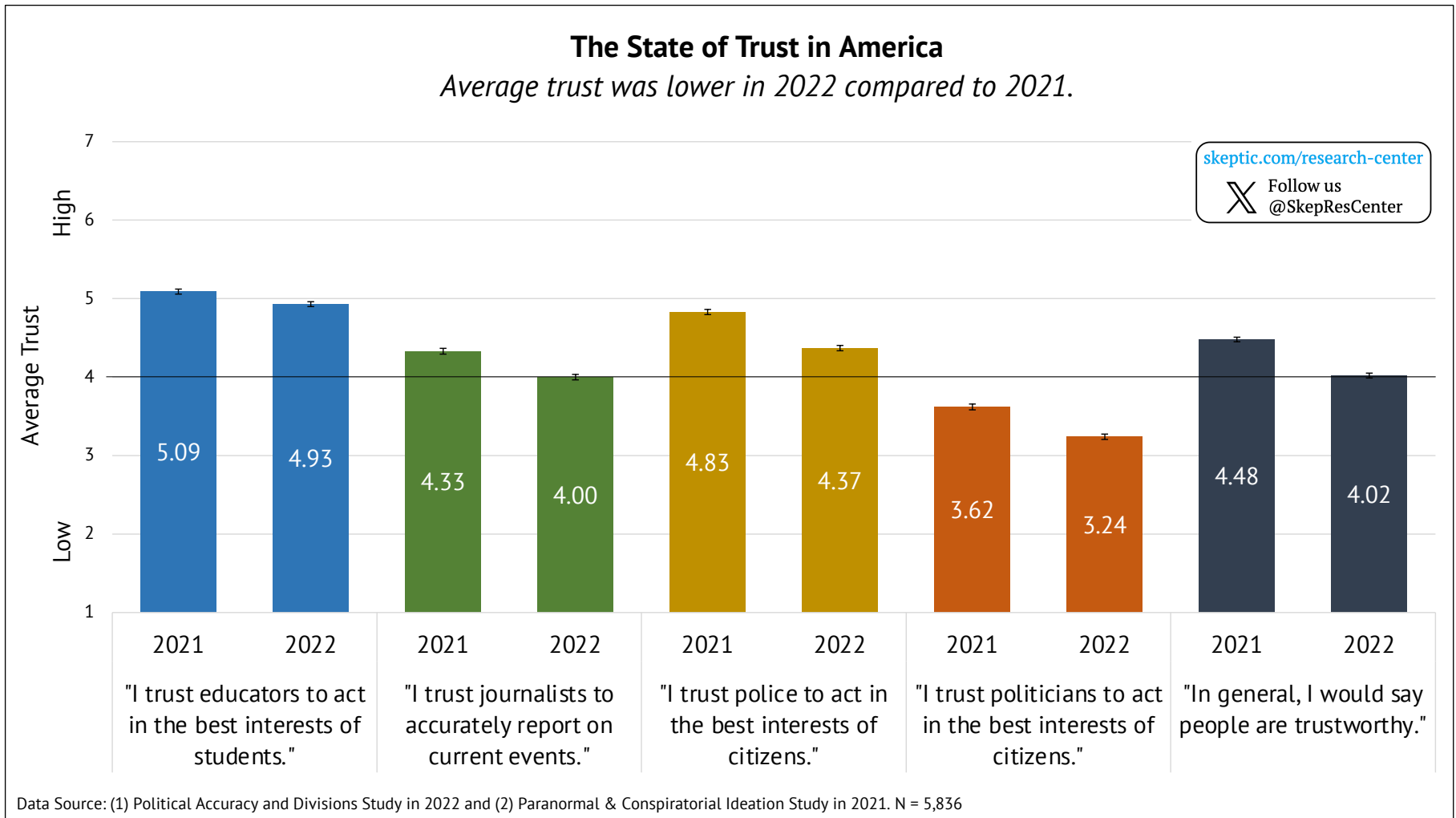


Figure 2

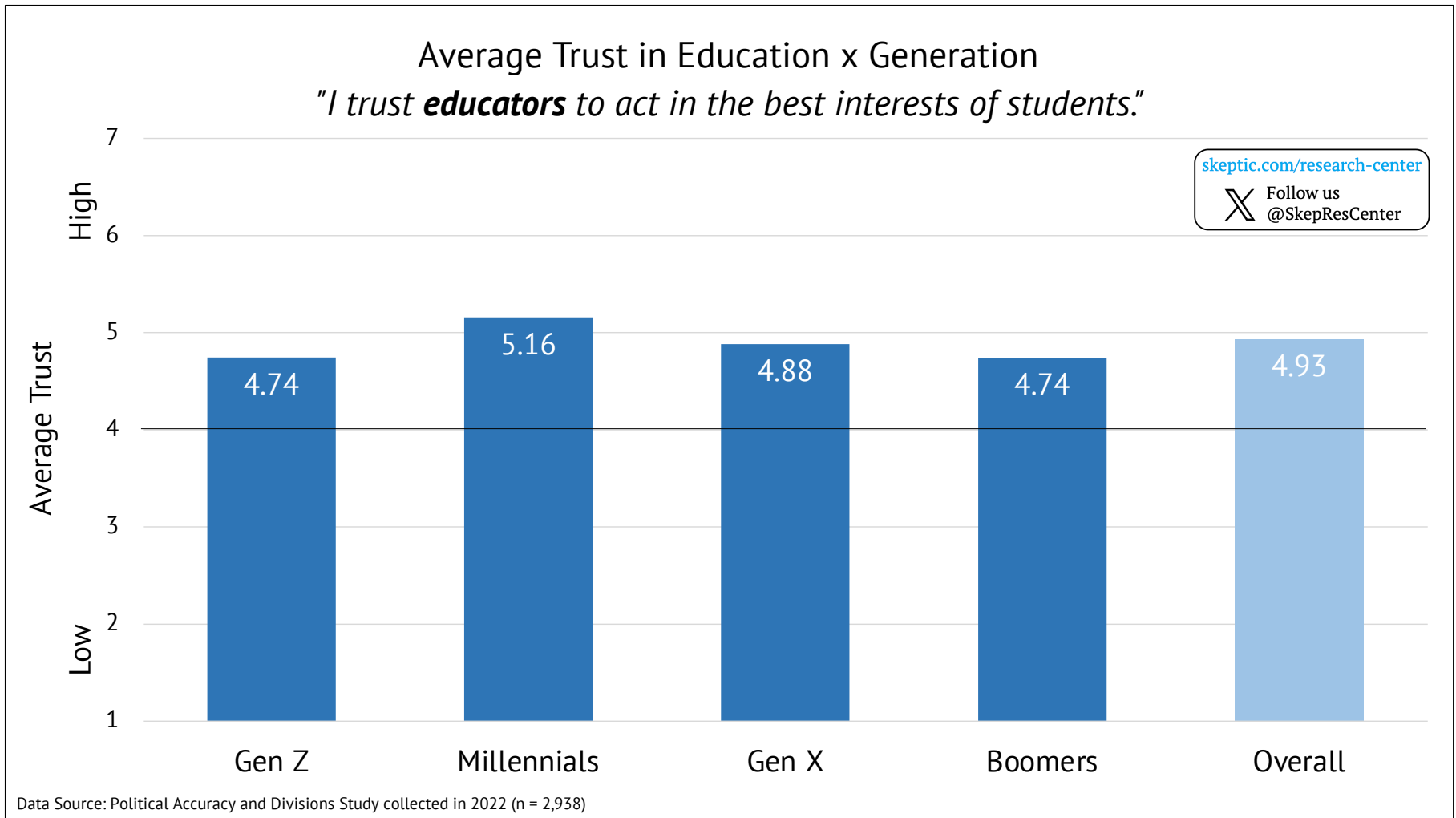


Figure 3

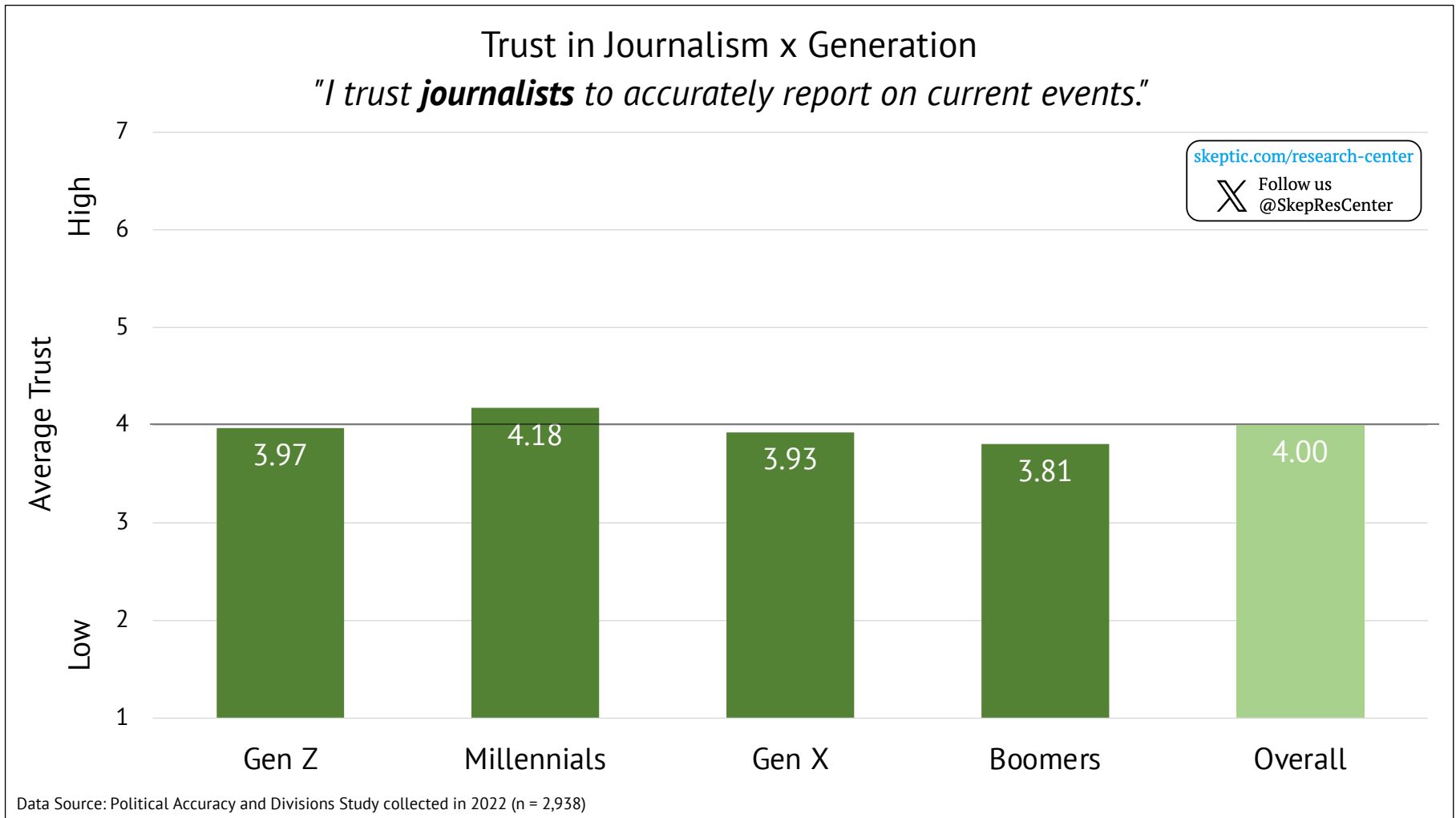


Figure 4

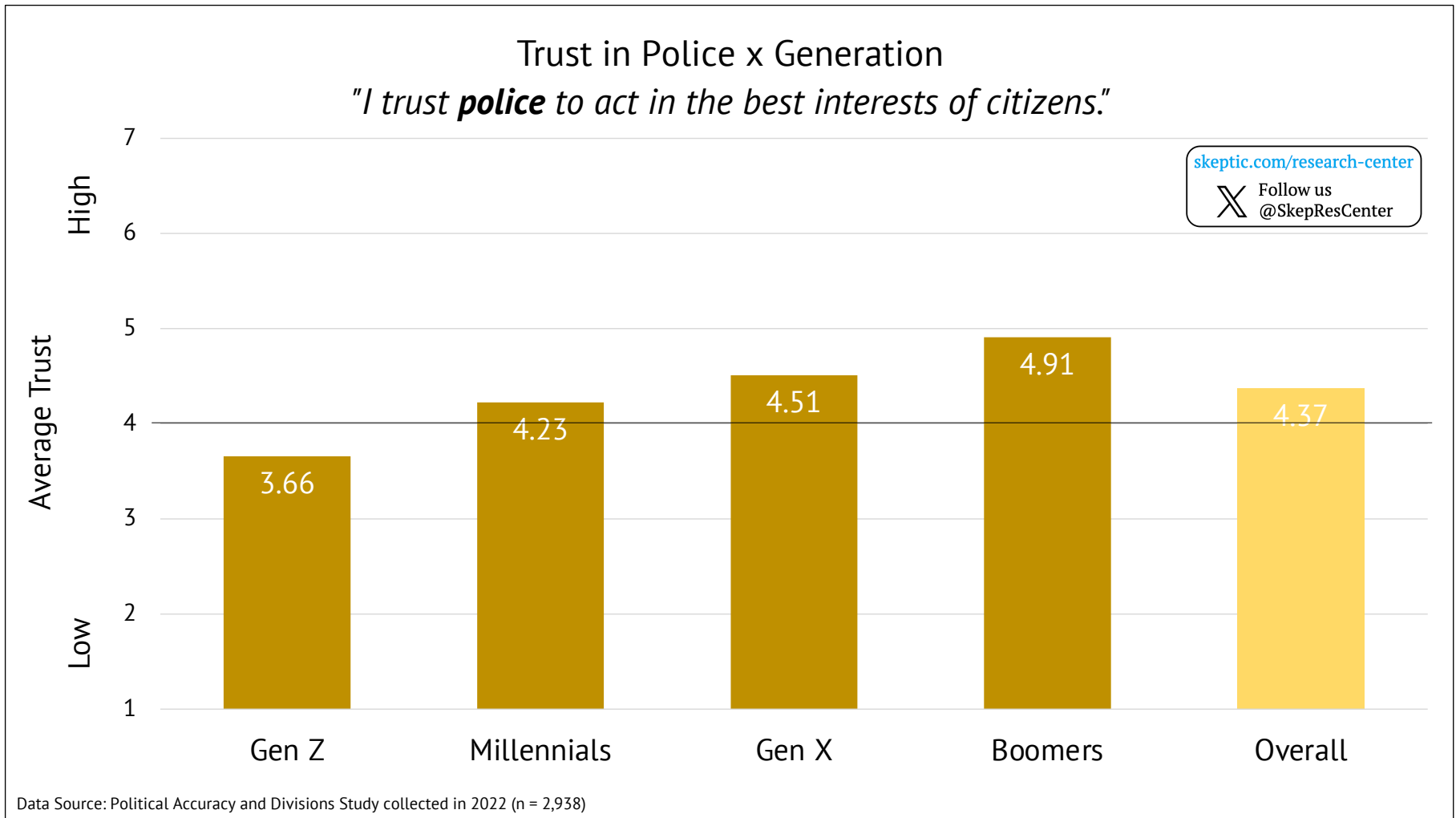


Figure 5

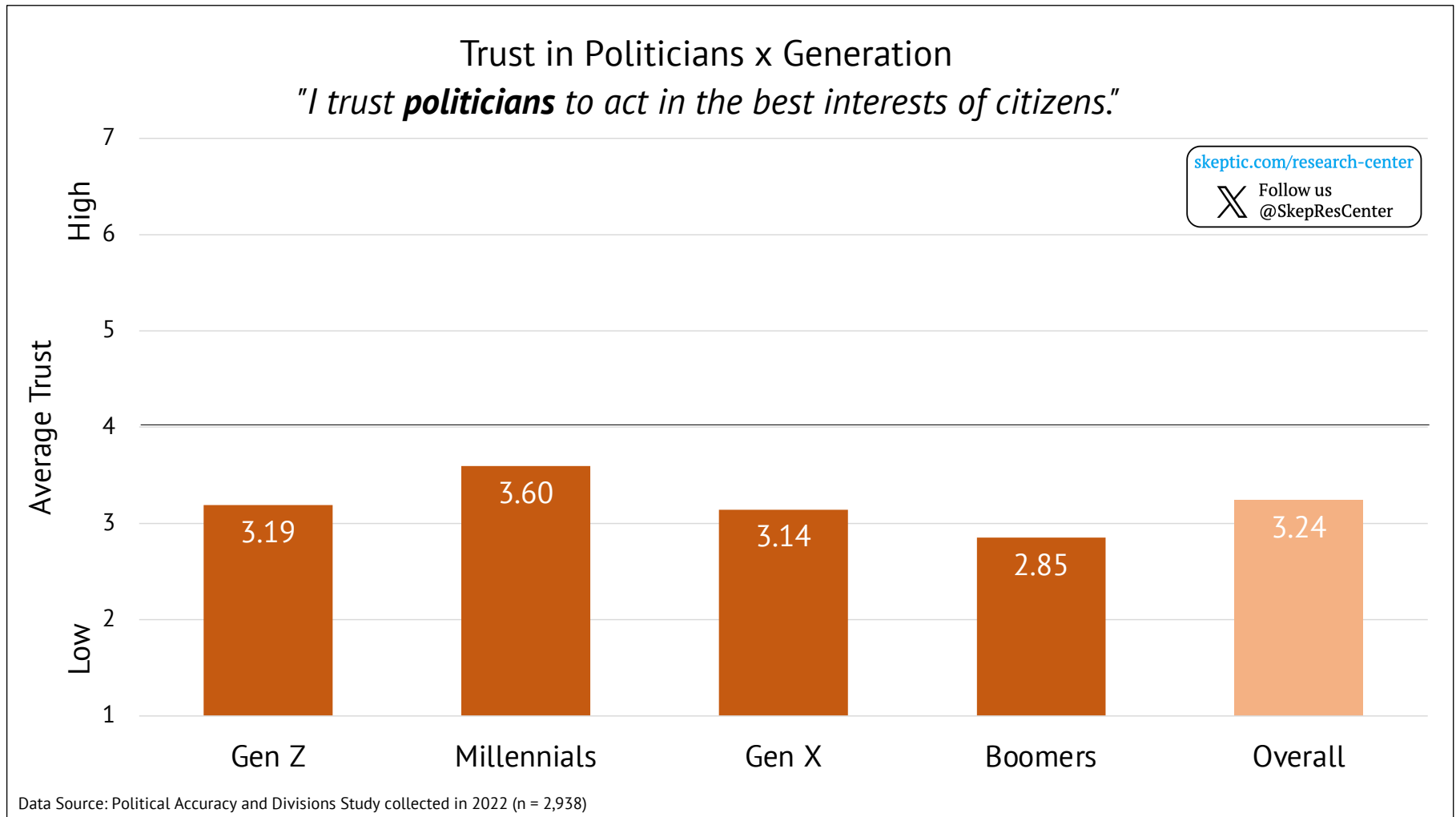
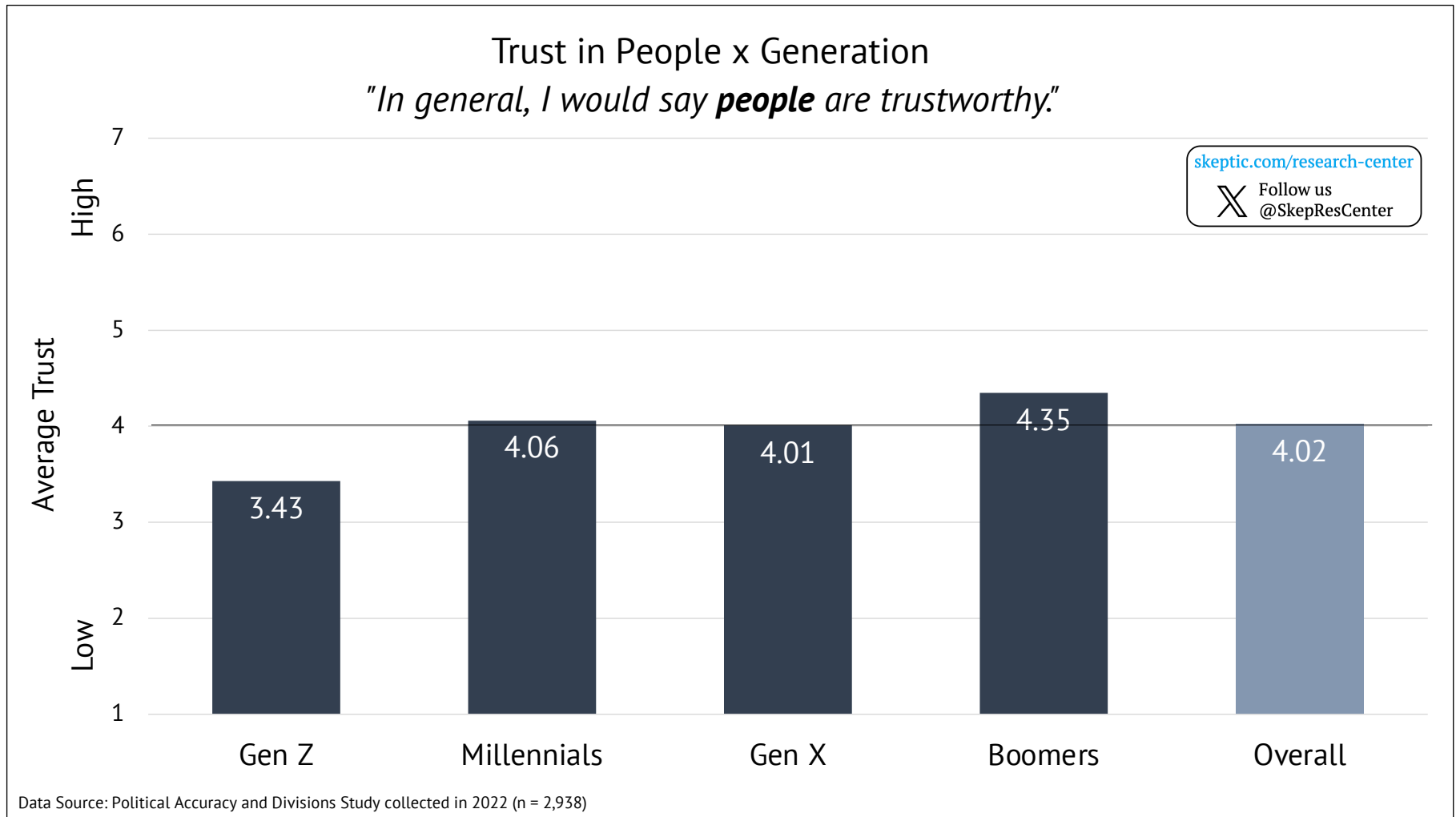


Figure 6



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