

## The public's levels of trust in US government agencies can often be very different to their trust in government in general

*With the recent of exposure of intelligence gathering by government agencies, public trust in government has suffered yet another blow. But are the levels of public trust in government reflected by trust in specific agencies? Using the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as a case study, [Scott E. Robinson](#), [Xinsheng Liu](#), [James W. Stoutenborough](#), and [Arnold Vedlitz](#) find that members of the public make judgments about the trustworthiness of individual agencies that can differ from their feelings of trust in government. They also find that those that pay closer attention to issues of homeland security trust the DHS to a greater extent.*

Continued revelations about the scope of government intelligence gathering, including programs whose existence were previously denied, come at a time of dwindling trust in the US government. Strident opposition to the governing Democratic Party compounds this lack of trust, and as a result, many wonder whether we are facing a crisis of trust in government and its agencies. Much of what administrative agencies do requires the voluntary compliance of individuals. This need leaves many of their leaders wondering about whether a crisis in trust could interfere with the agencies' abilities to pursue their missions.

Our research focuses on the dynamics of trust in government – specifically trust in individual administrative agencies like the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). We find preliminary evidence that the public makes assessments of specific agencies, which are not explainable entirely by their general assessments of the trustworthiness of government, and that these assessments reveal interesting patterns of granting and withholding trust.

Declining trust in the US government has been a



concern for decades. Most research indicates a cyclical pattern reaching a low level of trust in the Watergate era of the mid-1970s – and at levels quite similar to where we find public opinion today. For the most part, analysis has focused on trust in the government as a whole. Survey questions focus on reports of how frequently one trusts people in “government” to do the “right thing.” This level of abstraction is consistent with the orthodox view that the public does not hold nuanced, consistent opinions – especially on matters of policy. Where there was any degree of targeted analysis, survey questions would assess opinion related to the US president as a policy-maker or the US Congress and US Supreme Court as institutions.

The focus on broad institutional assessment contrasts with widely varying assessments of trust in specific administrative agencies. The [Pew Center](#) has conducted a number of polls that indicate varying assessments of agencies. Some agencies (notably the Center for Disease Control) are consistently popular while others are consistently unpopular (not surprisingly, the Internal Revenue Service). The wide variation in assessments of agencies raises important questions: Do assessments of trust vary by agency just as general assessments of performance do? Do individuals hold coherent opinions on the trustworthiness of specific agencies?

### Trust in specific agencies

To illustrate our argument that different agencies have different trust profiles, we have chosen to focus on the USDHS. As part of a project for the USDHS's Domestic Nuclear Detection Office, we conducted a national public opinion survey of US residents. This survey included questions about respondents' attitudes on homeland security policy, assessments of trust in the US Department of Homeland Security (USDHS) and other agencies, assessments of trust in major political institutions, and basic demographic

information. We used these survey responses (totaling over a thousand nationally-representative respondents) to assess whether general trust in political institutions accounted for the variability in reported trust in the USDHS. We found that it did not.

Not surprisingly, a respondent's level of trust in the president and Congress does significantly correlate with the respondent's level of trust in the USDHS. However, other factors are still important, even when accounting for this general trust. Specifically, we found that political ideology was related to reported trust (though partisan identification was not a significant part of the models that included both ideology and party identification). Conservatives were the most trusting of USDHS, with self-identified moderates being more trusting of USDHS than liberals. Interestingly, religiosity was also significantly related to trust in the USDHS – a finding we would like to explore in more detail in future research.

Most interesting in relation to our core research question was the finding that a respondent's reported level of attention to issues related to homeland security was strongly related to their reported trust in the USDHS. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship.

**Figure 1 – Effect of attention to Homeland Security issues on trust in the US Department of Homeland Security**

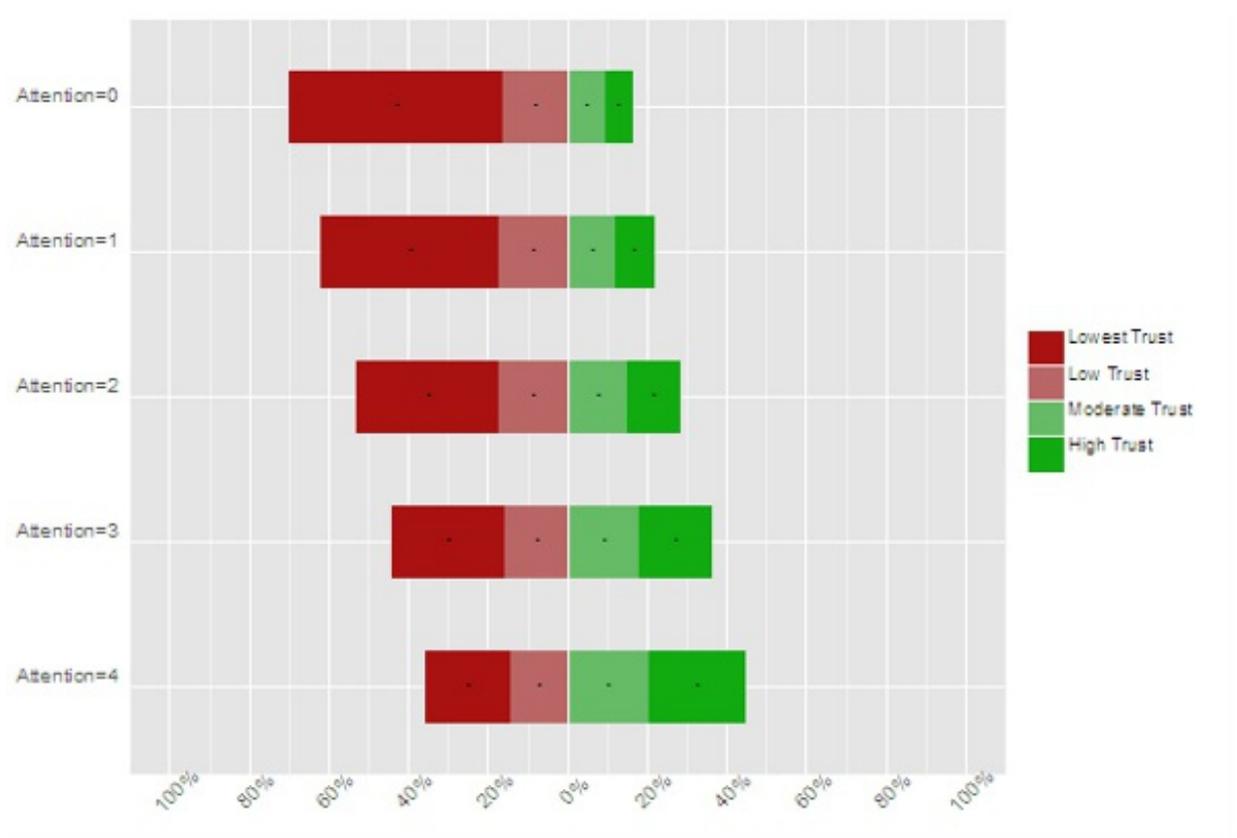


Figure 1 is based on the simulated responses of individuals who were typical on all variables other than their attention to homeland security; we set the attention levels to five levels of attention (with 4 the highest and 0 the lowest). One can see that individuals who had the lowest level of attention to homeland security, but were otherwise typical, were predominately distrusting of USDHS. As the level of trust increases, the proportion of the predictions in the higher levels of trust increases. At the highest levels of attention to homeland security issues, the proportion of respondents predicted in the highest trust category is larger than the proportion in the lowest trust category – with the proportions in each other category fairly evenly divided.

These results have implications for both the USDHS and for the study of trust in government. For the USDHS, the people who pay the most attention to issues of homeland security are also the most trusting of their work. This is a positive sign for the agency. More generally, the results suggest that members of the public do hold opinions of specific agencies – not just general attitudes about government as a whole.

Trust in a homeland security agency (USDHS) is related to a policy-domain specific attitude (attention to homeland security issues). This research opens up many new opportunities for the study of trust in government. Now we have reason to investigate the relationships between other agencies and specific attitudes relevant to their policy domains. There is reason, as well, to study whether stated trust in an agency affects behavior. Does, for example, trust in the USDHS make it more likely that you will act on USDHS recommendations like travel advisories, evacuation orders, and the like? We are only scratching the surface of what we can learn about trust in administrative agencies.

*This article is a shortened version of the [Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory paper](#) "Explaining Popular Trust in the Department of Homeland Security".*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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