

“Sowing Distrust of the News Media as an Electoral Strategy”

Sept 20, 2018

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Prepared for forthcoming book, *The Oxford Handbook of Electoral Persuasion*, edited by Elizabeth Suhay, Bernie Grofman and Alex Trechsel

“I don't believe what I read in the papers. They're just out to capture my dime.”
Paul Simon¹

“The press is the enemy, the establishment is the enemy, the professors are the enemy.”
Richard Nixon²

“The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!”
Donald Trump³

Introduction

Can news organizations can be trusted to provide accurate political information? This is a recurring question throughout American history. During the revolutionary era, a partisan press supporting independence was one of the most useful tools the anti-British forces had. The Stamp Tax, which sparked opposition to British rule when it was imposed in 1765, fell heavily on newspapers (Starr 2004, 65). At the start of the war, at least twice as many newspapers supported independence as favored staying with Britain (Davidson 1941, 129-145; Starr 2004, 68). The founders were influenced by both liberal republican political philosophy and the key role the press had played as allies in their recent struggle for independence when they included protections for the press in the first Amendment to the Constitution (Ladd 2012, 20).

Yet when the founders thought of the press, they mainly thought of newspapers allied with specific political causes. As Cook (1998, 22) writes, to the Constitution's authors “Freedom

¹ From the song “Have a Good Time” on the album *Still Crazy After All These Years*, Columbia Records, 1975.

² From the Nixon Oval Office tape recordings, in a conversation with Henry Kissinger on December 14, 1972 (Glaister 2008).

³ A tweet from Donald Trump's personal Twitter account (@realDonaldTrump) on Feb. 17, 2017. All punctuation in original. See Grynbaum (2017).

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 not clear that they ever supported a news media that functioned as a powerful independent institution checking the government (Cater 1959; Ladd 2012, 21).

The founding generation usually reacted negatively when they were subjected to criticism in the press while in office. Early in his career, George Washington wrote that newspapers were "easy vehicles of knowledge, more happily calculated than any other, to preserve liberty, stimulate the industry and meliorate the morals of an enlightened and free People [sic]." Yet after serving two terms as president, he lamented "the Editors [sic] of the different Gazettes [sic] in the Union...stuffing their papers with scurrility and nonsensical declamation..." (Pollard 1947, 5, 8; Ladd 2012, 28).

Similarly, Jefferson wrote in a 1787 letter that he preferred "newspapers without a government" to "government without newspapers." Yet after running in three presidential elections, Jefferson wrote in 1807 that "suppression of the press could not more completely deprive the nation of its benefits than is done by its abandoned prostitution to falsehood" (Mott 1950, 170; Emery, Emery, and Roberts 2000, 78; Ladd 2012, 27). After leaving office, former President John Adams called the newspaper coverage he received "the terrorism of a former day" and stated that, "I have been disgraced and degraded and I have a right to complain" (Pollard 1947, 47; Ladd 2012, 28).

The stances of national political leaders toward the press did not generally improve as the nation matured. In response to the "penny press" of the mid-1800s, President Millard Fillmore wrote in a letter in 1850, "In times like these, the telegraph in the hands of irresponsible and designing men is a tremendous engine for mischief aided as it is in many

places by a mercenary and prostituted press” (Pollard 1947, 273; Ladd 2012, 35). It is beyond the scope of this review to discuss the varied relationship between political leaders and the press through the 1800s and early 1900s, but one thing is fairly clear: The press was not considered an independent, trusted separate institution by political elites (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 American public thinks of whether the press provides accurate political information. A 1938 Gallup poll found little faith in the accuracy of information in newspapers. Just 40% of Americans believed that “newspapers furnish fair and unprejudiced news about politics and politicians.” Views at that time were relatively uniform across the political spectrum. As Figure 1 shows, 43% of those who approved of Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), and 36% of those who disapproved of him thought newspapers were fair.⁴

Not only were FDR’s opponents, who had a string of electoral losses in the 1930s, dissatisfied with newspaper coverage, but FDR’s supporters were as well. This should not be surprising because FDR was often intensely unhappy with the coverage he received and went public with his complaints (Rubin 1981; Stensaas 1986; Winfield 1994; Ladd 2012). He criticized the AP and UP wire services by name for their alleged bias against him (Rubin 1981). For example, in a 1936 press release, FDR accusing United Press (a predecessor to UPI) of “falsification of the actual facts” (Stensaas 1986, 6). From 1935 through 1939, FDR’s Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes engaged in a public campaign to discredit major newspapers and newspaper chains. Shortly after Roosevelt’s reelection in 1936, Ickes argued that, “Last Tuesday

⁴ As with many polls from the 1930s, this survey did not contain a party identification question.

we elected a President who was supported by less than 23 percent of our daily press...[O]ur democracy needs more than ever before, a truly free press that represents no class or economic group and that will re-win the confidence of our citizens because it is worthy of re-winning their confidence” (Winfield 1994, 146).

Yet by the mid-1950s, the situation changed dramatically. The 1956 American National Election Study (ANES) found that 71% of Americans thought that “newspapers coverage is fair to both sides.” A majority of both parties agreed. As Figure 2 shows, 64% of Democrats and 78% of Republicans thought newspaper coverage was fair, an astonishing number if you are familiar with current polling on the subject.

The 1950s were an unusual period in the United States in a variety of different ways. It was anomalous in its low political polarization, more equal distribution of wealth, and higher rates of macroeconomic growth (C. Goldin and Margo 1992; Levy and Temin 2007; C. D. Goldin and Katz 2009; Poole and Rosenthal 2007; Bartels 2008; P. Krugman 2009; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016; Rosenfeld 2017; Mason 2018). On top of all this, the media environment was also unique in American history. Earlier time periods saw intense competition among newspapers. But in the 20th Century, the number of American newspapers declined, reducing their exposure to competition. The number of cities with a least 2 major newspapers declined from 58% in 1910 to 21% in 1930, all the way down to 3% by 1980 (Emery, Emery, and Roberts 2000, 289; West 2001, 57).

Of course, by the 1950s, television was a major source of national political 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. NBC and CBS had morning news shows that also aired in the same

time block. The local NBC and CBS affiliates were often the only stations with strong enough signals for 1950s television sets to receive (Prior 2007, 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...Without the press, political success was not possible. More than one successful politician groveled before the Washington press corps in order to win favorable coverage for a political cause. 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.

While some commentators on the history of the news media (and on American society in general) tend to treat the 1950s as the norm, in fact it is highly anomalous in all of these ways. As other aspects of American society began to change, the national institutional media's trusted place in the American mind fell away.

Over the later portion of the twentieth century and into this century, a number of things changed. The two major American political parties polarized ideologically (Poole and Rosenthal 2007; Levendusky 2009; Noel 2013), growth in the income of the typical American household slowed down dramatically (P. R. Krugman 1997), and the news media became a

much more competitive marketplace which the rise of cable channels, political talk radio and internet news sources (Prior 2007).

As American politics transitioned out the strange middle of the twentieth century, political rhetoric about the news media changed a lot. After going into hibernation for a decade or two, partisan attacks of the media's credibility as an accurate course of information returned.⁵ The new criticism of the news media began among conservative activists, who in the 1950s and 1960s were on the fringes of American politics but over time moved to the center of power and prominence. 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, 172-73).⁶

But not until the 1964 presidential campaign, in which the conservative faction of the Republican Party was finally able to get one of their own, Barry Goldwater, nominated for president, did conservative criticism of the press become much more frequent. Many Republicans, including Eisenhower and Goldwater himself, complained that Goldwater wasn't getting fair treatment from journalists (Greenberg 2008, 172-73). When asked about how the

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).

news media covered him in a press conference the day after the election, Goldwater echoed complaints he had made on the campaign trail

I've never seen or heard, in my life, such vitriolic unbiased [sic] attacks on one man as had been directed to me. Sometimes they didn't spell it out, but a coward, uneducated, ungentlemanly, a bigot, and all those things... I think these people 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 modern conservative movement became more integrated into the Republican Party, criticisms of the establishment news media became an increasingly standard part of their political rhetoric. The Nixon administration perceived that the national news media was unusually hostile to them and made publicly criticizing the press an intentional strategy for fighting back. Starting in 1969, they sent Vice President Spiro Agnew to give a series of speeches over several years attacking the institutional news media. It began with a November 13, 1969 speech written by Patrick Buchanan, edited by Nixon, and aired live on all three networks, where 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...What do Americans know of the men who wield this power?...Little other than that they reflect an urbane and assured presence, seemingly well informed on every important matter...To a man, these commentators and producers live and work in the geographic and intellectual confines of Washington, DC, or New York City...They

talk constantly to one another, thereby providing artificial reinforcement to their shared viewpoints...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. I'm not blaming anybody for that. Perhaps what happened is, what we did brought it about... But 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 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. 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 publicly attack Republican leaning news outlets, especially the biggest of them all: Fox News Channel. 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. And it is not ideological... what 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).

But 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 and specifically referenced the national reporters in the hall covering the events. For instance, *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 general election campaign, Trump continued his line of attacks, telling 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).

Once taking office, his rhetoric continued, but he added that the media were the “enemy of the people,” a phrase that he first used in a tweet on Feb. 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). As Rich Lowry, the editor of *National Review*, wrote in his piece “The Media is Trump’s Evil Empire” for *Politico*, “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 political attacks on the establishment news media have grown since the 1950s from a fringe phenomenon to one of the primary tropes of the President of the United States’ rhetoric, trust in the news media has declined and polarized by party. Where once, the news media was one of the countries most respected national institutions, now respect for the media is low and divided along partisan and ideological lines (Gronke and Cook 2007; Ladd 2012). The best way to track opinion change over time is to compare questions asked with the same wording. It is even better if the question is asked using similar polling methods and in a poll alongside similar other types of questions in the rest of the survey. The longest time series of poll questions in national samples asking about national journalism is the confidence in the press question 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 American national political institutions. One of these is the “press.” Figure 3 compares confidence in the press from 1973 to 2016 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.

Figure 4 provides a more detailed breakdown of which institutions have lost public confidence the most. It lists institutions separately and shows their average confidence levels in four years: 1973, 1991, 2003, and 2016. It shows that, while the decline in confidence in the press has been dramatic, other institutions have also lost the public’s confidence. In addition to the

press, the loss of confidence has been the largest in political institutions, such as Congress and the executive branch, as well as selected others, like television, medicine and organized religion. The result is that, while the press was in the middle of the pack in terms of which institutions had the most trust, by 2016 it was near the bottom, with only Congress less popular. In the 2016 GSS, only 8% of the American public admit to having a “great deal of confidence” in the people running the press.

However, the low levels of public confidence in the media are not uniformly distributed across various demographic, political, and ideological groups that make up the American public. Americans who are white, higher income, and more highly educated are more likely to distrust the media (Cappella and Jamieson 1997, 211). In terms of partisanship and ideology, Republicans and conservatives are significantly more likely to distrust the media than independents, Democrats, moderates, and liberals, respectively (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Cook and Gronke 2001; Gronke and Cook 2007; Jones 2004; Lee 2010). This partisan gap has been increasing in the last two decades. For illustration, Figure 5 shows that same data as Figure 3, but separated into Democrats and Republicans.⁷ The decline in confidence in the press is not confined to Republicans. While Democrats have consistently had more confidence in the press than Republicans have had, this does not obscure the secular decline in both parties. 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 entirely disappeared was conducted in 1998, not long after President Clinton’s affair with White House

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.

intern Monica Lewinsky was exposed. The gap then grew substantially during George W. Bush's presidency, a gap that persisted through the Obama administration. The most recent GSS in 2016 took place before Donald Trump was elected president. Yet Gallup data shows that the partisan gap in trust in the media grew even wider in Trump's first year in office. Trust among Republicans continued to decline, while trust among Democrats bucked the historical trend and actually increased (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017; Swift 2017; Bump 2018). In 2017, some surveys found a 50 percentage-point difference between Democrats and Republicans on how many have a "great deal or fair amount of confidence" (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 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'" (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017; Bump 2018).

What changed around 2000 that caused the partisan gap to grow wider, and why does the divergence seem to have accelerated since Trump took office? The literature offers no clear answer, but there are several suspects. 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. 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. 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) as well as distrusting fellow citizens (Lee

2010). Media mistrust is further correlated with negative views of the economy (Lee 2010) as well as negatively correlated with presidential job performance ratings in presidential election years and congressional job performance in midterm years (Bennett et al. 2001). Additional correlates of media mistrust among individuals include support for traditional moral codes (according to a three-item Traditional-Modern Morality Index) and misanthropy, even when controlling for other related covariates like ideology, party identification, race, income, education, and others (Bennett et al. 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 and 5 here illustrate (Cook and Gronke 2001; Gronke and Cook 2007; Ladd 2012).

Comparative examinations of trust in the media find both similarities and differences between the United States and other countries. While declining media trust is not a universal finding (Hanitzsch et al. 2018), the relationship between trust in press and politics has been discovered internationally, although the “magnitude” of the relationship differs across countries (Ariely 2015), with a stronger relationship between the two found more in politically polarized societies (Hanitzsch et al. 2018). Individual correlates of media *trust* include individual political interest, interpersonal trust, and exposure to TV news and newspapers while correlates of media *mistrust* include education and exposure to Internet news (Tsfati and Ariely 2014). Contextual correlates (in Europe especially) include media autonomy, “party/press parallelism” (cf. Ladd 2012), and journalistic professionalism (Ariely 2015). In their study relying on the World Values Survey of 44 countries, Ariely and Tsfati (2014) also find an interactive effect between state ownership and democracy on trust in the media: state

ownership has a positive association with media trust in democratic societies but a negative association in nondemocratic societies.

Measuring Trust in the Media

There was very little 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 whether people had trust in journalism as an institution or in particular news outlets, or whether they viewed these entities as reliable sources of accurate information. The 1938 Gallup poll and the 1956 American National Election Study (ANES) that I highlighted above are the notable exceptions. As polls have asked about media trust more frequently since the 1970s, a lot of different question wordings have been used by different polling organizations.

As noted above, 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 Benard Shaw (CNN). 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.” 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)?” The ANES asked respondents to rate “the media” in general on a feeling thermometer in 1998, 2002, and 2004.

Gallup and the Pew Research Center also maintain useful time series on this topic. Since 1997, Gallup has periodically asked in national polls “how much trust and confidence” respondents have “in the mass media... when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly.” Since 1985, the Pew Research Center has periodically asked in national polls whether “in general... news organizations get the facts straight.”

In survey research, in some topics even small changes in question wordings can have big effects on responses. Given that, what are we to make of all these different wordings used by major public opinion research organizations? 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 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. Responses to these questions evaluating the news media as an institution are robust to question wording changes and stable over time. (But see Daniller et al. (2017) for a dissenting view.) Kohring and Matthes (2007) test the correlation between a variety of fairly specific media evaluation items using a 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 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 very accessible to nonacademics. However, Tsfati and his coauthors prefer to call this “media skepticism” (e.g. Tsfati 2002; Tsfati and Cappella 2003; Tsfati 2010), 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 different aspects of media trust. Tsfati (2002) and Ladd (2012) found that the percentage of people who refuse to answer or say they “don’t know” when asked about media trust in national surveys is consistently less than 1%, often substantially less. Overall, the fact that media trust is stable over time, that different wordings are correlated with each other (usually quite strongly) and that these questions have

⁸ See Kohring and Mathes (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—e.g., questions that mention specific aspects of news coverage—the responses are still fairly correlated.

lower refusal rates than most other survey questions, indicate that people have well-formed attitudes about the news media as an institution. Even though, like other institutions that appears in survey questions such as Congress or big business, the news media is made up of a lot of (often very) different actors, people still have strong opinions about the news media as a collective national institution. Responses to media trust questions are not “non-attitudes” (Converse 1964) produced entirely on the spot in response to the survey prompt. People have strong views about the news media as a national institution.

If people have strong views about the media as an institution, it is still not clear from just reading these fairly nonspecific question wordings which considerations come into people’s heads when they answer them.⁹ Fletcher and Park (2017) find that distrust in the media in general is associated with a preference for “non-mainstream news source” such as “social media, blogs, and digital-born providers.” Ladd (2012, ch. 4) used open-ended follow-up questions, in which people who were just asked about either the “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 question respondents were randomly assigned to answer, providing another piece of 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

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”

general, the major television networks, or 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 indicates that people have a clear view in their heads of what the news media is as an institution and that many people 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 still 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 2018), while both national and local media are more trusted than social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter (Ladd and Podkul 2018).

When asked about specific news organizations, rather than broad categories, the most trusted American 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* (Mitchell et al. 2014; Knight Foundation 2018). But these aggregate numbers hide substantial differences between liberals and conservatives. Establishment news outlets, which hold the

highest overall trust, receive the most trust from liberals, along with substantial trust among moderates. Conservatives have mixed to negative news of these outlets. 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 mainly ideological news sources. In contrast, there are a very small number of outlets that get high trust ratings from 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* (Stroud and Lee 2013; Mitchell et al. 2014; Ladd and Podkul 2018; Knight Foundation 2018). These partisan differences in which media 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 was first documented, scholars, pundits, and commentators have sought to understand the causes of this declining trust so as to better understand attitudes toward the press as well as explore other political implications of this finding. 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.

Cappella and Jamieson (1997) wrote in *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good* that "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." Many have attributed blame to the media itself for contemporary public mistrust, pointing particularly to changes in the type of reporting that have coincided with the period of declining trust. Scholars have especially focused on two types

of media content as sources of public discontent: focusing too much on sensational tabloid stories instead of more informative political content and, when reporters do cover politics, covering it as a game instead of focusing on the policy details.

Some scholars have worried that the media presenting politics too much as a game is a cause of mistrust, including excessive attention to the “horse race” during election campaigns (Sabato 1991, 2000; Fallows 1996; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Dautrich and Hartley 1999; Jones 2004). 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. 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 unanimous. For instance, as mentioned above a rise in game schema coverage occurred over the same decades as the decline in media trust. In experiments, Cappella and Jameson (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 horserace coverage reduced media trust among college educated Republicans, but not among others. Finally, a panel study from Sweden finds an association between “relative game-frame exposure” and declining media trust over time (Hopmann et al. 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 (Jones 2004; Dautrich and Hartley 1999) or of more airtime being dedicated to non-political tabloid or lifestyle stories (Zaller 1999b, 1999a;

Emery, Emery, and Roberts 2000, 479–85; West 2001, 104–6; Hamilton 2004). As major establishment media outlets faced fiercer and fiercer competition and threats to their business model over the past four decades, they have devoted less of their total news offering to policy-oriented political news and more to not just horse race coverage, but also to political scandals and nonpolitical or lifestyle news (Zaller 1999b, 1999a; Hamilton 2004). 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 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 though it may draw a larger audience and be just as informative as traditional styles of coverage, which some research suggests (Mathew A. 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” (quoted in Gunther 1992). Furthermore, as noted above, concerns about accuracy are one of the most frequently mentioned topics in open-ended polls about media trust, often expressing serious concerns about it (Ladd 2012, chap. 4). And in closed-ended polls, only 32% of Americans agree with the statement 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 to some degree. However, it is possible that the increasing economic competition and speed with which news organizations try to publish stories on the web may have increased their prevalence (Porlezza and Russ-Mohl 2013). One survey of editors of smaller U.S. dailies reported that three in four editors say that errors are a very serious problem for the industry (Mensing and Oliver 2005). It could be that 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. Political bias – particularly, *liberal* bias – is often pointed to as a reason for public mistrust. One study attempting to estimate ideological scores for major media outlets based on think tank and policy group citations found all but two news outlets the authors studied 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 et al. 2015).

According to one recent study, 77% of Americans in an open-ended survey noted bias as part of the reason why they believe the news media fails to distinguish fact from fiction (Newman and Fletcher 2017). However, 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” (Vallone, Ross, and Lepper 1985; Perloff 1989; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1993; Duck, Terry, and Hoog 1998; Christen, Kannaovakun,

and Gunther 2002; Feldman 2011, 2017).¹⁰ However, the hostile media effect is considered a permanent part of human perception. It is not clear how it could explain the decline over time to public trust in the media or the growing gap between Democrats and Republicans since 2000.

One way to address this 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, several other experiments find that, 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 perceived in its news reports, regardless of the content of those reports (Anand and Tella 2008; Mathew A. Baum and Gussin 2008) (Anand and Tella 2008; Baum and Gussin 2008). It is clear that some styles of news presentation and information about the source, especially transparency and a visible

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/>.

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 hard to change.

Elite Opinion Leadership

Public opinion research on a wide variety of public policy topics find that people tend to follow the views expressed publicly by politicians and pundits of their party, even when those elites change their views over time (Zaller 1992, 1994; Cohen 2003; Berinsky 2009; Jacobson 2007; Lenz 2012). 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 the rise of partisan news outlets like talk radio and Fox News Channel, where criticism of the liberal bias of the establishment media is a frequent topic of coverage (Barker 2002; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Berry and Sobieraj 2011, 2016). Content analyses consistently 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 and Knight 2000; Barker 2002, 25–16; 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 Republican and that the effect is larger when they are politically knowledgeable, which is consistent with Zaller's (2012) evidence that the knowledgeable are the most receptive to their side's elite messages. As noted above, the divide between Democrats and Republicans in media trust since 2000 corresponded with

the growth in the popularity of Fox News among Republicans, creating the possibility that it is responsible for some of the decline in Republican media trust over that period.

There are a number of studies that suggest that, whatever the flaws 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 about media coverage from their party reduce media trust, with the effect largest among highly educated liberal Democrats and highly educated conservative Republicans, the type of people on both sides of the spectrum who are most responsive to their side's 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.

Overall, the different causes of declining media distrust in the literature 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 trust in the media 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 improve media trust, at least somewhat.

Consequences of Declining Trust

Trust in the media has important consequences for how the public consumes and processes political information. As an effect of low levels of trust, the public tend to both reject news and change their news consumption. 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 measures are correlated with media use decisions, political preferences and political participation. This, I suspect, is not surprising to anyone. People tend to consume more news from individual news 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 consume less institutional news sources (Tsfati 2002, 2010; Jones 2004; Tsfati and Cappella 2003, 2005; Ladd 2012, 2013; Ladd and Podkul 2018). 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 (S. E.

Bennett et al. 1999; S. E. Bennett, Rhine, and Flickinger 2001; Lee 2010; Ladd 2012, 2013), 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).

Why do these patterns exist? Certainly to some degree, attitudes toward the media are a consequence of political opinions and media consumption habits, not solely a consequence of it. 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, consuming partisan alternatives to the institutional news media could (and research suggests does) reduce your trust in the institutional 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 will influence people more when they trust the media source (Druckman and Lupia 2000). Early work by Hovland, which has been very influential in the field of communication found that persuasion depended on perceptions of the information sender's expertise, trustworthiness and similarity to the recipient (e.g., Carl I. Hovland and Weiss 1951; Carl Iver Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1959; Sherif and Hovland 1961). Game theoretic models of persuasion emphasize that one's views of the information sender, particularly whether one shares their preferences, often determine whether information is accepted (Crawford and Sobel 1982; Calvert 1986; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Lupia 2002). In Zaller's (1992, 121) receive-accept-sample model of the survey response, distrust of the

messenger generates “partisan resistance” to new considerations that might change attitudes. There is a related body of work in political science which documents how people with less political information can follow cues from political elites in order to obtain the same political preferences as if they were more informed (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Ferejohn and Kuklinski 1990; Lupia 1994; Lodge and McGraw 1995; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). 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 or stakes in the topic, in which case the quality of the arguments will determine if they are persuasive (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo 1981).¹²

Studies that specifically look at the relationship between media trust and media influence on the public consistently find that source credibility effects apply in this area. Scholars have found media trust to play an important mediating role in a wide variety of different types of 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. Tsafati (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 a laboratory experiment testing framing in newspaper articles, Druckman (2001)

¹² Zaller (1992, 46-7) 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.”

finds that framing in the tabloid *National Enquirer* did not change readers opinions, while framing in the *New York Times* did.

Finally, there is also evidence that media trust (or distrust) influences how people directly receive information from the media. In an observational study, Tsfaty (2003) examined people's beliefs about others' opinions, finding that those who trust the media are more likely to accept media messages about the national division of public opinion. 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 thinks he is knowledgeable about the issue. 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. And in a laboratory experiment, Ladd (2012, chap, 6) finds that how people are more receptive of new information from the media about casualties in the Iraq war when they trust the media than when they don't.

Providing more evidence that attitudes toward the media source matter, two studies find that news media messages are more persuasive when they go against the direction of the news 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 (Crawford and Sobel 1982; Calvert 1985, 1986). In a correlational 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 the 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 American history but has put them more out in the open and taken them to much greater extremes.

There is a lot of precedent in American history for politicians trying to undermine the public's trust in independent sources of political news. There is a natural tendency for party leaders to attack the credibility of potentially powerful independent sources of information (Ladd 2012). In American history, it has been rare for the news media to be an independent, powerful institution in society. For much of American history (and in much of the rest of the world), most of the political press was affiliated with a political party, an ideological niche or cause, or for economic reasons gave only peripheral attention to politics. The trusted, politically powerful news media establishment rose and fell in the twentieth century during the

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, Ardèvol-Abreu et al. (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.

unusual post-war period when the political parties were unusually depolarized (West 2001). As the political parties become more ideologically distinct, political attacks on the mainstream media's credibility increased, the number of explicitly ideological and partisan news sources has increased, and trust in the media as an institution has declined.

Yet while it is not unusually historically or internationally 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 scorn for information outside of selected news outlet that support him, like Fox News Channel and conservative news websites, is different than previous presidents and potentially troubling. *The New York Times'* Katie Rogers and Maggie Haberman (2018) 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) if the institutional news media declines in importance. But if, instead, political leaders close themselves off from 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 indeed 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 attack, 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, Trump is a historically unpopular president, especially when you consider that he has presided over strong economy. 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 leader talk similarly, and Democrats copy the tactic, then the consequence could eventually be dire. This could reduce trust in the nonpartisan national media among all sides of the political spectrum, reducing 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, it is possible that, if this heated rhetoric persists over many years, future politicians will take these sentiments serious 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 in the media is growing. That is good news, because our need to understand this topic is greater than ever. The political world with the 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. 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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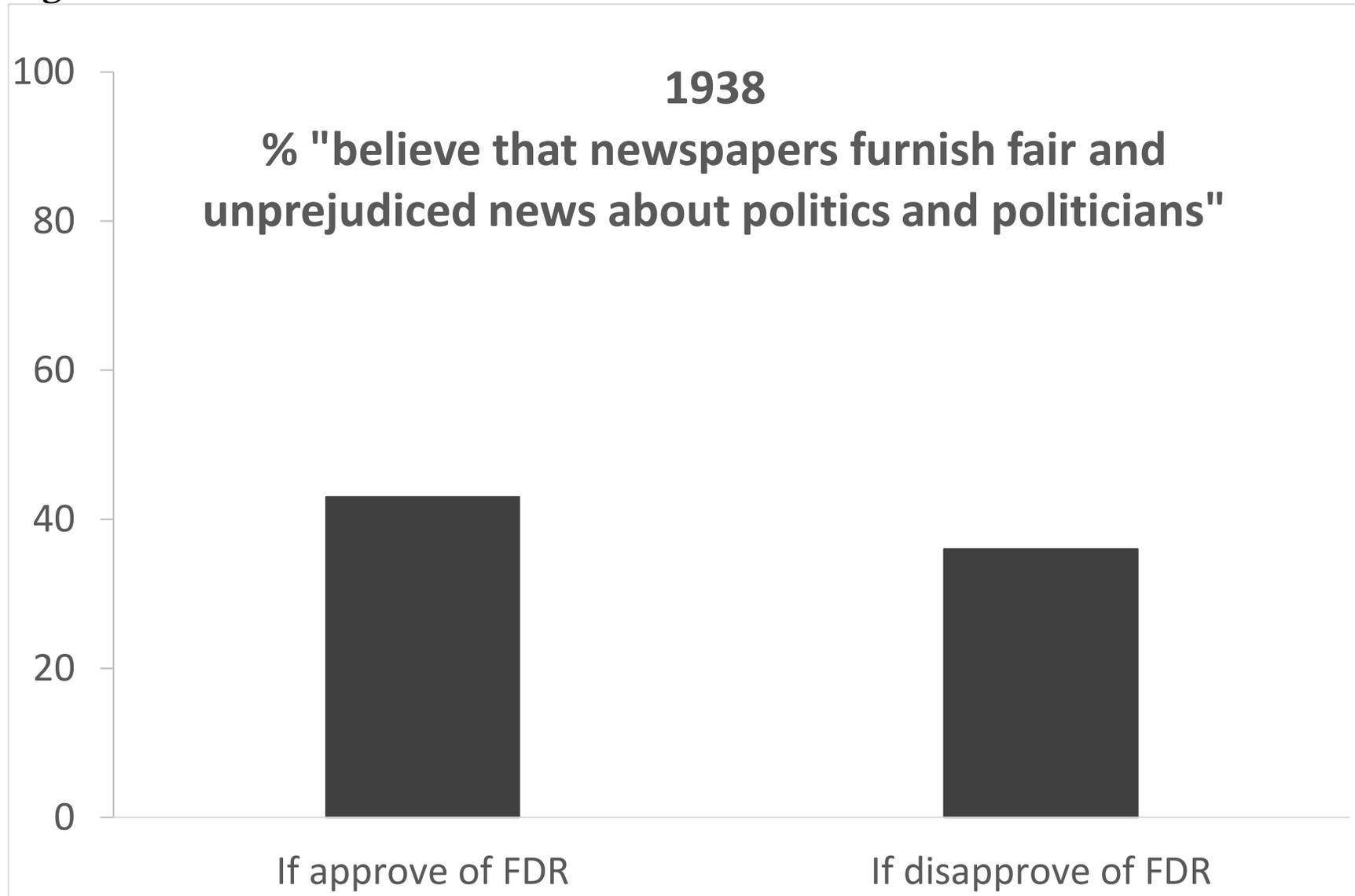
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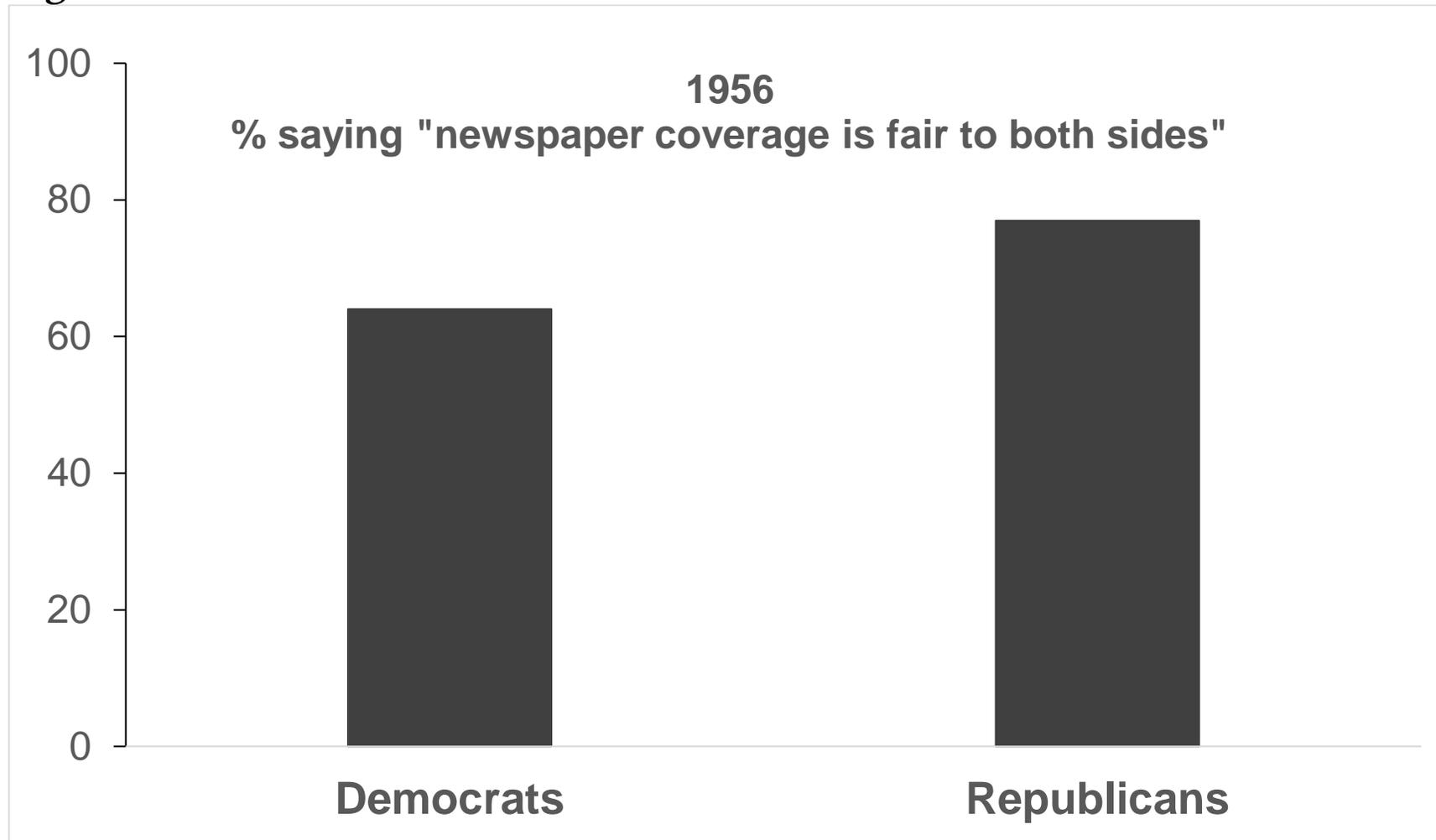
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Figure 1



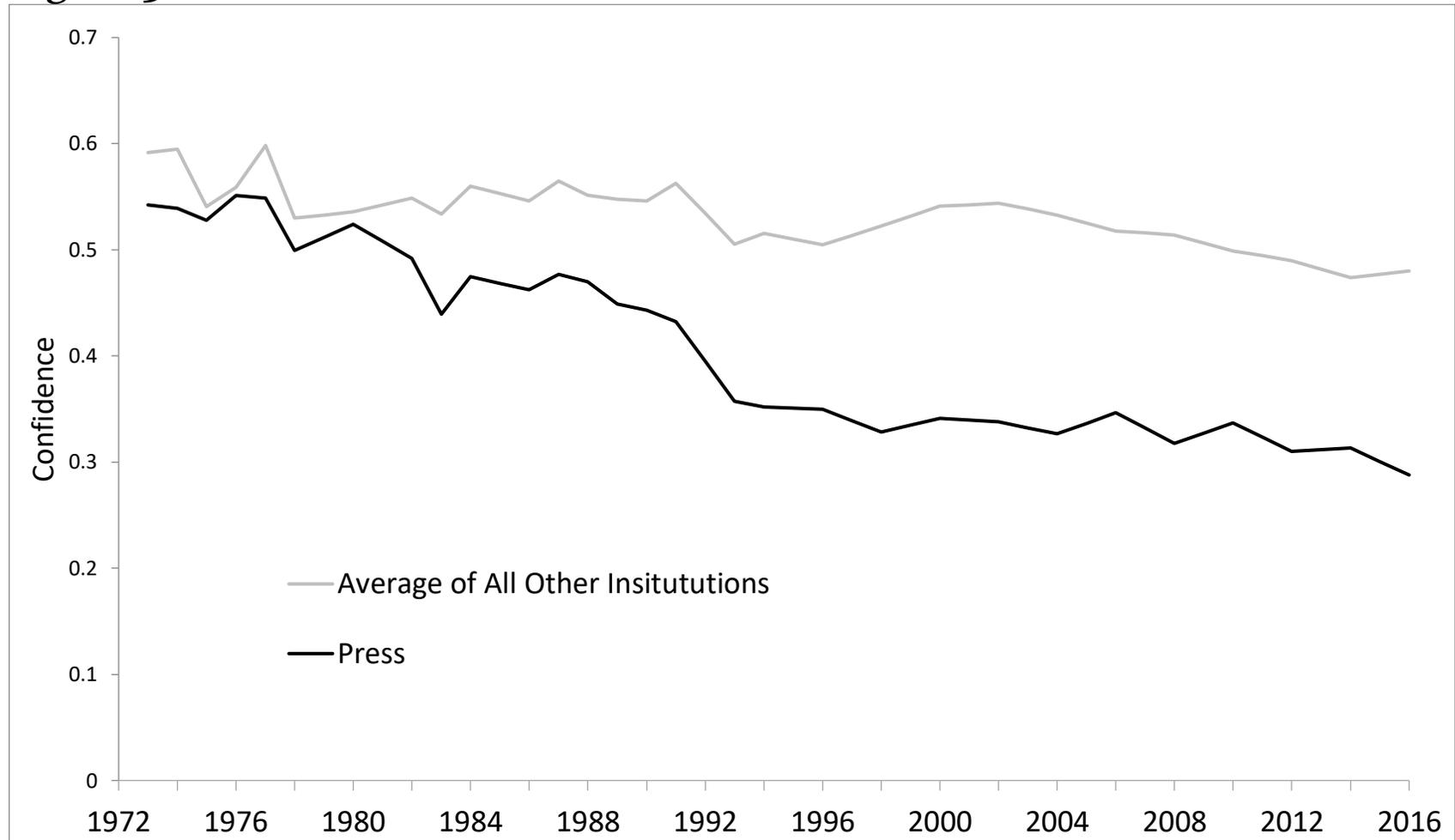
Source: August 1938 Roper Organization Poll, archived at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

Figure 2



Source: 1956 American National Election Study.

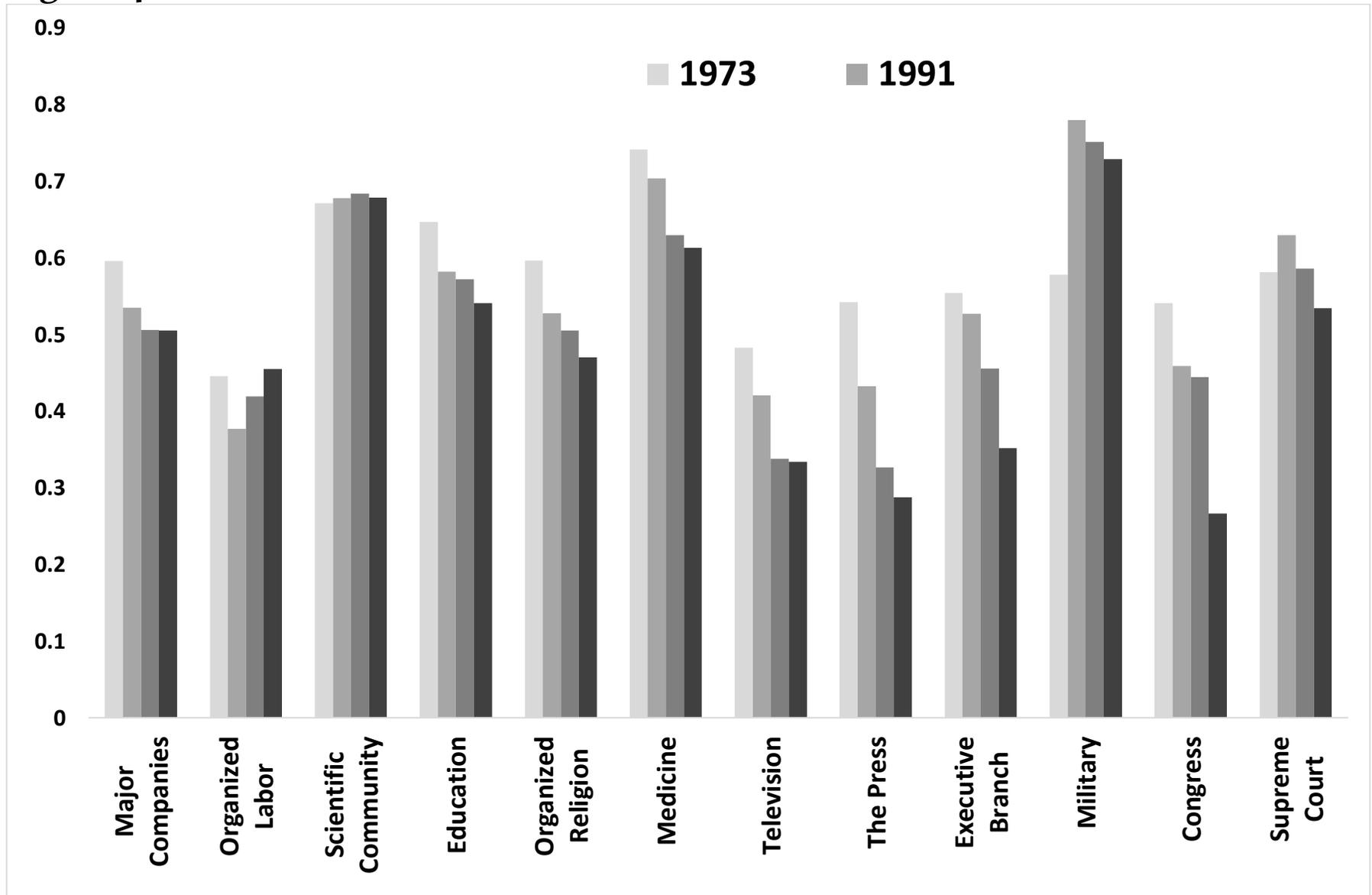
Figure 3



Source: 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 and 2016.

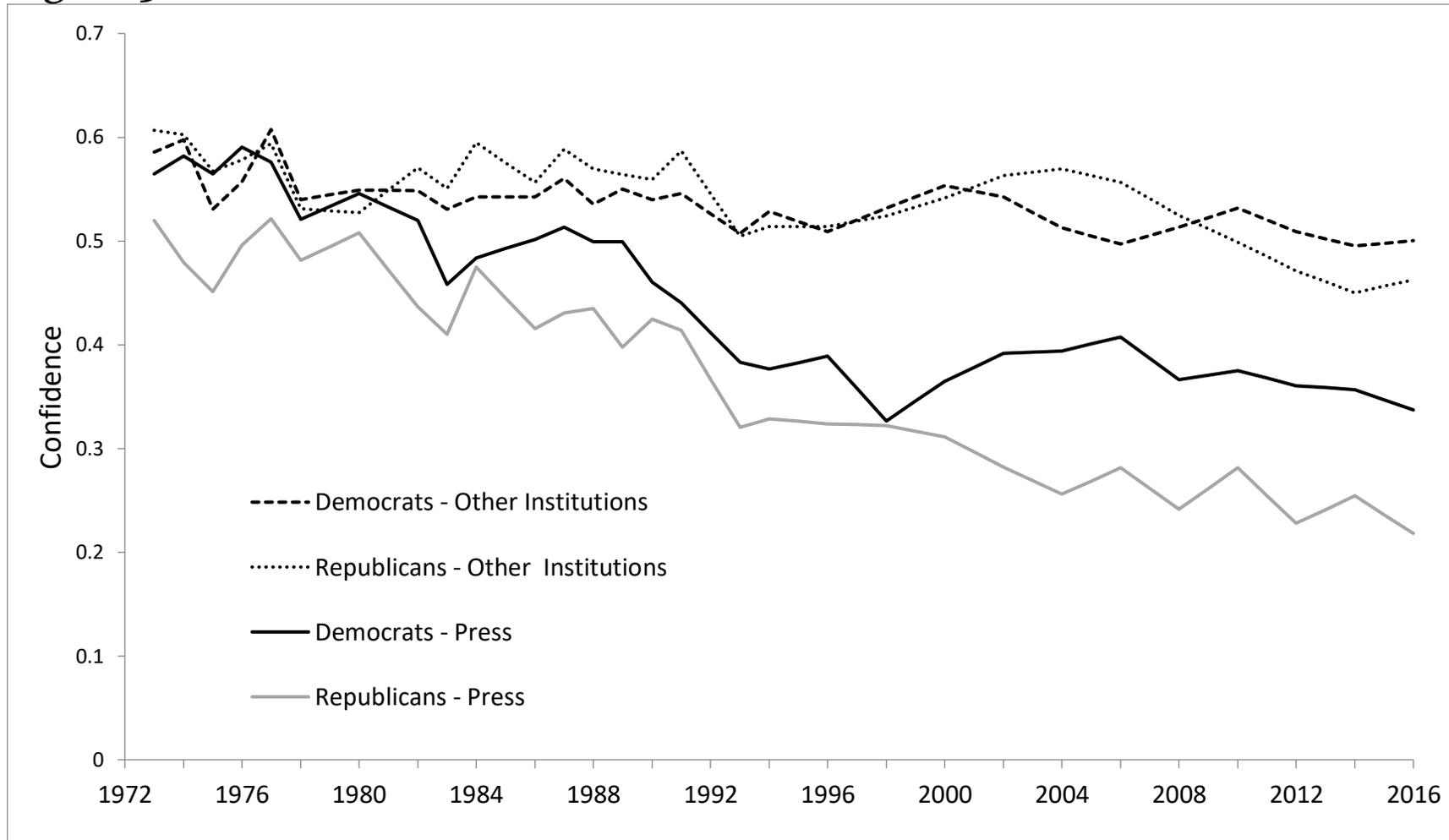
Note: Observations are weighted using the GSS "wtssall" weighting variable. For details, see Appendix A of the GSS 1972-2016 Cumulative Codebook. Responses are coded so that 1 indicates "a great deal," .5 indicates "only some," and 0 indicates "hardly any" trust. Institutions included in the average calculation are all institutions, other than the press, where confidence was probed in every GSS survey from 1973 to 2016: major companies, organized religion, education, the executive branch, organized labor, medicine, television, the Supreme Court, the scientific community, Congress, and the military.

Figure 4



Source: General Social Surveys conducted in 1973, 1991, 2004 and 2016. See the caption for Figure 3 for details on weighting and coding.

Figure 5



Source: General Social Surveys. See the caption for Figure 3 for details.