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# Media Distrust: Whose Confidence was Lost?

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# Media Distrust: Whose Confidence was Lost?

## **Abstract**

The news media is among the least-trusted institutions in the nation, with only 41% of Americans reporting a great deal or fair amount of trust in it (Swift 2017). This is a major change from the highly trusted media of the mid-20 th Century, although historically this independent, powerful, and widely respected media establishment is an anomaly. To analyze the causes of media distrust over the last forty years, I have demographically broken down results from a question asked by the General Social Survey since 1972. I tested these results, isolated through a regression analysis, against my predictions of potential sources of media distrust. Among all the factors, only political factors – partisanship and political ideology – were substantially significant, while age and hours of TV watched showed weak significance. This did not clearly support any of my predictions but indicates the preeminence of politics as a determinant of media trust.

## **Keywords**

political science, public opinion, media, press, media trust, distrust, Political Science, Social Sciences, Matthew Levendusky, Levendusky, Matthew

## **Disciplines**

American Politics

# **Media Distrust: Whose Confidence was Lost?**

Hunter Pearl

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## Introduction

A half century ago, the mass media was among the most trusted institutions in American life, and CBS Evening News Anchor Walter Cronkite was the most trusted public figure in the nation (Ladd 2012, 1). Gallup surveys taken in the early 1970s showed that 70% of Americans had a great deal or fair amount of confidence in the press to report the news fairly. Nearly 50 years later, the picture is strikingly different. The media is now rated as among the least-trusted institutions in the nation (Gronke and Cooke 2007), with those same Gallup surveys showing only 41% now have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media (Swift 2017).

It is hard to overstate the extent to which public attitudes toward the media have shifted in the last few decades, or the consequences of that shift for the media itself and the broader political context. Why the media captured public confidence before – and why it no longer does now – represent a fundamental unsolved puzzle in American politics.

One obvious hypothesis is that political actors have long politicized the media. In particular, Republican elites—Starting with Goldwater and cemented with the Nixon administration and Edith Efron’s book *The News Twisters*—have called out the media for an alleged liberal bias (Hemmer 2016). Not to be outdone, many on the left do the same, except alleging right-wing, pro-corporate biases (McChesney 2004). So while Donald Trump—with his shouts of “fake news!” and outrageous tweets—may raise media criticism to new levels, he is far from *sui generis* (Ladd 2012).

This politicization of media coverage reflects itself in public opinion data as well. Those identifying as Republicans or conservatives have, since at least the 1970s, reported a lower amount of trust in the media, and this gap has widened over time (Ladd 2012). In September 2016, the Gallup survey reported a low of 32% of respondents showing a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media, but in 2017 this recovered to the 40-44% range that was seen every other year for the last ten years. This recent shift, however, was driven entirely by changes among Democrats: while Republicans remained extremely distrusting of the media (14% in both years), Democratic support increased 20 percentage points (51% in 2016 to 72% in 2017). Further, the 2016 numbers for Democrats were about the same as those in 2015, whereas in 2015 trust by Republicans were more than double at over 30% (Swift 2017). A 2017 Pew Research Center report found a similar trend: from February 2016 to March 2017, U.S. adult respondents that expressed “a lot” of trust in news they get from national news organizations increased from 27% to 34% among Democrats while it fell from 15% to 11% among Republicans (Barthel and Mitchel 2017).

This disparity highlights the importance of breaking down general trends in explaining the larger picture. However, the 40-year trend still shows a dramatic decline for respondents identifying with either (and neither) parties. To explain both the mutual decline and the partisan split, there must be a factor or factors besides party ID that are affecting media trust.

The news media has been discussed frequently since the 2016 election of President Donald Trump. Though he is by no means the first politician to attack the media, Trump has voiced his opposition to the mainstream media to such a great extent

that the term he popularized - “fake news” – has risen in usage by 365% since 2016 and was named the Collins Dictionary Word of the Year for 2017 (Hunt 2017). One oft-reported factor of the 2016 Presidential election was Donald Trump’s ability to excite the white working class, a group of lower income and lower educational attainment Americans, to turn out for him in both the Republican primary and the general election. These loyal supporters often echoed Trump’s criticisms of the mainstream news media, with criticisms going beyond partisanship (“liberal” media) to include factors such as geography and social class (“coastal elite” media).

Does this represent a real change in the demographics of distrust? In the decade since Gronke and Cooke analyzed how media trust varies by demographic factors, have these patterns changed? If this were to be the case, our understanding of how and why the public has lost trust in the media would change dramatically. To narrow the list of possible causes of loss of confidence in the media as an institution, this paper will analyze how trust in the media varies by a wide variety of demographic attributes: education, race, age/birth cohort, sex, frequency of newspaper reading, hours spent watching TV, general verbal acuity, partisanship, and liberal-conservative self-identification, more commonly known colloquially as ideology. This is by no means an exhaustive list of factors that could affect media trust; however, together they cross-cut the American people in important ways.

In order to frame this discussion in context, I will delve into the historical background of the American media and its relationship with the public. I will then examine various theories on the causes of media distrust and make predictions about what different outcomes in demographic analysis of confidence in the media would

suggest. These results will be tested against a demographic break down of the long-run media trust trend from the General Social Survey (GSS) and a multivariate regression analysis of these demographic factors. Finally, I will draw conclusions about the causes and implications of media distrust from these tests.

## **Historical Background**

Scholars study Americans' level of confidence in various institutions because this institutional trust is critical to a well-functioning democracy: "whether citizens judge politicians or government trustworthy influences whether they become politically active, how they vote, whether they favor policy or institutional reforms, whether they comply with political authorities, and whether they trust one another" (Levi and Stoker 2000, 501). The perceived legitimacy of all government and civic institutions in democracies depend on some level of public trust, but for the media trust is even more central: a well-trusted media has the power to set national dialogue, shape public perceptions, and hold governments and public figures accountable. On the other hand, distrust leads to disbelief, and a media that is entirely disbelieved has no power or function whatsoever.

While there has been a secular decline in trust across all institutions, the media stands out for the extent of this decline (Gronke and Cooke 2007). Further, "partisanship and ideology have a weak connection with trust in the government yet show a strong connection with trust in the news media" (Lee 2010, p. 17). This suggests that, while they may be contributing factors, causes of general skepticism of antagonism towards civil and political institutions cannot fully explain modern media distrust.

Explanations must be specific to the media in order to understand it as an institution, predict future trends and behavior, and offer solutions.

We must view confidence in the media and the media itself in its larger context to avoid implicitly accepting uncertain assumptions. The Gallup survey quoted in the introduction asked Americans how confident they were in “mass media” (with examples given as newspapers, TV, and radio) reporting news “fully, accurately, and fairly.” What is the “mass media?” When this question was asked in the 1970s, it was synonymous with the “mainstream” media – news sources aimed at general audiences, with significant (at least city-wide and especially national) distributions.

The picture today of the mass media is complicated by numerous factors. There is a more heterogeneous media landscape; whereas in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Americans got their news from a local newspaper or one of the 3 major television networks, today Americans are increasingly likely to get their news from non-mainstream internet sources (Shearer and Gottfried). Internet sites feature “user-created” content, divorcing the source from its substance. Social media and news aggregation sites occasionally distribute articles by small and fringe publications. The line between news, commentary, and entertainment sources is increasingly blurred as many Americans receive their information about the news from comedic and satirical sources – 6% of the public and 11% of young adults in 2015 picked *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* or *The Colbert Report* as their most trusted news source (Gendron 2015) – as well as cable television, radio, and internet sources that mix news with news commentary. This may lead Americans to increasingly express more disparate responses regarding their trust in

their preferred news source, the mainstream media, and even overall media environment.

So why should Americans have confidence in the mass media to report the news “fully, accurately, and fairly”? How were these values chosen, and why should we include this in our discussions of confidence in the media? Though often referred to as the “fourth branch of government,” the media was not planned by a constitution but rather emerged from various conditions and has taken many roles. The mass media today is a collection of local, national, and international journalists, news aggregators, and media corporations. They use nearly all mediums and may have as their mission private profit, government-endorsed propaganda, public service, or activism. Their “role,” so far as it can be deduced from their common actions, is to provide information about current affairs to the public (though perhaps only for paying customers).

It follows that in survey questions such as “How much trust do you have in the media?” respondents are implicitly being asked how much confidence they have that the media, as a whole (therefore giving extra weight to mainstream sources), will correctly inform them on current events. We can therefore see why news reporting should be accurate (have true information) and full (not misleadingly omitting any facts). In this sense, we expect the media to do two things: to both take an oath of honesty – to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth – and to devote its resources to uncover important information, in particular, about government.

This leaves us with the third value cited by Gallup: to report the news “fairly.” What does it mean to be “fair” in reporting news, and why should we care about it? Its opposite, unfairness, would be characterized by strongly biased coverage of events. Bias

could clearly interfere with the media's role of informing the public if it were to lead a journalist make unsubstantiated claims or omit important facts or counterarguments – but these actions would violate the values of accuracy and fullness as well. In other cases, a biased report could favor one side and attack or ignore the alternative view yet still correctly inform the public. If the news is true, what is the harm in unfair reporting?

One answer may be that the best way to ensure that the truth is revealed is for our information-bearers to adopt a position of epistemic humility, assuming no knowledge beyond verified facts and leaving further interpretation and speculation to the public and segregated columnists (the “marketplace of ideas”). Another answer could posit fairness for fairness' sake; perhaps the media, as a powerful institution, has duties both to do its job (inform the public) and to be fair, just as we expect the government to be fair even if that fairness does not directly contribute to a government interest. As we shall see, the value of media fairness arose historically from a combination of economic, technological, and political conditions that gradually created and then cemented an ideal known as “objectivity.”

Objectivity is a journalistic principle, held throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as the central ethic of Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics (Mindich 2006, 145). Deriving from the word “objective,” objectivity seeks to eliminate all subjective bias from reporting; to present an unbiased account of the news, if such a thing is possible. Though exact definitions of objectivity are debated, Mindich (2006) argues for five components of objectivity: detachment, which removes the journalist's explicit perspective from the news piece; nonpartisanship, the refrainment from endorsing or favoring any one side; the “inverted pyramid,” a style of writing that organizes the most

important facts before details in a piece; facticity, or naïve empiricism, a dependence on facts, with the underlying belief that such facts can accurately explain the world; and balance, the practice of pairing perspectives on issues with opposing perspectives. Together, these components attempt to reach fairness by relying almost exclusively on verified facts, hiding the journalist's personal perspective, and balancing any accounts of one side of an issue with opposing views.

Indeed, Mindich even goes so far as to call objectivity the supreme deity of American journalism (Mindich 2006, 1). Its exalted status in the early-to-mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century embedded it into assumptions for what the media *should be*, and thus is also often considered a precondition to media trust. We should not blindly accept it, however. Why should the media balance its coverage of different sides of an issue? We want to be informed, but we do not assume that every issue should receive equal coverage. Could not this balancing run contrary to the media's main role in correctly informing the public? For example, if the large majority of scientists agree on one theory, it may mislead consumers on the state of scientific opinion on the matter to give the dissenting minority equal coverage. Ida B. Wells, an anti-lynching activist, frequently corrected the inaccuracies of the objective, balanced coverage of lynching done by the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century New York Times. Mindich concludes, "In fact, 'objectivity' helped to obscure an important piece of reality, the perceptions of Ida B. Wells and other African Americans" (2006, p. 113).

Even when objectivity does not take such a radical departure from reality, it is worth considering whether objectivity among individual sources is important for the media as a whole. The American legal system functions through combative sides that

present intentionally unbalanced accounts. They cannot lie, but they are incentivized to come up with any evidence or argument that could benefit their case. This provides the maximal material for all relevant sides of a case, which a judge or jury could then decide for themselves. Such a system more closely resembles opposing partisan news sources than a singular objective media.

Still, expectations that we can trust an individual media source to provide a complete picture of the world assumes that media sources (especially mainstream ones) follow this norm of objectivity. Assumptions of objectivity among news sources may coincide with what Jonathan Ladd calls the “conventional wisdom”: that a trusted, elite, and professional media is America’s natural state. He argues that contrary to this perception, however, “the existence of an independent, powerful, widely respected news media establishment is an historical anomaly” (Ladd 2012, pp. 7-8).

From the 1790s to the 1830s, prominent news agencies were owned and funded by political parties and groups in government. This party press did not have modern standards of objectivity, striving instead to unify and mobilize a political base. Initially this was done by promoting the party line through reasoned arguments, but by Thomas Jefferson’s presidency the party press often resorted to personal attacks and blatant partisanship (Kerbel 1999, pp. 29-30). While many interpret the “freedom of the press” guaranteed by the First Amendment as rule of separation of press and state, Robert McChesney argues that in the early republic the close relationship between the two was uncontroversial. Federal and state government printing contracts explicitly subsidized dominant partisan newspapers, a practice that was not completely ended until the establishment of the U.S. Government Printing office in 1860. President Jefferson

arranged for printing subsidies for his friend Samuel Harrison Smith to establish the hugely successful (and expressly Jeffersonian) *National Intelligencer*, and President Jackson devoted federal money to the editor of his Washington-based newspaper and gave political appointments to other editors (McChesney 2004, pp. 27-28).

Starting around the 1830s, technology making publishing newspapers cheaper and easier, as well as demand for advertising driven by new mass-market goods, led to the dominance of a competitive commercial press. New publications, called the penny press because each issue cost one cent (while the party press was six cents), focused on selling issues through yellow journalism and neutral political coverage for mass audience appeal (Kerbel 1999, p. 31). This commercially-focused press, which over the course of the nineteenth century devoted a shrinking portion of its reporting to politics, received little respect and much hostility from public figures and both far right and far left political movements (Ladd 2012, pp. 34-36).

Jonathan Ladd attributes the emergence of the “institutional news media” to a unique environment that allowed large news organizations to become trusted, powerful, and independent. In the early twentieth century, “competition in the newspaper market declined at the same time that legal and technological limitations suppressed consumer choice in the television and radio industry,” while a depolarizing party system disincentivized political attacks on the media or sponsoring partisan news outlets (Ladd 2012, p. 39). By the 1930s, newspaper circulation grew more than ten-fold from 1880 and 80% of adults reported regularly reading a daily newspaper, all while the number of newspaper publishers had decreased since 1910 (Ladd 2012, pp. 47-48). The chaotic

competition of the nineteenth century press had changed into an insulated and increasingly powerful press before the middle of the twentieth century.

Large newspapers became elite, hiring staff writers over freelancers and expecting reporters and editors to have college degrees and, later, journalism degrees. The Progressive movement's values of scientific "objectivity" and area expertise likely influenced the concurrent rise of the norm of "objective" reporting and the idea of a "professional" journalist that acts as an expert in sorting and conveying information (Ladd 2012, p. 43). In addition to objectivity, other codes of conduct unified reporting. News sections separated from editorials, became dominated by observable and verifiable data, relied on accepted authoritative sources, and wrote in the "inverted pyramid" style of news so that a full story could be understood from just the first few lines of the article. This uniformity was furthered by the regional and even national news broadcasts made possible by radio and conventionalized by the Big Three television networks (Ladd 2012, p. 49).

As the media gained power, respect, and independence in the mid-twentieth century it started to be considered as an institution or even a new, independent political force, living up to the title "the Fourth Estate." Media trust was rising as well – in the 1930s, opinions were mixed but generally showed modest trust in the fairness of the media (an average 1937 Gallup polling showed 47% thought newspapers were fair in their treatment of political news while 38% said unfair). By the 1960s this trust was substantial (60-70% trust in network news' fairness). In a 1970 Roper survey that asked Americans if their most-watched news anchor colored the news with bias, only 6% responded that he did while 78% said their anchor reported things "as it happened." A

famous 1972 poll found that 73% of Americans trusted Walter Cronkite, ahead of the average senator, governor, President Nixon, or Vice President Agnew (Ladd 2012, pp. 59-64).

While earlier polls did not include demographic breakdowns, the first ones to do so noted a few interesting differences in media trust among demographic groups. A 1938 Roper Organization poll dataset included presidential preference and occupation, the latter of which Ladd separated into higher and lower educational occupations. He found that “Moving from low education to high education decreases the percentage of respondents saying newspapers are ‘fair and unprejudiced’ from 44% to 33% among FDR supporters and from 41% to 29% among FDR opponents” (Ladd 2012, pp. 60-61). A 1956 ANES survey asked Americans whether they felt that newspapers were fair to both sides of the election: 66% thought newspapers were fair while only 27% thought they were unfair. Among those who thought they were unfair, 71% thought they favored Eisenhower and the Republicans but only 10% thought they favored Stevenson and the Democrats. It included a breakdown by “political awareness,” measured here by 12 objective political knowledge questions, a factor that is highly correlative to higher educational attainment. Republican faith in the fairness of newspapers ranged only from 68% to 81% in decreasing political awareness, while an average of 64% of total Democrats thought newspapers were fair but only 50% of the most politically aware Democrats did (Ladd 2012, pp. 62-63).

Many describe the 1950s through the 1970s as a sort of golden age for media. Polls reported high levels of trust in the accuracy, fairness, and alertness of news media (especially in television news). The media played crucial and largely praised roles in

shifting opinions of the Vietnam War and breaking the Watergate scandal. Yet in the 1980s public opinion started to sour, and by the early 1990s Americans' growing distrust of the media attracted academic speculation and debate. The media landscape had changed so dramatically in two decades that there was no singular obvious culprit. As President Clinton expressed his anger at the "knee-jerk liberal press," scholars blamed the media's "cynical view of politicians" (Patterson 1994, p. 245), or an increased societal cynicism (Kerbel 1999, p. 3). Meanwhile in the early 1990s, the internet expanded, supplanting cable news' role as the source for breaking news. Cable news had to find a new focus for its 24/7 airtime since people were already familiar with the facts of most news stories, so they turned toward providing analysis, and increasingly partisan analysis (Levendusky 2013, p. 9).

Since the 1990s, scholarship has usually posited that, to borrow McChesney's terminology, "the problem of the media" is either due to: lower quality journalism resulting from the commercial competition of media corporations (McChesney 2004, p. 17; McChesney 2015, p. 3), the increasingly (and overly) political or partisan nature of the news (Kerbel 1999), or beliefs among the public but not directly caused by the media itself (Gunther 1992).

The first theory points to the media's response to technological and economic changes. When televisions only had a few nationally broadcast channels, the dominant cable television networks had less pressure to tailor news presentation for maximized viewership. The profit motive tamed, television news journalists were free to make what they considered 'quality journalism' – longer, more in-depth pieces on topics that they

thought were the most pressing issues of the day, conforming with their professional norm of objectivity.

As technological changes allowed more companies to be created and compete through additional television channels (and later through the internet), news agencies felt a stronger pressure to constantly expand viewership. This may have led to sensationalized pieces on hot topics aimed at luring customers in, shorter and simpler pieces to keep their attention, and possibly a willingness to entertain rather than inform. The strongest version of this critique argues that there has been a ‘tabloidification’ of the news: that all news media has become like tabloids, spending more time on frivolous or “soft” issues like celebrity gossip (including the personal lives of politicians) and making exaggerated or unsupported claims to grab attention.

Though these tactics may expand viewership, it could be perceived as lowering the quality of journalism and leading to greater distrust when media companies’ goals of attracting viewership are viewed as leading audiences to be misinformed or under-informed. In this way media distrust may be viewed as the result of unaligned incentives: media corporations are ultimately controlled by profit, which may be maximized by hooking in and entertaining audiences rather than helpfully informing them (the audiences’ gauge of trustworthiness). This theory would explain why television news, which was more shielded from competition than newspapers in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, received higher levels of trust at that time (Kerbel 1999, pp. 11-14). It easily explains why Americans of both major political parties have seen a sharp decline in media trust since the heyday of the Big Three television networks, but has a more difficult time explaining why Republicans have an increasingly larger distrust of the

media than Democrats. An interesting avenue to research would be whether nonprofit media sources, such as NPR, PBS, and the BBC, have changed their behavior in line with modern corporate media and the levels of trust in these sources.

The competitive, profit-driven media may be seen as a reoccurrence of the type of media of the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> Century; however, there is a twist. While that media was politically neutral, and later apolitical, the modern media is marked by a strong political focus, a significant presence of explicitly partisan sources, and possibly a liberal bias in mainstream news sources – journalists are far more likely to identify as Democrats than Republicans and Republican identification is less than a third as high among journalists as it is among the general population (Willnat 2014). Yet media bias may be argued to be conservative in the sense of maintaining the status quo or may be a form of “establishmentarianism” (Exoo 1994). Politicization and partisanship in the media is reminiscent of the media of the early American republic, perhaps even a “return to its more partisan roots” (Levendusky 2013, p. 8). Importantly, however, this media partisanship is likely caused by a customer-based profit motive or the political preferences of media owners or journalists rather than organization by government or political parties.

The theory that this politicization and/or partisanship is the major cause of modern media distrust could therefore be argued to be a symptom of the media’s competitive, commercial pressure; however, those that focus on perceived bias among the mainstream media may acknowledge the profit incentive of partisan media but identify partisanship to be the crucial element in media distrust. Some may also argue that the media is simply reflecting a more divisive, political climate in the U.S. – but that

doing so opens the media to greater distrust (Kerbel 1999). Politicization and bias in the media fits the trends of overall distrust with greater effect on Republicans but may have a more difficult time explaining the decreasing media trust prior to the 1990s.

While these former theories leave open the possibility that American's distrust of the media is unwarranted, they still explain the trend of distrust as directly resulting from the actions of the media. Critics of this approach like Albert Gunther, however, argue that the change has come primarily from the public rather than the media (Gunther 1992). This argument relies on research that contradicts public perceptions, such as findings that suggest there is no significant mainstream media bias despite perceptions that it is increasingly biased.

Media distrust may become a self-fulfilling cycle: when the media was assumed to be trustworthy, there was little reason to doubt it; after politicians and others complained of media bias, however, the public may believe it or mistakenly believe that they have noticed it themselves. This could explain why Republicans have shown a sharper decrease in media trust – their increasing partisanship – or the expanded hostility towards the media by Republican politicians – may increase their perception of media bias. As for the general decrease in media trust, a strong predictor of media distrust is political cynicism (Lee 2005), so if the public were becoming more cynical then the media would be less trusted regardless of actual media actions.

The primary observations on which these theories are built are not mutually exclusive; the modern mainstream media is almost certainly more sensational and less respecting of privacy of celebrities and politicians, more political and partisan, and perceived as biased most strongly by partisans (especially conservative ones). These

arguments are also far from exhaustive, and one could mix and match aspects of all three. Still, they are plausible theories that posit testable phenomena. One method would be to simply poll Americans on the causes of their trust or distrust of the media, but this would leave open the debate about whether these complaints relate to actual media actions or simply respondents' misperceptions. This unstated knowledge may be implied, however, in the demographic makeup of responses to general confidence in the press.

If the cause of media distrust were due to nonpolitical factors such as lower quality journalism, then we should expect respondents' political party identification and ideology to be relatively insignificant. While recent polls suggest that Republicans and conservatives are more distrustful of the media, if regression analysis shows that this difference can be explained by other demographic factors then this would support the first theory. The first theory would also predict that more media-literate Americans would have lower trust in the media, as they would be most sensitive to a decline in journalism quality. Older Americans, with direct experience of past, more trustful media, may have a lower opinion of the modern press.

If media distrust were primarily caused by journalists' partisan biases or divisive media politicization, we should expect political identification to be the most significant demographic factor. Though it would be less significant, media literacy may be negatively correlated with media trust as one would need to perceive media partisanship and would be less trustful of the media once they do. Partisan media may inspire distrust of less partisan media or may be more likely to be consumed by those who are already less trusting of less partisan media. Since more partisan individuals more often

consume media that caters to their own partisan identities, we may expect that those who consume more media to be less trustful of media as a whole.

As with the second theory, if media distrust is a result of public misperceptions of media bias then political identification would be the most significant demographic factor. Unlike the second theory, however, this theory would expect that media literacy is positively correlated with media trust because perceptions of media bias are here seen as a misreading of the media. There are no clear implications in this theory for the effect of different amounts of media consumption. Since this theory assumes that the media itself is not the primary cause of changing opinions, media trust should be higher among older Americans. Older Americans have experienced a media that had higher perceptions of trustworthiness; if the modern media is in actuality equally trustworthy then older Americans should maintain their previous original high level of media trust (unless they themselves became significantly more partisan).

### **Hypothesis**

According to surveys in the late 1990s, complaints that the media does not respect people's privacy, ignores errors in their reporting, shows favoritism, is liberal, puts too much emphasis on negative news, exaggerates problems, and is too sensational were all held in significantly larger percentages by respondents with higher educational attainment (Smith and Lichter 1997). These complaints largely focus on the media being too aggressive in expanding their audience, too unprofessional, and too partisan – all criticism that one rarely finds lobbed against the main national news organizations of

the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. If these are concerns of Americans with high educational attainment, and they were not pronounced in the mid-century, then they may be factors in the decline of media trust among this group, a decline that would not be found in the less-critical lower educational attainment group. This led me to my primary hypothesis, that the long-term decline in confidence in the media has been driven specifically by the declining trust of more highly educated Americans.

Certainly a case could be made for the other perspectives as well. Gronke and Cook (2007) presented a convincing rationale for hypothesizing the opposite take: “Educated people, for example, might be more favorable to the press than to other institutions, given that they are the beneficiaries of the ‘knowledge gap,’ whereby more educated consumers of the news are better able to understand and use it to learn about politics.” (267). I agree that a greater understanding the news would increase the relevancy of the media to a demographic (although direct appeals at relevancy may backfire - see “too partisan” and “too aggressive in expanding their audience” above). A greater desire to use the media to learn about relevant issues, however, may lead to greater discontent if the actual product does not line up with desires.

Obviously education does not exist in a vacuum; race, sex, age, party identification, and political philosophy cross-cut these demographics in various ways. It is therefore necessary to study the changes in media trust among all of these demographics. For these demographic variables, the groups that were least likely to view the news media favorably – and most likely to view it unfavorably – were (separately) whites, younger people, Republicans, and conservatives (Knight Foundation 2018, p. 5). Sex was not examined in this study, so I will assume it is insignificant. For these groups

to have *not* declined further than their counterparts would imply that the gap between counterpart groups was the same or larger, and for instance blacks and liberals would have nearly unanimously had trust in the media in the 1970s. I therefore predict that the trend of declining trust in the media can disproportionately be seen among whites, males, older people, Republicans, and conservatives over the past 40 years.

Additionally, the General Social Survey (GSS), from which I will be drawing my data, includes other relevant factors: how often respondents read newspapers, how many hours of TV they watch on average (which may or may not include TV news), and a measure of their vocabulary (as measured by their defining 10 words of varying difficulties). A larger consumption of news may give one a stronger opinion on the news in general, and since general confidence in the media has been lower than 50% for decades, this would seem to be more likely a negative opinion. Still, those that choose to consume more news media would likely be those who at least see some value in following the news. It may also reflect a pre-existing trust in the media. Previous research has concluded, “Americans who trust the main-stream media tend to consume it in moderately greater quantities – and are less likely to consume nonmainstream sources such as internet sources and political talk radio – than those who are skeptical toward the mainstream media. Still, people consume media for more reasons than simply to stay informed (such for social or entertainment needs), and even the most skeptical respondents report significant weekly consumption of mainstream television news and newspapers” (Tsfati and Capella 2003, pp. 518-519). I thus predict that those who consume less newspaper or TV media will have less trust in the news.

As vocabulary increases with education, I predict that media trust will be lower for those with larger vocabularies. This likely indicates a higher media literacy, which could lead one to find more faults with the media and thus have a lower confidence in it. This effect will likely be too related to education for it to be included in the regression analysis. Regardless of the accuracy of my predictions for race, gender, age, party ID, ideology, frequency of newspaper reading, hours spent watching TV, however, the results will be synthesized to isolate education in order to test if these two factors are driving media distrust.

*Hypothesis 1:* The more highly educated Americans are, the less likely they are to trust the media

*Hypothesis 2:* White Americans are less likely to trust the media than nonwhite Americans.

*Hypothesis 3:* Younger Americans are less likely to trust the media than older Americans.

*Hypothesis 4:* Republicans are less likely to trust the media than Democrats.

*Hypothesis 5:* Conservatives are less likely to trust the media than liberals.

*Hypothesis 6:* Sex is not a significant factor in media trust.

*Hypothesis 7:* Americans who more often read newspapers will have higher media trust.

*Hypothesis 8:* Americans who watch television more often will have a higher media trust.

*Hypothesis 10:* Americans with higher vocabulary quiz scores will have a lower media trust.

If all of these hypotheses were supported by the data, this would lend credibility to the second theory on the causes of media distrust. I will thus hypothesize that the primary cause of media distrust is the politicization and polarization of media sources.

### **Trends**

The General Social Survey (GSS) has been giving Americans the following question every year or two since 1972: “I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?” The specification that this trust is in the ‘people running’ these institutions has been a sticking point for some researchers, but the survey set is nonetheless useful in tracking the general trend of media (dis)trust (Gronke and Cooke, 2007, p. 263).

Respondents are given a list of institutions, one of which is the “press,” and are given the following answer choices: “a great deal,” “only some,” “hardly any,” “don't know,” “no answer,” and “not applicable.” Among the former three, there has been a gradual, modest decline of “great deal” and “only some” answers and a strong increase

in “hardly any.” All answers, but especially “hardly any,” saw their biggest change in the early 1990s (figure 1.1).

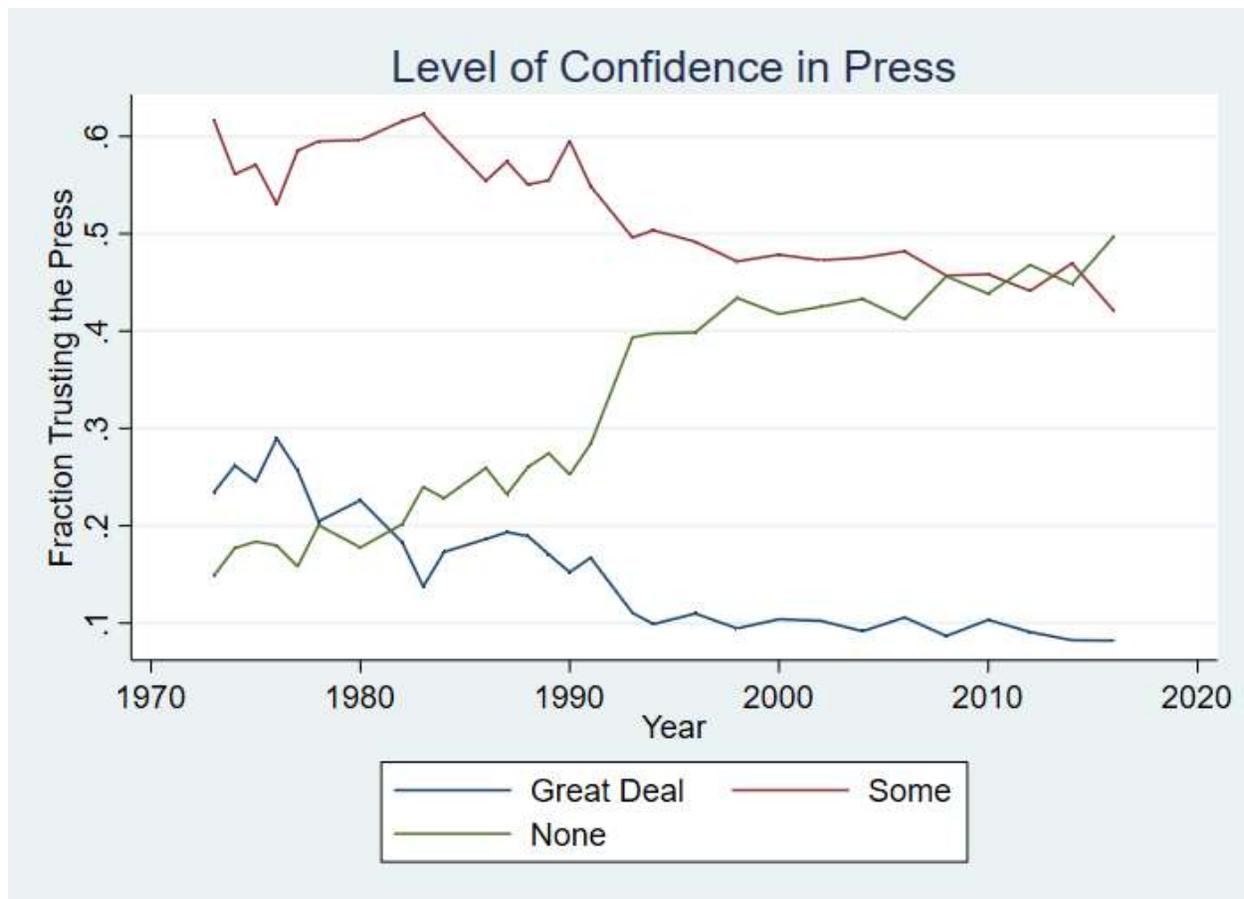


Figure 1.1

The fact that the phenomenon of decreasing confidence in the media can be attributed a disappearance of strong supporters of the media and a tripling of those who have “hardly any” confidence in the institution is an important point – Gronke and Cook refer to it as “the main story” (2007, p. 264). Still, assuming that those who no longer had a great deal of confidence in the media instead answered “only some,” and it was from this pool that the increasingly large “hardly ever” group emerged, the trend is as gradual as the questions allow. With only three possible affirmative responses to choose

from, even a gradual change could look sudden if enough people passed from one threshold to another.

Though it is still based off of these unwieldy answers, I have averaged the three responses into one line to most clearly see the trend of media confidence over the last 45 years (figure 1.2). This average trust can be calculated for demographics to examine heterogeneous trends across these different sub-groups. In every demographic there was a clear decline in media trust, but the decline varied among groups. I expected to notice a slightly larger decrease in trust among whites, and this held true – whites showed a modestly larger decrease in trust than nonwhites (from a difference of a few percentage points to around 5%) (figure 1.3). As expected, the difference between the sexes appears insignificant; the data shows the declines among male and female respondents as nearly identical (figure 1.4).

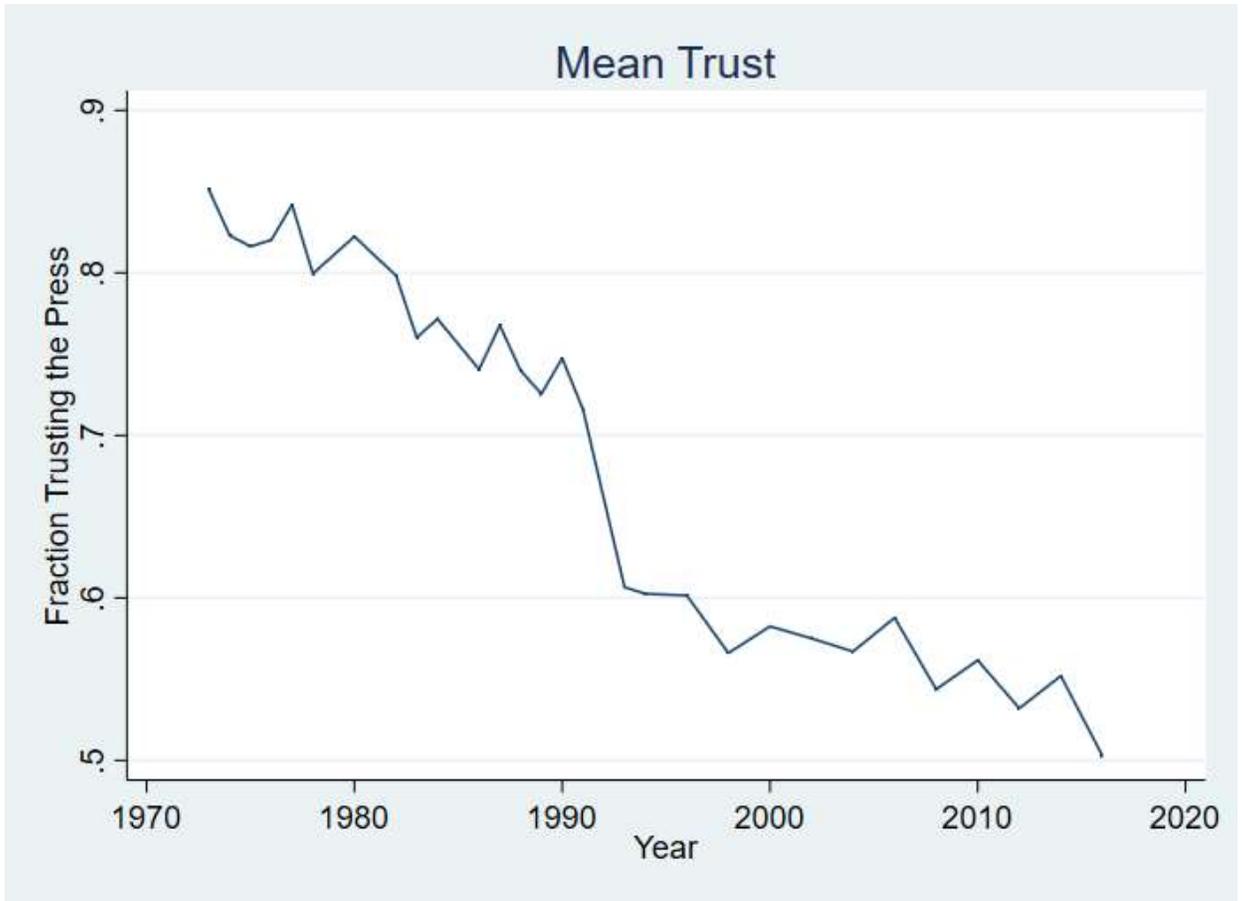


Figure 1.2

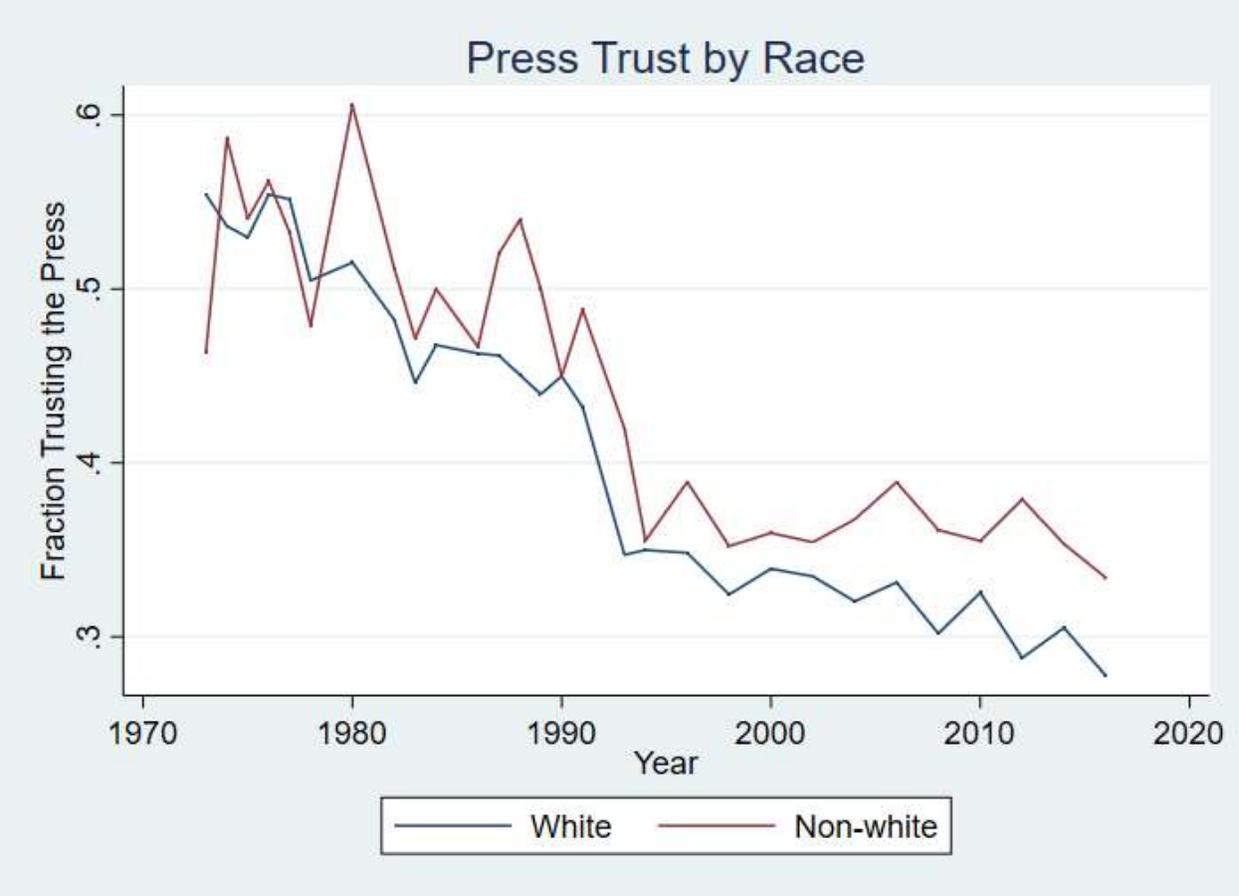


Figure 1.3

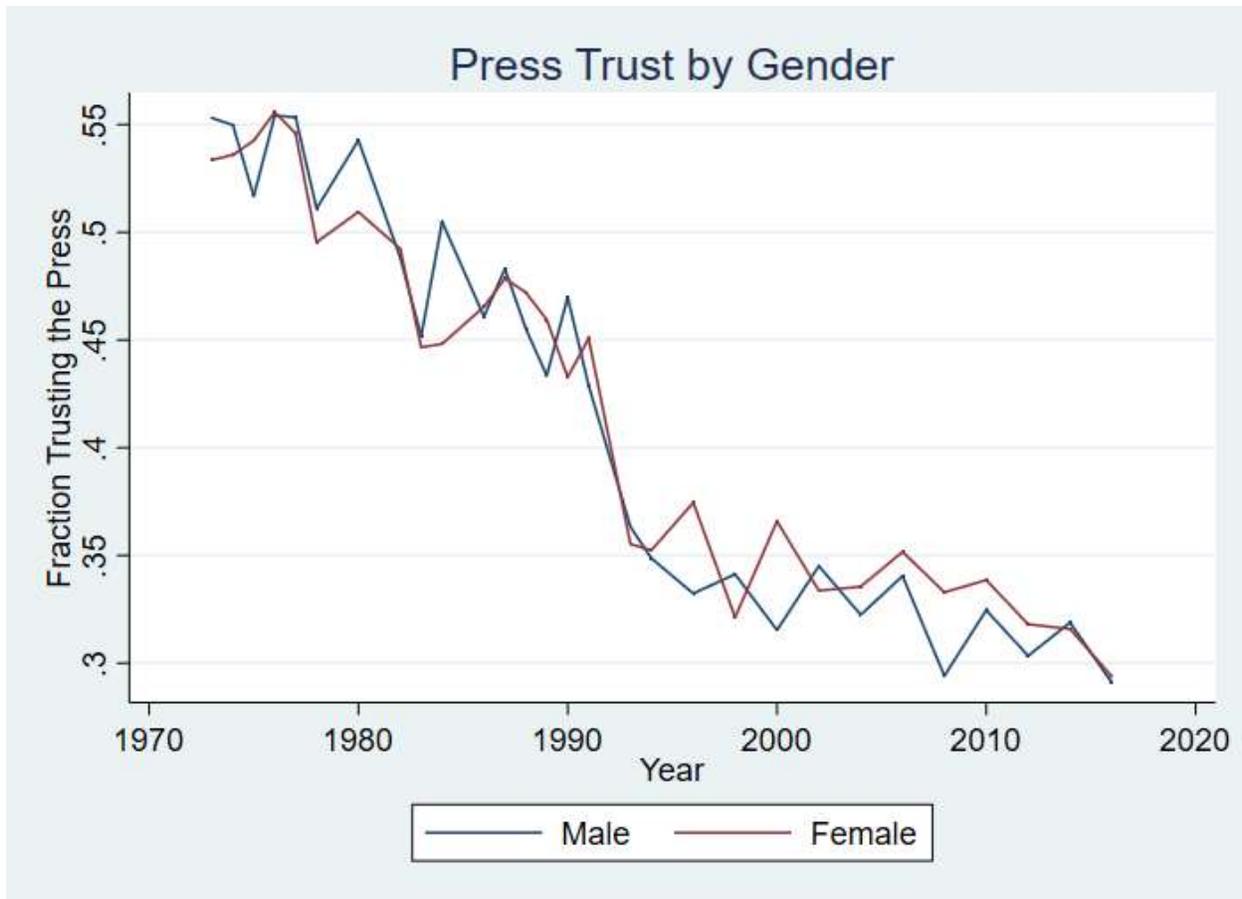


Figure 1.4

Since recent survey results have especially noted that Republicans and conservatives are more distrustful of the press than Democrats and liberals, I suspected this gap would be among the largest of all the demographic breakdowns. Though Republicans and conservatives started with lower media trust than other demographics, their decline of more than 25% makes them the groups whose trust declined the most. The gap between those who identify as Democrats and Republicans and between identifying liberals and conservatives was significant in the 1970s (>5%) but is currently much larger (>10%) (Figures 1.5 and 1.6, respectively). The large gap that we see today has been present since the early 2000s, but in the 1990s the gap was quite small. The media trusts in the respective graphs even converged after a sharp drop in democrats'

and liberals' trust in the mid-1990s. Since that convergent point Republicans and conservatives continued on a downward trend while Democrats and liberals have seen a slight trend of increase in trust, the only such trend in the last forty years.

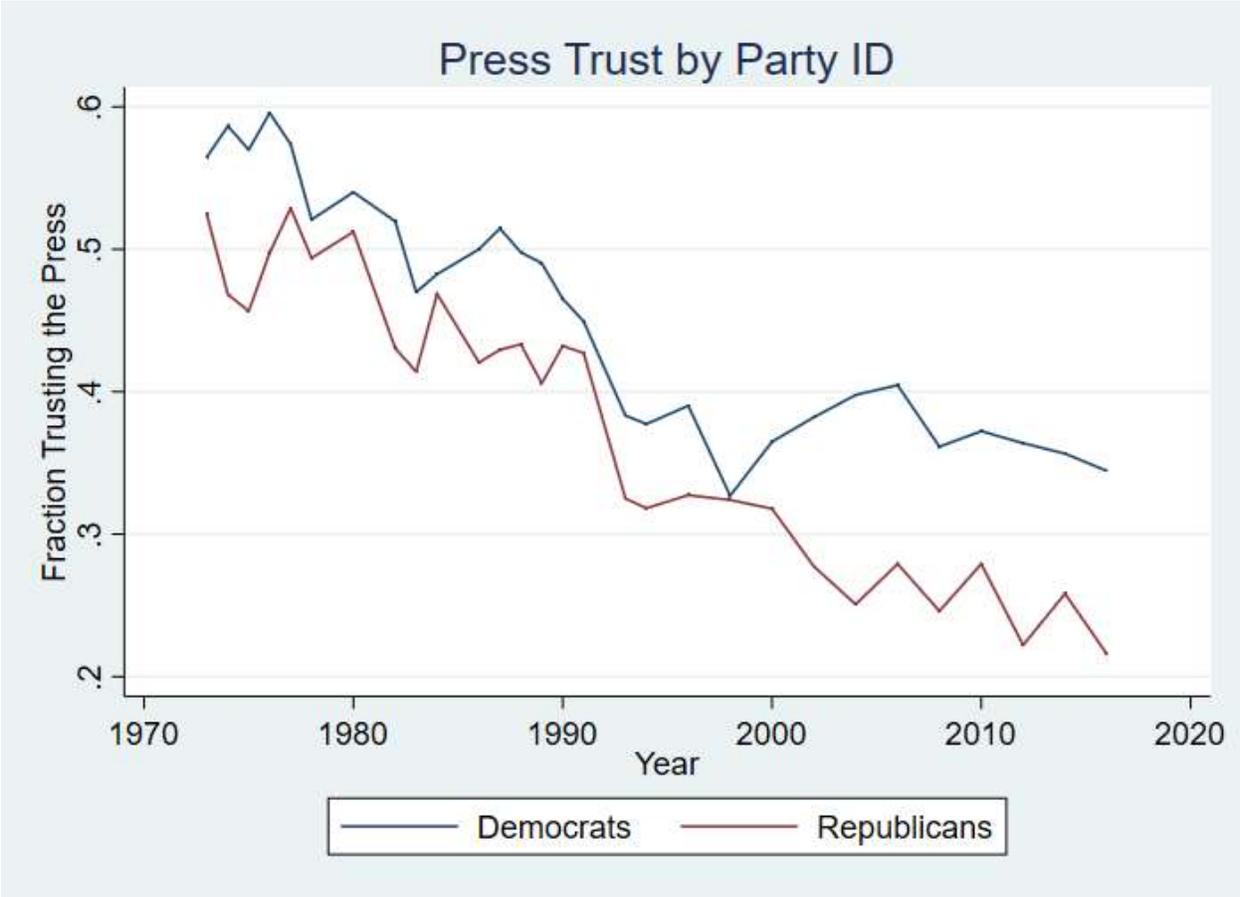


Figure 1.5

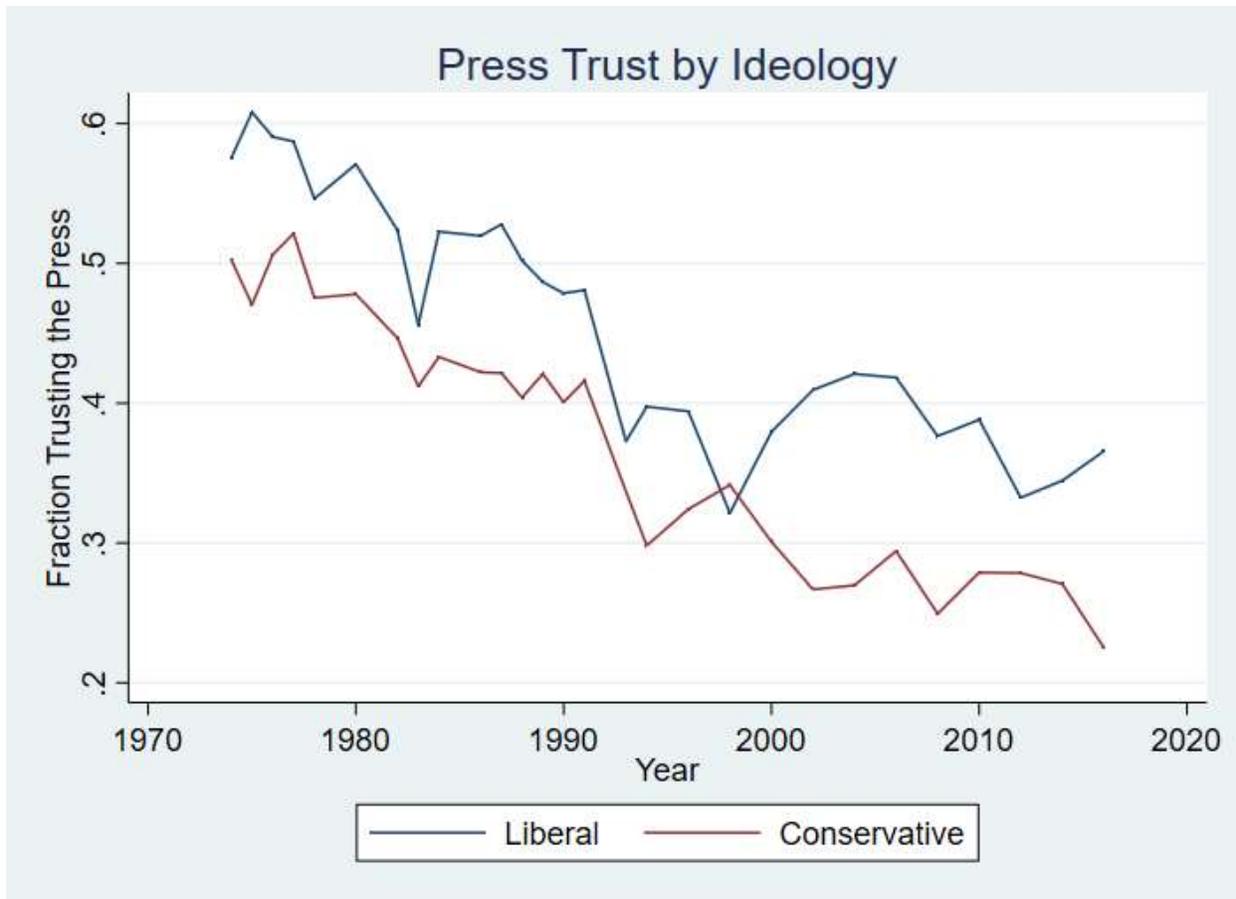


Figure 1.6

Younger Americans have, as suspected, shown the least media trust. As of the latest surveys, media trust increased with age, with older respondents (ages 60+) being the most trustful, followed by the those in the middle bracket (ages 35-59) and then younger respondents (ages 18-34). This has been constantly switching, with the opposite order in 2008. Still, the gap is for the first time greater than 5% between the most trustful and least trustful ages, and since younger respondents were the most trustful age bracket in the 1970s, this shows a large decrease in the media trust of the youngest Americans (figure 1.7).

It is important to note that the generation of Americans that were in the youngest age bracket in 1972 joined the oldest age bracket in the last decade. To study how groups

different age groups changed over time, I created five cohorts based on birth year (figure 1.8). Until the mid-1990s, all cohorts fell in tandem, with the youngest cohort in the 1970s (born 1950-1969) starting with slightly higher trust but dropping below the others. The cohort born 1910-1929 (roughly made up of the G.I. Generation) expressed slightly less media trust prior to the early 1990s; however, after the drop in this period, their trust rebounded to nearly their pre-90s levels. Still, since none of these cohorts consistently deviated from the general age trends, the overall effect of cohorts on age appears to be insignificant.

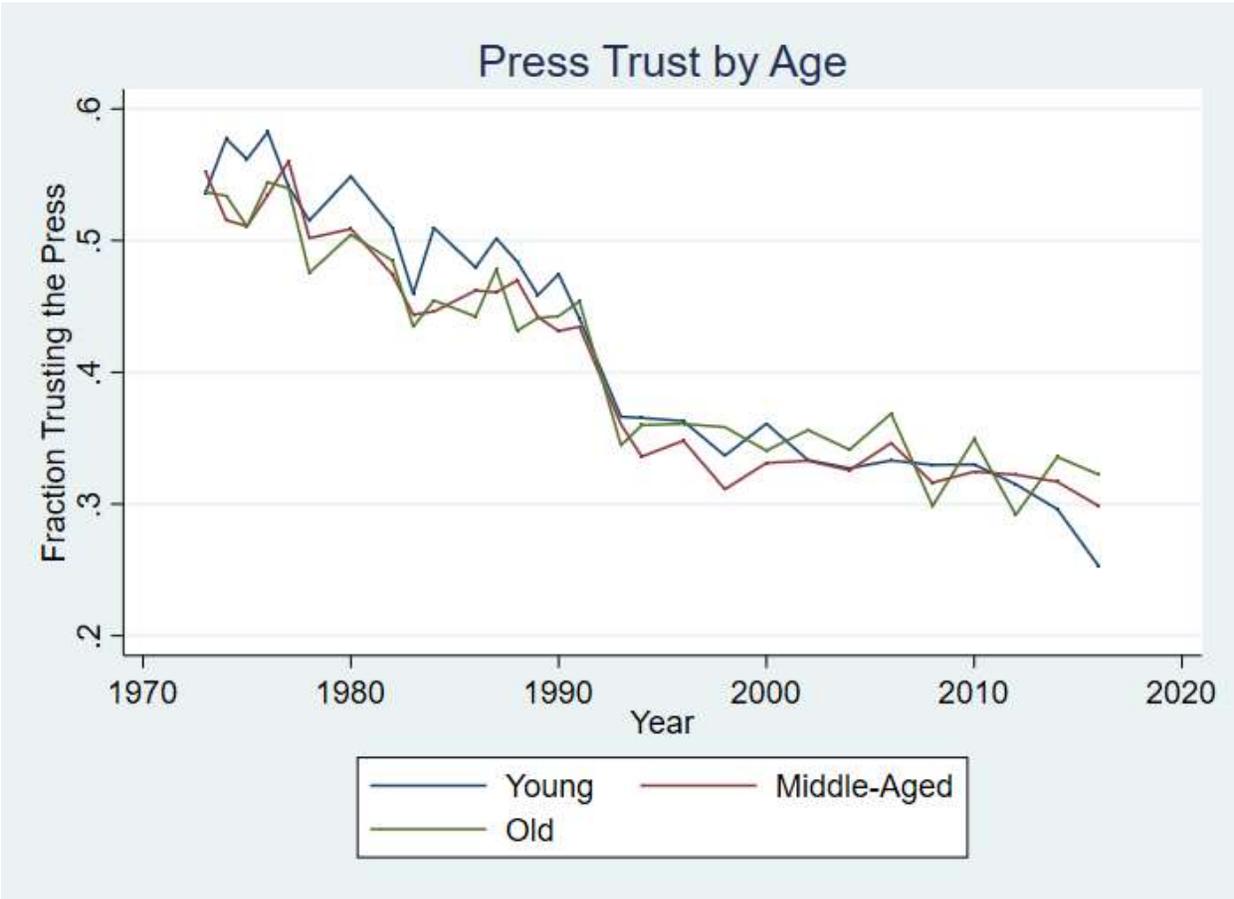


Figure 1.7

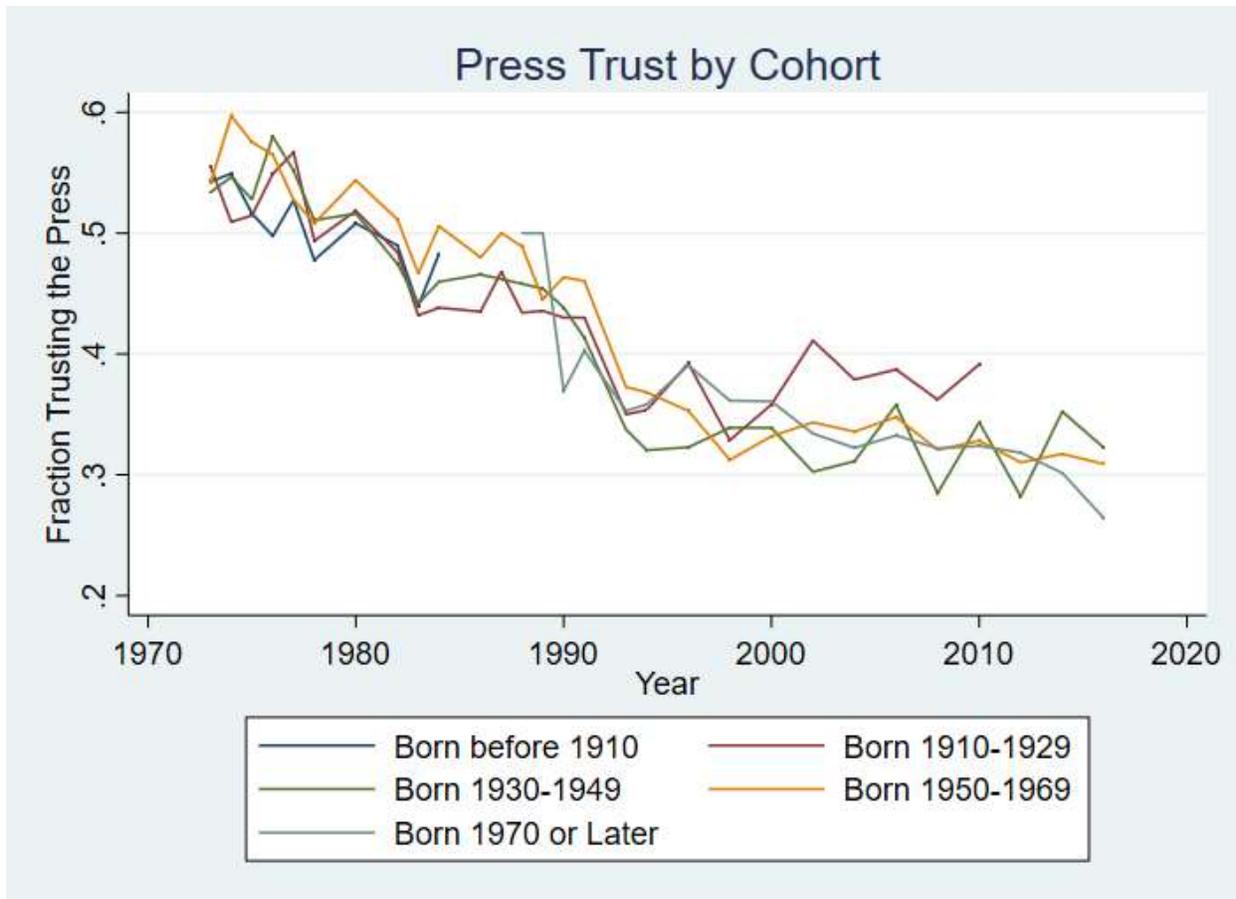


Figure 1.8

For both the frequency with which respondents read newspapers and the average hours of TV respondents watches TV, I was correct in predicting that those with less media exposure had a larger decrease in trust (figure 1.9 and 1.10, respectively). In both cases the lower-exposure groups were slightly less trustful than their counterparts in the 1970s but have become significantly less trustful since. In vocabulary quiz scores we can see one of the largest gaps of all demographics when we separate the bottom quartile of scores from the top quartile and middle 50%. Those with the lowest vocabulary quiz scores are the most trustful of the media of any group, while both the highest and the middling scorers showed lower levels of trust (figure 1.11).

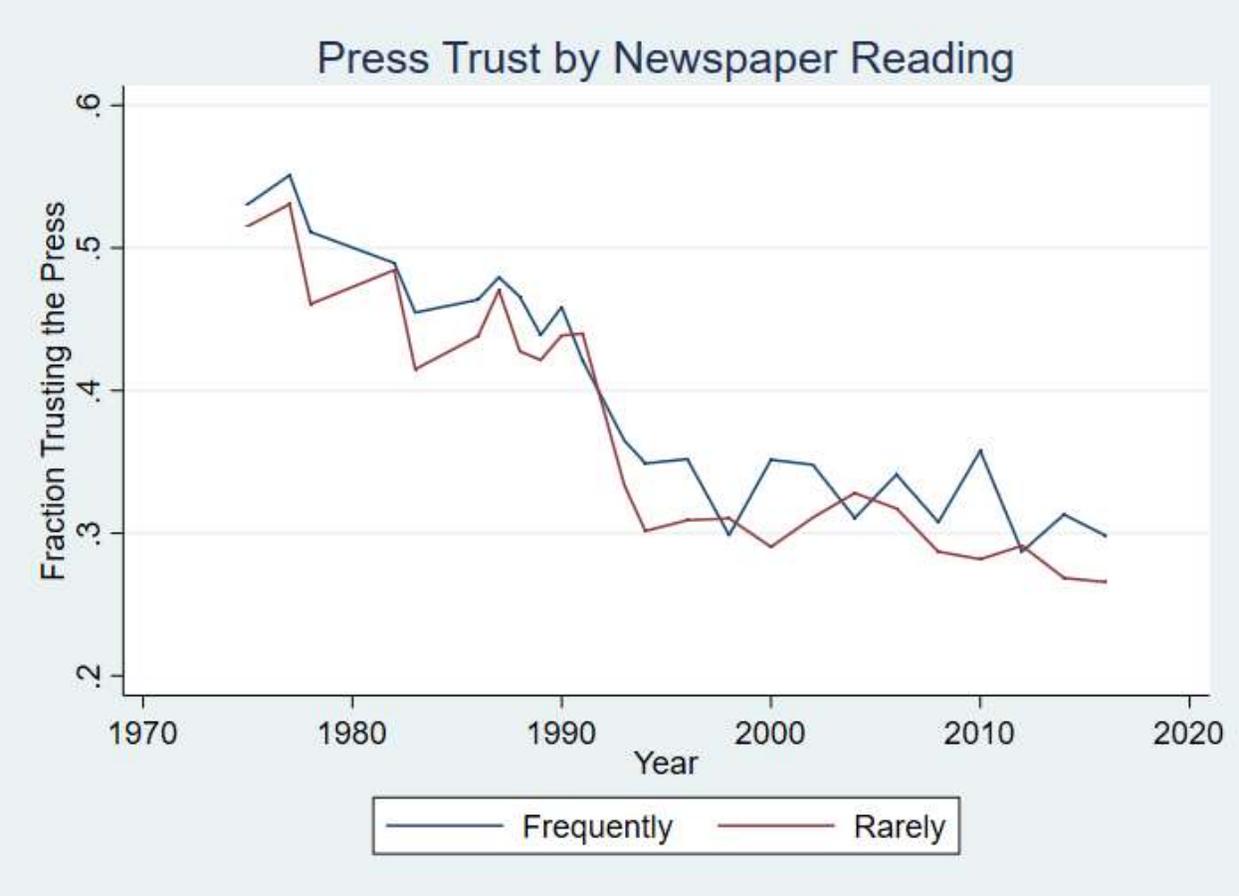


Figure 1.9

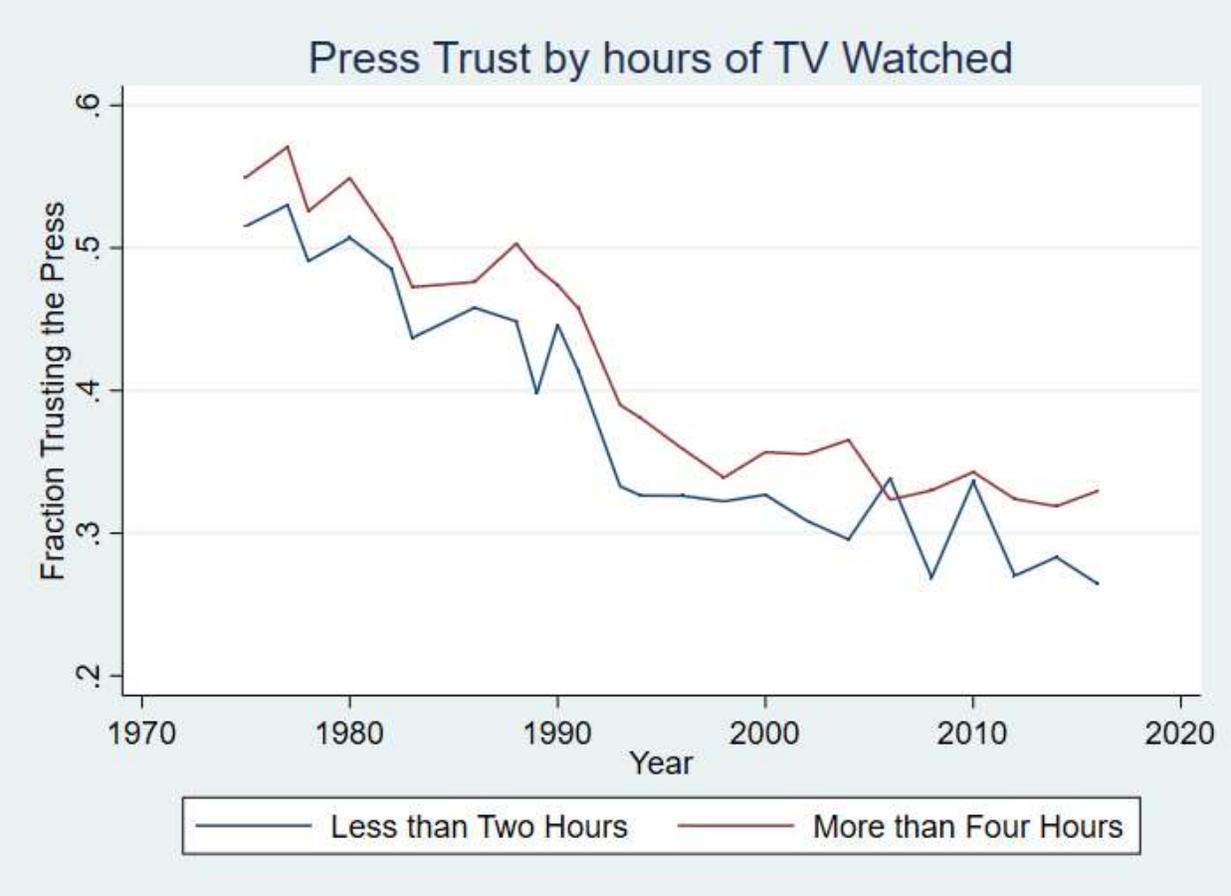


Figure 1.10

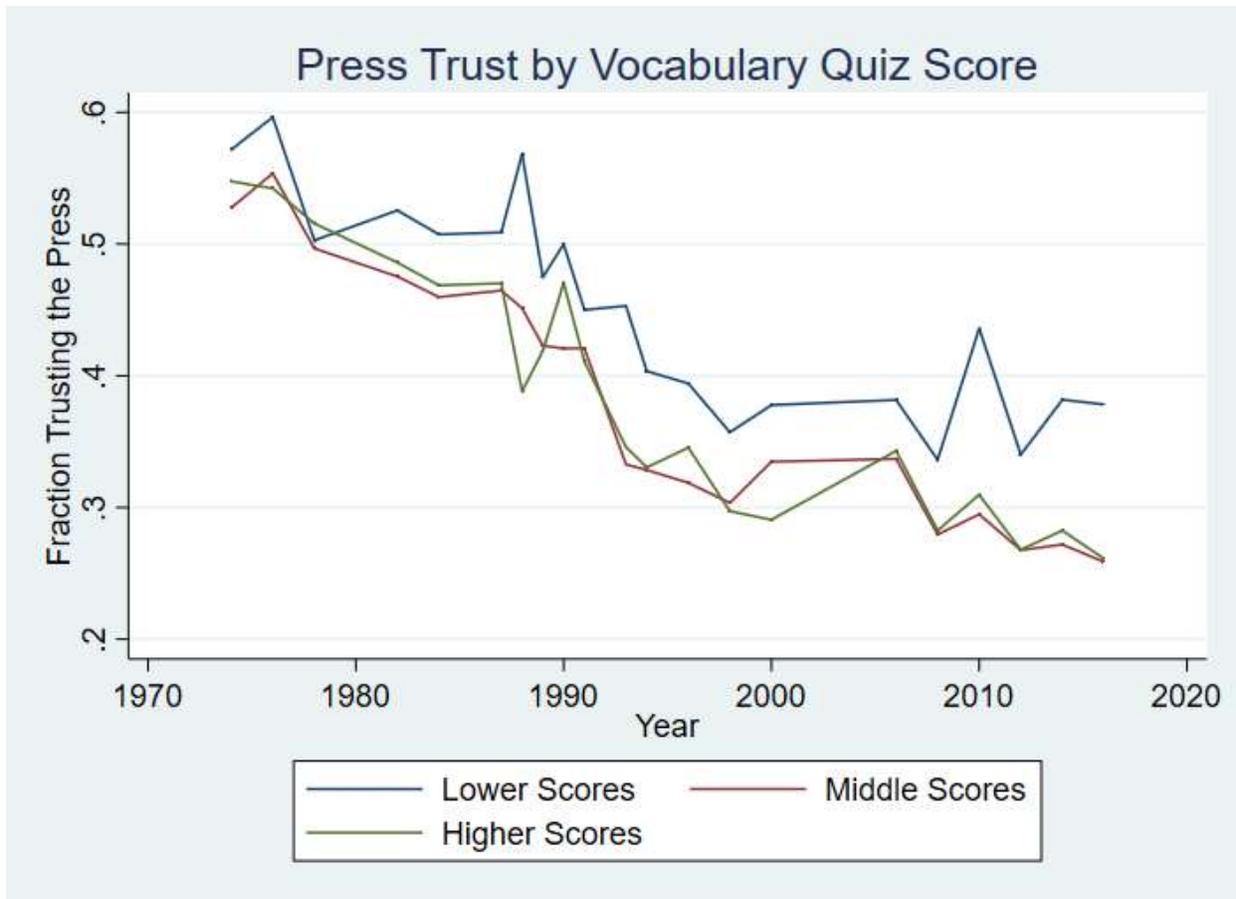


Figure 1.11

Finally, in education I was correct in my prediction that more highly educated and wealthier Americans would be more distrustful of the media (although whether these groups are driving media distrust still must be explored). For education, I separated those with a college degree or more with those with less than a High School diploma. While these groups had similar levels of trust for the 1970s and 1980s, a gap appeared after both groups sharply declined in trust in the early 1990s. Those with a college degree or more dropped 10 points more quickly and has fallen nearly 5 more points since then, whereas those with less than a high school degree have slowly fallen 5 to 10 points, creating a gap of more than 5% (figure 1.12).

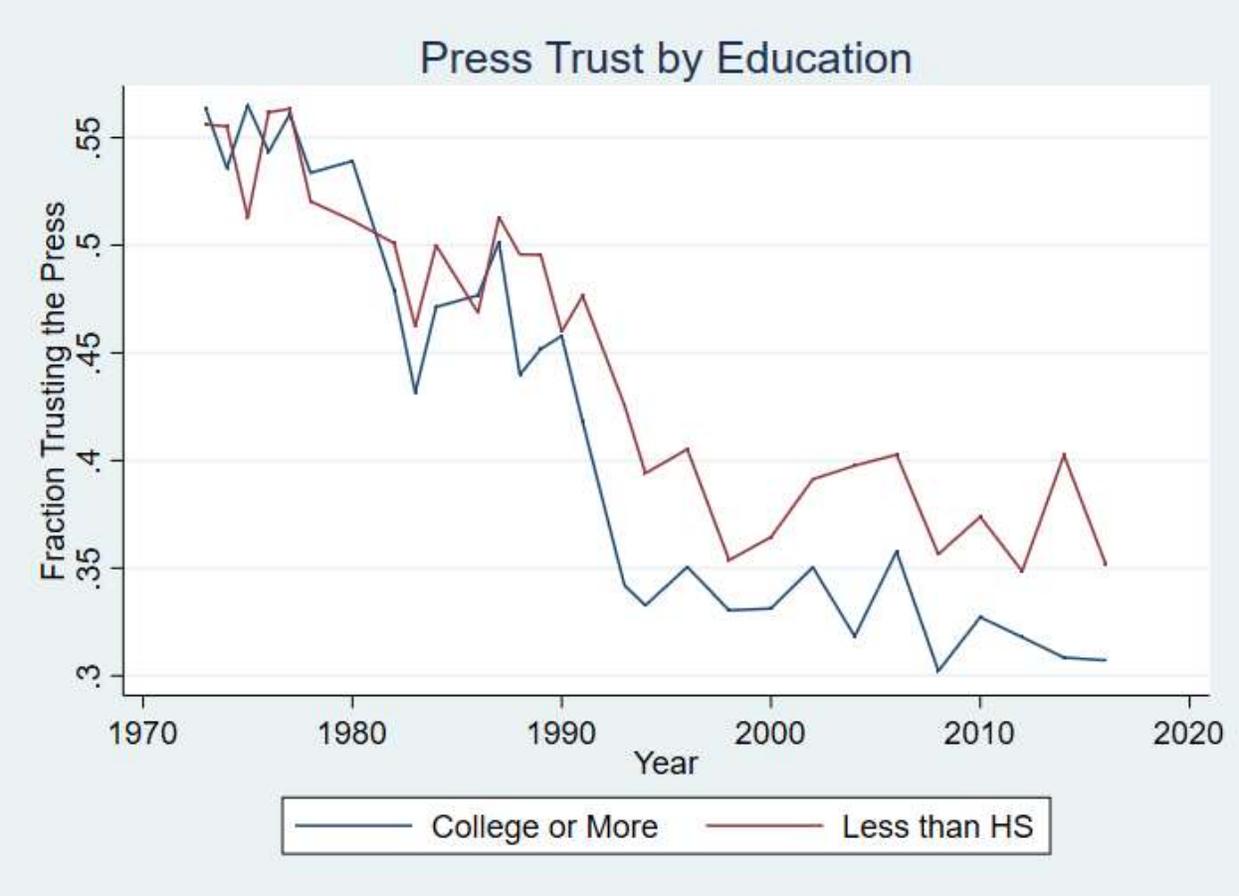


Figure 1.12

## Regression Analysis

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Pooled Sample	1978	1991	2016
Education	<b>-0.011</b> (0.001)	-0.003 (0.003)	-0.010 (0.005)	-0.005 (0.004)
Partisanship	<b>-0.015</b> (-0.001)	-0.003 (0.005)	-0.012 (0.008)	<b>-0.015</b> (0.006)
Male	-0.005 (0.005)	0.019 (0.017)	-0.007 (0.029)	0.032 (0.021)
Caucasian	<b>0.017</b> (0.006)	0.041 (0.028)	-0.117 (0.042)	<b>-0.067</b> (0.025)
Ideological Identification	<b>-0.021</b> (0.002)	<b>-0.024</b> (0.007)	-0.010 (0.012)	<b>-0.034</b> (0.008)
Age	<b>-0.002</b> (0.000)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	<b>0.002</b> (0.001)
Newspaper Reading Frequency	<b>-0.033</b> (0.002)	<b>-0.021</b> (0.008)	-0.026 (0.012)	-0.007 (0.007)
Amount of TV Watched	<b>0.004</b> (0.001)	0.007 (0.004)	0.005 (0.007)	0.007 (0.004)
Constant	0.784 (0.017)	0.658 (0.067)	0.760 (0.115)	0.492 (0.077)
N	19,363	1,401	502	924

Table 1: Media trust by demographic, isolated.

*Note:* Cell entries are regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses.

**P<0.05**

As had been seen in the simple analysis of the GSS, male and female respondents showed no significant difference in media trust in the regression analysis. Race, age, and newspaper readership are similarly insignificant when isolated by regression. As expected, partisanship and political views show a strongly significant difference (with Republicans and Conservatives showing significantly lower trust, respectively). Both TV hours and age were statistically significant but substantively insignificant, with both being positively correlated with trust. Partisanship and ideologies were also the only factors that increased in relevance from 1991 to 2016.

The substantial difference of partisanship and ideology supports the theories that media distrust is mainly due to the politicization and partisanship of the media (theory 2) and that it is mainly due to Americans' misperceptions of partisan bias in the media (theory 3). It undermines the theory that media distrust is mainly due to sensationalized and lower-quality news pieces (theory 1). The statistically significant higher trust for those who watch more television undermines the argument in theory 2 and does not support or undermine the other theories. The significant positive correlation with age undermines theory 1 and support theory 3. The fact that no significant difference in trust was observed based on education undermines theories 1 and 3 but lends support to theory 2. The lack of significance in other variables does not support or undermine the theories. The overall results are ambiguous, not clearly supporting any of the three theories that I tested.

## **Conclusion**

I started this project with a question about what caused the dramatic decline in media trust over the last four decades. Though, notably, this could be seen as returning to a norm of media distrust as opposed to a departure from the norm of high media confidence, it nonetheless represents a substantial and persistent unanswered puzzle in American politics. In order to find a general framework with which to explain the causes of media distrust, I grouped explanations into three broad-ranging theories, representing decades of scholarship on the issue. These three theories each implied unique differences between demographic groups; if the results were in line with any one of the set of predictions for each theory, this would support that theory's claims.

The actual results did not, however, fall cleanly in line with any set of predictions. The only substantially significant variables were political factors – partisanship and ideology. The statistical significance of two demographic factors – hours spent watching TV and age – along with the lack of significance of the other factors do not complement the partisan results in lending credibility to any of the three theories.

So where do these mixed results leave us in the search for the causes of media distrust? Clearly political partisanship and ideology are the dominant factors in determining Americans' level of confidence in the media. Whether this is primarily due to a change in the press or the public themselves cannot be established in this study; however, two aspects of the trends strongly suggest that changes to the public alone cannot account for the distrust. One of these aspects is that while Republicans and conservatives have lower, and increasingly lower, trust than Democrats and liberals, the long-run trend still shows these latter two groups substantially declining in media trust

as well. The other aspect is that, while Americans' general distrust may be linked with a growing public cynicism, confidence in the media has declined by a greater amount than that of other institutions (Gronke and Cooke 2007).

If the media itself must play a part in its reception to the public, future research could attempt to isolate media activities to analyze responses to individual characteristics of the media. These characteristics could be as subtle as slightly more cynical or satirical language or tone or greater acknowledgements of the limits of fact-finding. They could be in meta-trends, such as a greater emphasis on "soft" news or national politics. Perhaps it is in the style of reporting – critics of mainstream media argue that political issues are done a disservice by "game-framing": reporting politics primarily in strategic terms (Lawrence 2000). Or maybe it is the tendency of partisan and alternative sources to dispute and attack other, especially main-stream, sources. Simply by talking about bias in the media we may have reified its existence, sowing skepticism into a medium in which trust was once a given.

Though the causes of media distrust remain an unresolved issue, the implications of this distrust are hard to miss. A lower trust in the media damages the media's ability to inform the public: any news report has a greater chance of being disbelieved and Americans may instead believe alternative or social media sources to the contrary. The media's ability to act as a fact-checker, a whistleblower, and a platform to hold politicians and other public figures accountable are all severely limited by a great level of distrust. The presence of investigative journalism is vital to deterring corruption; state capitals that are far from population centers experience greater corruption, likely due to a lack of investigative media and consumers of such media (Hasen 2015). While it is

clear that many who have a low level of confidence in the mass media nonetheless consume it, it is likely that at some level of distrust they will dramatically decrease consumption, threatening to annihilate the media's revenue and influence.

This trend is magnified by partisanship. The extremely low media trust among Republicans and conservatives means that the media will have a tremendous difficulty in fact-checking, whistleblowing, and holding accountable right-wing groups or GOP politicians. Attempts to do so may not only be unconvincing among Republicans and conservatives but also may further turn these groups against the media due to a perceived bias. If as a result of a high media distrust, Republicans and conservatives were to drastically reduce their media consumption (or segregate to exclusively partisan or alternative sources), then mainstream sources will be economically incentivized to cater to the more Democratic and liberal inclinations of its remaining audience. This segregated, un-institutionalized media could easily disconnect from norms of journalistic ethics and accountability – leading exclusive viewers to never learn of major events that are politically inconvenient, such as investigations of politicians of their own partisan identification.

More fundamentally, institutions such as the media are only institutions so far as they play a role in our democratic society. Whether it is perceived as a marketplace of ideas or a system of democratic deliberation, the conglomeration of speech is what allows the United States and the world to create and accept the ideas that will define the future. Though the makeup and characteristics of the media has changed drastically since the days of the early republic, it still maintains the vital role in informing citizens that demanded that it be given its own special Constitutional protection: the freedom of

the press. It may not be possible to return to the levels of media confidence of a half century ago, and if it were to require recreating that landscape it may not even be desirable, but knowledge of the causes and implications of current media distrust may nonetheless prove valuable. The media does not simply relay current events: its actions also *are* current events, and Americans' relationship with the media reflects America's relationship with itself.

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