

Who Endorses Conspiracy Theories about Government Elites?

Research Report: PCIS-004 | March 26, 2022

Research Question

In this report we delve into a new group of conspiracy theories, this time regarding the alleged nefarious influence of government elites. We focus here on QAnon, Deep State, and Jeffrey Epstein. QAnon has been branded a “viral, pro-Trump conspiracy theory” (Roose, 2021) that came to light after Hillary Clinton’s campaign chair, John Podesta, had his emails hacked. Proponents of the conspiracy theory insisted that hidden messages in the emails revealed an extensive network of Satan-worshipping pedophiles amongst the Democrat political elite. Deep State conspiracy theories are typically more general. Here, the contention is that elections only swap out public-facing political representatives, while the real political decision-making process takes place amongst an unelected secret group. Finally, we turn to a very specific conspiracy theory regarding the apparent suicide of convicted sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein. Was Epstein murdered by his elite clientele to silence him? As with our other reports in this series, we ask: who in the United States most endorses these conspiracy theories?

Methodology

Data Source

- Paranormal and Conspiratorial Ideation Study (“PCIS,” collected in July-August 2021)

Data Quality Control

- All participants in this dataset passed attention, response time, fraud, duplication, and bot checks.

Participants

- 3,073 adults in the United States (53.3% Female)
- Average Age = 46.47 years ($SD = 19.38$ years)
- 58.1% White; 21.4% Hispanic; 14% Black; 6.4% Asian

Measures

- Endorsement:** Respondents were asked whether they agree with the following statements. Answer options ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” using a 7-point scale.
 - QAnon: “The government, media, and financial worlds in the United States are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation.”
 - Deep State: “The actions of the US government are not determined by elected officials, but by an unelected secret group of business and cultural elites known as the Deep State.”
 - Epstein Murder: “High ranking officials, powerful politicians, and noted celebrities are hiding information about the murder of Jeffrey Epstein to cover up illegal or immoral sexual activity.”

Summary of Findings

- Despite widespread framing of QAnon as a Republican conspiracy, we find that QAnon is endorsed by equal proportions (19%) of Democrats and Republicans (Fig. 1).
- Republicans were more likely than Democrats to endorse the Deep State (34%) and Epstein conspiracies (50%; Fig. 1).
- Men (30%) were more likely than women (22%) to agree with the Deep State conspiracy, but not more likely to endorse QAnon and the Epstein murder conspiracies (Fig. 2).
- Relative to White, Asian, and Hispanic respondents, Black respondents were more likely to agree with the QAnon and Deep State conspiracies (Fig. 3).
- Those with graduate degrees were the least likely to endorse the QAnon conspiracy (Fig. 4).

Take-Home Message

- In contrast to prior research reports and media portrayals of white Republicans as the typical proponent of the QAnon conspiracy (see Roose, 2021; Jones et al., 2021), our data indicate equal endorsement amongst Democrats and Republicans, and higher rates of endorsement amongst Black Americans relative to other racial groups.
- Gender and educational attainment were minimally associated with overall conspiracy endorsement, though higher levels of education did steadily reduce agreement with the QAnon conspiracy.

Share your interpretation with us (research@skeptic.com) and it may be included in Skeptic Magazine.

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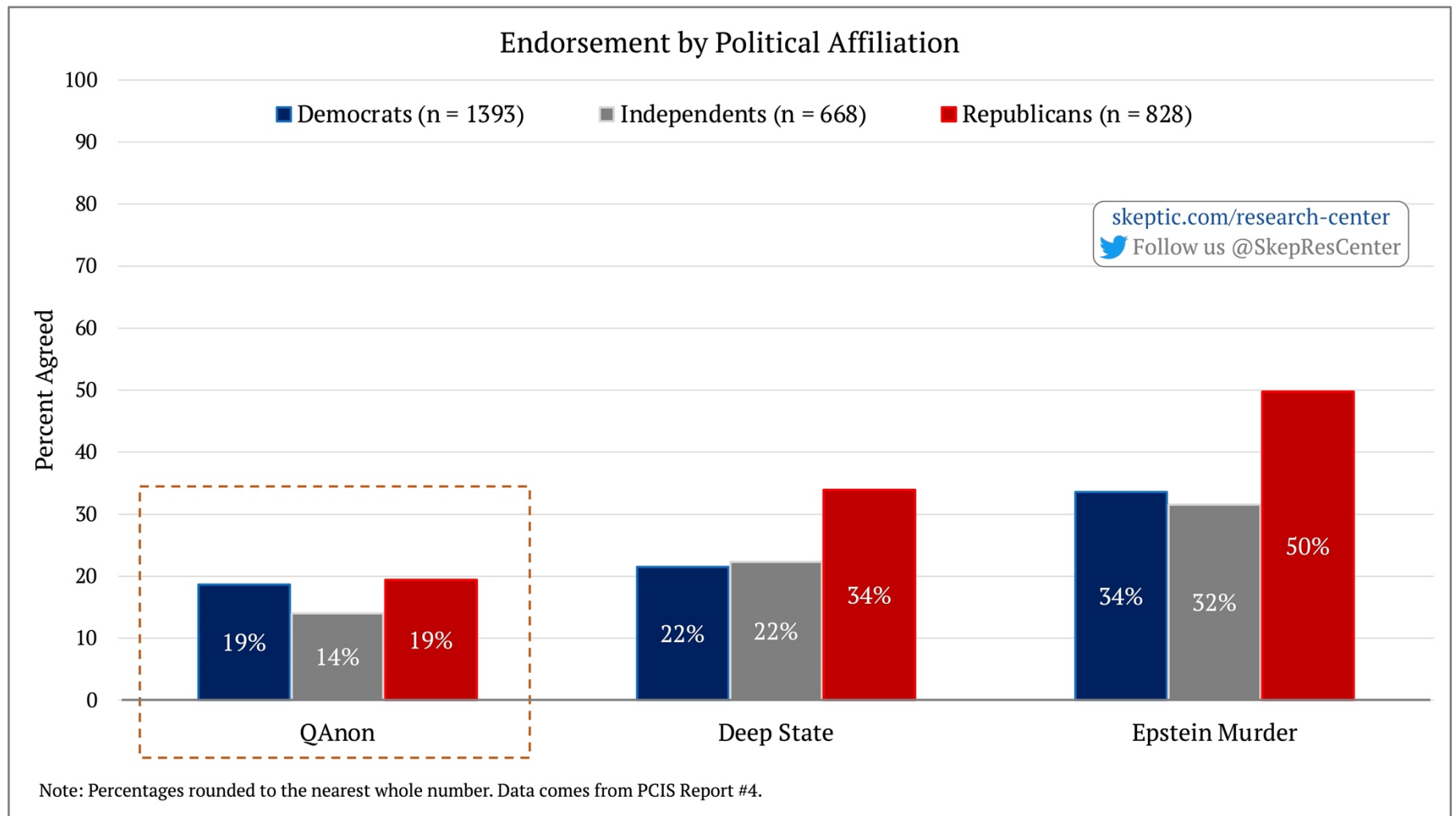
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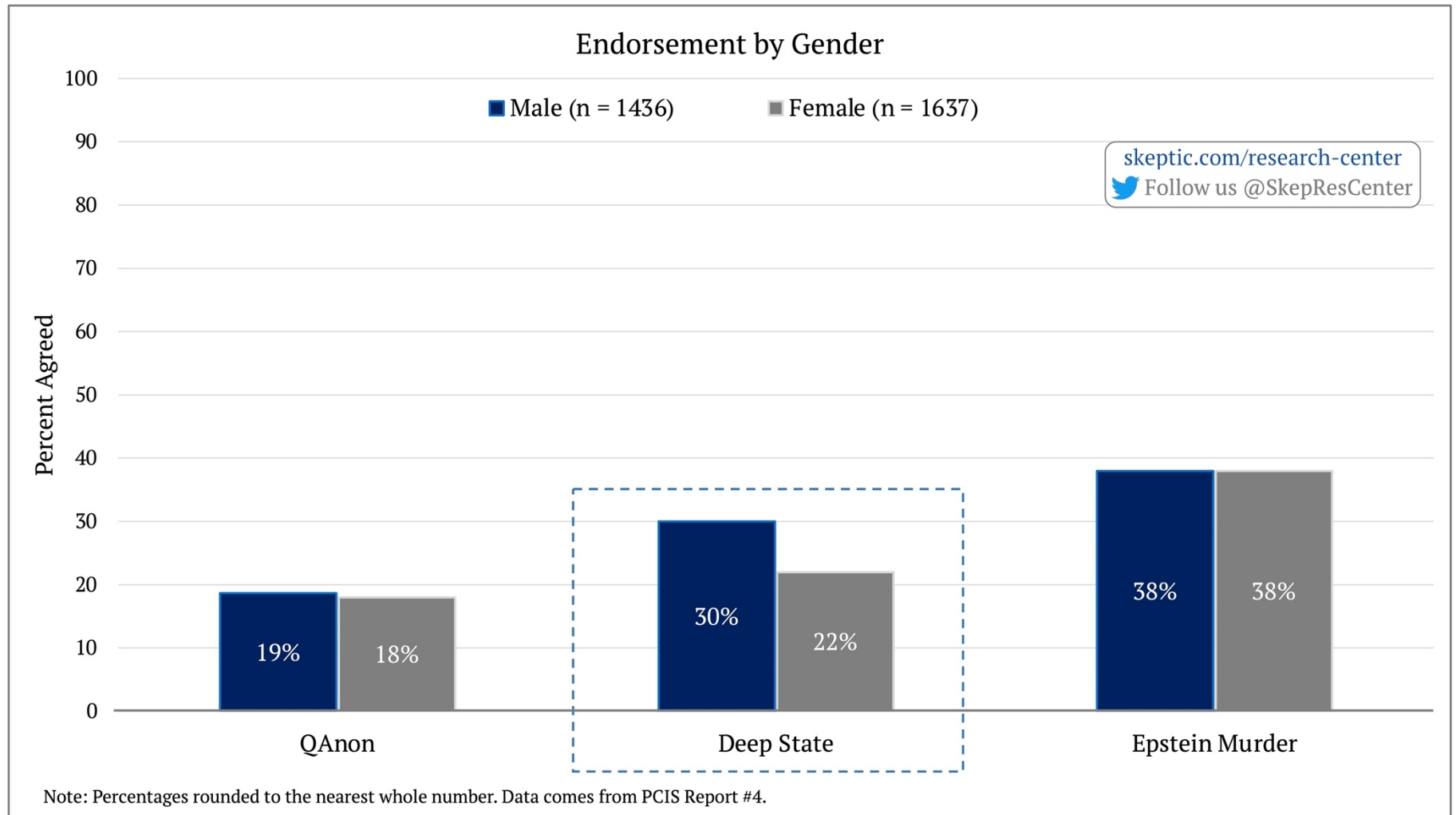
McCaffree, K., & Saide, A. (2022). Who Endorses Conspiracy Theories about Government Elites? Skeptic Research Center, PCIS-004.

Figure 1



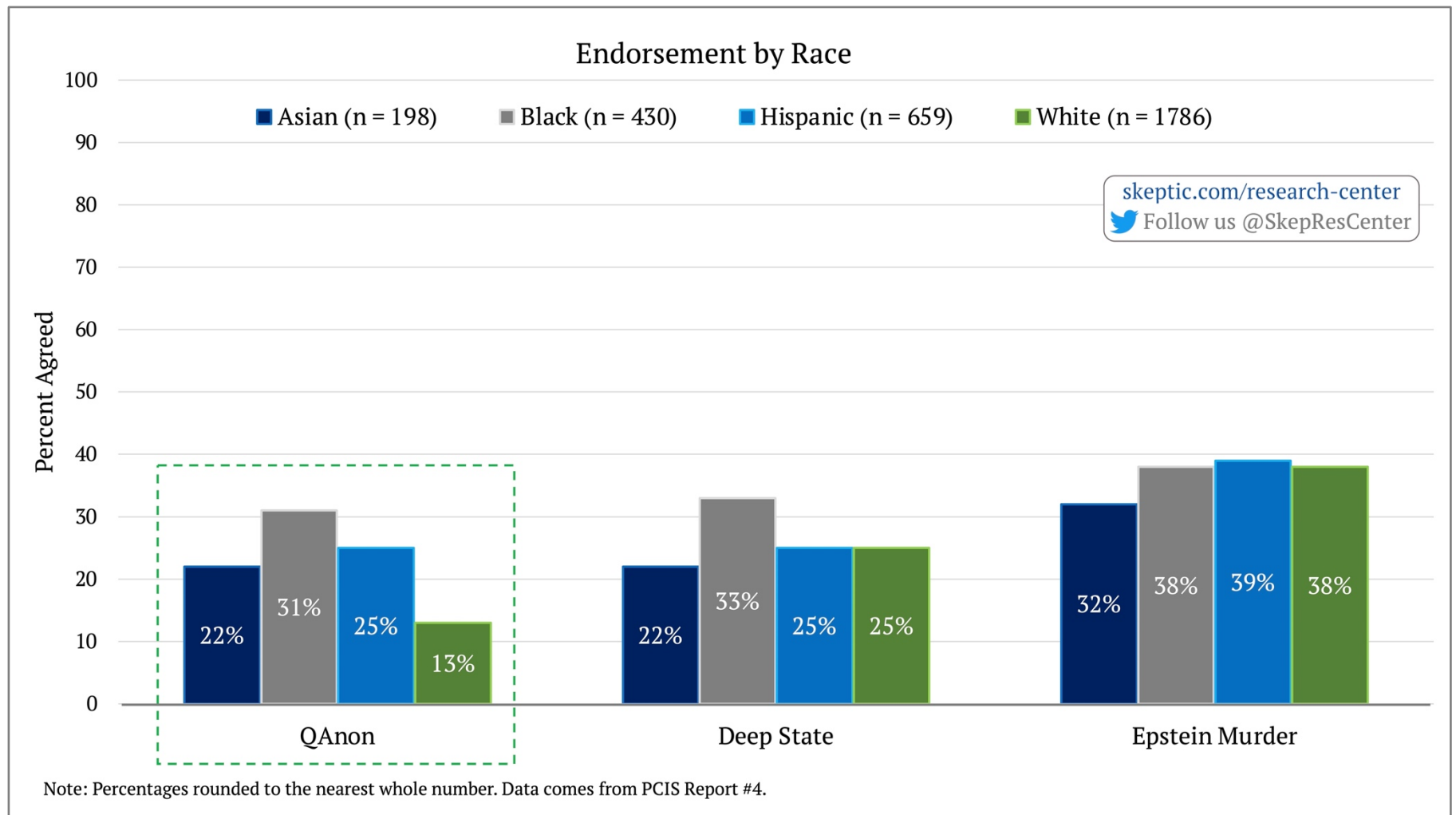
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Figure 2



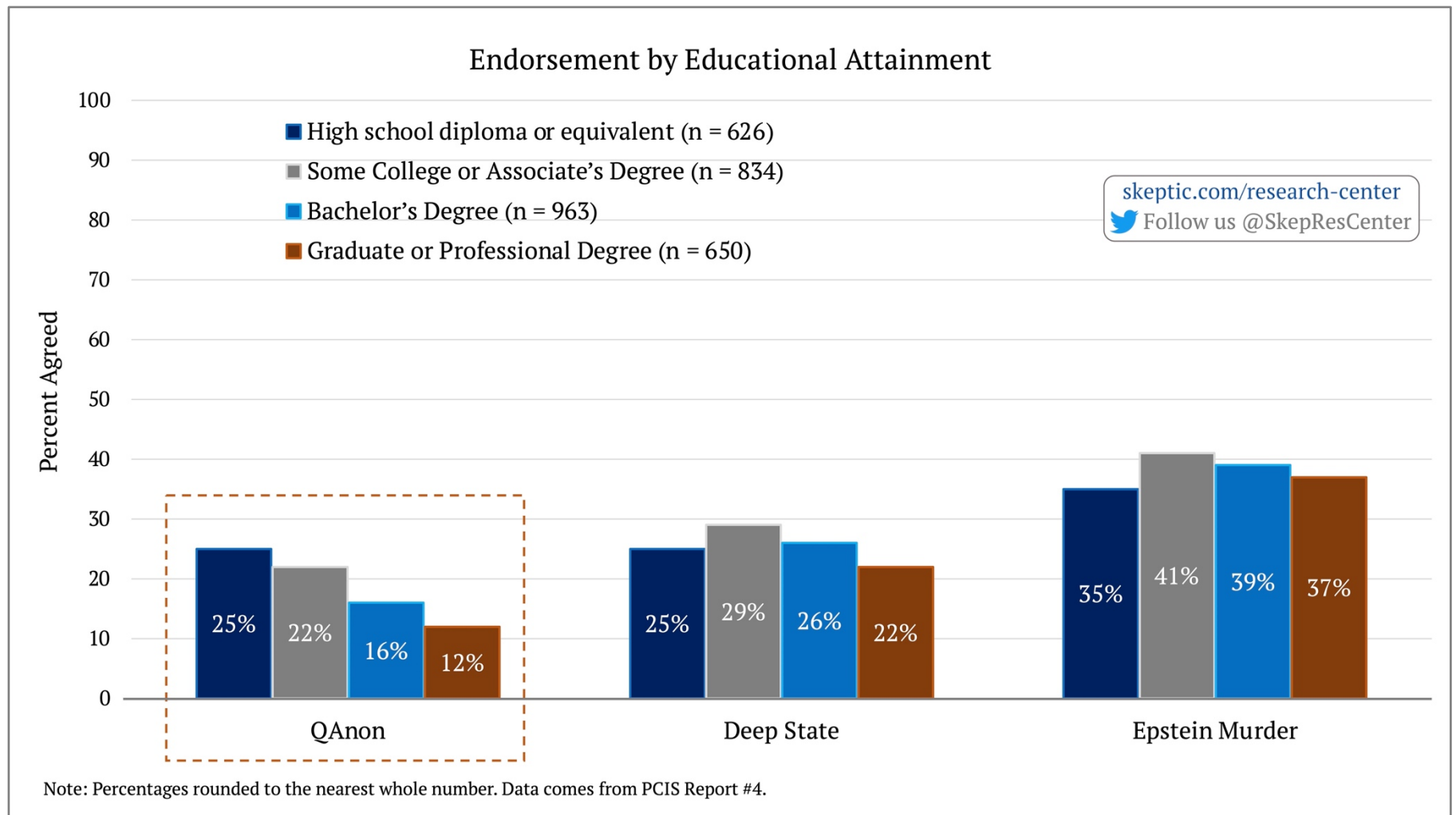
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Figure 3



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Figure 4



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