

Sowing Distrust of the News Media as an Electoral Strategy

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, trust in the news media went through a period of general decline and then a second period (since 2000) of polarization by party. Currently, trust in the media is low among those of all political affiliations, but it is substantially lower among Republicans than Democrats. Scholars have investigated a variety of plausible causes of this increasing distrust of the media, yet the largest source of this change seems to be increasing amounts of criticism of the institutional media from politicians and political pundits. This trend also has important consequences for how people acquire political information and make election decisions. Those who distrust the news media are more likely to consume information from partisan news outlets, and are more resistant to a fairly wide variety of media effects on public opinion. Because it can partially insulate one's supporters from many types of media persuasion, partisan attacks on the news media have become an increasingly prominent political tactic.

Keywords

trust; confidence; media trust; media skepticism; media effects; persuasion; journalism

“The press is the enemy, the establishment is the enemy, the professors are the enemy.”

Richard Nixon¹

“The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!”

Donald Trump²

“I don't believe what I read in the papers. They're just out to capture my dime.”

Paul Simon³

Can news organizations can be trusted to provide accurate information? This is a recurring question throughout US political history. As Cook (1998, 22) writes, to the Constitution's authors “‘Freedom of the press’ . . . referred less to journalistic independence from government intervention than to the capacity of individuals to have free access to a printing press and thereby disseminate their views.” It is beyond the scope of this review to discuss the press's place in US society through the late 1700s, 1800s and early 1900s, but one thing is fairly clear: The press was not considered an independent, trusted institution by political observers. The press was decentralized, with many competing newspapers. These papers were often partisan, affiliated with social movements, or eschewed heavy political coverage in favor of other topics. While journalism did provide a check on the government, it was not because it was a highly respected, independent, national political institution (see Ladd 2012, chap. 2–3).

Modern public opinion polling was invented in the 1930s and 1940s. Even though these early polls have methodological weaknesses, they are our first evidence of what the US public thinks about whether the press provides accurate political information. A 1938 Gallup poll found that just 40 percent of Americans believed that “newspapers furnish fair and unprejudiced news about politics and politicians.” This skepticism of the press was relatively uniform across the

political spectrum. As Figure 1 shows, 43 percent of those who approved of Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) and 36 percent of those who disapproved of him thought newspapers were fair.⁴ Yet by the mid-1950s, the situation changed dramatically. The 1956 American National Election Study (ANES) found that 71 percent of Americans thought that “newspapers coverage is fair to both sides.” As Figure 2 shows, 64 percent of Democrats and 78 percent of Republicans thought newspaper coverage was fair.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

The 1950s were an unusual period in the United States in a number of different ways. It was anomalous in its low political polarization, more equal distribution of wealth, and higher rates of macroeconomic growth (Bartels 2008; Goldin and Katz 2009; Goldin and Margo 1992; P. Krugman 2009; Levy and Temin 2007; Mason 2018; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016; Poole and Rosenthal 2007; Rosenfeld 2017). On top of all this, the media environment was also unique in US history. Earlier time periods saw intense competition among newspapers. But in the twentieth century, the number of cities with a least two major newspapers declined from 58 percent in 1910 to 21 percent in 1930 and 3 percent by 1980 (Emery, Emery, and Roberts 2000, 289; West 2001, 57). By the 1950s, television became a major source of national news. However, in most locations, people could only see two or three national network half-hour newscasts per day. Evening half-hour network newscasts often aired at the same time, allowing people to watch only one (see Prior 2007, especially 61–64).

It was in this political environment—with low competition among news outlets, low political polarization, low income inequality, and fast economic growth—that the national news

media became a highly respected national political institution, a role it has not played before or since. West (2001, 65) describes the media's role in the political system in this era in this way:

The high source credibility and homogenous product of American journalists had major ramifications for the political process . . . No other outside participants in the political system accumulated as much influence as journalists . . . The 1960s and 1970s represented the pinnacle of power for American journalists. Not only had they carved out professional autonomy for themselves within media organizations, they had persuaded the public that reporters were best-equipped to provide fair, balanced, and informative coverage.

Over the latter portion of the twentieth century and into this century, a number of things changed. The two major US political parties polarized ideologically (Levendusky 2009; Noel 2013; Poole and Rosenthal 2007); growth in the income of the typical US household slowed down dramatically (Krugman 1997); and the news media industry became a much more competitive marketplace with the rise of cable channels, political talk radio, and internet news sources (Prior 2007).

As US politics and society changed, political rhetoric about the news media changed as well. After being confined to the fringe for a decade or two, partisan attacks on the media's credibility increased.⁵ This new wave of media criticism began among conservative activists, who in the 1950s and 1960s were on the fringes of US politics, but over time moved to the center of power and prominence. Even in the 1950s, Joe McCarthy's aide Roy Cohn complained about liberal bias against them from major newspapers, while William Buckley called the establishment media the "liberal machine" (Greenberg 2008, 172–173).⁶

In 1964, the conservative faction of the Republican Party was finally able to get one of their own, Barry Goldwater, nominated for president, who started to bring attacks on the national press into the mainstream. Many Republicans, including Eisenhower and Goldwater himself, complained that Goldwater wasn't getting fair treatment from journalists (Greenberg 2008, 172–173). When asked about how the news media covered him in a press conference the day after the election, Goldwater echoed complaints he had made on the campaign trail: “I think [journalists] should frankly hang their heads in shame because I think they've made the Fourth Estate a rather sad, sorry mess” (Anderson 2006).

As the conservative movement became more integrated into the Republican Party, criticisms of the establishment news media became a more standard part of their political rhetoric. The Nixon administration perceived that the national news media as hostile and made public criticism of the press an intentional strategy for fighting back. Vice President Spiro Agnew gave a series of speeches over several years attacking the institutional news media, beginning with a November 13, 1969, speech written by Patrick Buchanan, edited by Nixon, and aired live on all three networks, in which he said:

. . . this little group of men who not only enjoy a right of instant rebuttal to every presidential address, but more importantly, wield a free hand in selecting, presenting, and interpreting the great issues of our nation . . . To a man, these commentators and producers live and work in the geographic and intellectual confines of Washington, DC, or New York City . . . Is it not fair or relevant to question [this power's] concentration in the hands of a tiny and closed fraternity of privileged men, elected by no one, and enjoying a monopoly sanctioned and

licensed by government? The views of the fraternity do not represent the views of America. (Coyne 1972, 267)

The strategy continued. After the 1971 White House correspondents' dinner, Nixon sent a memo to his Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman saying "The reporters were considerably more bad-mannered and vicious than usual. This bears out my theory that treating them with considerably more contempt is in the long run a more productive policy" (Associated Press 1987). When the Watergate scandal engulfed the Nixon Administration, things did not improve. At a 1973 prime-time televised press conference at the White House, Nixon told the assembled national correspondents:

I've never heard or seen such outrageous, vicious distorted reporting in 27 years of public life . . . when people are pounded night after night with that kind of frantic hysterical reporting it naturally shakes their confidence. And yet, don't get the impression that you arouse my anger. You see, one can only be angry with those he respects. (Nixon 1973)

Justified or not, by the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, criticism of the institutional news media had become a staple of national conservative rhetoric. Incumbent President Bush received more negative national news coverage than his opponent Bill Clinton during the 1992 presidential election (Hetherington 1996), and criticizing the news media for bias was common among Republicans that year. A popular Republican bumper sticker read, "Annoy the Media, Re-Elect Bush" (Dickerson 2006). In 1996, Republican presidential nominee Bob Dole, who trailed in the polls all year, attacked the press on the campaign trail, saying,

We've got to stop the liberal bias in this country. Don't read the stuff. Don't watch television. You make up your own mind. Don't let them make up your mind for

you. We are not going to let the media steal this election. The country belongs to the people, not the *New York Times*. (West 2001, 104)

Rhetoric from national Democratic Party politicians rarely takes this form: an explicit attack on the mainstream by name. While far left publications and authors have, for years, criticized the national media as being too centralized in its ownership and generally influenced by corporations (e.g., Bagdikian 2014), major Democratic pundits and politicians rarely echo this rhetoric. But national Democrats increasingly criticize Republican leaning news outlets, especially the biggest of them all: Fox News Channel.

Here are a few representative examples. In 2009, less than a year into the Obama administration, Obama Senior Advisor David Axelrod said on ABC's *This Week* program, "Mr. [Rupert] Murdoch has a talent for making money, and I understand that their programming is geared toward making money. . . [but] they're not really a news station." White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emmanuel echoed this, saying in an interview with CNN that Fox News is "not a news organization so much as it has a perspective" (Allen 2009). Several months later, interim White House Communications Director Anita Dunn went on CNN to attack the Fox News channel, saying, "The reality of it is that Fox News often operates almost as either the research arm or the communications arm of the Republican Party . . . [W]hat I think is fair to say about Fox, and the way we view it, is that it is more of a wing of the Republican Party" (Stein 2010).

Donald Trump has taken public criticism of the national news media to unprecedented levels of prominence and viciousness. At campaign rallies, Trump often attacked the media in general, as well as specific reporters in the hall (Tur 2017). *USA Today* describes a December 2015 rally in which, "Trump [told the] crowd the journalists covering him are 'absolutely dishonest. Absolute scum. Remember that. Scum. Scum. Totally dishonest people.'" Two weeks later in

Grand Rapids, Michigan, Trump said, “I would never kill them, but I do hate them. And some of them are such lying, disgusting people. It’s true” (Hampson 2016). Months later, in the 2016 general election campaign, Trump told a crowd in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, that “we are in a rigged system and a big part of the rigging are these dishonest people in the media. Big part of it” (CNN 2016).

On taking office, Trump added that the media were the “enemy of the people,” a phrase that he first used in a tweet on February 17, 2017, and afterward became a very commonly used phrase in his tweets attacking the media. Despite the White House press secretary being asked repeatedly to retract or even modify the declaration that the media are the “enemy of the people,” neither she nor Trump himself has ever disavowed the statement. Instead, Trump has repeated it over and over, especially in tweets and in public speeches (Cassidy 2018). Rich Lowry (2017), the editor of *National Review*, wrote, “Trump may not know how to get anything done, may not have a well-developed philosophy, may not be delivering on his agenda, may not be an admirable person, but he’s a righteous, unyielding warrior against the media” (Lowry 2017). In a representative example from a Trump rally in August 2018, *New Yorker* reporter John Cassidy (2018) describes the scene: “‘They can make anything bad, because they are the fake, fake disgusting news,’ [Trump] said. Pointing to the press stand at the back of the hall, he described the journalists there as ‘horrible, horrendous people.’ The crowd responded with chants of ‘CNN sucks.’”

Who Mistrusts the Media?

As attacks on the establishment news media have grown since the 1950s from a fringe phenomenon to one of the primary tropes of the current president’s rhetoric, trust in the news

media has declined and polarized by party. While the news media was once among the country's most respected institutions, now respect for the media is low and divided along partisan lines (Gronke and Cook 2007; Ladd 2012). The longest time series of national poll questions asking about national journalism with the same question wording is in the General Social Survey (GSS). Since 1973, the GSS has included a battery of questions asking respondents how much confidence they have in a series of different US national political institutions, including "the press." Figure 3 compares confidence in the press from 1973 to 2018 with the average confidence level in all other institutions in the GSS question battery. Confidence in the press has declined substantially more than the average confidence level.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Figure 4 provides a more detailed breakdown of which institutions have lost the most confidence. It shows their average confidence levels in four years: 1973, 1991, 2004, and 2018. While the decline in confidence in the press has been dramatic, other institutions have also lost the public's confidence. Other than the press, the loss of confidence is the largest for Congress, the executive branch, and television, with smaller declines for medicine and organized religion. The result is that, while the press was in the middle of the pack in 1973, by 2018 it was near the bottom, with only Congress and television receiving less confidence from the public. In the 2018 GSS, only 13 percent of the US public admit to having a "great deal of confidence" in the press.

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

The low levels of confidence in the media are not uniformly distributed. Americans who are white, of higher income, and more highly educated are more likely to have negative views toward the media (Cappella and Jamieson 1997, 211). Among political affiliations, Republicans and conservatives are significantly more likely than others to have negative views toward the

media (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Cook and Gronke 2001; Gronke and Cook 2007; Jones 2004; Lee 2010). This partisan gap has been increasing since 2000.

Figure 5 shows the same data as Figure 3, but with Democrats and Republicans separated.⁷ Confidence in the press has declined in both parties, but the partisan gap has grown as well. The partisan gap grew in the mid-1970s, before shrinking and remaining relatively small through the 1980s and early to mid-1990s. The only survey in which the gap disappeared entirely was conducted in 1998, not long after President Clinton's affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky was exposed. The gap then grew substantially during George W. Bush's presidency, persisted through the Obama administration, and then grew even larger during Trump's presidency. The party gap widened in the 2018 GSS as confidence increased among Democrats, while continuing to fall among Republicans. Among Democrats in the 2018 GSS, 19 percent have "a great deal" of confidence in the press and 27 percent have "hardly any." Among Republicans in the same survey, only 3 percent have "a great deal" of confidence in the press and 52 percent have "hardly any." Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler (2017) find very similar patterns in Gallup polls asking about trust in the media during Trump's presidency (see also Bump 2018; Swift 2017). Republican respondents are increasingly willing to agree with attacks on the media in the same words Donald Trumps has used, such as that the media constitute an "enemy of the people" and "keep political leaders from doing their job" (Bump 2018; Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017).

[Insert Figure 5 about here]

What changed around 2000 that caused the partisan gap to widen, and why does the divergence seem to have accelerated since Trump took office? The literature offers no one clear answer, but there are several possibilities. Ladd (2012) argues that elite partisan criticism,

especially from politicians and partisan media outlets, is a key cause of the decline in trust in the institutional news media. If this is the case, it could be that the rising audience of Fox News Channel in the early 2000s spread criticism of the establishment media to more Republicans. And since 2016, it could be that the way Donald Trump has elevated the frequency and extremity of Republican criticism of the media might have accelerated the partisan divide. Trump's attacks might keep attitudes toward the media among Republicans very negative, while signaling to Democrats that the new media might not be so bad if Trump is attacking it so much. But more research is needed to test these possibilities.

At the individual level, low levels of trust in the media are also associated with distrust of other public and social institutions. Distrusting the media has often been found to correlate with distrusting government (Jones 2004; Lee 2010) and distrusting fellow citizens (Lee 2010). Media mistrust is further correlated with negative views of the economy (Lee 2010) and negative views of the president's job performance ratings in presidential election years and congressional job performance in midterm years (Bennett, Rhine, and Flickinger 2001). Additional correlates of media mistrust include support for traditional moral codes (according to a three-item Traditional-Modern Morality Index) and misanthropy (Bennett, Rhine, and Flickinger 2001). Nevertheless, analyses of confidence in the press versus confidence in other institutions reveal that, while they are correlated, "the media is being conceptualized differently than the bulk of other institutions" by the public, as evidenced by inconsistent trends of trust across institutions over time, as Figures 3–5 here illustrate (Cook and Gronke 2001; Gronke and Cook 2007; Ladd 2012).

Comparisons of trust in the media in the United States and other countries find both similarities and differences. While declining media trust is not a universal finding (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018), the relationship between trust in news media and political trust

(i.e., trust in government institutions and political parties) has been discovered internationally, although the “magnitude” of this relationship differs across countries (Ariely 2015), with a stronger relationship found more in politically polarized societies (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018). Internationally, other individual correlates of media trust include individual political interest, interpersonal trust, exposure to TV news and newspapers, low levels of education, and low exposure to internet news (Tsfati and Ariely 2014). Contextual correlates include media autonomy, “party/press parallelism” (cf. Ladd 2012), journalistic professionalism (Ariely 2015), and state ownership of media organizations, although the relationship of trust to state ownership is negative in nondemocratic societies. (Tsfati and Ariely 2014).

Measuring Trust in the Media

There was only sporadic polling on attitudes toward the news media prior to the 1970s. The few polls that did address this topic often focused on support for first amendment rights for journalists rather than on whether people had trust in journalism as an institution, trust in particular news outlets, or if they viewed these entities as accurate sources of information. The 1938 Gallup poll and the 1956 ANES that I highlighted earlier are the notable exceptions. As polls have asked about media trust more frequently, a lot of different question wordings have been used by different polling organizations.

As noted earlier, since 1973, the GSS has asked about “the press” as part of a question battery about different institutions with the following premise:

I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

Over the years, the ANES has used a variety of question wordings in addition to the 1956 question about newspaper bias. A 1993 ANES pilot study asked whether people agreed that “Media coverage of politics often reflects the media’s own biases more than facts.” A 1995 ANES pilot study asked respondents to rate the following television news anchors on a feeling thermometer: Tom Brokaw (NBC), Peter Jennings (ABC), Dan Rather (CBS), and Bernard Shaw (CNN). In 1998, the ANES asked whether people approved “of how the news media is handling these allegations (that President Clinton lied under oath about his affair with Monica Lewinsky)?” In 1996, 1998, 2000, 2004, and 2008, the ANES asked, “How much of the time do you think you can trust the media to report the news fairly?,” offering respondents the options of “just about always,” “most of the time,” “only some of the time,” “almost never,” or “none of the time.” The ANES asked respondents to rate “the media” in general on a feeling thermometer in 1998, 2002, and 2004.

The 2018 ANES pilot study has a battery of questions about media trust. These include a media trust question that has previously been used by Gallup: “In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the news media when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly?” It also includes three questions asking if respondents support the news media’s role “checking the powers of the U.S. government by covering what is happening so the public can be well-informed,” two questions asking about perceptions of bias, a question asking whether respondents can find “a news source that provides accurate information about what is happening in the country,” and a question asking how “concerned” respondents are about “violence” against journalists.

Gallup and the Pew Research Center also maintain useful time series on this topic. Since 1997, Gallup has periodically asked the question about “trust and confidence” used in the 2018

ANES pilot. Since 1985, the Pew Research Center has periodically asked in national polls whether “in general . . . news organizations get the facts straight.”

Even small changes in poll question wordings can sometimes have big effects on responses. Given that, what are we to make of all these different wordings used by major surveys? It is conceivable that people have different views on these different aspects of the media (confidence, trust, etc.) and these questions are measuring different attitudes (Jones 2004). However, this seems not to be the case.

Ladd (2012) found that when the same respondent is asked different versions of these media evaluation questions, the responses tend to be highly correlated. This is even the case when the questions not only use different wordings, but are asked in ANES panel studies several years apart. This indicates that responses to questions evaluating the news media as an institution are robust to question wording changes and stable over time (for a dissenting view, see Daniller et al. 2017). Kohring and Matthes (2007) test the correlation between a variety of fairly specific media evaluation items using confirmatory factor analysis and find that general trust in the media is a hierarchical factor that contains four lower order factors: selectivity of topics, selectivity of facts, accuracy of depictions, and journalistic assessments. However, these lower order factors come from asking very specific questions about how the media cover the news. And even then, the four factors are strongly correlated with each other, all measuring the underlying concept of media trust.⁸ Thus, while it is still useful to ask about various different aspects of media coverage, one should remember that these tend to be correlated with each other.

I prefer to call this concept—how positively people evaluate the news media as an institution on survey questions—media trust, because I think this describes it in a way that is accessible to nonacademics. However, Tsfaty and Cappella prefer to call this “media skepticism”

(e.g. Tsfati 2002; Tsfati 2010; Tsfati and Cappella 2003), which they define as: “[T]he perception that journalists are not fair and objective in their reports, that they do not always tell the whole story, and that they would sacrifice accuracy and precision for personal and commercial gains” (Tsfati and Cappella 2003).

More evidence that people hold strong views about the media as a collective institution is that very few people refuse to answer questions about media trust. Tsfati (2002) and Ladd (2012) found that the percentage of people who either refuse to answer or say they “don’t know” when asked about media trust in national surveys is consistently less than 1 percent, often much less. Together, the fact that media trust is stable over time, different wordings are correlated with each other (usually quite strongly) and these questions have lower refusal rates than most other survey questions, all indicate that people have well-formed attitudes about the news media as an institution. Responses to media trust questions are not “non-attitudes” (Converse 1964) produced entirely on the spot in response to the survey prompt. Even though, like other institutions that are evaluated in survey questions, the news media is made up of a lot of different actors, people still have strong opinions about the news media as a collective national institution.

If people have strong views about the media as an institution, it is still not clear from reading these fairly nonspecific questions which considerations come into people’s heads when they answer them.⁹ Fletcher and Park (2017) find that distrust in the media is associated with a preference for “non-mainstream news source” such as “social media, blogs, and digital-born providers.” Ladd (2012, chap. 4) used open-ended follow-up questions, in which people who were just asked about their “trust in the media” or their “confidence in the press” or were asked to rate the media on a feeling thermometer were asked right afterward to explain what they were thinking when they answered the question. The thoughts mentioned were similar regardless of

which of the three questions respondents were randomly assigned to answer, providing more evidence that attitudes toward the media as an institution are robust to question wording differences. The most common thoughts were about general accuracy or bias, followed by sensationalism. Even though people often had a lot to say about the media, few people mentioned specific news outlets in their open-ended responses. Yet, among those that did, they most often mentioned television in general, the major television networks, or they mentioned Fox News for the purposes of contrasting it with the media in general. Some people described Fox as much better than the establishment news media, some as much worse, but almost all saw it as distinct from that establishment. All this provides further evidence that people have a clear view in their heads of what the news media is as an institution and have fairly strong opinions about it.

While there are better time series over decades of questions measuring attitudes toward the news media as an institution, surveys have asked about individual outlets as well. This chapter will not review all of the polling on individual news outlets. Yet, I will note several things. People tend to give more positive media evaluations when asked about specific outlets, rather than the media in general (Daniller et al. 2017). However, people give quite different evaluations to different outlets. For instance, people give higher ratings when asked about “the news media you use most often” rather than just “the media” (AP and NORC 2017). When asked about broad media categories, Kiouisis (2001) found that newspapers are trusted the most, followed by online news media and television news (cf. Johnson and Kaye 1998). When people are asked to compare local versus national news sources, local news sources are more trusted (Barthel and Mitchell 2017; Ladd and Podkul 2019), while both national and local media are more trusted than social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter (Ladd and Podkul 2019).

When asked about specific news organizations, rather than broad categories, the most trusted US news sources are usually the Associated Press, PBS, NPR, CNN, the three major broadcast networks, and national newspapers like the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* (Knight Foundation 2018; Mitchell et al. 2014). But these aggregate numbers hide substantial differences between liberals and conservatives. Trust of establishment news outlets, while highest overall, is substantially correlated with liberal ideology. In general, liberals' trust tends to be spread out over a larger number of outlets, and these are mostly outlets that see themselves as trying to be fair to both sides, not as mainly ideological news sources. In contrast, there are a very small number of outlets that are highly trusted by conservatives. The most trusted news sources among conservatives are usually Fox News, the Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh radio programs, Breitbart News, and (in some polls) the *Wall Street Journal* (Knight Foundation 2018; Ladd and Podkul 2019; Mitchell et al. 2014; Stroud and Lee 2013). These partisan differences in which outlets one trusts are larger among the most politically knowledgeable (Stroud and Lee 2013).

Causes of Declining Trust

Ever since the decline in the public's trust in the news media became well known, scholars, pundits, and commentators have sought to understand the causes. Broadly, four types of explanations for this decline have been advanced in the scholarly literature: changes in media content, the journalistic process, political context, and mode of media consumption.

Changes in Media Content

Many have attributed blame to the media itself for contemporary public mistrust, pointing particularly to changes in the style of reporting that have coincided with the period of declining trust. As Cappella and Jamieson (1997, 209) wrote: “The public’s trust in the institution is falling; in part, this may be due to the media’s own sowing of the seeds of public distrust.” Scholars have especially focused on two trends in media content sources of public discontent: covering politics as a game instead of focusing on the policy details; and focusing too much on sensational, less informative, tabloid-style stories.

Some scholars have worried that the media presenting politics too much as a game is a cause of mistrust, including excessive attention to the election “horse race” (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Dautrich and Hartley 1999; Fallows 1996; Jones 2004; Sabato 1991, 2000). Patterson (1993, 74) calls this “game schema” coverage. This style is often accompanied by negative or “cynical” depictions of all sides in the political conflict (Cappella and Jamieson 1997). Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston (2008, 170) argue that “The core preoccupation with power and partisan gamesmanship is largely what turns citizens off about their own government and the news messengers who seem implicated in the game.” The evidence for this is suggestive, but not unambiguous. For instance, as mentioned earlier, a rise in game schema coverage occurred over the same decades as the decline in media trust. In experiments, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) find that viewing this type of cynical coverage caused people to view political actors more cynically. Ladd (2012, chap. 5) found that priming subjects with horse race coverage reduced media trust among college educated Republicans (yet not among others). Finally, a panel study from Sweden finds an association between “relative game-frame exposure” and declining media trust over time (Hopmann, Shehata, and Stromback 2015).

Another aspect of the changing style of news coverage that may have reduced trust in the media is the greater tabloid-style news content, whether it is in the form of more coverage of personal life and scandals of political figures (Dautrich and Hartley 1999; Jones 2004) or of more airtime being dedicated to non-political tabloid or lifestyle stories (Emery, Emery, and Roberts 2000, 479–485; Hamilton 2004; West 2001, 104–106; Zaller 1999b, 1999a). As major establishment media outlets faced fiercer competition and threats to their business model over the past four decades, they have devoted less of their total news offerings to policy-oriented news and more to not just horse race coverage but also to political scandals and nonpolitical or lifestyle news (Hamilton 2004; Zaller 1999b, 1999a). This response to competition has been especially large in media markets with a greater preference for “softer” news (Hamilton 2004). Ladd (2012, chap. 5) finds that priming respondents to think about tabloid news stories reduces media trust, although the effect is only statistically significant among Democrats, possibly because of insufficient sample size. This style of coverage may reduce trust in the media as an institution even while drawing larger audiences and being just as informative as traditional styles of coverage, which some research suggests (Baum 2002, 2006; Zaller 2003).

Perceptions of Accuracy and Bias in the Journalistic Process

Ben Bradlee, former editor of the *Washington Post*, once argued, “The credibility of a newspaper is its most precious asset, and it depends almost entirely on the integrity of its reports” (Gunther 1992). Concerns about accuracy are also one of the most frequently mentioned topics in open-ended polls on media trust (Ladd 2012, chap. 4). And in closed-ended polls, only 32 percent of Americans agree that “the news media does a good job in helping distinguish fact from fiction because of the journalistic process” (Newman and Fletcher 2017). It could be that learning about

inaccuracies and biases in the news media are responsible for lower media trust. Every few years brings a high-profile political story that needs to be retracted or substantially revised, along with the daily misquotes, incorrect headlines, and story problems that have always been part of journalism. However, it is possible that the increasing economic competition and speed with which news organization try to publish stories on the web may have increased their prevalence (Porlezza and Russ-Mohl 2013). One survey of editors of smaller US dailies reported that three in four editors say that errors are a very serious problem for the industry (Mensing and Oliver 2005). Perhaps these errors lead to perceptions that most journalists are not careful.

Relatedly, it could be that perceptions of political bias, beyond concerns about accuracy and fact-checking, may reduce media trust. Some writers point to political bias—particularly *liberal* bias—as a reason for the public’s mistrust. One study attempting to estimate ideological scores for major media outlets based on think tank and advocacy group citations found all but two major news outlets were more liberal than the median member of Congress (Groseclose and Milyo 2005). A different study analyzed the ideological composition of the media (particularly newspaper and other print media) and found, based on patterns of campaign contributions, that journalists are overwhelmingly left-wing (Bonica, Chilton, and Sen 2015).

In one recent poll, 77 percent of Americans in an open-ended question noted bias as a reason why they believe the news media fails to distinguish fact from fiction (Newman and Fletcher 2017). Some of these perceptions of bias could be caused by the *hostile media effect*, “where opposing partisans perceive identical news coverage of a controversial issue as biased against their own side” (Christen, Kannaovakun, and Gunther 2002; Duck, Terry, and Hoog 1998; Feldman 2011, 2017; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1993; Perloff 1989; Schmitt, Gunther, and Liebhart 2004; Vallone, Ross, and Lepper 1985).¹⁰ However, psychologists depict the hostile

media effect as a permanent part of human perception. It is not clear how it could explain the decline over time in trust in the media or the growing gap between Democrats and Republicans since 2000.

One way to address bias accusations would be for journalists to be more transparent. Curry and Stroud (2017) found, in an experiment, that when articles contained “transparency indicators” readers rated the news organization and the reporter more positively on trust and other types of evaluations and were more likely to say that they intended to seek out more news from that news organization. These trust indicators included background information about the reporter, a clear label indicating that the story was “analysis,” footnotes in the article, a special section describing how the article was written, and a notification that this news organization was participating in the “Trust Project,” a collaboration of news organizations worldwide to increase trust in media.¹¹ On the other hand, in experiments, when people are shown news reports from national news organizations that they already have strong opinions about, those prior views greatly influence perceptions of bias in the reports, regardless of the content of those reports (Anand, Tella, and Galetovic 2007; Baum and Gussin 2008). Overall, some styles of news presentation and information about the source, especially transparency and a visible commitment to increasing trust, can increase trust in that source when news consumers don’t already have strong views about whether it is trustworthy. But if consumers already have opinions about the trustworthiness of the source, changing those views based on that outlet’s behavior is very hard. Like attitudes toward the news media as an institution, attitudes about specific news organizations are strongly held and difficult to change.

Elite Opinion Leadership

Public opinion research on a wide variety of public policy topics finds that people follow the views expressed publicly by politicians and pundits of their party, even when those elites change their views over time (e.g., Berinsky 2009; Cohen 2003; Jacobson 2007; Lenz 2012; Zaller 1992, 1994). The decline in trust in the media has corresponded with a long-term increase in criticism of the media by prominent national politicians, as well as with the rise of partisan news outlets like conservative talk radio and Fox News Channel, where criticism of liberal bias in the establishment media is frequent (Barker 2002; Berry and Sobieraj 2011, 2016; Jamieson and Cappella 2008). Content analyses find that criticism of the institutional news media is the first or second most frequent topic on the most popular conservative talk radio programs (Barker 2002, 25–26; Barker and Knight 2000; Jamieson and Cappella 2008, 169; Project for Excellence in Journalism 2008). Using how many miles respondents report driving “in a typical day” as an instrument for talk radio exposure, Ladd (2012, chap 5) finds that talk radio reduces media trust among Republicans and that the effect is larger when they are politically knowledgeable, which is consistent with Zaller’s (1992) evidence that the knowledgeable are the most receptive to their side’s elite messages. As noted earlier, the divide between Democrats and Republicans in media trust since 2000 corresponded with the growing popularity of Fox News among Republicans, creating the possibility that it is responsible for some of the decline in Republicans’ media trust since 2000.

There are a number of studies suggesting that, whatever the flaws in in the news media, people perceive those flaws and reduce their media trust when they hear about it from partisan sources. Watts et al. (1999) find that perceptions of media bias in presidential campaigns are more strongly related to claims of bias by campaigners and opinion commentators than to the tone of news coverage of the candidates. Gunther (1992) and Ladd (2012) find that political

engagement, which can expose citizens to elite messages (Zaller 1992), is strongly related to perceptions of media bias. Perceptions of news bias tend to correlate with discussion with ideologically similar individuals, where elite messages can be spread, but not with political discussion in general (Eveland and Shah 2003).

Finally, two priming experiments find strong effects of elite rhetoric and weak effects of actual news content. Ladd (2010a, 2012, chap. 5) finds that priming people to think about complaints from their party about media coverage reduces media trust, with the effect largest among highly educated liberal Democrats and highly educated conservative Republicans, the type of people who are most responsive to partisan rhetoric (Zaller 1992). In another experiment, Van Duyn and Collier (2018) find that subjects are able to differentiate between real and fake news stories in the absence of elite rhetoric. However, when people are also primed by tweets from elites saying a news report is fake, they are significantly more likely to say that a real news story is actually a fake one. Furthermore, being exposed to elite tweets complaining about fake news caused as large a reduction in general media trust as reading an actual fake news story did.

All these different possible causes of declining media trust are not mutually exclusive. To state the obvious, just because one variable has an effect on media trust does not rule out another variable also being influential. In my view, the evidence that elite rhetoric influences media trust is fairly strong and would be consistent with evidence on political persuasion in other areas. However, it also seems likely that the style of media coverage has an effect, and that some reforms to journalistic practices could at least somewhat improve media trust.

Consequences of Declining Media Trust

Trust in the media has important consequences for how the public consumes and processes political information. There is a growing body of work indicating that trust in the news media influences what news people choose to consume and whether they are influenced by the information they encounter.

Trust in the media is correlated with media use decisions, political preferences, and political participation. People tend to consume more news from individual outlets that they say they trust, although this is far from a perfect correlation (e.g., Stroud and Lee 2013). Those that say they distrust the news media as an institution are more likely to consume news from partisan news outlets, such as partisan magazines and websites, conservative talk radio, and Fox News Channel, and to consume less from institutional news sources (Jones 2004; Ladd 2012, 2013; Ladd and Podkul 2019; Tsfati 2002, 2010; Tsfati and Cappella 2003, 2005). Furthermore, people who distrust the institutional news media and those who trust partisan news outlets have more extreme party identifications, more extreme political views, and more extreme beliefs about politically relevant facts (Bennett et al. 1999; Bennett, Rhine, and Flickinger 2001; Ladd 2012, 2013; Lee 2010), as well as being more likely to vote for their party's presidential candidate (Ladd 2010b, 2012, chap. 7) and to engage in political activism (Feldman et al. 2017).

What leads to these correlations? As discussed in the previous section, to some degree attitudes toward the media are a consequence of political opinions and media consumption habits. Having more extreme political views and beliefs could cause you to trust the institutional media less because the only place you see your existing views represented are in partisan outlets. In addition, using partisan news outlets could (and research suggests does) reduce your trust in the institutional news media because these partisan sources criticize the institutional media so often. But is there any causation flowing in the other direction? Does media trust affect

consumption and persuasion? Given that causation flows in multiple directions, experiments and over-time comparisons have been very helpful in determining the effects of media distrust.

The literatures on persuasion and information acquisition in a number of different fields would lead us to suspect that media messages influence people more when they trust the media source (Druckman and Lupia 2000). Early work by Hovland found that persuasion depended on perceptions of the messenger's expertise, trustworthiness, and similarity to the recipient (e.g., Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1959; Hovland and Weiss 1951; Sherif and Hovland 1961). Game theoretic models of persuasion emphasize that one's views of the messenger, particularly whether it shares the recipient's preferences, often determine whether information is accepted (Calvert 1986; Crawford and Sobel 1982; Lupia 2002; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). In Zaller's (1992, 121) receive-accept-sample model of public opinion, distrust of the messenger generates "partisan resistance" to new considerations. There is also a related body of work in political science which examines how people with less political information can follow cues from trusted political elites to obtain the same political preferences as if they were fully informed (Ferejohn and Kuklinski 1990; Lodge and McGraw 1995; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). Finally, dual process models of persuasion in social psychology find that the expertise of the messenger influences when people accept persuasive arguments except in cases where they have a lot of personal engagement in the topic, in which case the quality of the arguments will determine if they are persuasive (Chaiken 1980; Petty and Cacioppo 1981).¹²

The importance of source credibility in persuasion, which is so widely documented, also applies to media effects on public opinion. The most common media effects in the academic literature are agenda setting, priming, and framing. Studies suggest that all of these depend on

trust in the media. In a laboratory experiment, Iyengar and Kinder (1985) find that those who trusted the media were more susceptible to agenda-setting effects from television news. Tsfat (2002) finds evidence in polls over time that those who distrust the press resist media agenda setting. In a laboratory experiment, Miller and Krosnick (2000) find that, among the politically knowledgeable, only those who trust the media are primed by newspaper articles. In another laboratory experiment, Druckman (2001) finds that framing in the tabloid *National Enquirer* did not change readers' opinions, while framing in the *New York Times* did.

There is also evidence that media trust influences how people directly receive information from the media. In an observational study, Tsfat (2003) examined people's beliefs about others' opinions, finding that those who trust the media are more likely to agree with media messages about the national division of public opinion. Using panel survey data, Ladd (2012, chap. 6) finds that those who distrusted the news media increased their perceptions of the threat of war less than others in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In a survey experiment, Lupia and McCubbins (1998, chap. 9) find that people's opinions on an unfamiliar policy issue will follow the endorsement of a talk show host (Phil Donohue or Rush Limbaugh) only if they report that they usually agree with the host and think he is knowledgeable about the issue. In another survey experiment, Ladd (2012, chap, 6) finds that people are more receptive of new information from the media about casualties in the Iraq War when they trust the media.

Another way that attitudes toward the media source matter is that messages are more persuasive when they go against the source's perceived bias. This is consistent with game theoretic models of persuasion, which claim that sources are more credible when they send messages contrary to their perceived biases (Calvert 1985, 1986; Crawford and Sobel 1982). In an observational study, Chiang and Knight (2011) combined newspaper endorsement data with

presidential vote preference data from the 2000 and 2004 National Annenberg Election Studies, finding that endorsements were more strongly associated with vote preferences when they went against the newspaper's perceived bias. Baum and Groeling (2007, 2009) find, using an online experiment and observational survey data, that messages on cable news channels were more influential when they contradicted the channel's perceived bias.¹³

Distrust of the Media and Political Polarization: The Downward Spiral?

In a speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars on July 25, 2018, President Trump laid out a strategy: “Stick with us. Don’t believe the crap you see from these people, the fake news What you’re seeing and what you’re reading is not what’s happening” (Cassidy 2018; Cillizza 2018). The attacks on the national journalistic establishment launched by Donald Trump are far from unprecedented. As in other areas, Trump adopted behaviors with lots of precedent in US history, but has put them more out in the open and taken them to much greater extremes.

Many politicians in US history have tried to undermine the public’s trust in independent sources of political news. In fact, it has been historically rare for the news media to be an independent, powerful institution in society. For much of US history (and in much of the rest of the world), most of the political press was either affiliated with a political party, ideological niche, or social movement, or for economic reasons it gave only peripheral attention to politics. The trusted, politically powerful news media establishment rose and fell in the twentieth century during the unusual post-war period, when the political parties were unusually depolarized and most news organizations faced unusually low economic competition (West 2001). As the

political parties become more ideologically distinct, political attacks on the mainstream media's credibility increased, and the variety of news and entertainment media choices exploded trust in the media as an institution has declined.

Yet while it is not historically or internationally unusual to have a more decentralized, less powerful, less trusted news media, there are dangers if the trend goes too far. As other pundits and academics have observed, the type of extreme anti-media rhetoric that President Trump employs is reminiscent of authoritarian regimes, where leaders tell the people not to trust any other information source but them. Indeed, Trump's scorn for information outside of Fox News Channel and conservative news websites is different than that of previous presidents and potentially troubling. Katie Rogers and Maggie Haberman (2018) of the *New York Times* write that, "Mr. Trump, at a pivotal moment in his presidency, is increasingly living in a world of selected information and bending the truth to his own narrative. As his aides work to keep him insulated from the outside world, Mr. Trump is doubling down in his efforts to tell supporters to trust him over the words of critics and news reports." With the public having less trust in large national media institutions, and instead getting information from a wider variety of news outlets with different journalistic styles and ideological commitments, it is inevitable (and not necessarily a big problem) that the institutional news media declines in importance. But if, instead, political leaders close themselves off from any diverse sources of information, and encourage the public to do so as well, it could reduce the public's abilities to hold the government accountable.

Yet while Trump's rhetoric is very troubling, these events have not happened during Trump's presidency. Trump has not been able to convince a broad swath of the public to distrust and ignore all except his favored news outlets. On the contrary, major newspapers that Trump

frequently attacks, such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, have held their audience during Trump's presidency. His strategy of attacking the mainstream media with unprecedented vitriol has not led the public to ignore negative stories about Trump, leading him to be consistently popular despite events. On the contrary, so far Trump is an historically unpopular president, especially when you consider that he has presided over a strong economy. So far, all that Trump's anti-media rhetoric has managed to do is further sour committed Republicans on the establishment media.

The major danger is that Trump's more extreme anti-media rhetoric will be copied by others in the political system. If future Republican leaders talk similarly, and Democrats copy the tactic, then the consequences could eventually be dire. This could reduce trust in the nonpartisan national media among all sides of the political spectrum, eroding the public's receptivity to new information and their ability to hold national elected officials accountable for their actions in office. It is also possible that, while Trump has not yet followed up his rhetoric with attempts to censor or to intimidate national news organization financially or through the criminal justice system, if this heated rhetoric persists over many years, future politicians will take these sentiments seriously enough to put actions behind the words. If that is the case, not only would people be unwilling to receive new information, but the independent national news media might cease to provide it adequately.

Research into the causes and consequences of distrust of the media is growing. That is good news, because our need to understand this topic is greater than ever. The political world with a highly trusted national media establishment of the 1950s will not return. Rhetoric about the national media will inevitably be more negative, trust levels lower, and the media industry more decentralized than it was then. But we still need political leaders with enough respect for the vital

role of journalism in a functioning democracy that they keep their criticism of the institutional media less vitriolic than what has come from Trump. Some criticism is a natural part of the political system. Too much could lead to a breakdown in democratic accountability and the press freedoms that make democracy possible.

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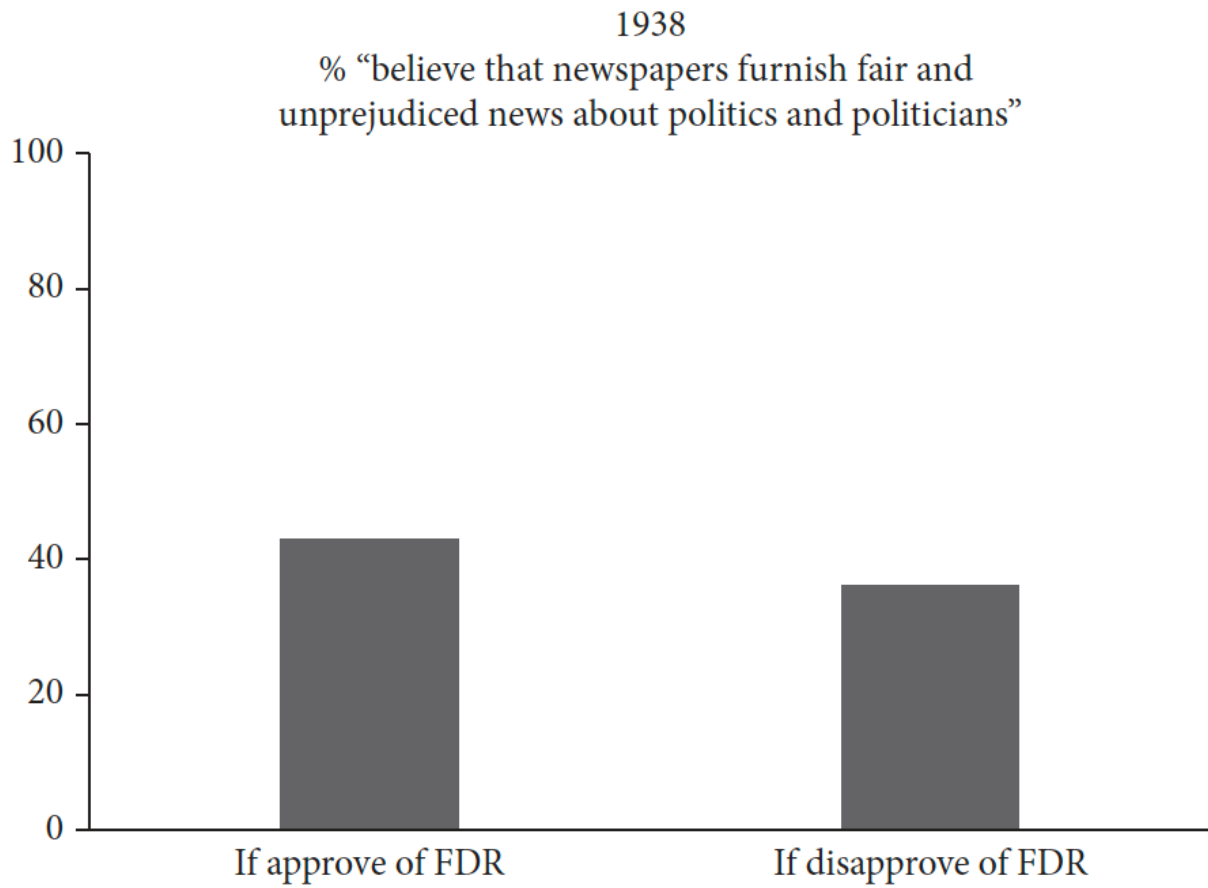


Figure 1. Caption: Attitudes toward Newspapers in the 1930s

Source: Data from August 1938 Roper Organization Poll, archived at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

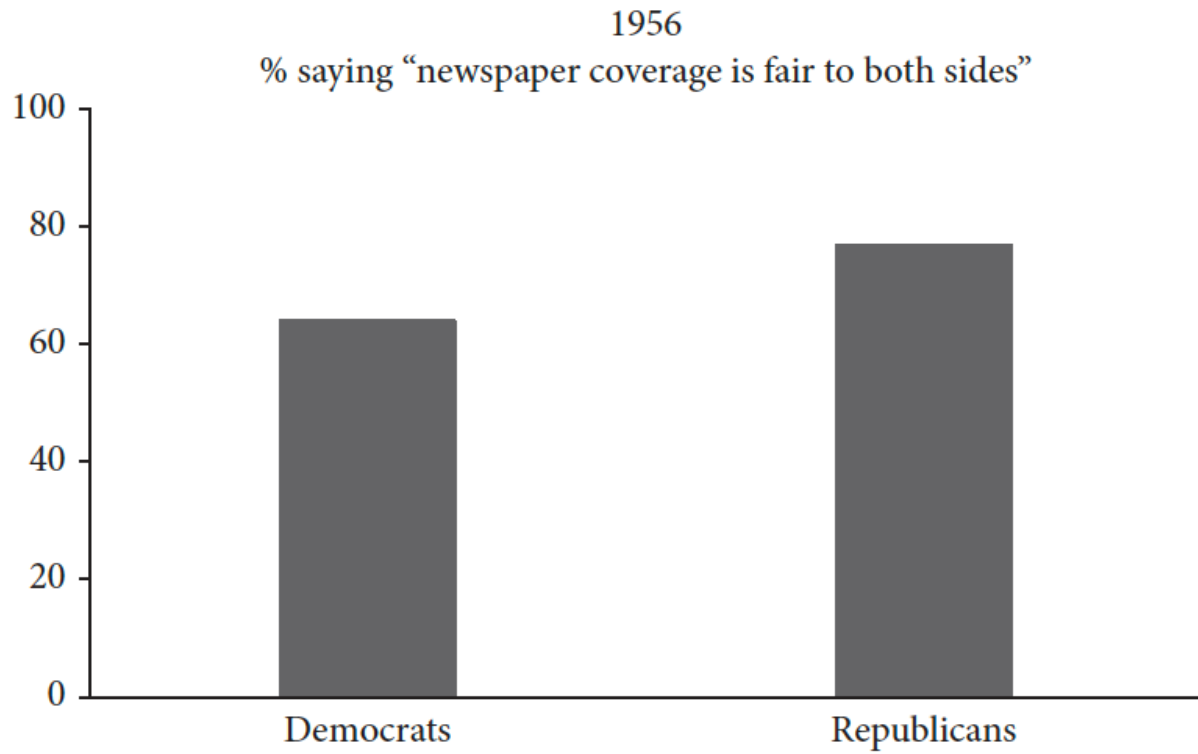


Figure 2. Caption: Attitudes toward Newspapers in the 1950s

Source: Data from 1956 American National Election Study.

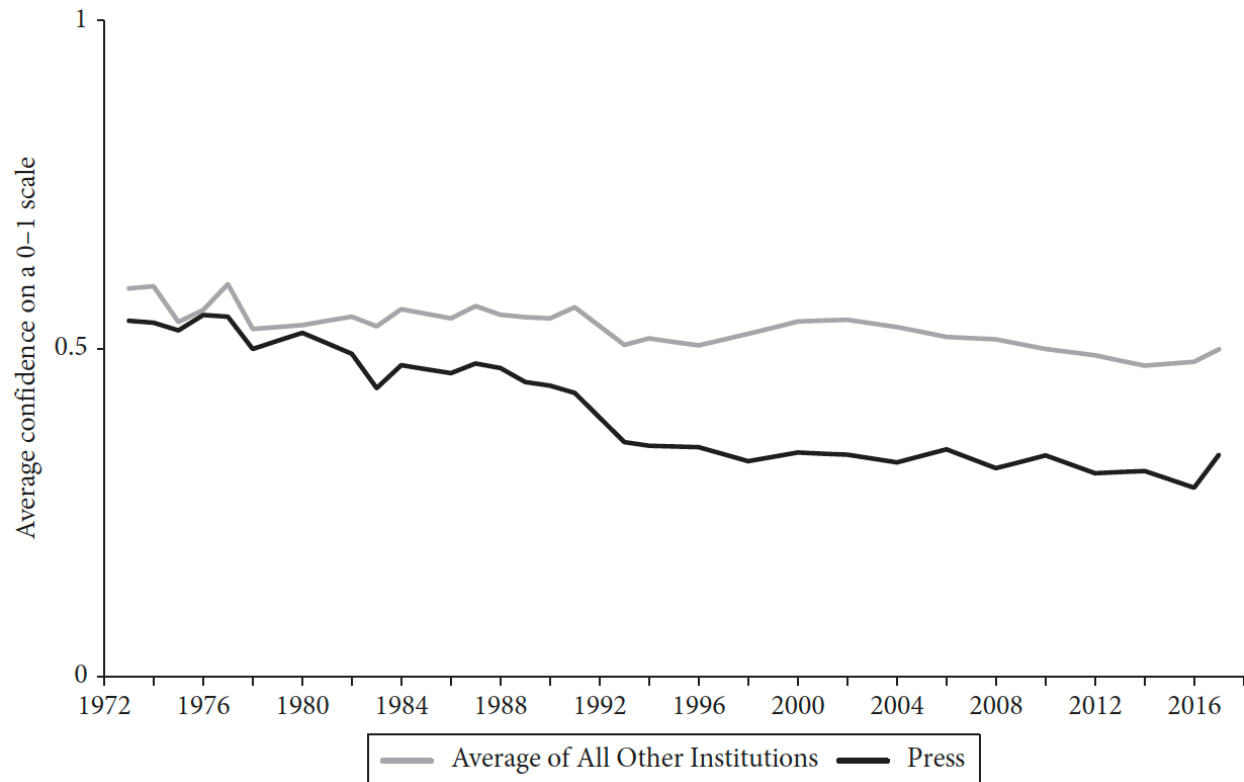


Figure 3. Caption: Confidence in the Press, 1973-2018

Source: Data from General Social Surveys conducted in 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018.

Note: Observations are weighted using the GSS “wtssall” weighting variable. For details, see Appendix A of the GSS 1972–2018 Cumulative Codebook. Responses are coded so that 1 indicates “a great deal,” 0.5 indicates “only some,” and 0 indicates “hardly any” trust. Institutions included in the average calculation are all institutions, other than the press, where confidence was probed in every GSS survey from 1973 to 2018: major companies, organized religion, education, the executive branch, organized labor, medicine, television, the Supreme Court, the scientific community, Congress, and the military.

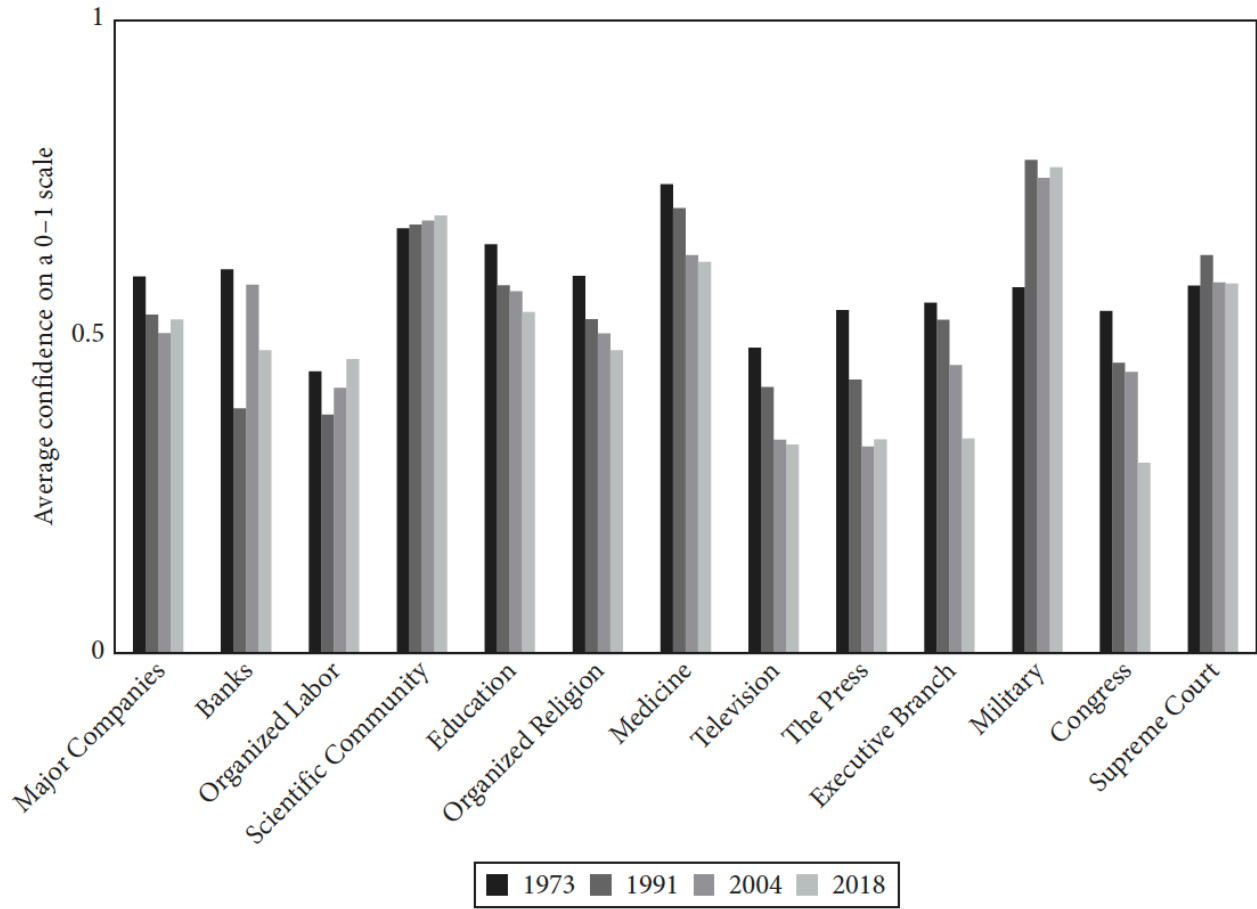


Figure 4. Caption: Change in Confidence in American Institutions over Time

Source: Data from General Social Surveys conducted in 1973, 1991, 2004, and 2018. See the note for Figure 3 for details on weighting and coding.

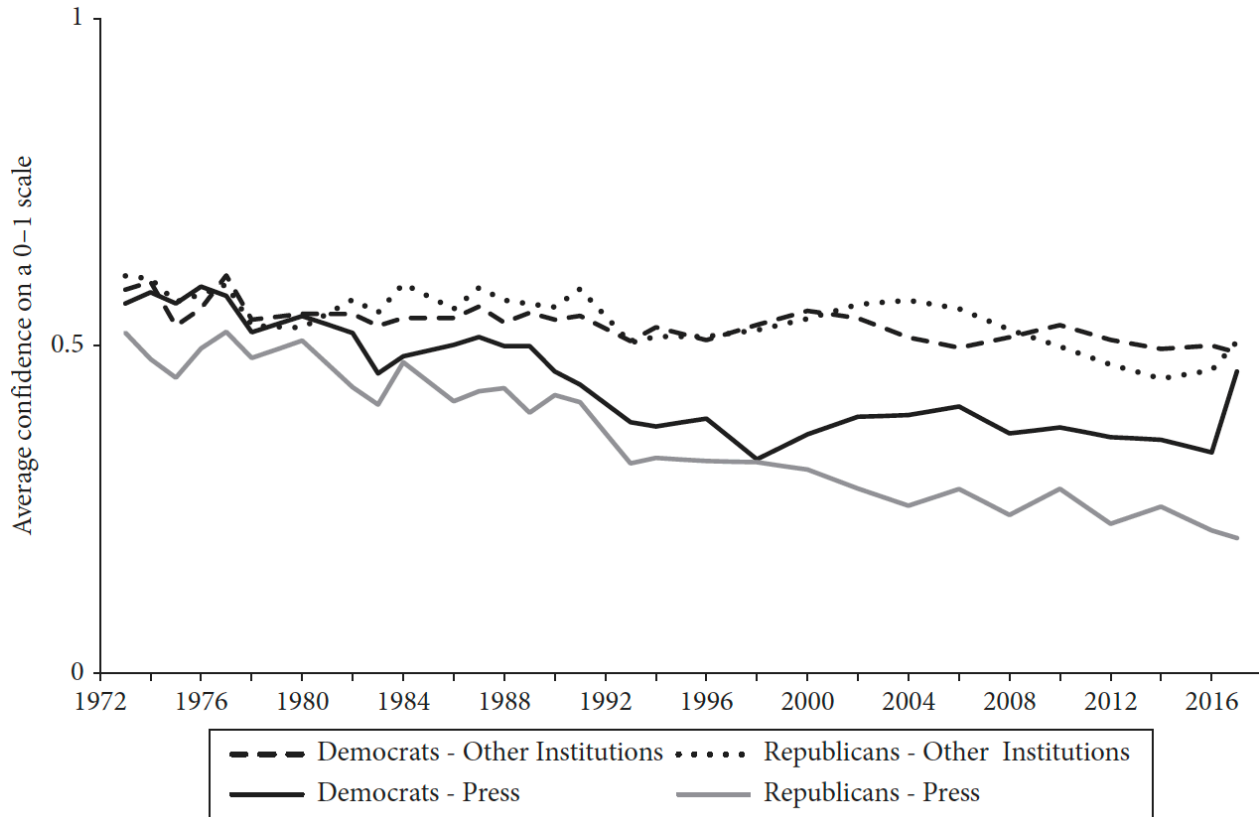


Figure 5. Caption: The Decline in Confidence in the Press versus Other Institutions by Political Party

Source: Data from General Social Surveys. See the note for Figure 3 for details.

Notes

- ¹ From the Nixon Oval Office tape recordings, in a conversation with Henry Kissinger on December 14, 1972 (Glaister 2008).
- ² A tweet from Donald Trump’s personal Twitter account (@realDonaldTrump) on Feb. 17, 2017. All punctuation in original. See Grynbaum (2017).
- ³ From the song “Have a Good Time” on the album *Still Crazy After All These Years*, Columbia Records, 1975.
- ⁴ As with many polls from the 1930s, this survey did not contain a party identification question.
- ⁵ When major political figures did criticize the mainstream press in the 1950s, which happened rarely, it tended to be Democrats. In response to widespread support for Dwight Eisenhower, a moderate Republican, in the 1952 and 1956 presidential campaigns, some Democrats complained of a “one-party press,” by which they meant a Republican press. At a 1955 Democratic Party fundraiser, Harry Truman complained that “There has been no parallel in our history to the cloak of protection thrown about this administration by so much of the press” (Greenberg 2008, 171).
- ⁶ In the South, resistance to how national television networks covered the Civil Rights movement was so intense that some local network affiliates refused to air national news programs (Classen 2004). Women for Constitutional Government, a multistate women’s organization founded to stop the integration of the University of Mississippi in the early 1960s, identified one of its strategies as “breeding distrust of the mainstream media” (McRae 2018, 210).
- ⁷ Independents who place themselves exactly in the middle of the party identification scale are excluded from this graph. But all those who lean toward one part or the other are grouped with their party.
- ⁸ See Kohring and Matthes (2007) for a detailed review of previous attempts to develop multi-item scales of respondents’ assessments of different aspects of media credibility, a task that is beyond the scope of

this review. The key point here is simply that the various general wordings used by major national survey organizations tap into very similar respondent attitudes. This is consistent with the findings that, even when less general questions are asked—for example, questions that mention specific aspects of news coverage—the responses are still fairly correlated.

- ⁹ Fisher (2016) notes that none of the major surveys studying trust in the media (including, e.g., Pew, Reuters, and GSS) “provide participants with a definition of trust.”
- ¹⁰ Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt (1998) find that Republicans and Democrats both perceive local newspaper coverage as biased against them during a presidential campaign, regardless of the actual slant of that coverage, which is consistent with the hostile media effect.
- ¹¹ The Trust Project, which funded this study, is “a consortium of top news companies led by award-winning journalist Sally Lehrman,” which is “developing transparency standards that help you easily assess the quality and credibility of journalism.” See <https://thetrustproject.org/>.
- ¹² Zaller (1992, 46–47) argues that most people in contemporary democracies are neither as involved nor as interested as those in Petty and Cacioppo’s experiments who evaluated message content. As he puts it, in politics, “The stakes are theoretically high, but people find it hard to stay interested.”
- ¹³ While the most important way that most people engage with traditional media is to consume and be persuaded by their content, this is not the case for social media. One of the main ways people engage with participatory media, like social media and blogging, is by generating and sharing content. Using panel survey data, Ardevol-Abreu, Hooker, and Gil de Zúñiga (2018) find that, over time, people share and generate content more when they trust this type of citizen-oriented media, but that this type of citizen media participation is not correlated with trust in the conventional media. Given the growing importance of this type of media participation, more research is needed into its relationship to media trust.