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# American Voter Attitudes Towards Divided Government

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# American Voter Attitudes Towards Divided Government

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## A Review of the Literature:

- Prominent political scientist David Mayhew notes that the differences in the legislative achievements of divided and united governments is minimal, and notes that landmark legislation like the Civil Rights Act was passed during a time where parties were divided against themselves, creating divided government.
- In 2001 Senator James Jeffords switched from being a Republican to an Independent that caucused with Democrats, creating a divided government. Research found that the approval for the switch roughly fell along partisan lines, and voters who approved of Jeffords's job performance approved of the party switch as well.
- Morris Fiorina, one of the most prominent scholars in the area of divided government, wrote in his book *Divided Government* that voters do not consciously "put a ball and chain" on the president by voting for divided government. Instead, he suggests that divided government is a consequence of voters trying to facilitate change in their government. It is easier to elect an executive of the different party than it is to flip a chamber of a legislature since the public is only changing one seat instead of dozens.

## Hypotheses:

**H1: Voters who tend to be ideologically moderate prefer divided government.**

**H2: Voters who have less trust in the government to do the right thing prefer divided government.**

**H3: Voters who believe that elections make the government pay attention to the concerns of voters prefer divided government.**

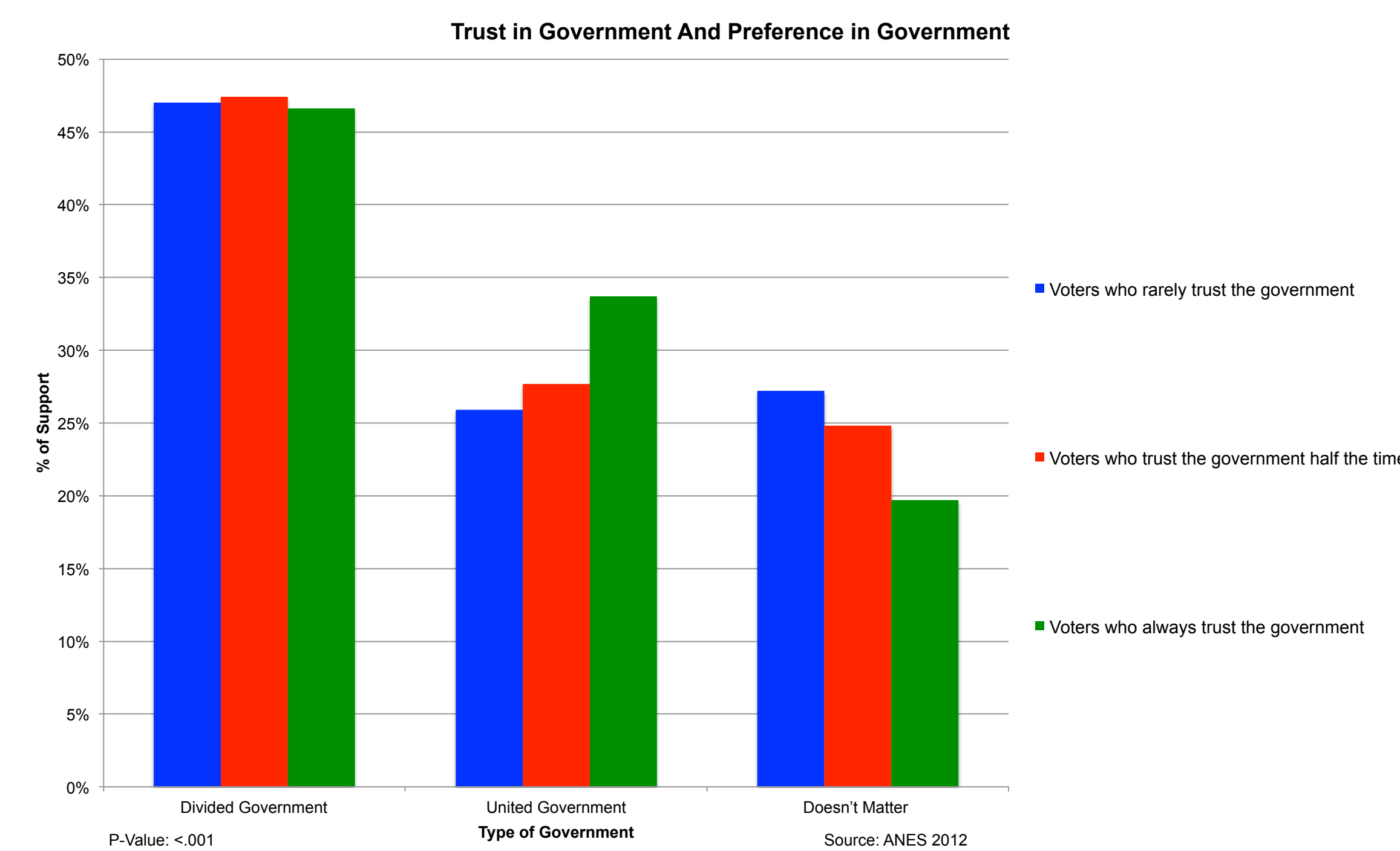
## Data

**H1: Ideology**

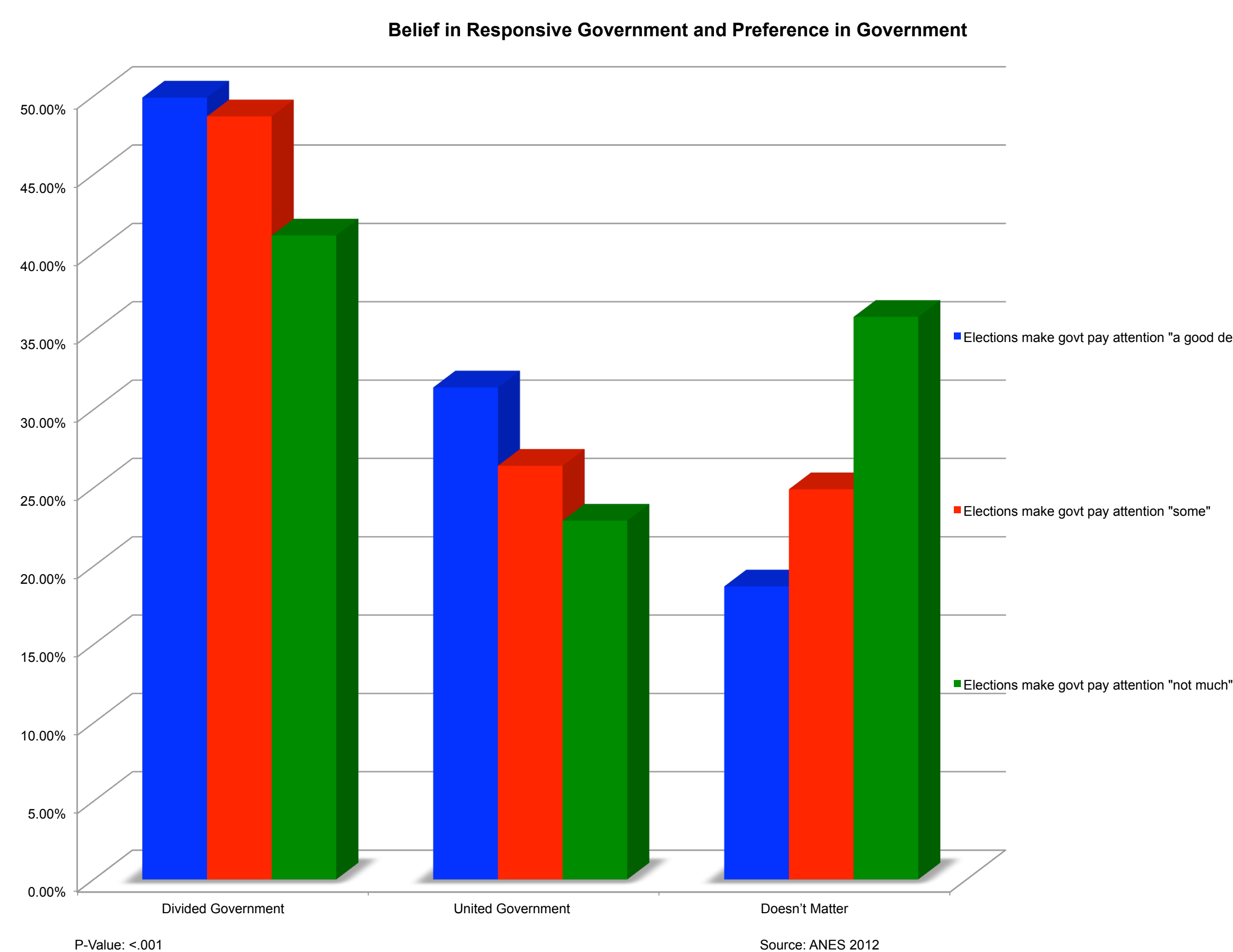
Ideology	% Divided	% United	% Doesn't Matter
Conservative	50.8%	26.2%	23%
Liberal	40.5%	36.6%	22.9%
Moderate	49%	21.8%	29.2%

P-Value: <.001 Source: ANES 2012

**H2: Trust**



**H3: Belief in Responsive Government**



**H1:** This table was made based off of cross tabulations in SPSS. The data has been recoded to group all types of conservatives and liberals together into one cohesive group.

**H2:** This graph was also created using data from the SPSS software. The question that was posed to the respondents was, "How often do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" The respondents were given choices ranging from "never" to "always", and they were recoded into "Rarely trust the government," "Trust the government half the time," "Always trust the government"

**H3:** This data was the only set that did not need to be recoded as it was already divided into categories that were appropriate for this paper. The question posed here to respondents was, "How much do elections make the government pay attention?" The respondents were given the choices "a good deal of the time," "some of the time" and "not much of the time".

## Findings

### H1: Ideology

Conservatives are most likely to prefer divided government, with 50.8% of them preferring this type of government. These results were found to be statistically significant with a p-value of <.001. In addition, nearly half of moderates preferred divided government.

### H2: Trust

In terms of trust, voters of all levels of trust prefer divided government over united government, with nearly all categories registering around 47%. These results were also statistically significant, with a p-value of <.001

### H3: Believe in Responsive Government

Voters who believe that elections make government pay attention "a good deal" are most likely to prefer divided government, with 49.9% of them preferring such a government. These results were also statistically significant with a p-value of <.001. What is also notable is that those who believe elections don't make the government pay attention are most likely to believe that whether a government is divided or united doesn't matter.

## Conclusions

- Ideology and partisanship tend to drive preference in divided government.
- This is possibly due to the makeup of congress in 2012, with Republicans being able to stop the president's agenda
- Trust is not a large factor in preference for united or divided government.
- Those who are more optimistic about how government responds to elections are more likely to prefer divided government.
- Voters who feel more discouraged by how the government responds to election outcomes are more likely to think the type of government does not matter.

## References

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- Mayhew, D.R. (1991). *Divided We Govern: Party Control, Lawmaking, and Investigations, 1946-1990* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Nicholson, S.P. (2005). The Jeffords Switch and Public Support for Divided Government. *British Journal of Political Science*, 35(2), 343-356. doi:10.1017/s0007123405000189