Unpacking Trust: Understanding How General Measures of Trust in Government are Related to Component Measures in Specific Policy Areas

PRINCETON SURVEY RESEARCH CENTER

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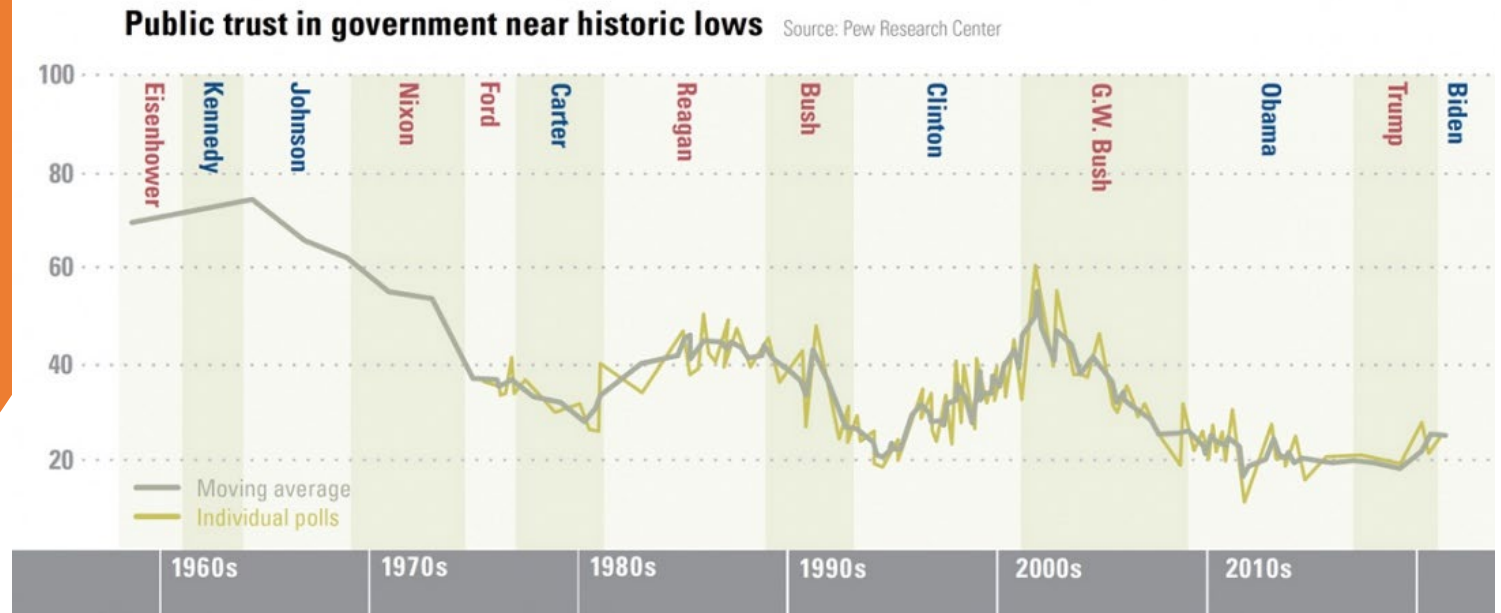
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The Long Term Decline of Trust

- Since 1960, Americans' trust in the federal government to handle domestic problems has fallen from roughly 75% to about 30% (Pew Research Center, 2021)

Public trust in government near historic lows Source: Pew Research Center

Why Trust Matters

Lack of trust:

Reduces support for government action and for compromises on policy, making it harder to solve problems

Increases political polarization

Raises concerns about the deconsolidation of democracy and greater openness to democracy's alternatives

Raises transaction costs and creates inefficiencies

Influenced by partisan perceptions

Understanding Trust

Reasons for decline in trust

- Cultural
- Government performance
- Mass and social media; negative ads
- Disproportionate reliance on technical expertise and interest groups

Criticisms of survey questions

- ANES question: "How often do you trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right?"
- Trust vs. mistrust – two ends of a continuum or distinct concepts?
- Most questions only indicate the presence or absence of trust and fail to measure within a continuum (Van de Walle and Six, 2014)

Four Elements of Trust

- **Appropriate** for government to be involved
  - "The federal government <u>needs</u> to…"

- **Transparency**
  - "The federal government is <u>clear and transparent</u> about how it…"

- **Competency**
  - "The federal government has the <u>expertise and resources</u> needed to…"

- **Reliability**
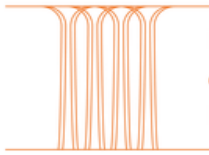 - "The federal government is <u>reliable</u> when it comes to…"

Questionnaire

Trust questions repeated for five areas of federal government regulation

- Regulate banks

- Protect people from COVID-19

- Oversee immigration

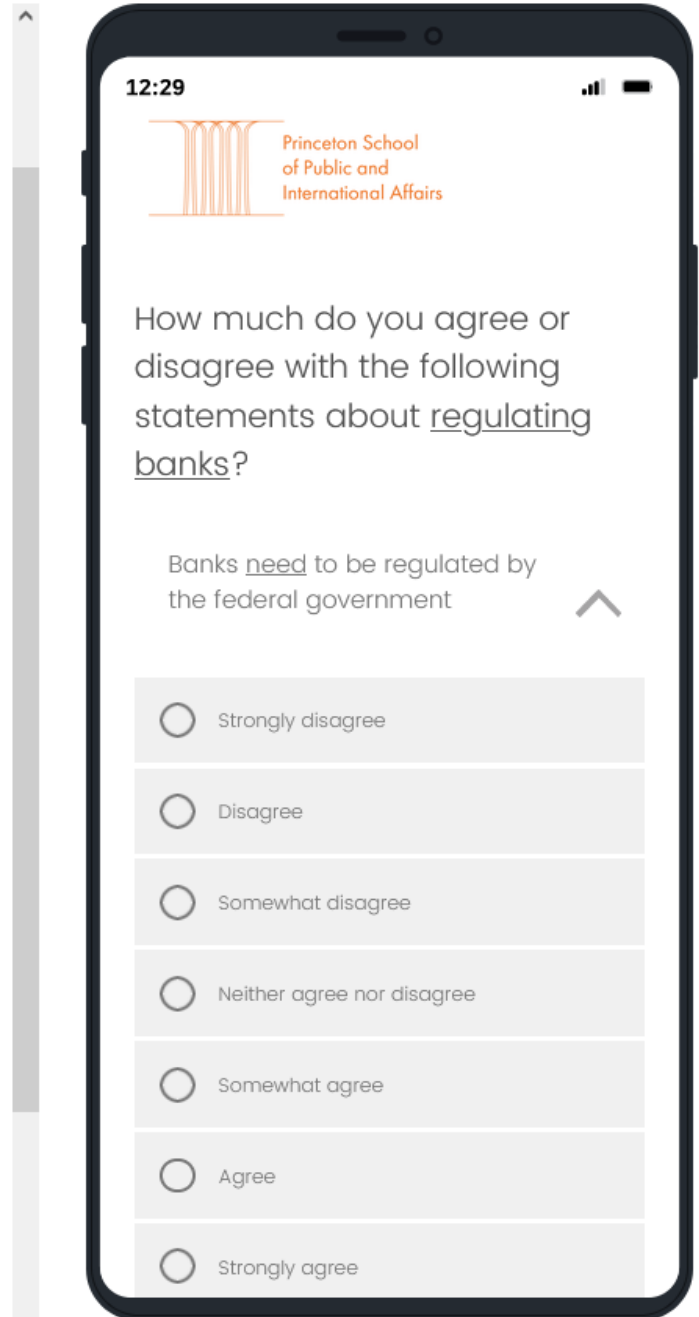- Environmental protection

- Maintain military forces

Test for priming effect on Gallup general trust question:

- "How much trust do you have in our federal government in Washington when it comes to handling domestic issues?"
- Split sample experiment – 50% asked before policy area questions; 50% after

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about regulating banks?

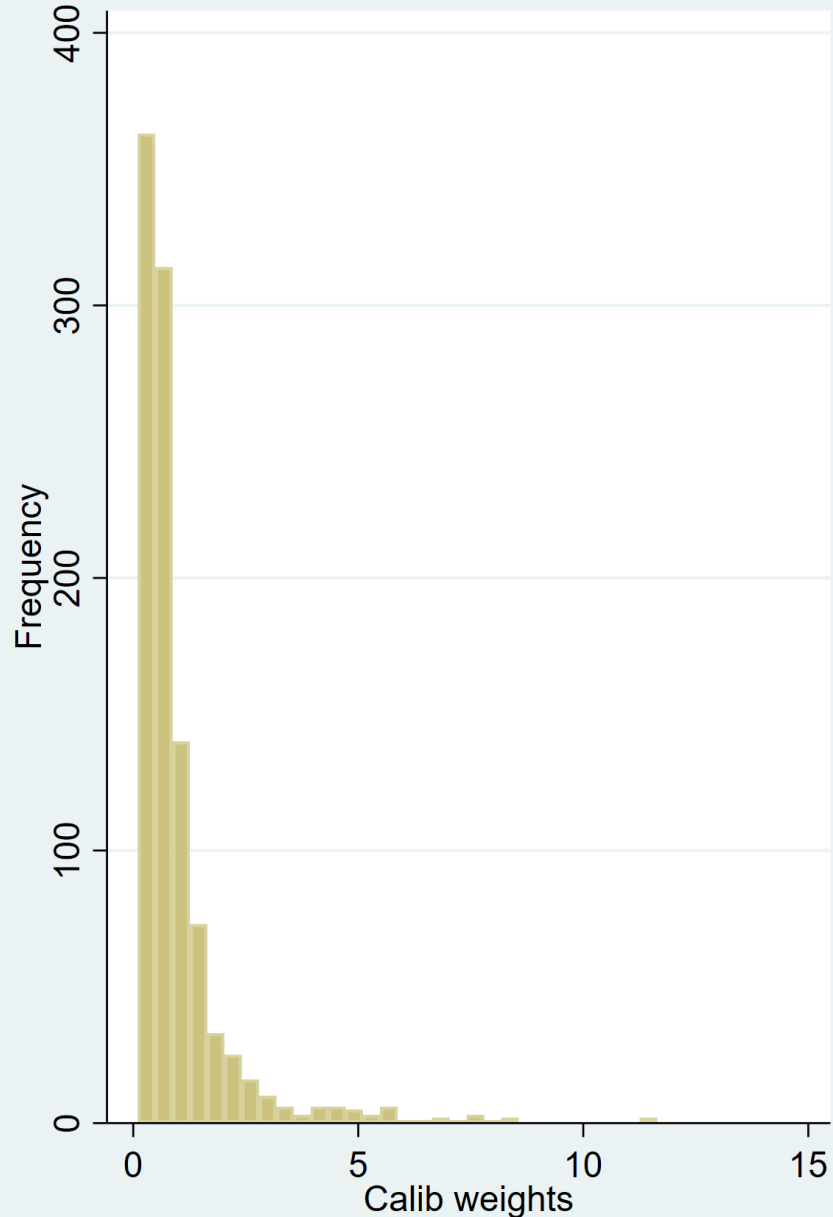|	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Banks need to be regulated by the federal government	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The federal government is clear and transparent about how it regulates banks	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The federal government has the expertise and resources needed to regulate banks	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The federal government is reliable when it comes to regulating banks	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Survey Responses

- CINT national non-probability panel
- 51 items
- All trust rating on scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)
- 1,234 initial responses
  - No consent, n=66
  - Response not complete, n=64
  - Recaptcha score <.5, n=16
  - Speeders (<120 seconds) n=19
    - Speeder warning
- 1,022 completes from April 1–April 7, 2022
- Median completion time 6.5 minutes
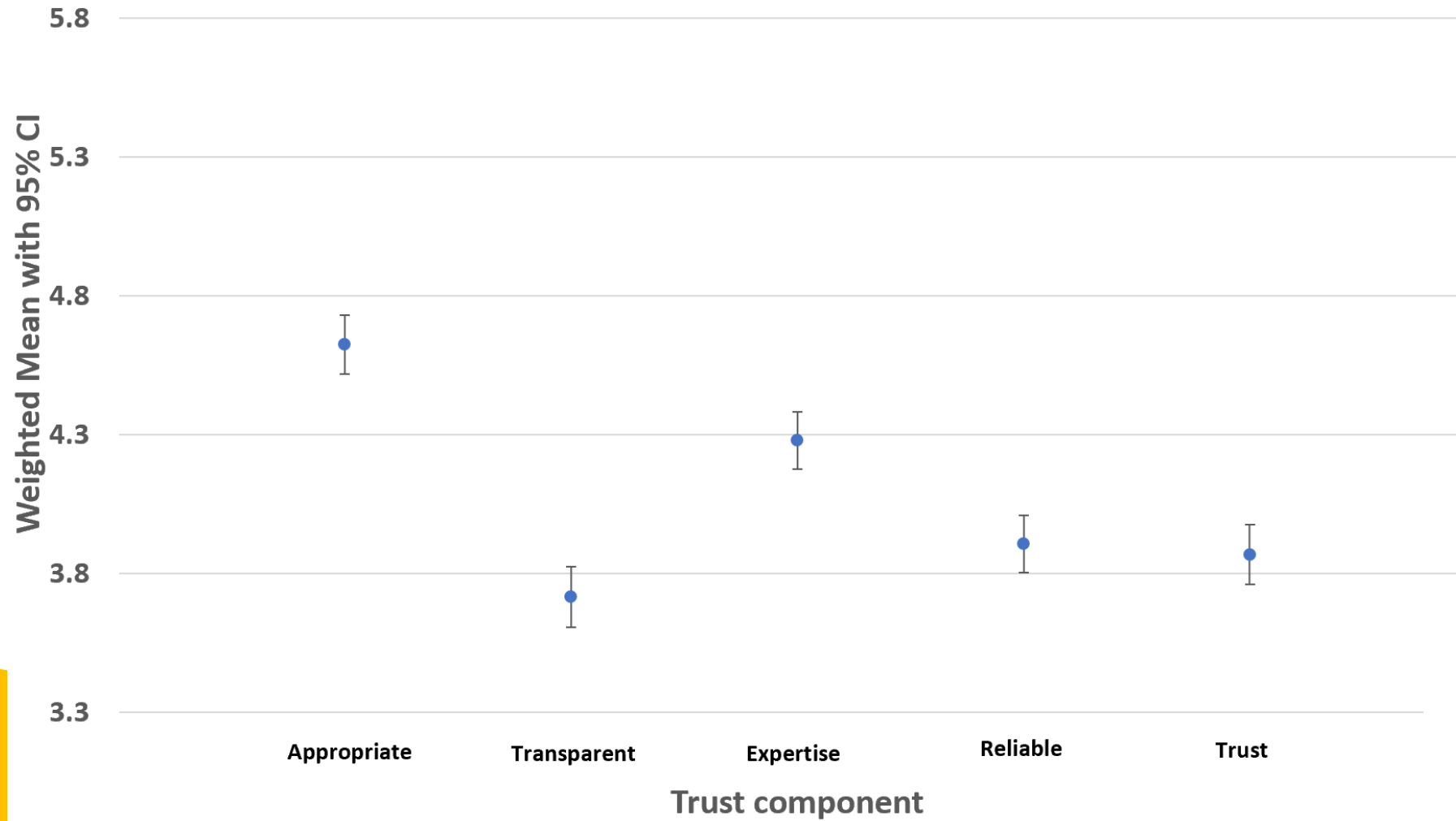- Cost: $2.35 per response

Raking Weights
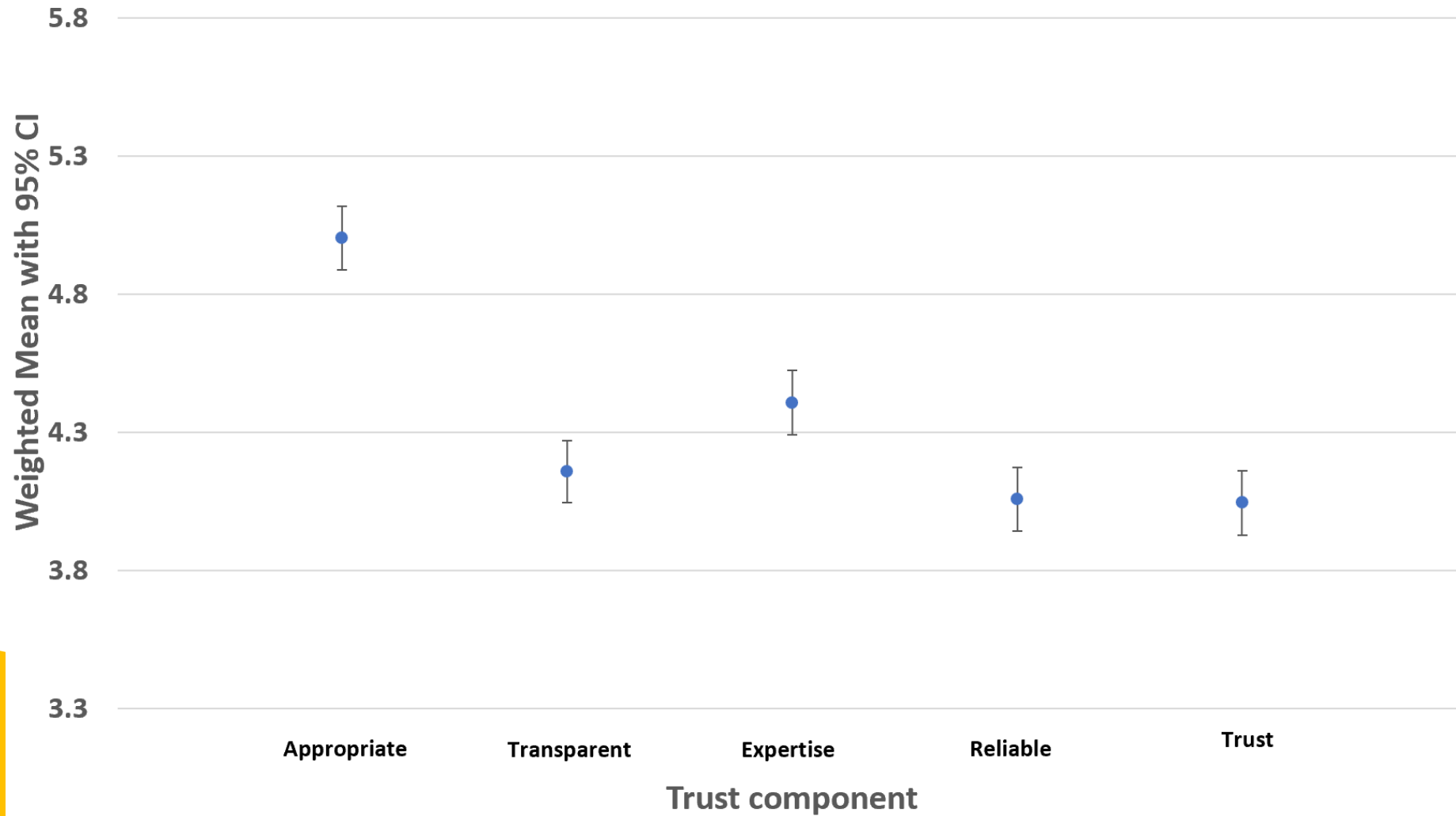
- 2015-2019 ACS 5-year estimates
- 2020 Presidential vote outcome
- STATA ipfraking procedure for:
  - Sex, age, education, Hispanic ethnicity, race, Census division, HH income
  - 2020 vote for President
    - 1=Trump 2=Biden 3=Other 4=Did not vote
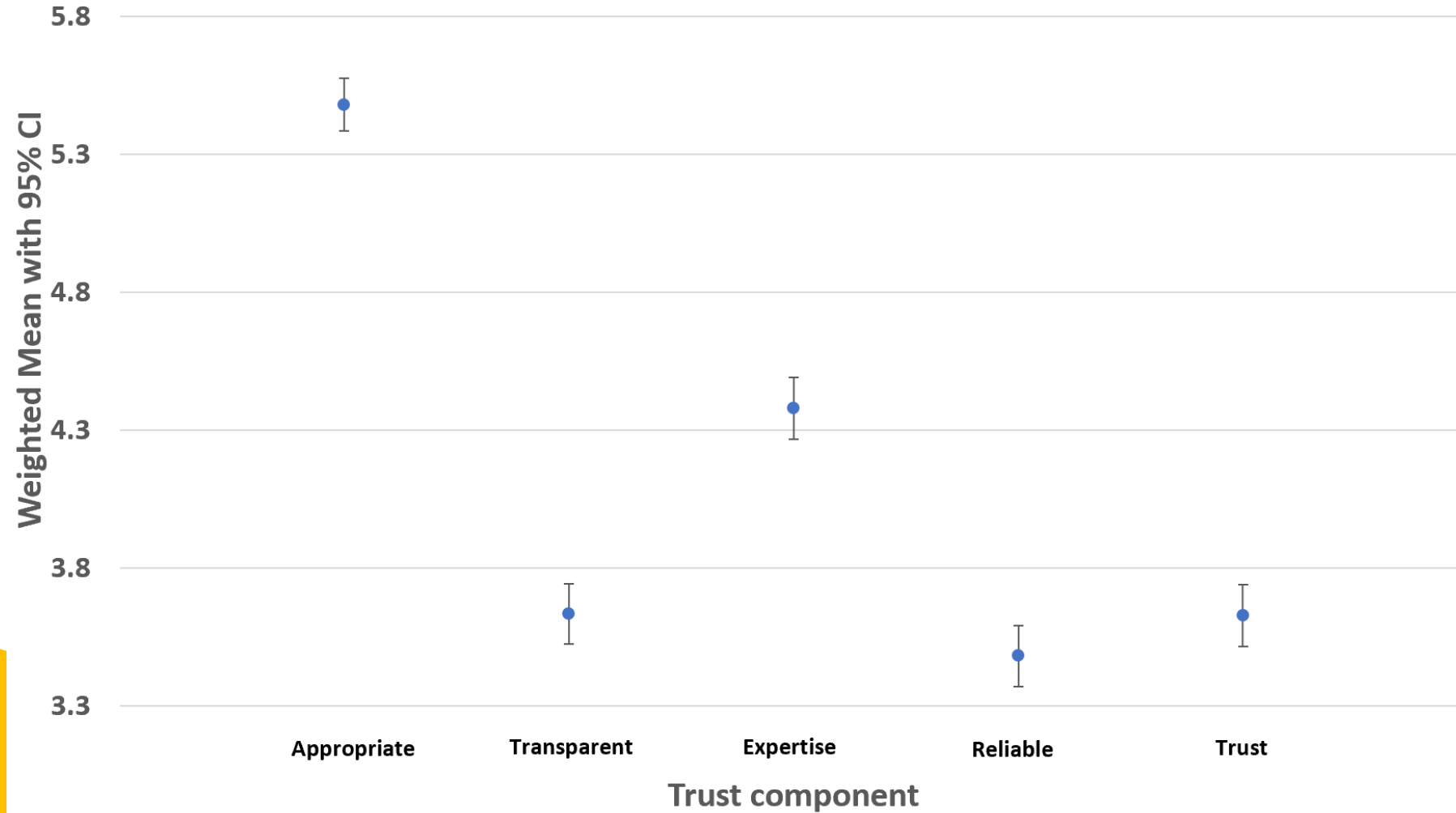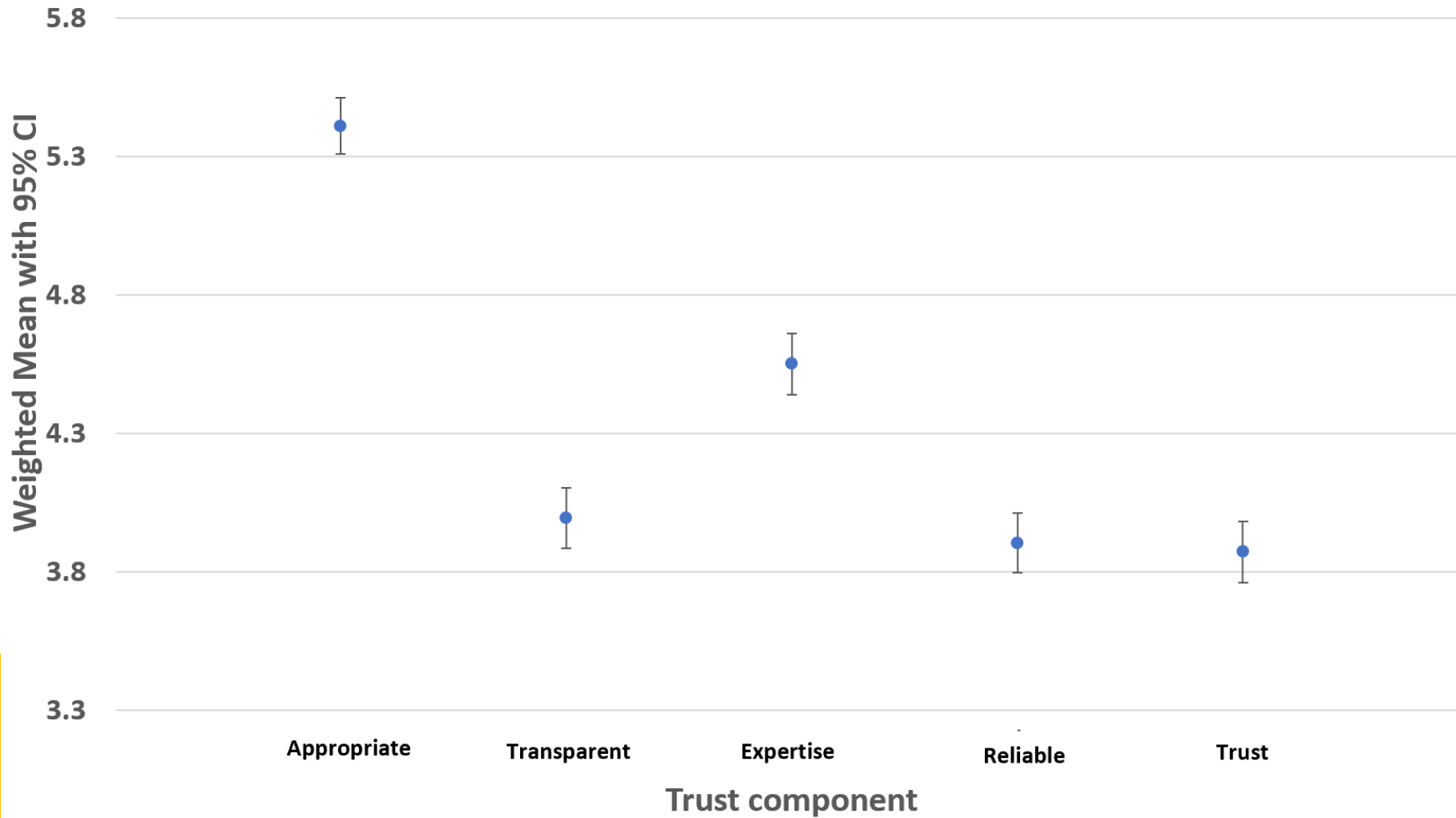- Weight range=.102 to 11.6; Mean=1 Median=.63
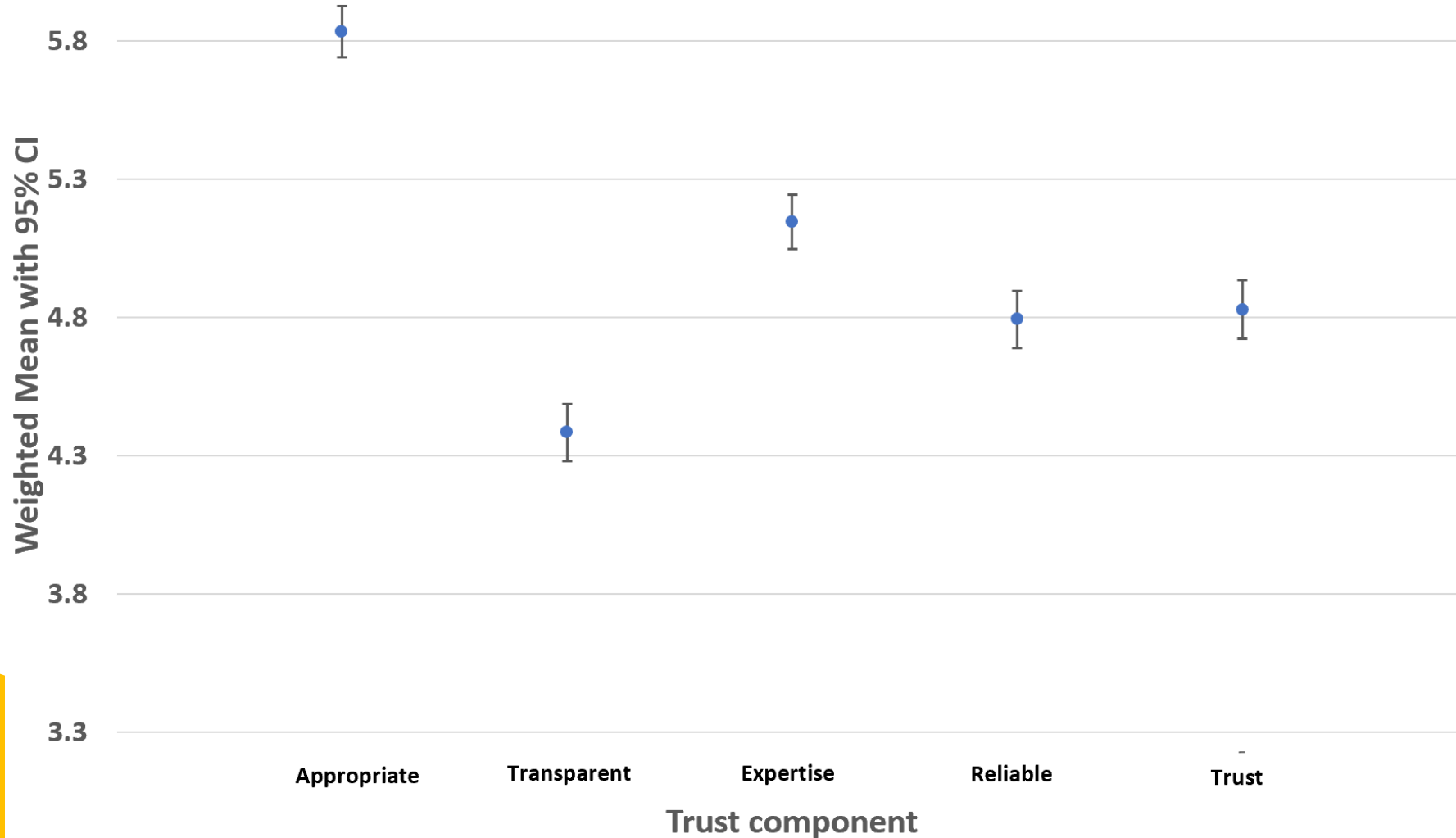
Regulating Banks

COVID-19 Response

Overseeing Immigration

Protecting the Environment

Maintaining Military Forces

No Effect on General Trust from Priming by Policy Areas

"How much trust and confidence do you have in our federal government in Washington when it comes to handling domestic problems -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?"

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                        General trust question appears:

                |     First      Last |      Total
----------------+---------------------+----------
 A great deal   |    12.5%       10.7% |     11.6%
----------------+---------------------+----------
 A fair amount  |    38.9%       45.5% |     42.2%
----------------+---------------------+----------
 Not very much  |    33.6%       31.0% |     32.3%
----------------+---------------------+----------
 None at all    |    15.0%       12.8% |     13.9%
----------------+---------------------+----------
        Total   |     511         510 |     1,021
                |   100.00      100.00 |    100.00
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Conclusions

Overall trust most closely related to transparency and reliability

Higher ratings for appropriateness and expertise

No evidence of a priming effect on general measure of trust

Results point less to a crisis for democracy and more toward a problem with perceptions of government performance

References

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