The Effects of Mixed Institutional Messaging During the COVID-19 Crisis

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"Policy in a Pandemic" Series

An Introduction

- **General Research Focus**: In what ways do political environments and executive interventions affect policy implementation and citizen behavior?
  - *Rethinking the Administrative Presidency* (Johns Hopkins University Press)
    - 2019 Herbert A. Simon Award (American Political Science Association)
    - 2017 Best Book Award (American Society of Public Administration)

Politics

Trump versus the scientists: The president's tug-of-war with experts over coronavirus policy

He says he's "not a doctor," but he doesn't hesitate to float medical theories.

By **Libby Cathey**

April 24, 2020, 4:55 PM • 13 min read

An Introduction

- ***Today's talk: Mixed Institutional Messaging***

- **Setting:** COVID-19 Crisis in the United States

- **Objective 1:** *To test the effect of the president's persistent conflict with expert opinion on topics of uncertainty during the COVID-19 crisis*

  - *How do citizens update their priors as a function of exposure to the president's position on a given topic?*

  - *What about when that exposure is countered by added exposure to the CDC's position on the same topic?*
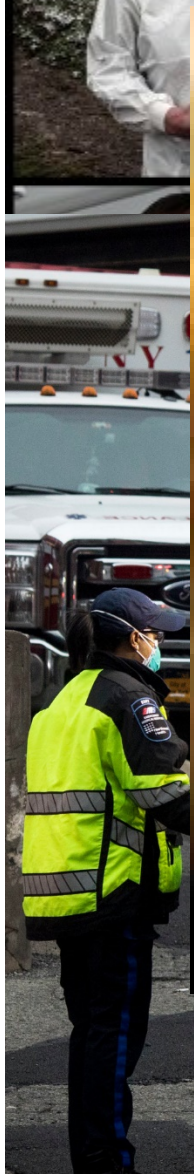
An Introduction

- ***Today's talk: Mixed Institutional Messaging***

- **Setting:** COVID-19 Crisis in the United States

- **Objective 2:** *To test President Trump's implicit brand equity during the crisis*

  - *The "Trump" brand has a long legacy in both the private sector and in politics.*

  - *We test the extent to which the Trump administration's use of Trump's name in public service announcements is associated with how citizens approve of his job during the crisis*

KTLA **5** NEWS

Los Angeles County Responds

Confronting COVID-19

LIVE

23, 2020

county.gov   safer at home

An Introduction

- ***Today's talk: Mixed Institutional Messaging***

- **Setting:** COVID-19 Crisis in Los Angeles County

- **Objective 3:** *To understand how mixed institutional messaging during the crisis at the national and state level can affect front-line workers at the local level*

  - *In a "diary method approach," we followed over 200 local government employees who filled out daily journals for three weeks (April 13-April 30, 2020) in the midst of the crisis.*

  - *Provides real-time insights on the stresses that mixed institutional messaging can cause as well as the emotional labor public servants employ when engaging with the public.*

Mixed Institutional Messages and Bayesian Updating under Uncertainty: A COVID-19 Case Study

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Tima Moldogaziev

Penn State University

&

John D. Marvel

### George Mason University

To What Extent Do Voters Trust the Federal Government on Topics of Uncertainty in Crisis?

- Trust requires an assessment of the "trustee's" integrity, competence, and beneficence.

- But, perhaps most importantly, it requires an assessment of the extent to which the "truster" (voters) perceive that their interests are encapsulated in the actions of the trustee (the government) (Hardin, 2002).

- Hence, in a highly polarized political environment, it is likely that "encapsulated interest" is correlated with partisan identification.
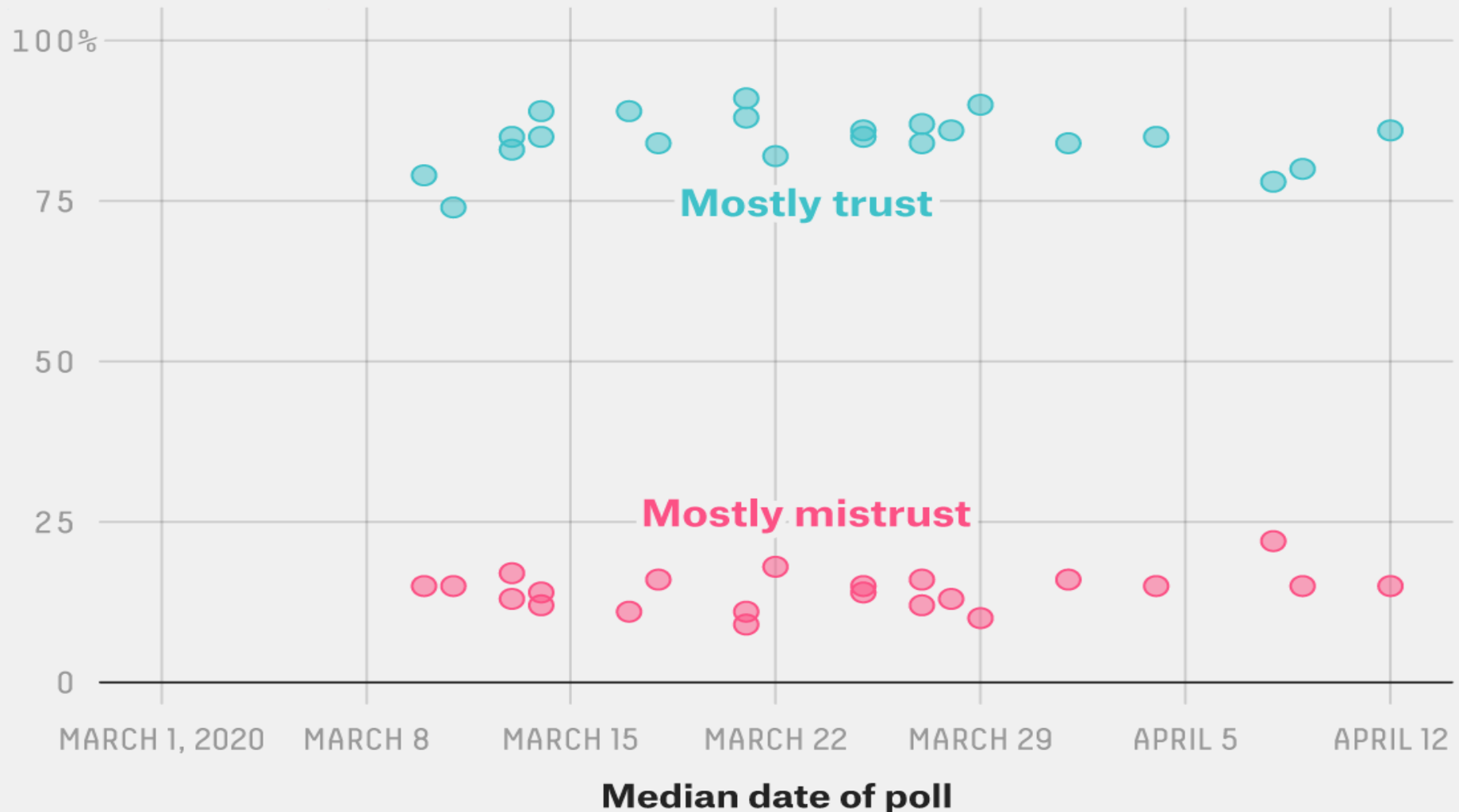
Americans generally trust the government on COVID-19

Polls conducted since the beginning of March of whether Americans trust or have confidence in the federal government to handle the coronavirus pandemic or to share accurate information about it


Median date of poll
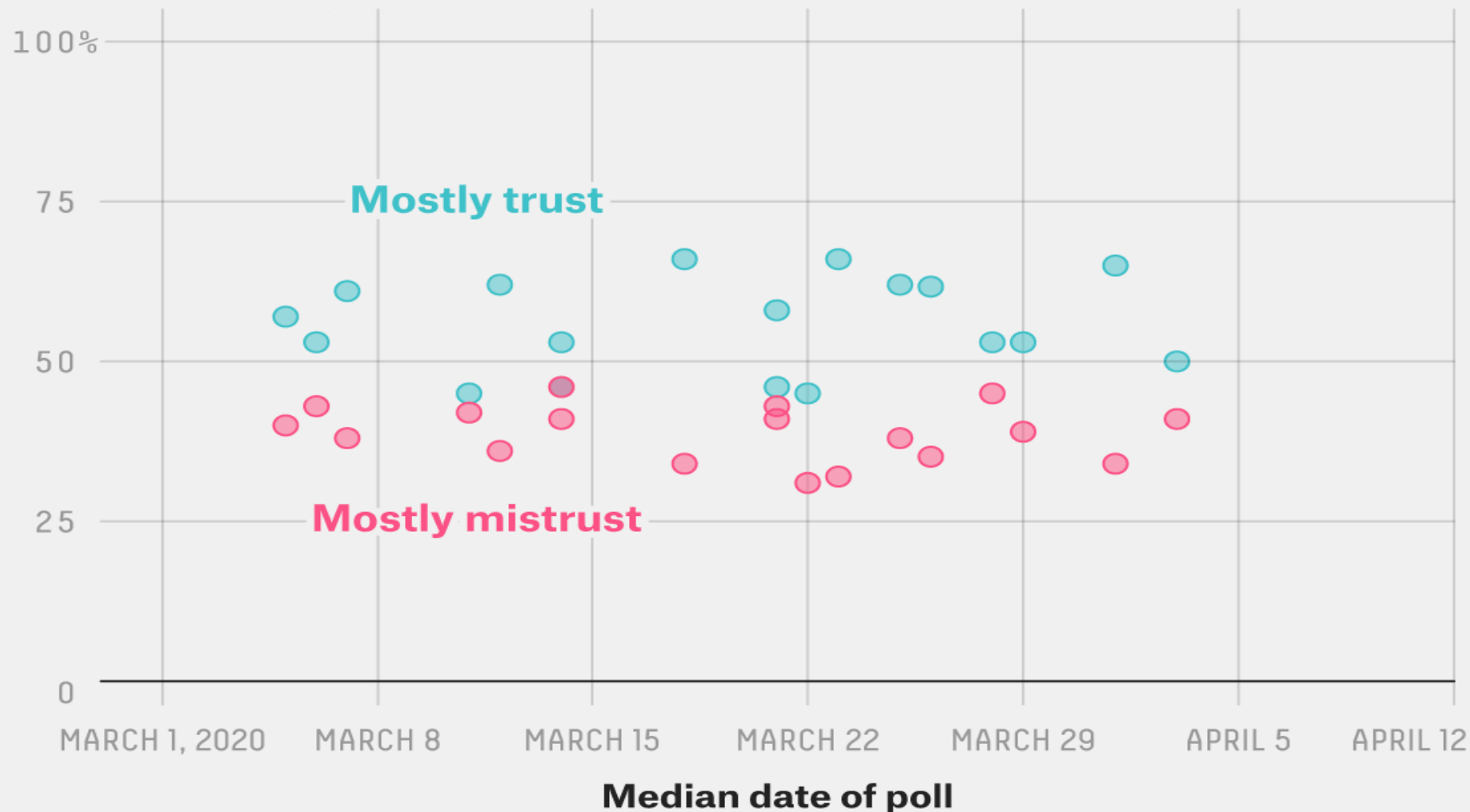
Americans overwhelmingly trust the CDC on COVID-19

Polls conducted since the beginning of March of whether Americans trust or have confidence in the CDC to handle the coronavirus pandemic or to share accurate information about it

Mostly trust

Mostly mistrust

Median date of poll

Many Americans don't trust Trump on COVID-19

Polls conducted since the beginning of March of whether Americans trust or have confidence in President Trump to handle the coronavirus pandemic or to share accurate information about it

Mostly mistrust

Mostly trust

Median date of poll
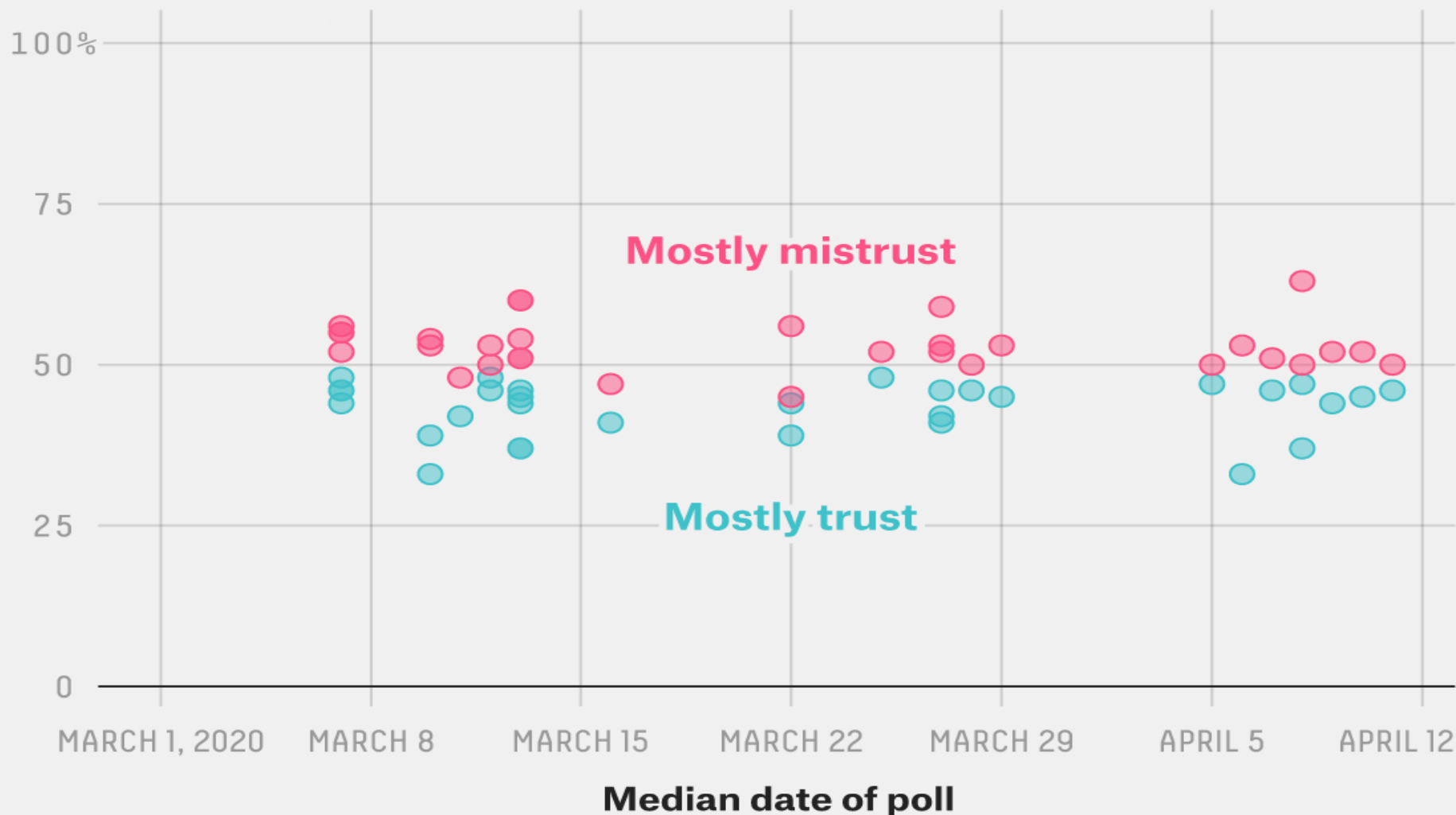
CDC Director,
Robert Redfield

Survey Experiment:
Updating Priors about COVID-19

- SO, what happens when the president and the CDC openly disagree on important topics related to the crisis?

- In a survey, we asked >1,000 US voters to make their best estimate on three points of uncertainty regarding the COVID-19 crisis:

  - What is the case fatality rate of COVID-19?

  - How long do you think it will be until a vaccine is developed?

  - How important is it to wear a mask in public to prevent the spread?

Survey Experiment:
Updating Priors about COVID-19

- Each subject (i.e., voter) was first given very basic information about each of these uncertainties, so that we could make sure that they had at least some informed opinion.

- Then, they were asked to give their best guess.

If you had to guess what **percentage of those infected with the Novel Corona Virus (COVID 19) will likely die (i.e., *the case fatality rate*)**, what would it be?

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   11   12   13   14   15   16   17   18   19 20

Case Fa [2.4] (percentage)

If you had to guess what how many months it will take **before a vaccine will be developed**, what would it be?

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   11   12   13   14   15   16   17   18   19   20   21   22   23 24

Months until vaccine is developed

On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 stands for **Not Important at All** and 10 stands for **Extremely Important**, **how important do you think it is that people wear a mask** to prevent the spread of the Novel Corona Virus (COVID-19)?

Not Important at All	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Extremely Important
○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Survey Experiment:
Updating Priors about COVID-19

- Each subject (i.e., voter) was then randomly assigned to one of two groups:

  - The control group, which was exposed to **only Trump's** stated position on the three topics.

  - The "treatment" group, which was exposed to **both Trump's** position **and** the stated position of the **CDC**.

Survey Experiment:
Updating Priors about COVID-19

- ## Trump's position on CFR:

  In recent public remarks, **President Trump suggested that the case fatality rate** from Corona Virus (COVID-19) could be **much lower than 1%.**

  ○ Please click to indicate that you read the statement above.

- ## CDC's position on CFR:

  In a recent published report, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention **(CDC) suggested that the case fatality rate** from Corona Virus (COVID-19) could be **as high as 3%.**

  ○ Please click to indicate that you read the statement above

Survey Experiment:
Updating Priors about COVID-19

- Trump's position on when a vaccine may be ready:

  President Trump says a vaccine could be developed "in a few months."

  ◯ Please click to indicate that you read the statement above.

- CDC's position on when a vaccine may be ready:

  The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention **(CDC) says** it will take from **12 to 18 months** to develop a vaccine.

  ◯ Please click to indicate that you read the statement above.

Survey Experiment:
Updating Priors about COVID-19

- Trump's position on the importance of masks:

President Trump says wearing a mask is "a voluntary thing" and that **he is "choosing not to do it."**

○ Please click to indicate that you read the statement above.

- CDC's position on the importance of masks:

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (**CDC**) **is urging all Americans to wear a mask when they leave their homes.**

○ Please click to indicate that you read the statement above.

Survey Experiment:
Updating Priors about COVID-19

- Subjects were then offered the same scales a second time and asked if they would like to ***update their previous estimates***

- We are then able to capture the extent to which exposure to different information sources leads to updates in a direction that better align with a given source.
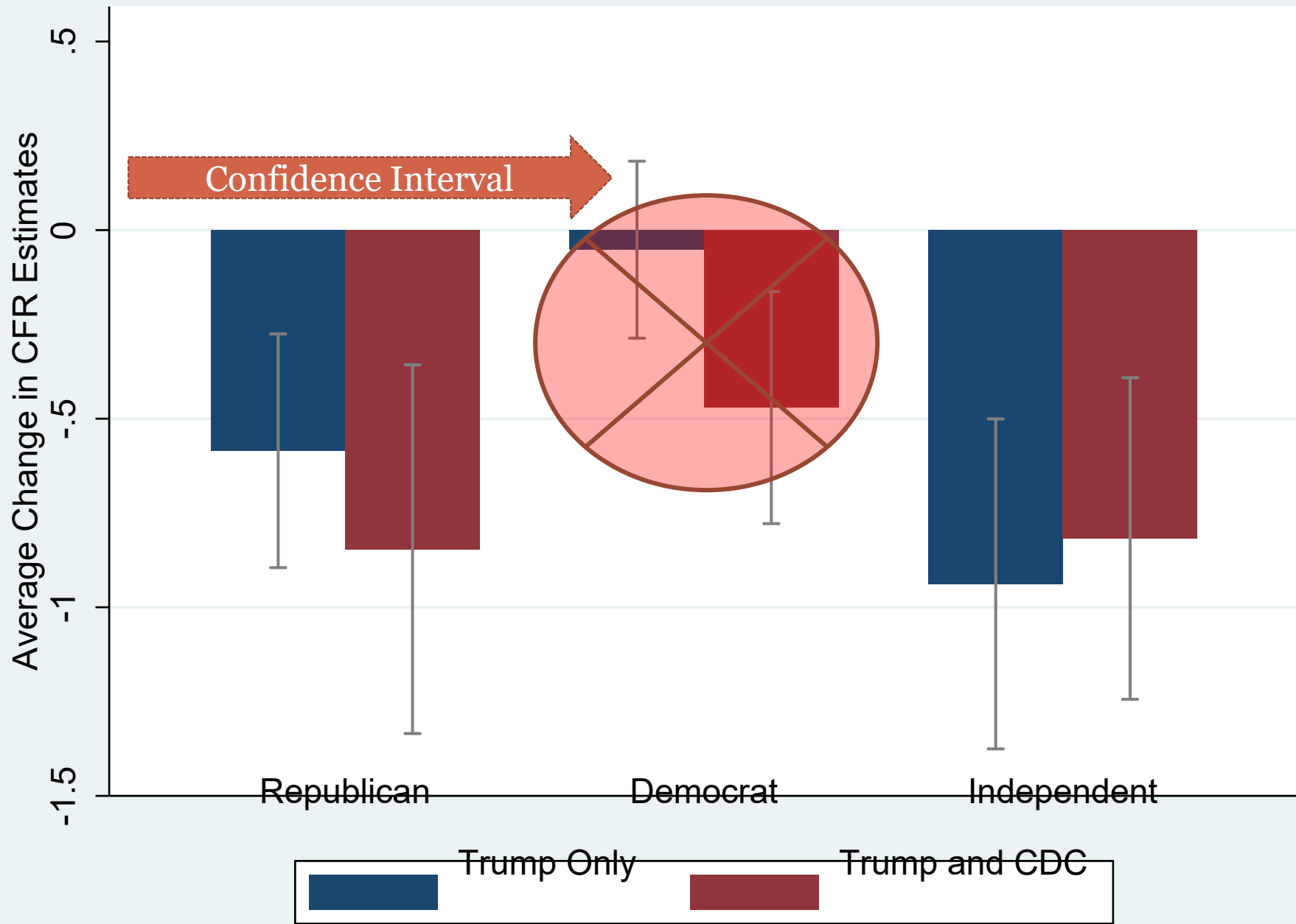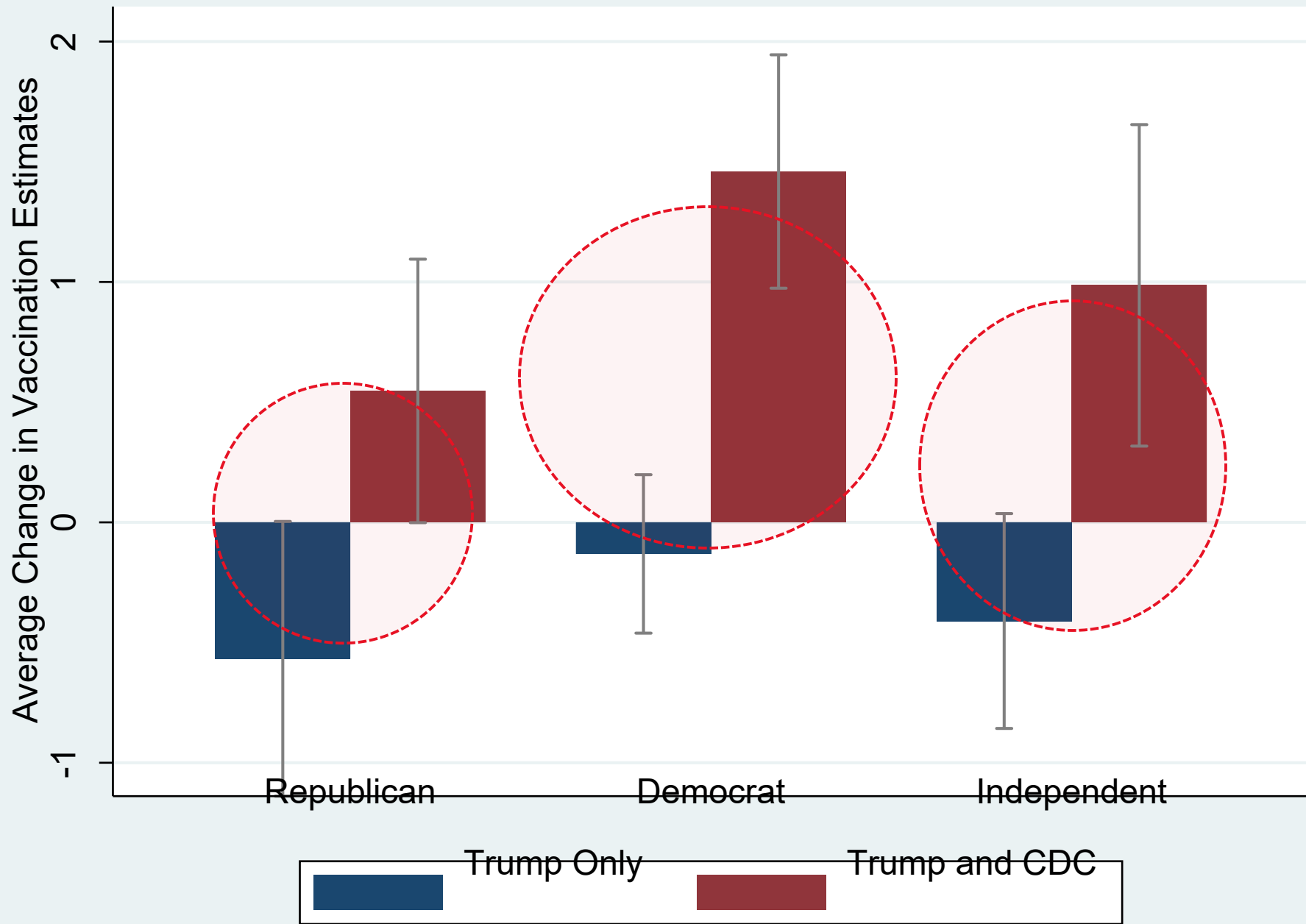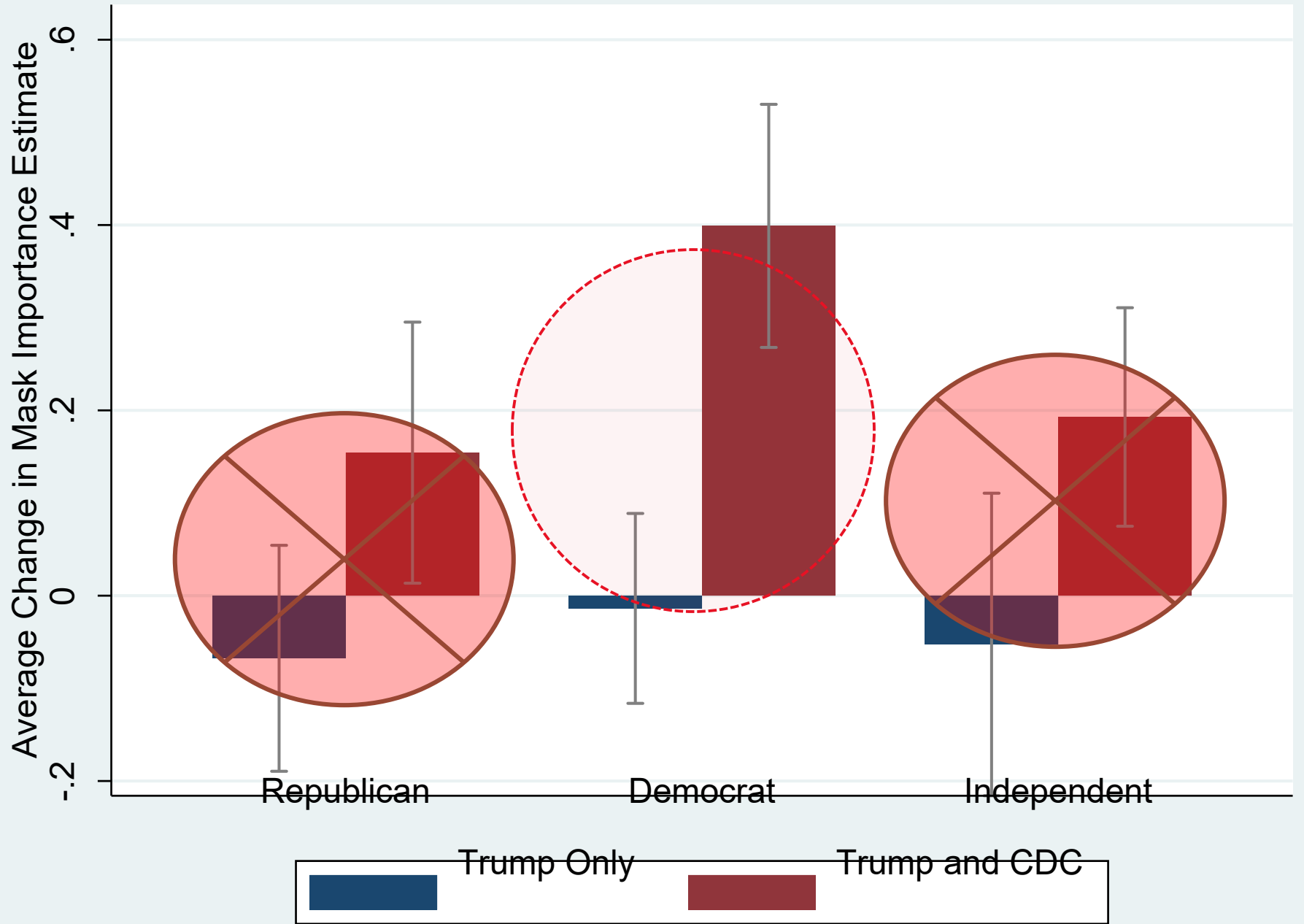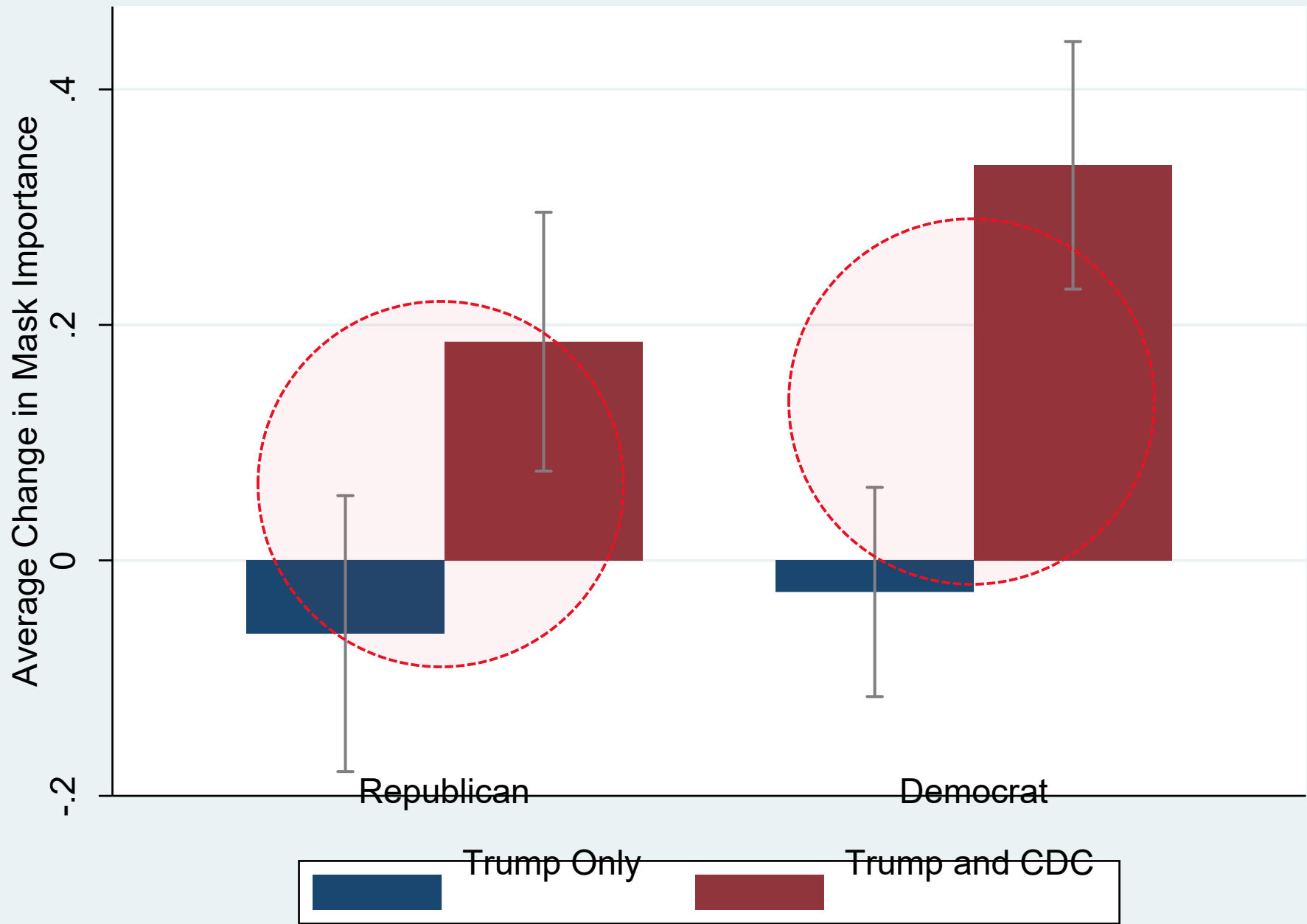
Take-Aways from Mixed Messaging Experiment

- Inconsistency in institutional messaging matters!
- People update their priors according to the information to which they are exposed.
- But not all information sources are equal.
- On average, voters seem to update their priors on points of uncertainty about the crisis more towards CDC than the president
  - NOTE: *when they are exposed to the CDC's position*

The 'Trump Card' and Branding Effects of a National PSA during the COVID-19 Crisis

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Penn State University

&

John D. Marvel

George Mason University

Brand Equity and the Effects on Trump's Reelection Campaign

- We test the associations people have with the Trump administration's latest "branding" effort.

- We provided over 1,000 US adults a picture of the public service announcement (PSA) that was sent to every American household back in early March, outlining the guidelines recommended by the CDC to "Slow the Spread."

- Remember this one?

SLOW THE SPREAD

PRESIDENT TRUMP'S CORONAVIRUS GUIDELINES FOR AMERICA

THE WHITE HOUSE

CDC

For more information, please visit

CORONAVIRUS.GOV

MARCH 16, 2020

Survey Experiment: Updating Priors about COVID-19

- We then asked respondents to click on the first thing that they notice on the card.
- In doing so, we capture the implicit association people make with the purpose of the card.
- We then ask a series of questions related to the crisis. In particular, we ask subjects their relative approval of Trump's general job performance as well as his performance handling the crisis.
- In correlating their implicit associations with Trump's name to their assessments of his job, we can measure Trump's "brand equity"
  - Brand Equity: the value that derives from consumer perception of a brand name

SLOW THE SPREAD

PRESIDENT TRUMP'S CORONAVIRUS GUIDELINES FOR AMERICA
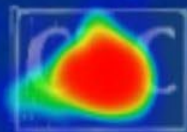
For more information, please visit

CORONAVIRUS.GOV

MARCH 16, 2020
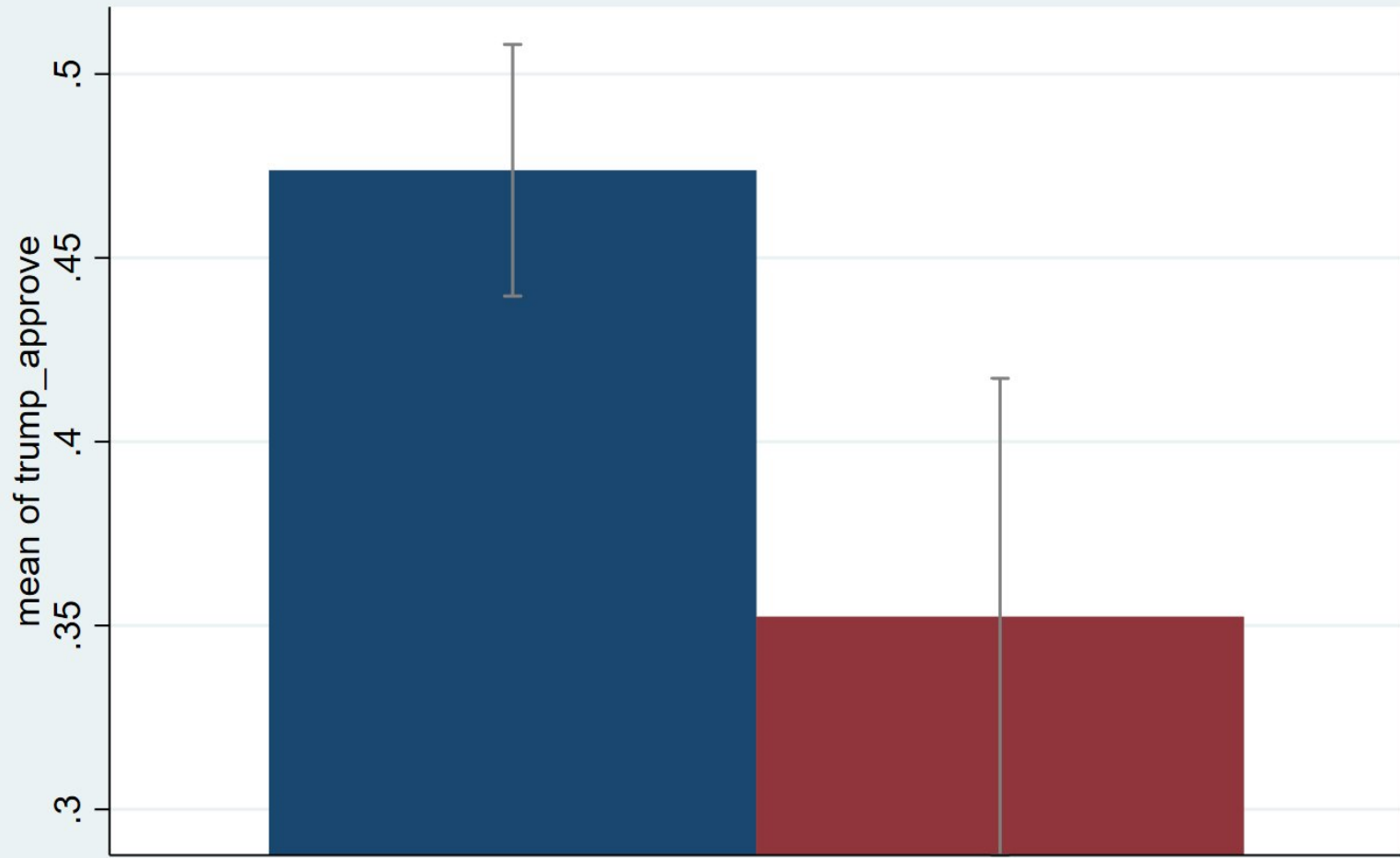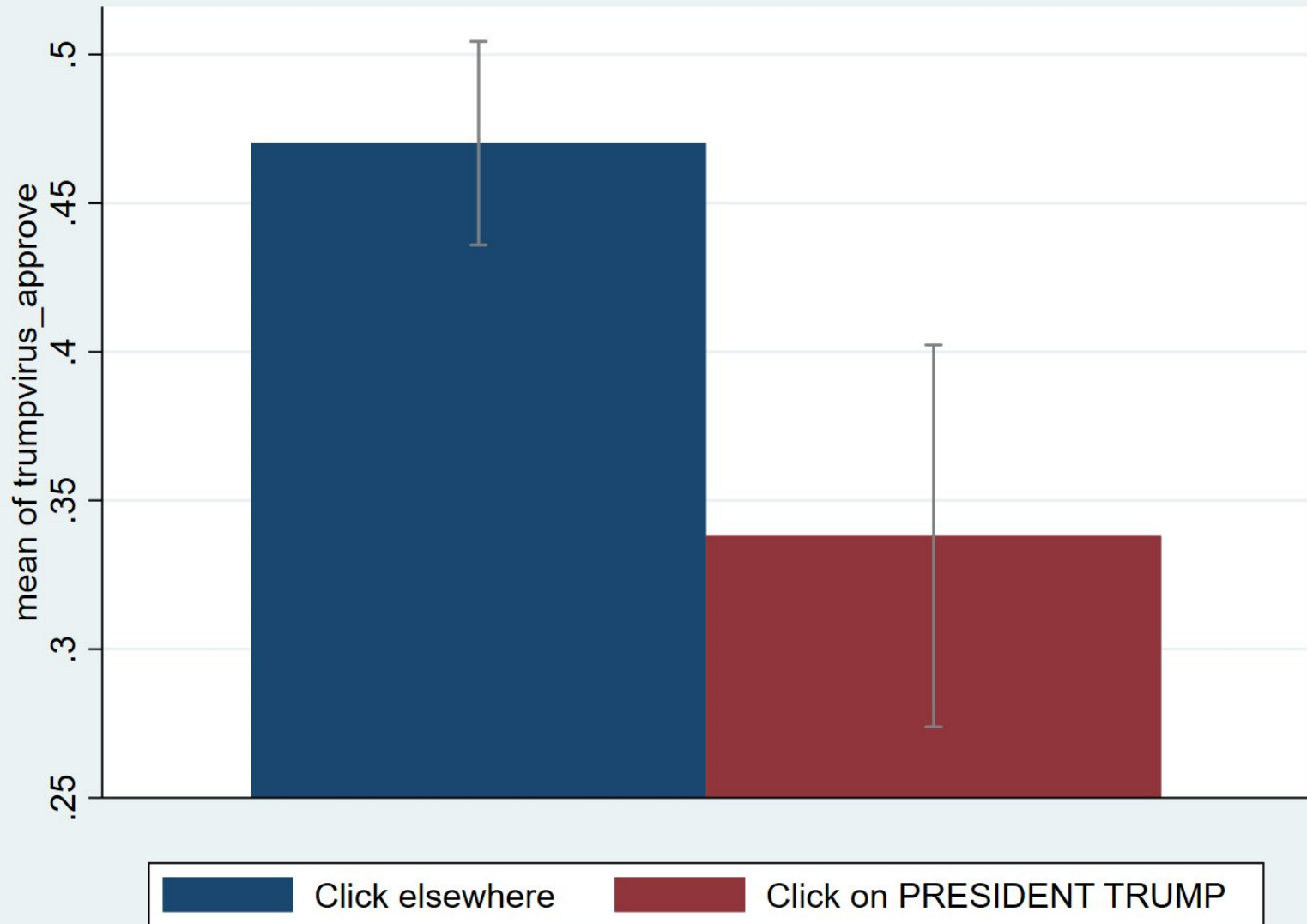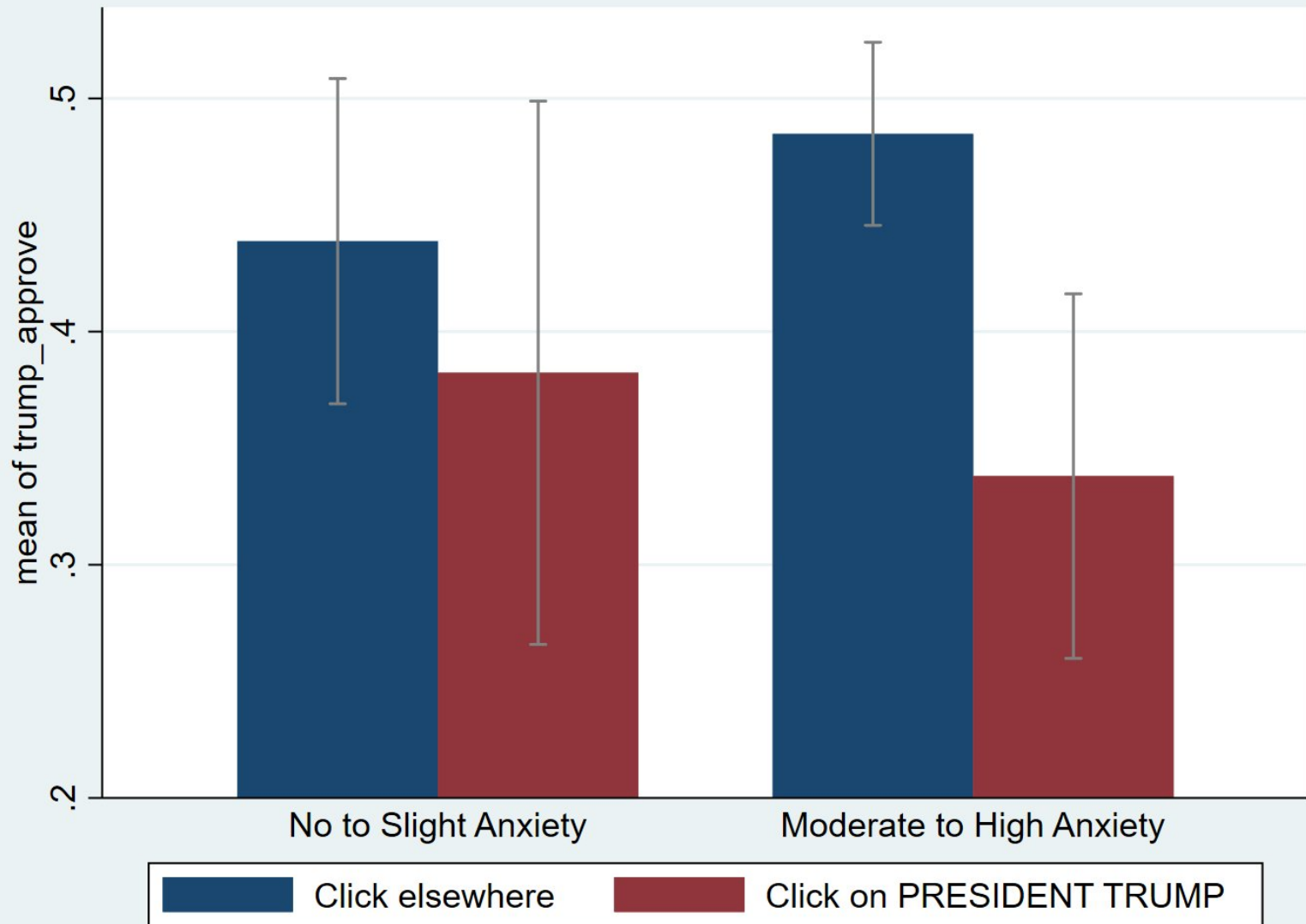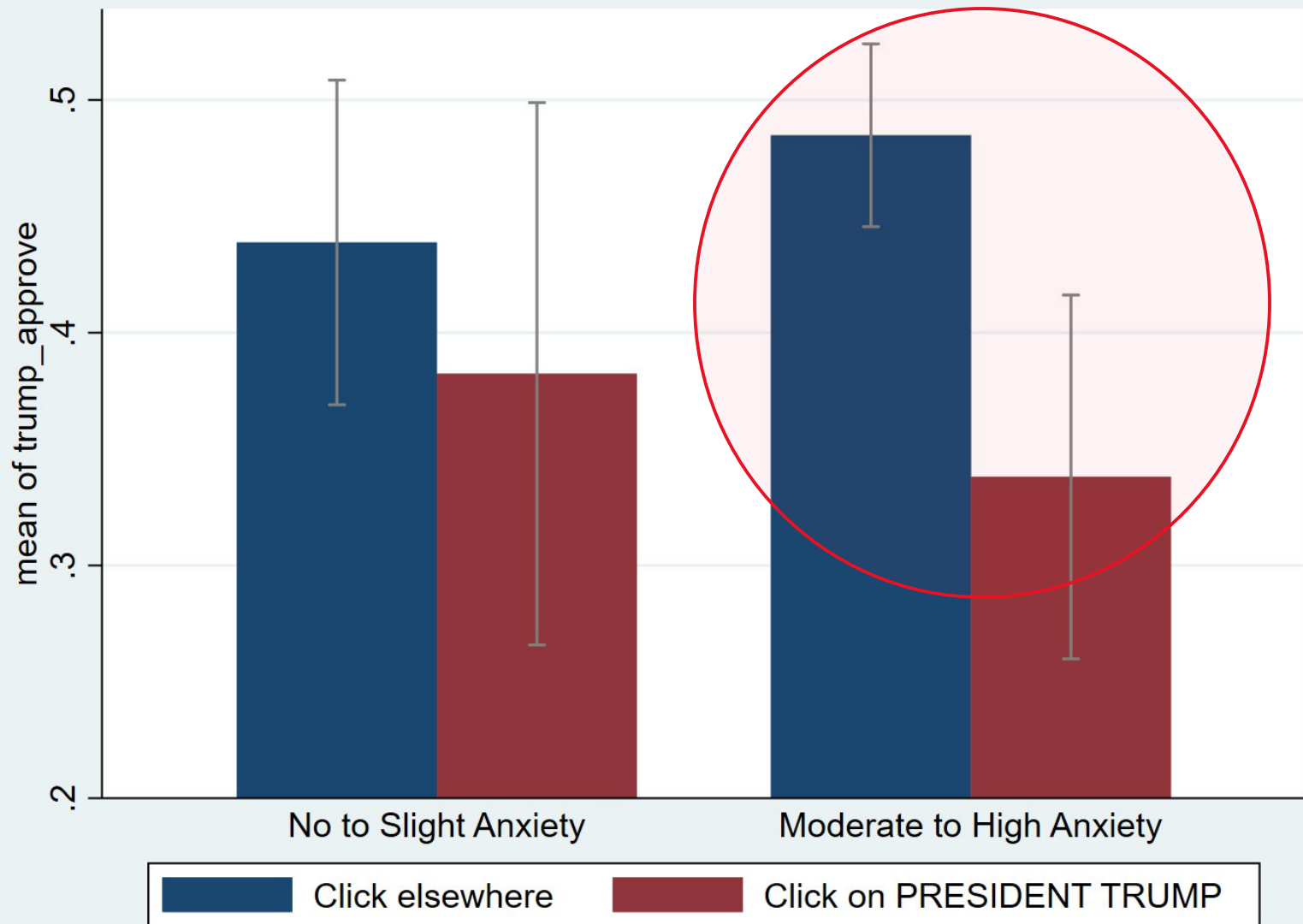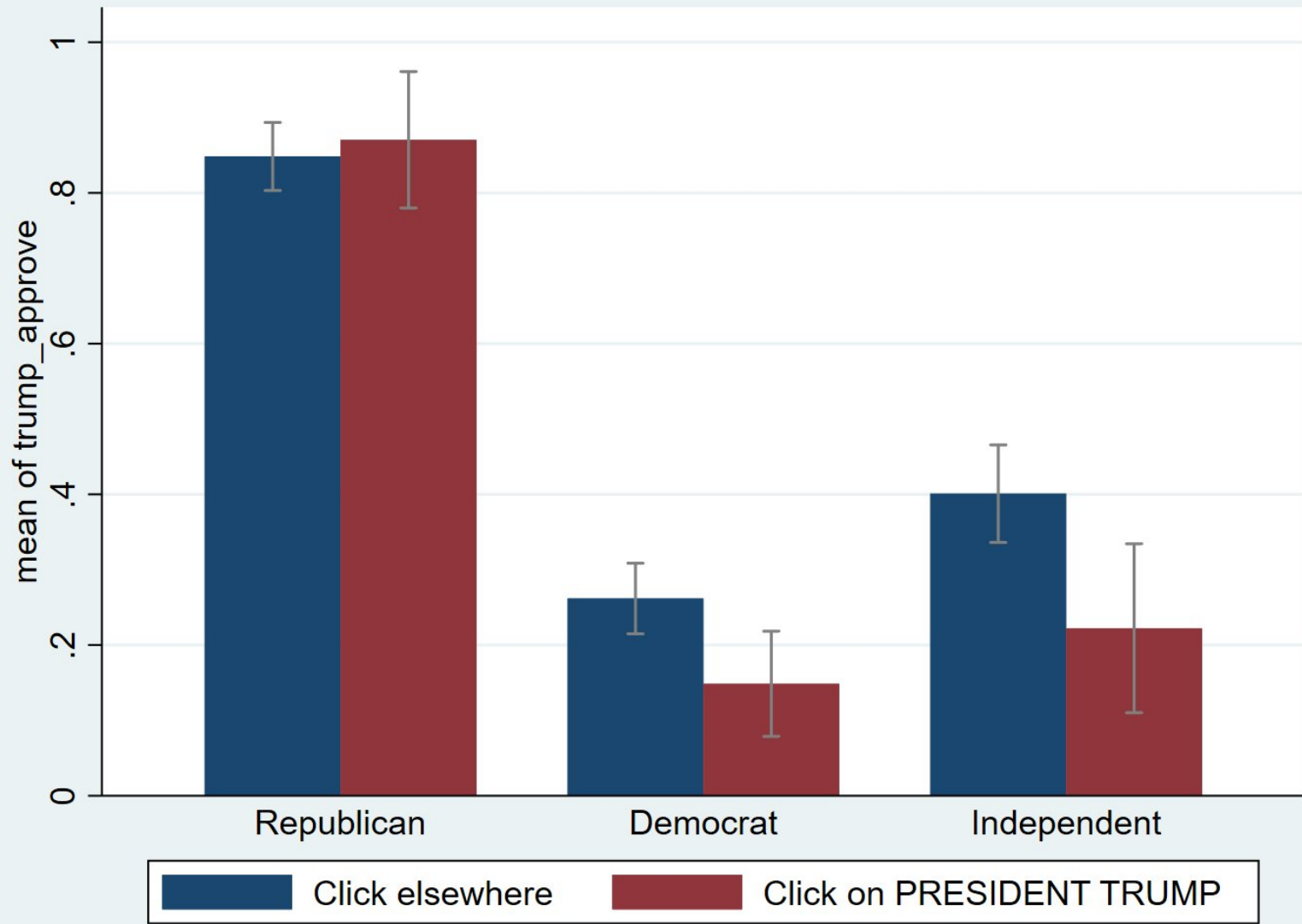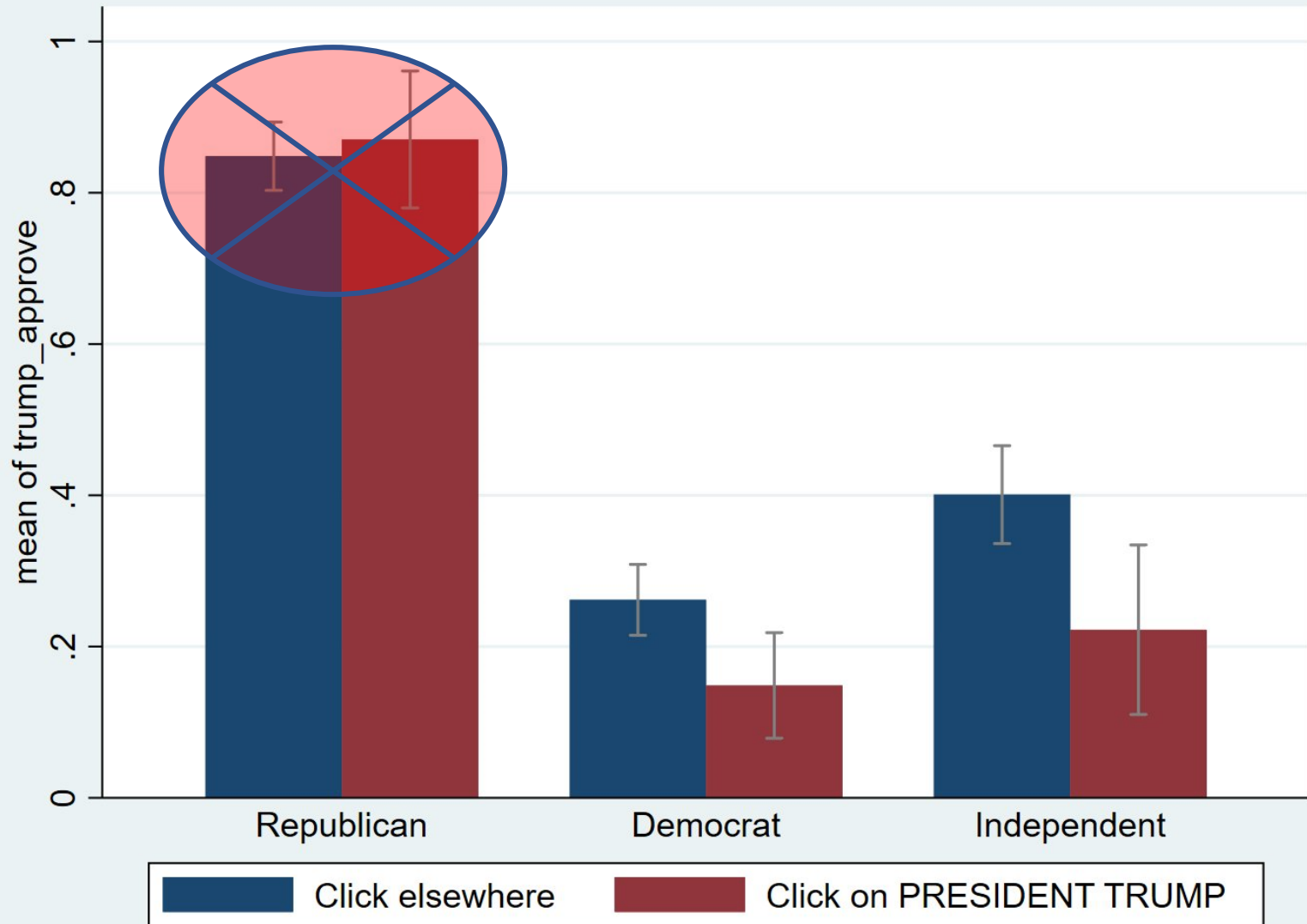
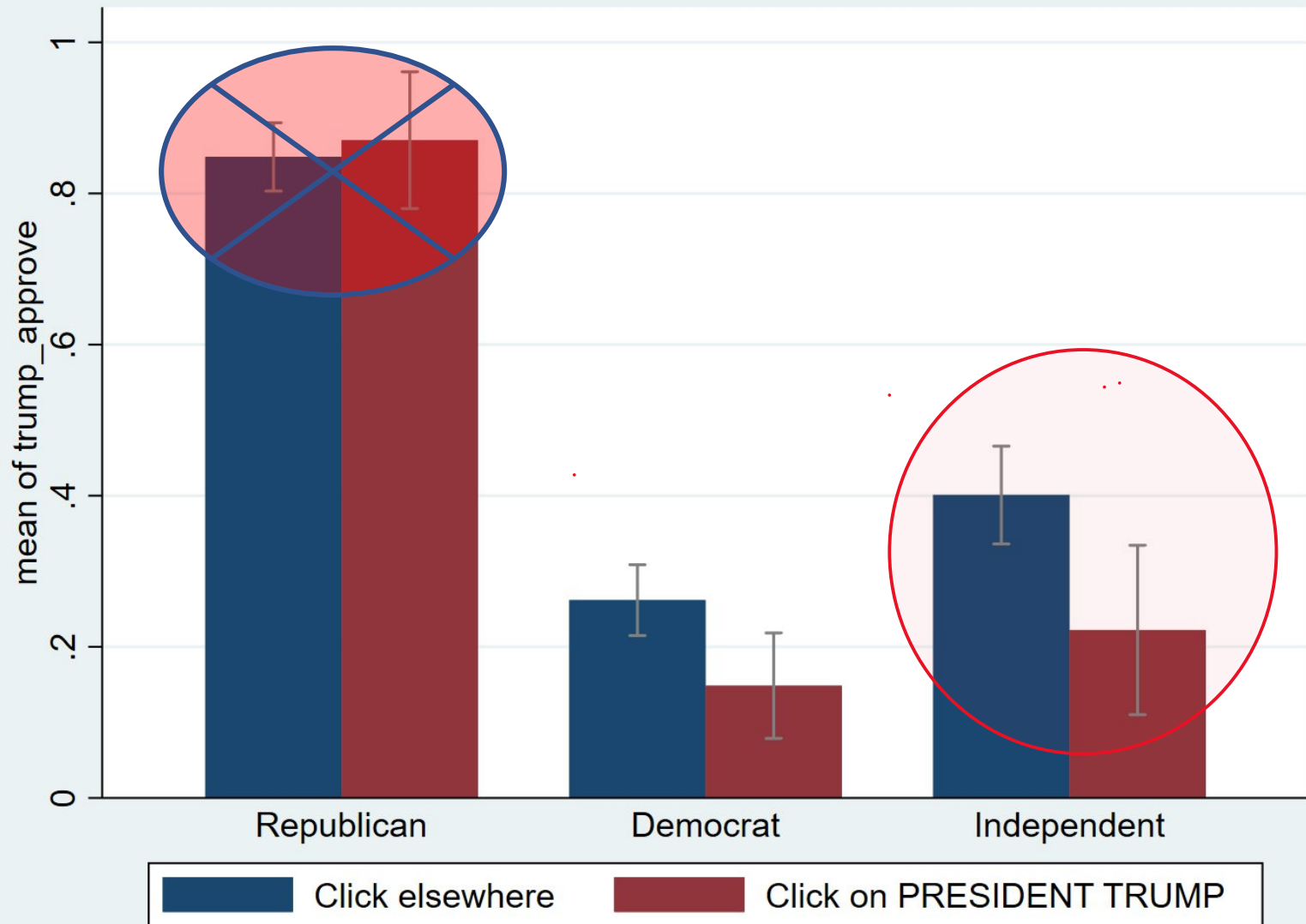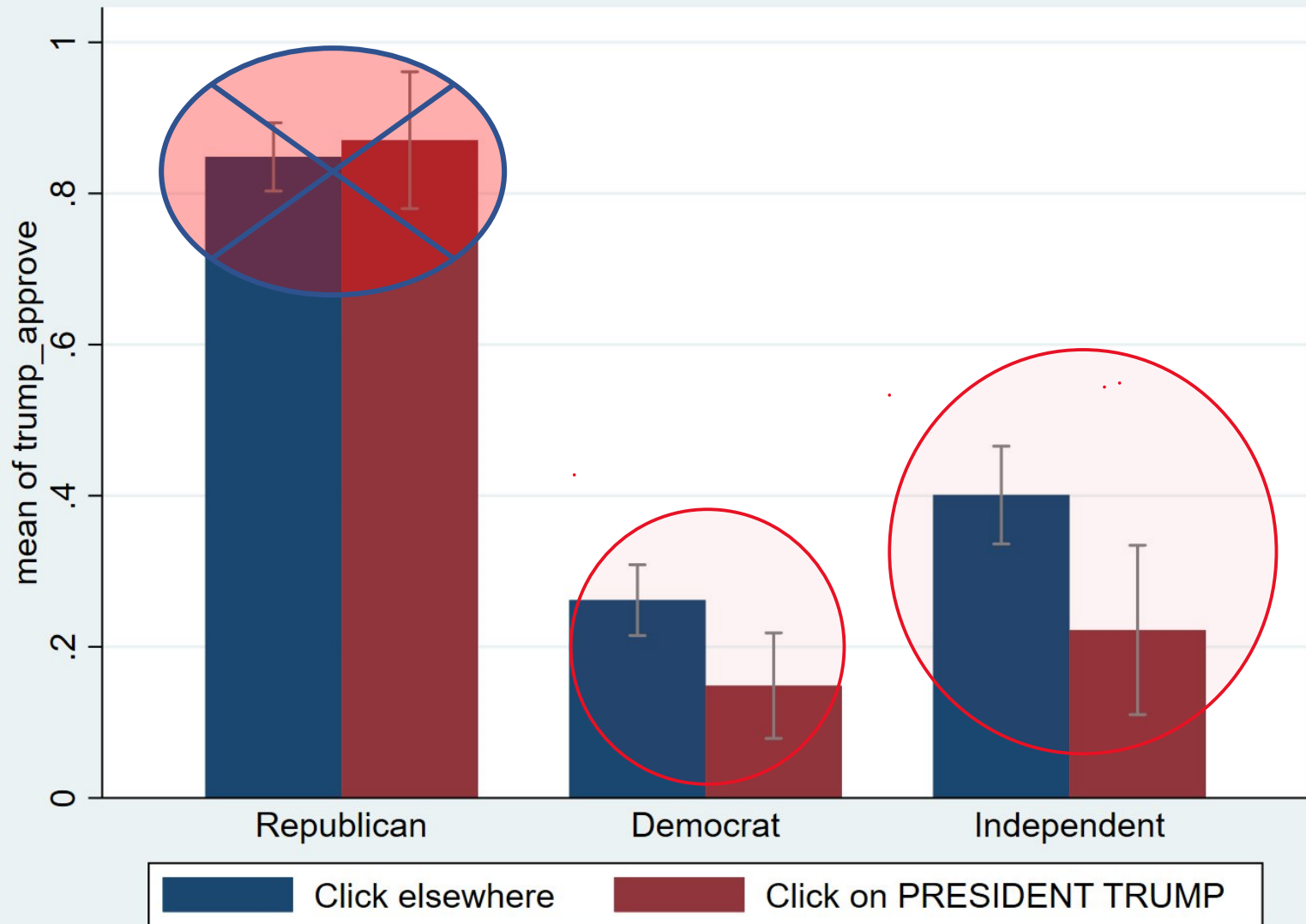# Take-Aways from Trump Branding Experiment

- In the eyes of both Democrats and Independents, any implicit association of the PSA card to President Trump leads to more negative assessments of his job generally and in addressing the crisis

- In other words, Trump's name appears to carry negative brand equity

- Implicit association of Trump's name to the PSA effort and perhaps otherwise (stimulus checks?) may lead to deleterious effects for his reelection campaign

A Diary Method Approach to Understanding the Emotional Toll of the COVID-19 Crisis on the Front-Lines

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&

Cynthia Barboza-Wilkes

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Data and Measures

- In a "diary method approach," we followed over 200 local government employees who filled out daily journal surveys for three weeks (April 13-April 30, 2020) in the midst of the crisis.

- Among many other topics, we asked these local public servants the extent to which any of the following political actors hindered or helped them in jobs that day.

  - A score of 7 would indicate a "great amount of help," whereas a score of 1 would indicate a "greatly hindered."
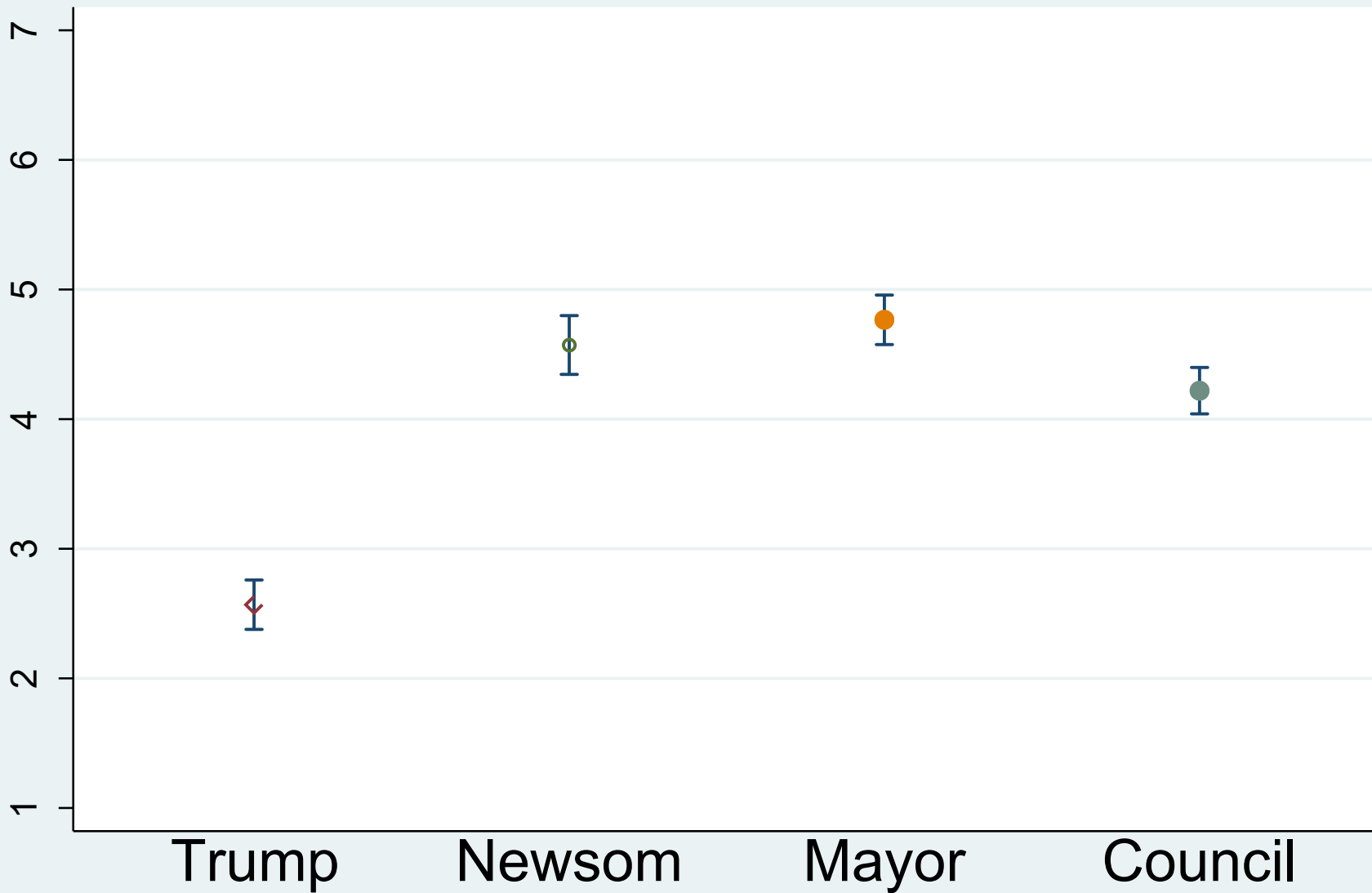
95% confidence intervals

Data and Measures

- We followed these questions with diary entries that allowed us to collect a great deal of qualitative evidence on the daily obstacles and stresses that these public servants face on the front-lines of the crisis.

- The data collection continues with exit interviews over the next two weeks.

Data and Measures

- However, we can say that over 40% of respondents indicated that mixed messages on the national, state, and local levels complicate their jobs.

- Moreover, we asked how the political environment in which they operate causes them stress.

- Here were some of their answers:

The Political Environment: Examples from the Front Lines

Citizens approach them with confusion over messages they receive from the news, particularly news from Trump's daily briefings.

The Political Environment: Examples from the Front Lines

An impression that City Council members sometimes use the crisis as an opportunity to push tangential agendas, thereby wasting departmental resources in addressing those agendas.

The Political Environment: Examples from the Front Lines

Uncertainty over furloughs, cutbacks, and other economic uncertainties (including for their spouses/partners/family) induce stress and anxiety

The Political Environment: Examples from the Front Lines

Lack of clarity on priorities during the crisis induces frustration and anger

The Political Environment: Examples from the Front Lines

Conflicting information leads to noncompliance of health directives regarding distancing and masks.

The Political Environment: Examples from the Front Lines

City and national politics is determining resource outlays and not community need.

The Political Environment: Examples from the Front Lines

New information from federal sources less reliable or timely than the actions taken by State and County governments.

Conclusion

- Mixed messaging from political elites has real impacts on the ground
- Citizens rely on political elites for information under crisis conditions
- It helps to have positively valenced brand equity in order to gain people's confidence
  - Partisan identification determines, in part, how much confidence people have in those sources
- Uncertainty leads to conflicting views that complicate the jobs of those on the front-lines

Thanks!