

Distrust of the News Media As a Symptom and a Further Cause of Partisan Polarization

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Political Attacks on the News Media

A defining characteristic of the modern political era is that more ideological parties have meant more conflict between politicians and the news media. Nevertheless, the strain between those in government and those in the Fourth Estate reached a new low following the election of Donald J. Trump as president. Speaking at his first major press conference following his election, the then-president-elect wasted no time before openly attacking the press from the bully pulpit, calling one news organization “a failing pile of garbage” and another “terrible” and “fake news.”¹ But while President Trump has been unprecedentedly blunt and crude in attacking the news media, he is certainly not the first politician to attack the institutional news media for political gain.

Political criticism of the news media has become increasingly common over the past 45 years, as the Republican Party gradually became a truly conservative Party and the Democratic Party an almost uniformly liberal one. In the middle of the twentieth century, conflict with the national news media was fairly rare among moderate Republicans in national politics. However, as the conservative movement slowly gained more power in the party, conflict with the institutional press increased. Barry Goldwater’s presidential nomination in 1964 marks the modern beginning of the conservative ascendancy in the Republican Party. Goldwater had a very strained relationship with the press. They covered him negatively and he frequently criticized them for it. Nationwide only 35% of newspapers endorsed Goldwater, while 42% endorsed President Johnson and 23 were editorially neutral.² When asked about how the news media covered him in a press conference the day after the election, he echoed his complaints from 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.³

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 send 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.⁴

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.”⁵ Of course, when the Watergate scandal engulfed the 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.⁶

Justified or not, by the 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 election⁷ 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.”⁸ 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*.⁹

On the campaign trail in 2000, a hot mic picked up then-candidate George W. Bush whisper to Dick Cheney referring to a *New York Times* reporter as an expletive.¹⁰ In 2002, President George W. Bush endorsed Bernard Goldberg's book, *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News* by prominently displaying a copy under his arm in front of photographers when leaving for a trip to Maine in 2002.¹¹

Criticism of the news media began as a tactic of the conservative movement, where it was directed at institutional news sources, such as the broadcast networks, national newspapers and later CNN, which they perceived as unfriendly to them and their cause. Yet, as the Democratic Party has become more uniformly liberal (part of the trend of both parties being more ideologically consistent) and more conservative news outlets such as talk radio and especially Fox News have come to prominence, national Democrats have also criticized the press. President Clinton had a very tense relationship because he objected to how the covered the Whitewater and Lewinsky Scandals, although he only occasionally made his criticisms public.¹²

By the Obama administration, Fox News was firmly established as the most viewed cable news channel. They criticized Fox's coverage often. The Obama Administration often targeted Fox News specifically. In 2009, less than a year into the 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."¹³ 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.”¹⁴

On the Republican side, even before Trump’s candidacy, outsider candidates had tried for several presidential election cycles to gain traction with extra-strident criticism of the news media. During the 2012 Republican primaries, the frontrunner and eventual nominee Mitt Romney was challenged for months by Newt Gingrich, who made attacking the media in Republican debates a centerpiece of his campaign strategy. In a September 2011 debate, he responded to a question from *Politico*’s John Harris by proclaiming, “I for one, and I hope that all of my friends up here, are going to repudiate every effort of the news media to get Republicans to fight each other, to protect Barack Obama who deserves to be defeated.”¹⁵ In a November 2011 debate, he responded to a question about the national economic by lamenting, “It is sad that the news media doesn’t report accurately how the economy works.”¹⁶ Later, he responded to a health care policy question by Maria Bartiromo of CNBC by saying, “My colleagues have done a terrific job answering an absurd question.”¹⁷ Even Fox News reporters were not safe. In a Fox-sponsored debate, he angrily told moderator Chris Wallace, “I wish you would put aside the gotcha questions... I would love to see the rest of tonight’s debate [involve] asking us about what we would do to lead an America whose president has failed to lead instead of playing Mickey Mouse games.”¹⁸ In a January 2012 debate, when CNN’s John King asked Gingrich about his alleged past marital infidelity, Gingrich pivoted to an attack on the media: “I think the destructive, vicious negative nature of much of the news media makes it harder to govern this country, harder to attract decent people to run for public office. I’m appalled you would begin a presidential debate on a topic like that.”¹⁹ Discussing attacks on the press during the 2012 primaries, *New York Times* reporter Jeff Zeleny, observed that, “It is a very common

tactic for Republican presidential candidates, or even Democratic presidential candidates, to try and use the media as foil here..”²⁰

The pattern continued in 2016, when Trump wasn’t the only presidential candidate to attack the media. During the third Republican debate, Sen. Ted Cruz said, “The questions asked so far in this debate illustrate why the American don’t trust the media. This is not a cage match... How about talking about the substantive issues people care about?” He was greeted with loud applause inside the auditorium and this comment received the highest scores ever recorded in one of Frank Luntz’s focus groups.²¹ Sen. Marco Rubio followed up by stating: “The Democrats have the ultimate super PAC, they’re called the mainstream media.”²² He, too, was greeted with thunderous applause from the Republican debate attendees.

Yet Donald Trump was arguably the politician most consistently critical of the media in 2016, expressing his displeasure at the press during campaign rally speeches as well as via his prolific Twitter presence. Describing a December rally during the primary campaign in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, *USA Today* writes, “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.”²³ 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.”²⁴

Covering Trump, reporters discovered that the negative feelings toward the press were strongly shared by the candidate’s supporters as well. Steve Lemongello of the *Orlando Sentinel* reported that a prayer at a Trump rally referred to the media as a “den of vipers,” “crooked,”

“biased,” and having “the stench of evil.”²⁵ *CNN* reporter Noah Gray explained how a Sunrise, Florida, crowd changed the words of the oft-repeated, anti-Hillary Clinton “Lock Her Up” chant to “Lock Them Up,” referring to the press.²⁶ Finally, in a very extreme case of anti-media sentiment reported at a Trump rally, a sign was left near the media area displaying a swastika with the word “media” near it.²⁷

Democratic presidential candidates also complained about the mainstream media. Senator Bernie Sanders often decried the “corporate media” and even expressed a desire to “start new media.”²⁸ Speaking to Rachel Maddow on *MSNBC*, Sanders explained: “We have got to think of ways the Democratic Party, for a start, starts funding the equivalent of Fox television... [P]ressure has got to be put on media.”²⁹ Secretary Hillary Clinton also raised issues with the media’s treatment of candidate Trump during the election. At one fundraiser, Clinton lamented the media’s handling of Donald Trump. *CNN* reported her comments, stating, “she wished ‘he would be asked the follow-up questions’ about his plans and proposals, arguing that he gets away with empty plans and promises.”³⁰ Months after the election was over, Secretary Clinton weighed in on the media once more, launching particular attacks at conservative media arguing: “The other side has dedicated propaganda channels. That’s what I call Fox News. It has outlets like Breitbart and crazy InfoWars and things like that... I think the Democrats can do a lot but they are still going to face a very difficult media environment.”³¹ It seems that politicians on both sides of the aisle might agree that the fractured media landscape breeds distrust.

After Trump took office, this style of rhetoric about the media persisted, most frequently in President Trump’s Twitter account. Less than a month after the president’s inauguration, he tweeted that, “The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!”³² Reiterating this point but

also suggesting there is ideological bias, Trump later tweeted, "Network news has become so partisan, distorted and fake that licenses must be challenged and, if appropriate, revoked. Not fair to public!"³³ Like his predecessor, Trump decided to go after organizations perceived to be ideologically biased. But his complaints about distrusting the media are not solely about ideological bias. Akin to Secretary Clinton's comments during the campaign, President Trump also takes issue with *reporting*. Tweeting in December 2017, Trump explained, "Very little discussion of all the purposely false and defamatory stories put out this week by the Fake News Media. They are out of control - correct reporting means nothing to them. Major lies written, then forced to be withdrawn after they are exposed...a stain on America!"³⁴

Following President Trump's first hundred days, these media attacks seem to be effective with his supporters. According to a national survey of 1000 Trump supporters who were asked "Do you agree or disagree with Donald Trump's statement that the press 'is the enemy of the American people?'" 87% of respondents agreed. As Rich Lowry, the editor of *National Review*, wrote in his piece "The Media is Trump's Evil Empire" for *Politico Magazine*, "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."³⁵ Even after Trump leaves office, as long as Republicans perceive the press as "the out-group, the enemy,"³⁶ some type of regular public jousting between them and the press will likely continue.

All this is a stark contrast to the 1950s and early 1960s, when criticism of the national news media by major politicians was rare, and the press was popular among both parties. As the parties have become ideologically sorted, with the Republicans more uniformly conservative and the Democrats more uniformly liberal, attacks on the news media from both sides have become a

major part of national politics. This has led some journalists to lament over how they are treated. In his postmortem on the 2004 presidential election, the then-Dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism Nicholas Lemann wrote in the *New Yorker* that, "...2004 was such a bad-karma campaign year for the mainstream media, which collectively felt both more harshly attacked and less important—a pair of misfortunes that rarely occur at the same time." Former Editor-in-Chief of *The Hotline* and current *Congressional Quarterly* blogger Craig Crawford wrote in his 2006 book, *Attack the Messenger: How Politicians Turn You against the Media*, that "Today's media is as bullied as ever" and that "Public distrust of the news media is one of the most hazardous political challenges now facing Americans."³⁷

This high level of political attacks on the news media, growing over the 45 years and reaching a new peak with resident Trump, has been one of the major causes of the large decline in the public's trust in the media. 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. Partisan polarization and political attacks on the media are not the only causes of declining trust in the media. The changing technological landscape, which allows ideological cable channels and web sites to flourish, and the end of the fairness doctrine, which legalized ideological radio shows, are also a part of the story. These technological and legal changes enhanced the effects of the polarized national partisan environment. National politicians increasingly see establishment news outlets and outlets affiliated with the other side as needing to be discredited in their supporter's eyes. And as this rhetoric succeeds, and trust in the press falls, it only incentivizes future politicians to appeal to people's existing skepticism of the news media criticism them further.

The Decline in Media Trust

Over the past 45 years, there has been incredible growth in the number of media options. While in the 1950s and 1960s people had relatively few choices for news and entertainment, now they have much more discretion. They can watch as much (or as little) news and entertainment as they want. In the realm of news, they can choose sources that focus on all varieties of information, including topics such as celebrity and entertainment, business, sports, as well as politics.³⁸ Finally even among the political news options, there are different styles from which to choose. One can select information presented in a style similar to that which predominated in the mid-twentieth century, in which the journalist attempts to present the facts from a neutral perspective, or a source that mixes information with opinion and analysis. Sometime the latter format features debate, where competing sides argue about a political issue. But more often different sources occupy their own ideological niches on different news outlets, and present the news from either a liberal or conservative perspective.³⁹

Yet ironically, despite each person's ability to craft her media diet to suit her preferences, satisfaction with the media has not increased. In fact, it is much lower than in the mid-twentieth century, when people had a comparatively meager selection. Figure 1 shows the percentage of the public that believed newspapers were fair, as measured in the 1956 American National Election Study (ANES), a nationally representative survey conducted at the time of that year's presidential election. The figure separates respondents by party identification and political knowledge. In the mid-1950s, people identifying with both parties had substantial faith in the press's fairness. Overall, 78% of Republicans and 64% of Democrats believed newspapers were fair. Political knowledge had only a small relationship to these attitudes. The only exception was a small decline in beliefs about fairness as Democrats became more knowledgeable. In the third and fifth knowledge categories (out of five), only 48 and 50 percent believed newspapers were

fair, while in the first and second categories, 64% and 74% believed that they were fair. Yet overall, a much greater proportion of people had trust in the media than would in subsequent decades, across all party and knowledge categories.

The General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative survey of social attitudes conducted approximately every 2 years, has included a question battery probing trust in a variety of social institutions, including the press, in every survey since 1973. Figure 2 graphs average confidence in the press among GSS respondents from 1973 to 2016. As a point of comparison, it also shows average confidence across all other institutions in the GSS battery.⁴⁰ Confidence in the press has declined fairly dramatically since the early 1970s. In the early 1970s, confidence in the press was at roughly the average level of confidence in all institutions in the GSS question battery. In the 1980s and 1990s, confidence in the press diverged, becoming much lower than the typical level.

The pattern is not confined to Republicans, as some people have speculated. Figure 3 presents the same GSS data separated into Democrats and Republican groups.⁴¹ Democrats have consistently had more confidence in the press than Republicans have had, but this does not obscure the secular trend. 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 intern Monica Lewinsky was exposed. The gap then grew substantially during George W. Bush's presidency, a gap that persisted through the Obama administration.

Putting this all together, you can think of the change in confidence in the press as taking place in two phases. The first phase was the 1980s and 1990s, when average confidence in the press declined, without much of a gap opening between the parties. Confidence in the press

declined in both parties. The second phase is after 2000, when confidence in the press polarized along party lines. A large gap opened between the parties in their levels of confidence in the press, a gap that persists to this day. This may be because, even though the rise of Fox News led to more criticism of the media from Democrats, Fox is not considered part of the media establishment by most people. On the other hand, Republican criticism of the press continued to grow more frequent and was focused on outlets that are more clearly part of the traditional establishment media.

To compare more closely how confidence in the press has changed relative to other institutions, Figure 4 compares confidence levels in specific institutions in the GSS question battery between 1973 and 2016. Confidence in the press has seen one of the steepest declines of any institution measured. Only one institution inspires more confidence in 2016 than it did in 1973: the military. Confidence in the scientific community and in organized labor are essentially unchanged, yet, beyond that, most the other institutions experienced some level of declining confidence. Confidence declined modestly in major companies, education, organized religion, medicine, television, and the Supreme Court. Yet three institutions suffered fairly large declines in confidence: Congress, the press and the executive branch. Although the past decades have been an era of mostly declining confidence in American national institutions, the decline in confidence in the press is one of the steepest that was measured.

In summary, the public has become less confident in the press as an institution over the past 45 years. This decline is one of the steepest of any national institution. The decline has occurred among both parties, although a substantial partisan gap in press confidence has opened since 2000.

Media Distrust Polarizes Political Perceptions and Media Choices

Does this growing distrust of the institutional media change how people learn about the political world? There is substantial evidence that it does.⁴² Those who distrust the media are less influenced by new messages they encounter. Instead, they rely more on their prior beliefs and partisan predispositions to form their current political perceptions. This happens for two reasons. First, even when someone who distrusts the press confronts the exact same message as someone who trusts the press, the former will be less accepting of the message. But that is not all. Those who distrust the media are also exposed to different messages because they tend to select the media outlets they use based on their partisanship, choosing those that reinforce their predispositions.

An especially clear way to see this is to look just at messages about facts, not opinions. National conditions are sets of facts that are especially important to politics because voters tend to reward and punish the president and Congress based on the overall state of the country. Here is an example. The 2000 ANES asked several questions about people's perceptions of how certain national conditions had changed during the 8 years that Bill Clinton had been president. Even though the questions do not ask who should take blame or credit, but simply what changes have taken place, responses differed across party affiliation. Because this was a period when a Democrat was president, Democrats tended to believe that trends in national conditions were better than Republicans believed them to be. This tendency to see objective national conditions through a partisan lens has been documented before.⁴³ Yet here one can see the role of media distrust in enhancing these partisan differences.

Figure 5 shows beliefs about how national conditions changed between 1992 and 2000 in five different areas. In each, everyone agrees what a good trend would be, regardless of one's ideology or partisanship. For instance, everyone agrees that the economy getting better and the

deficit shrinking would be positive outcomes, all else equal.⁴⁴ These are the type of questions that tend to produce partisan biases, where people tend to think their party's presidents produce better results and the opposing party's presidents poorer ones.

Figure 5 shows the partisan divide in perceptions of change in these areas among those with less or more trust in the media. In four out of the five areas, partisan divisions in perceptions of national conditions are larger when people distrust the news media. The only perceptions that are not more polarized when people distrust the media are those of the crime rate.⁴⁵ In every other area, we can see the results of distrusting new messages and relying more on partisan sources of information.⁴⁶

Figure 6 shows a similar pattern in response to questions in the 2004 ANES, which included three questions about how national conditions had changed over the past year. These questions asked about the overall national economy, the unemployment rate, and the inflation rate. The pattern in 2004 is the same as in Figure 5. Of course, in 2004 a Republican was president. So the polarity of the partisan bias is reversed. Republicans now perceive national conditions more positively than Democrats do. But in each of these areas, the amount of partisan polarization is greater among those with less media trust.

As we mentioned at the start of this section, one component of this polarization is the result of people resisting new messages they encounter in the mass media, but another part of this polarization is people choosing to expose themselves to different messages altogether.⁴⁷

Figure 7 presents data from the 2010 Pew Research Center's "Media Consumption Survey." It shows the percentage of Democrats and Republicans who report using various prominent news sources "sometimes" or "regularly," yet it separates them according to whether or not they think there is "a lot" of political bias in news coverage. Attitudes toward the news

media are playing an important role in partisan media selection. Local news, which is subjected to little political criticism, shows no discernable partisan usage pattern. But the other six sources are all the subject of more partisan self-selection when people have less trust in the media's accuracy.

Media outlets often criticized for having liberal biases are used more frequently by Democrats than Republicans, a gap that increases among those who distrust the media. As one moves from those who do not perceive a lot of media bias to those who do, one moves from Republicans being 9 percentage points more likely to watch network news to Democrats being 9 percentage points more likely to watch. The gap between Democrats and Republicans in their CNN viewership grows from 5 to 22 percentage points. The partisan gap in NPR listenership grows from 5 to 13 percentage points. The gap in PBS News Hour viewership grows from 7 to 13 percentage points. And the partisan gap in MSNBC viewership grows from 4 to 24 percentage points.

The one outlet in this table that is often criticized for having a conservative slant is the Fox News channel. Republicans are more likely to watch Fox than Democrats. But, in keeping with the pattern, this selectivity is more extreme among those who think the overall media are biased. Among those who do not perceive a lot of bias, 56 percent of Republicans and 38 percent of Democrats watch Fox at least sometimes, a 19 percentage point gap. But among those who perceive a lot of overall media bias, 75 percent of Republicans and 33 percent of Democrats watch Fox, a 42 point gap.

In summary, not only are those who distrust media messages more likely to resist the messages that they do encounter, they encounter different messages because they select media outlets that reinforce their partisan predispositions.

The Polarization of Trust in Specific News Outlets

The changes in confidence in the press as an institution have been followed by changes in which specific types of news sources Americans trust. As mentioned above, confidence in the press as an institution changed in two waves. First, overall average levels of confidence in the press declined, mostly in the 1980s and 1990s. Second, since 2000, the parties have polarized in the levels of confidence in the press, with Democrats holding less negative attitudes toward the press than Republicans. This environment, where confidence in the press as an institution tends to be low with substantial partisan divisions, has been accompanied by the public's attitudes toward specific types of news outlets taking a very partisan turn.

Figure 8 shows the extent to which Democrats, Republicans, and Independents “trust the information they get from” four different types of sources, based on a 2017 Pew Research Center survey. There are relatively small differences in how much different types of partisans trust information from friends, family and acquaintances and social networking sites. However, when we turn toward types of sources that are traditionally considered part of the media, we see big partisan differences. Local news organizations are trusted by 36% of Democrats but only 24% of Republicans. The gap for national news organizations is even larger. Thirty-four percent of Democrats trust national news organizations for information, while only 11% of Republicans do the same.

The 2014 Pew Research Center survey of “Political Polarization and Media Habits” dug a little deeper by asking about trust in a series of very specific outlets. It found large differences in trust among committed political ideologues. To illustrate, Figure 9 compares the percentage of strong liberals and strong conservatives who said they trust or don't trust a series of prominent media outlets in the United States. The percentage who said they “neither” trusted or distrusted

the outlet or had not heard of the outlet is not included in the chart. This is why the percentages for each new outlet add up to less than 100%. These options being available means that expressions of trust or distrust can be interpreted as a measure of intensity or feeling and/or familiar with the news outlet.

What is most striking about Figure 9 is that almost none of these famous national media brands is trusted by both liberals and conservatives. The only outlet with a higher percentage trust than distrust among both liberals and conservatives is the Wall Street Journal. Beyond that, among liberals, many more people trust than distrust NPR, PBS, the New York Times, all three broadcast networks, MSNBC, CNN and the Huffington Post. Yet in each of these cases, the situation is reversed for strong conservatives. Many more conservatives distrust than trust each of these outlets.

On the other hand, news outlets with conservative reputations, including Fox News, Breitbart, the Rush Limbaugh Show and the Sean Hannity Show, are all much more trusted than distrusted by strong conservatives and almost exclusively distrusted by strong liberals. Ideologues seem to have the strongest opinions about Fox News channel. Eighty-eight percent of strong conservative trust Fox News, and 81% of strong liberals distrust it. Turning to the other conservative sources, Breitbart, the Rush Limbaugh Show and the Sean Hannity Show are trusted by, respectively, 25%, 62% and 58% of strong conservatives. Meanwhile, 0% of strong liberals trust any of these three sources.

As the news media has become a hot topic of partisan debate, confidence and trust in the media as an institution has declined and polarized. Part of this politicization of attitudes toward the media is that those on different sides of the political divide trust different specific sources for information. This exacerbates the polarization in beliefs about facts discussed above.

Conclusion

In the last 45 years, the public's trust in the media has significantly declined. This has happened in two parts. First, the overall average level of confidence in the press declined in the 1980s and 1990s. Next, since approximately 2000, a gap has widened between Democrats and Republicans, with Democrats now having substantially more confidence in the press as an institution than Republicans, perhaps because Republican criticism of the press has been more frequent, more intense, and more focused on establishment news outlets.

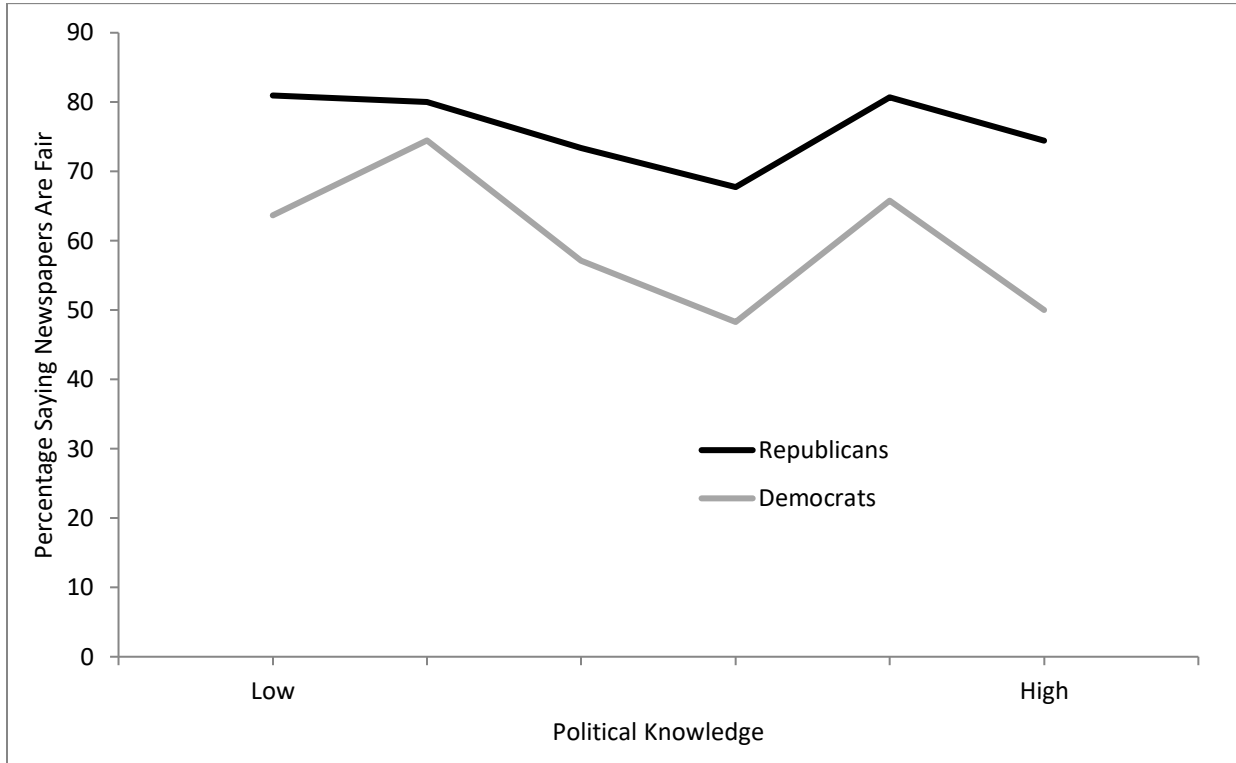
As this has happened, the media environment has become much more fragmented and partisan. Major media organizations still exist that the public associates with the conventional style of journalism practiced in the mid-twentieth century. But now these organizations must constantly compete with other news sources that provide news in a more ideological and/or entertaining style. In this environment, where people regularly choose which type of news source to use for information, one's level of trust in the mainstream (or institutional) news media is more consequential than ever.

Those who distrust the media as an institution are more likely to seek out news outlets that reinforce their partisan predispositions. They are also more likely to resist information from the mainstream media. As a result, those who distrust the media have beliefs about national conditions that are more reflective of their partisan predispositions than do those who have more media trust. Media distrust is a symptom of, and also contributes to, the growing partisan polarization of the American political system.⁴⁸ Whether media trust continues to decline will be an important determinant of whether America's partisan divide grows even wider in the years ahead.

Discussion Questions

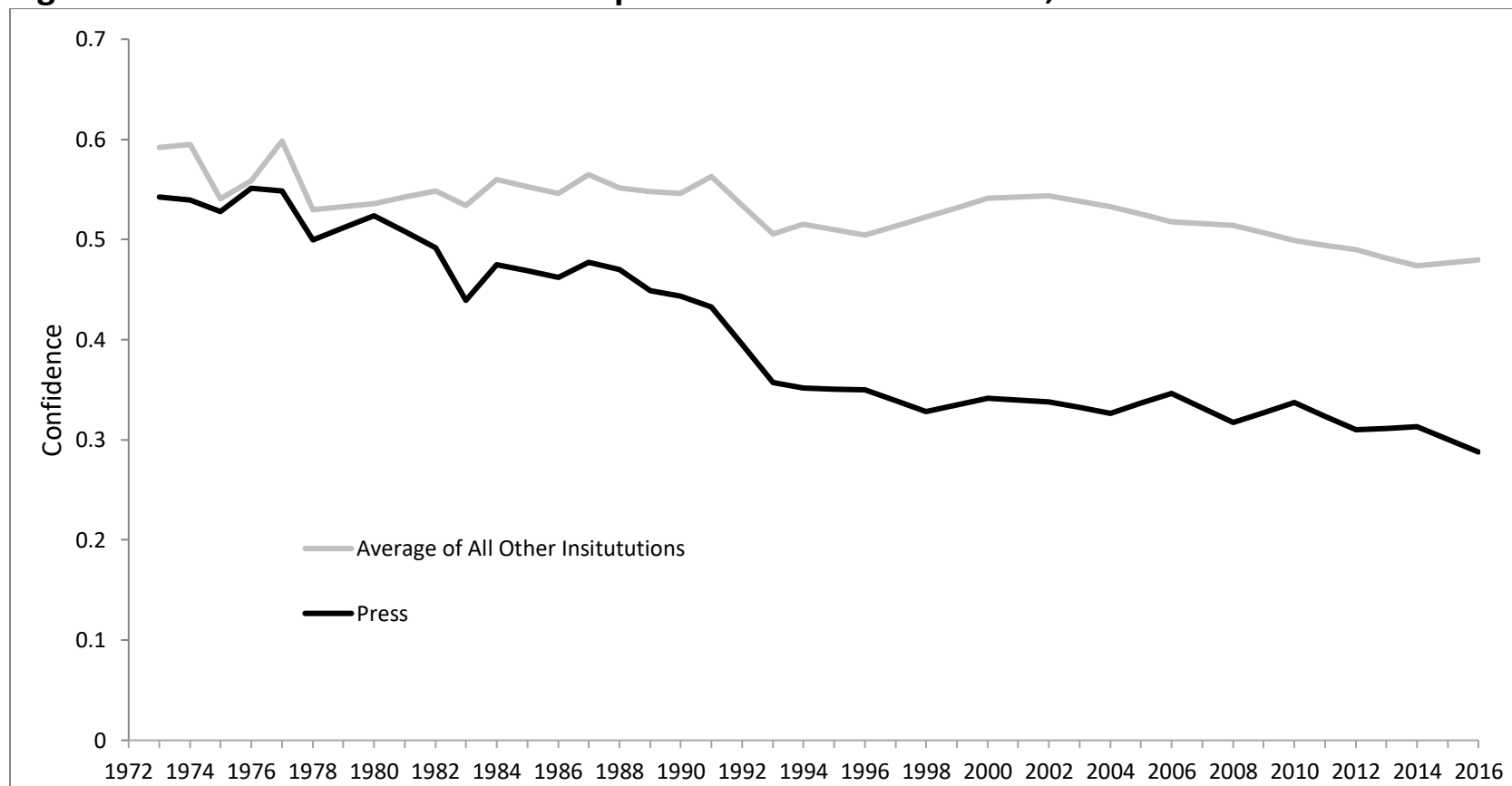
1. Why do you think was the main cause of declining media trust after the 1950s and 1960s?
Was it really political polarization or might there be another ultimate cause of this?
2. In Figure 3, why do you think that the gap between Democrats and Republicans in their trust in the media grew wider after about 2000 but not before?
3. In Figure 4, what distinguishes the institutions that have lost the most popularity since the 1970s compared with those that have not? Are there any patterns here?
4. In general, is it a good thing to be more skeptical of information sources in general and more selective about which specific news sources you trust (as shown in Figures 8 and 9)? Isn't it rational to trust information sources who agree with your preferences?
5. What type of media environment should reformers try to work to create in the future?
Should we try to recreate a news environment where there is a fairly homogeneous media establishment that is highly trusted, but that offers few choices? If not, what is better?
And what do we hope the state of media trust will look like in that desired media landscape?

Figure 1: Belief in Newspaper Fairness in 1956



Source: 1956 American National Election Studies Time Series Survey

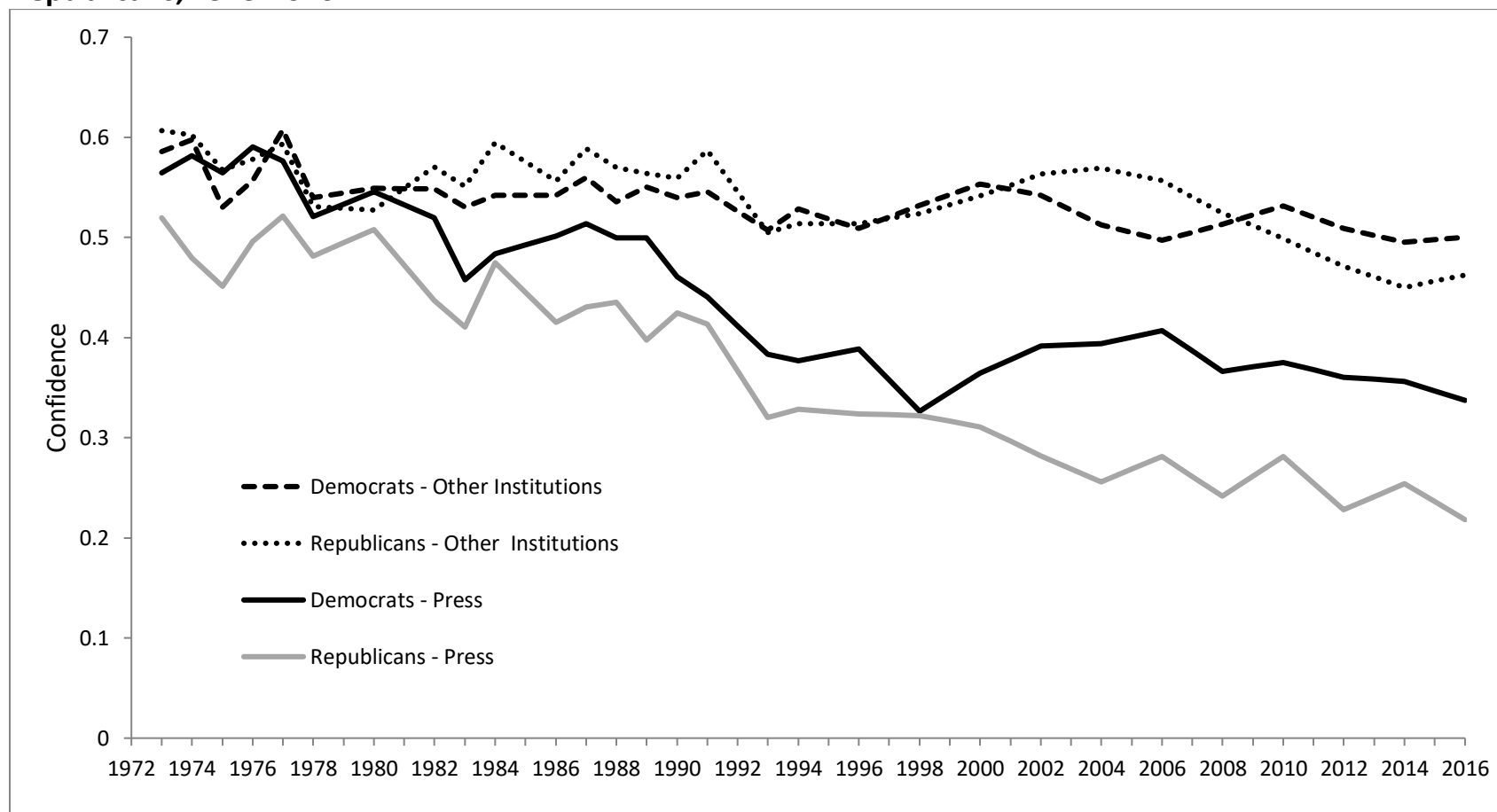
Figure 2: Confidence in the Press Compared to Other Institutions, 1973-2016



Source: 1973-2016 General Social Surveys

Note: Figure graphs average confidence across all respondents in the given GSS survey. Responses are coded so that 1 indicates “a great deal,” .5 indicates “only some,” and 0 indicates “hardly any” trust. The y-axis indicates the average confidence across the whole (weighted) sample when the responses are coded this way. 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.

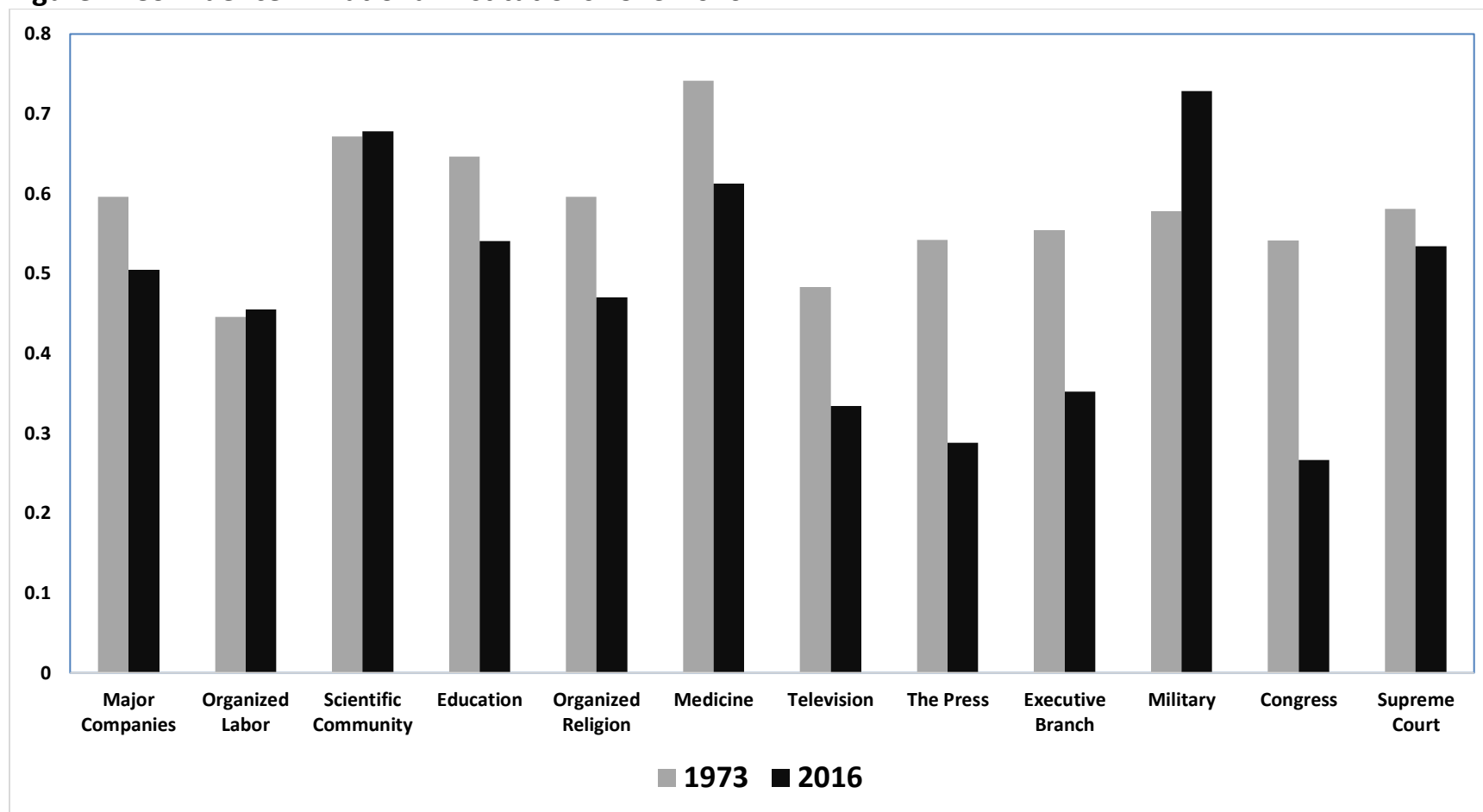
Figure 3: Confidence in the Press compared to Confidence in Other Institutions among Democrats and Republicans, 1973-2016



Source: 1973-2016 General Social Surveys

Note: Figure graphs average confidence across all respondents in the given GSS survey. Responses are coded so that 1 indicates “a great deal,” .5 indicates “only some,” and 0 indicates “hardly any” trust. The y-axis indicates the average confidence across the whole (weighted) sample when the responses are coded this way. 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.

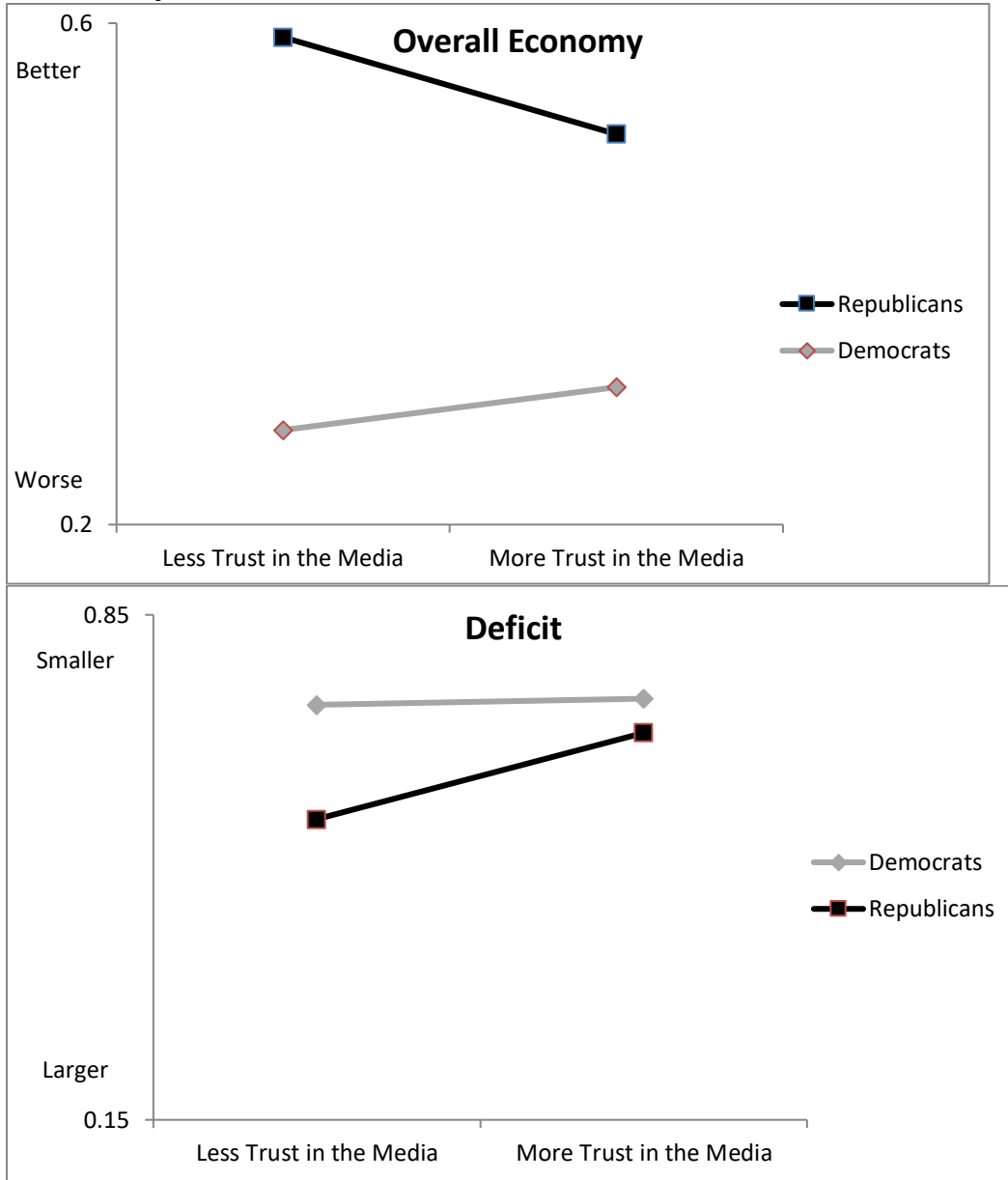
Figure 4: Confidence in National Institutions 1973-2016

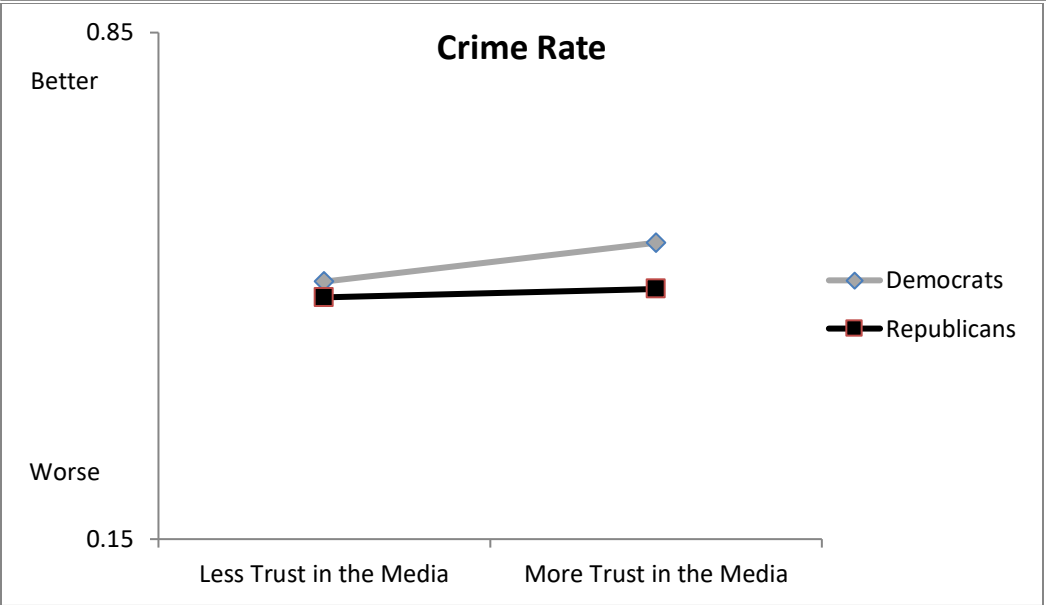
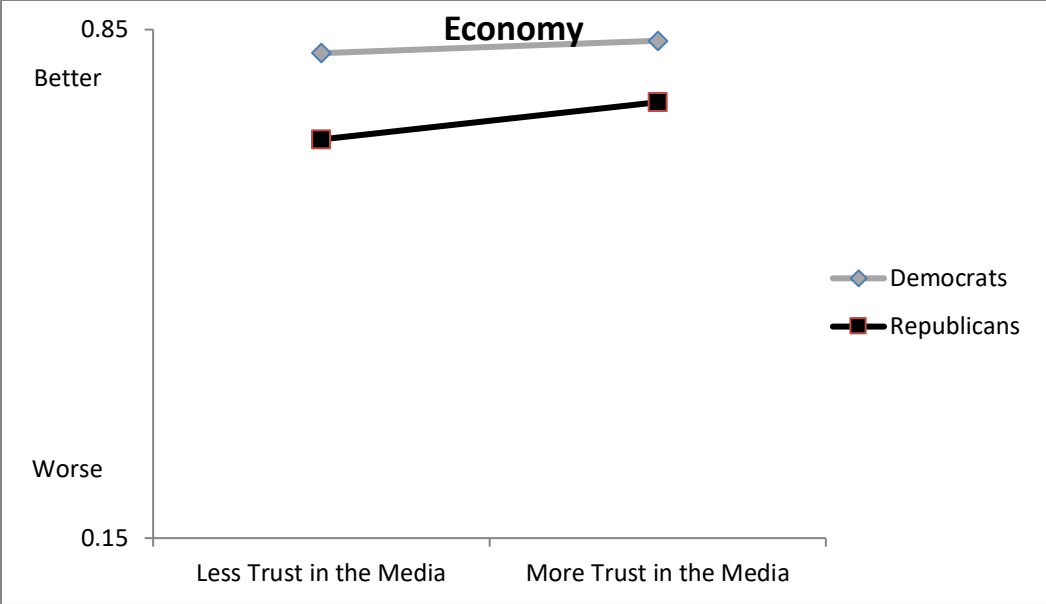


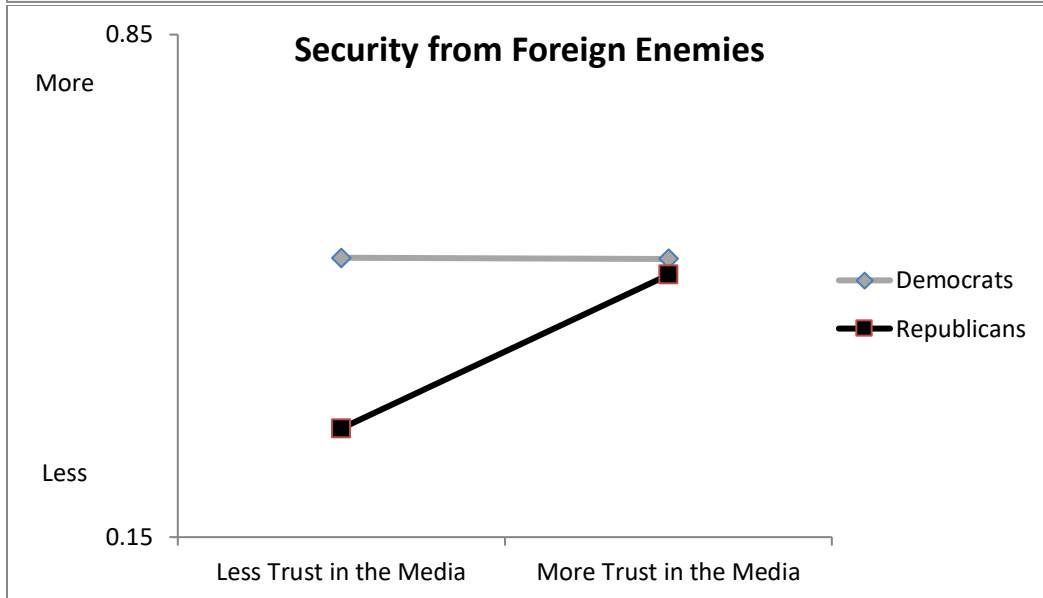
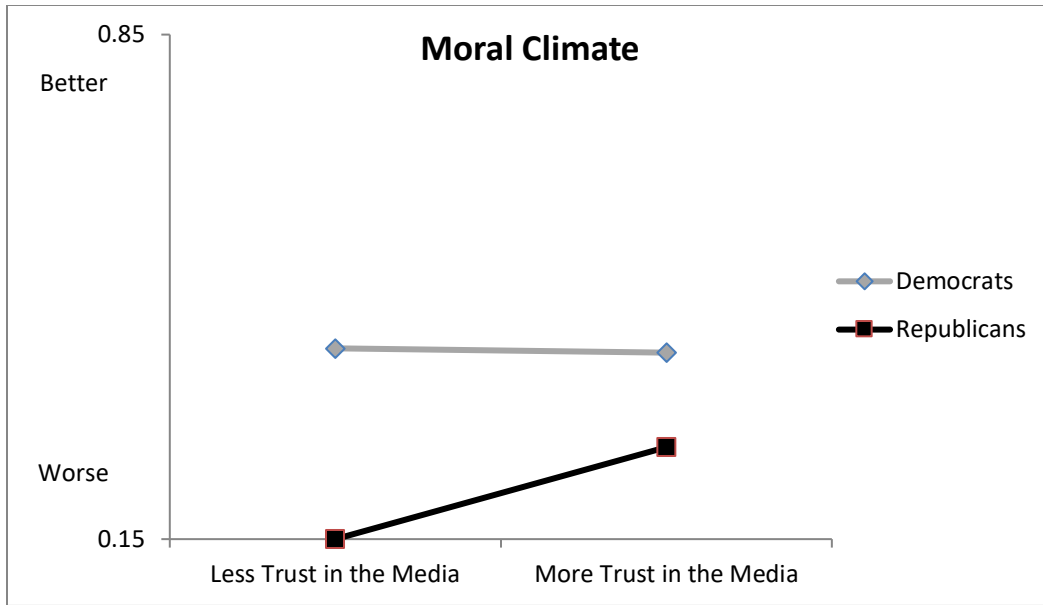
Source: 1973-2016 General Social Surveys

Note: Figure graphs average confidence across all respondents in the given GSS survey. Responses are coded so that 1 indicates “a great deal,” .5 indicates “only some,” and 0 indicates “hardly any” trust. The y-axis indicates the average confidence across the whole (weighted) sample when the responses are coded this way.

Figure 5: Perceptions of Change in National Conditions During Bill Clinton's Presidency



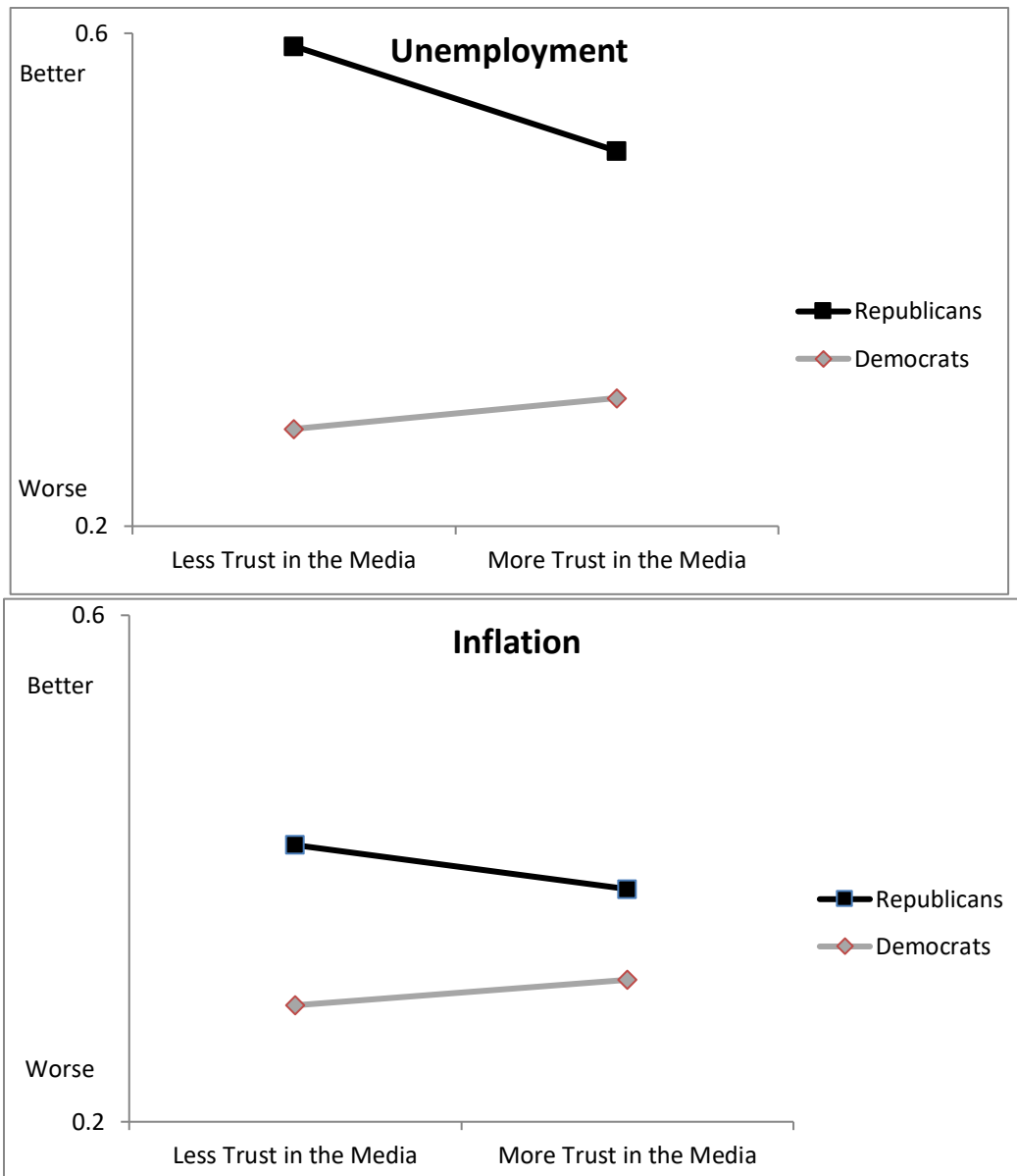




Note: Each perception variable is coded to range from 0 to 1, with interior categories equally spaced between those endpoints. For ease of presentation, those saying they trust the media “only some of the time” or “almost never” are grouped here as “Less Trust in the Media.” Those who trust the media “most of the time” or “just about always” are grouped in the “More Trust in the Media” category. Average perceptions of change in the moral climate among Republicans with “Less Trust in the Media” are exactly .15.

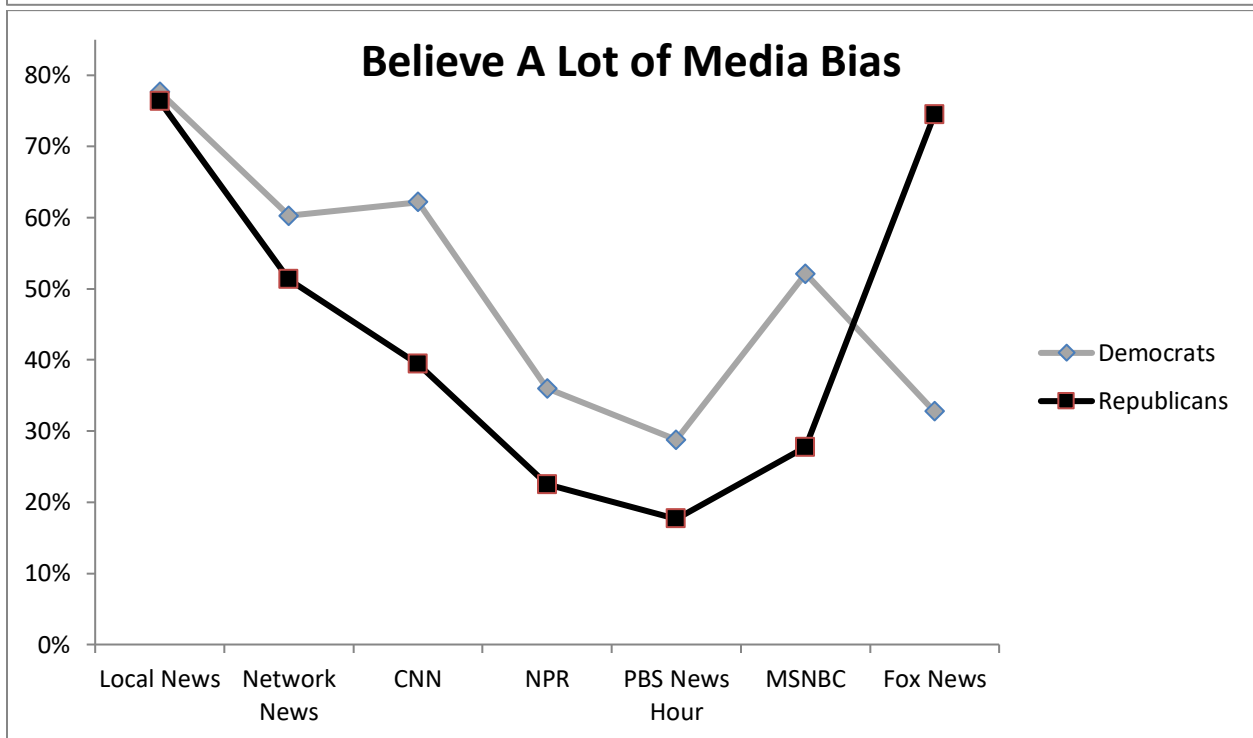
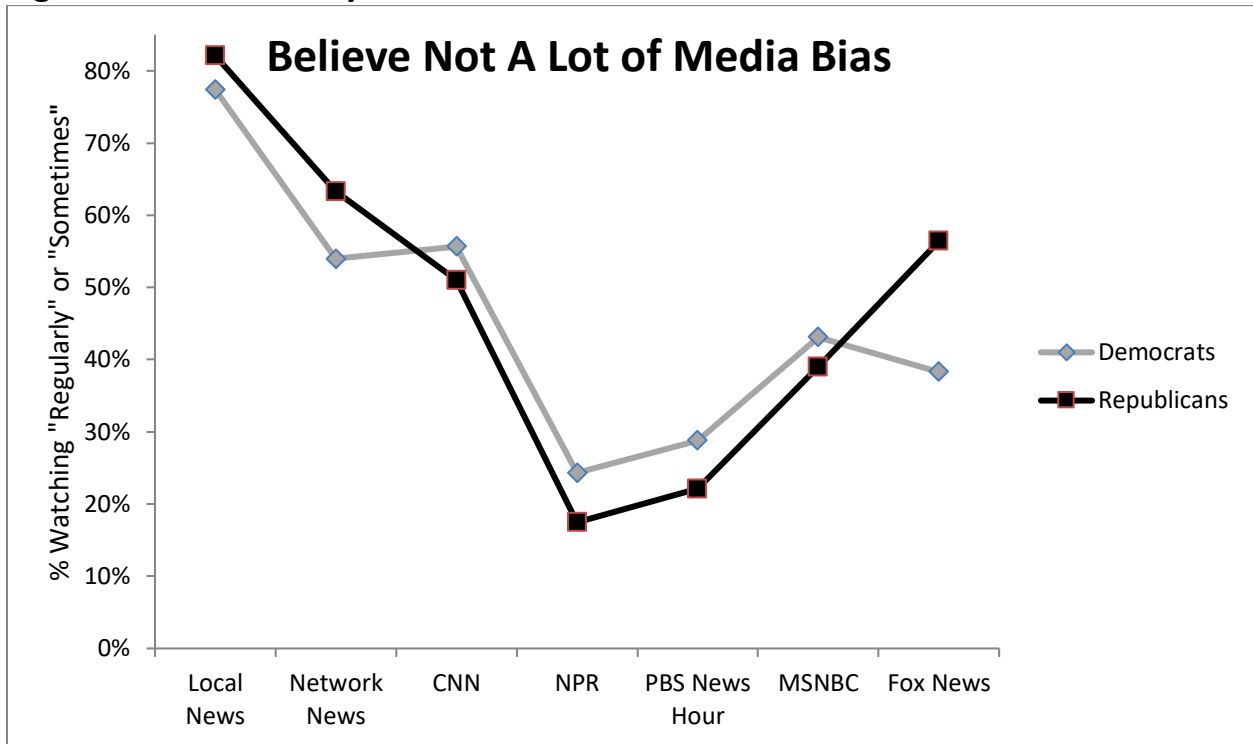
Source: 2000 American National Election Studies Time Series Survey

Figure 6: Perceptions of the National Economy in the Year Prior to a Presidential Election



Note: Perception and media trust variables are coded as in Figure 8
Source: 2004 American National Election Studies Time Series Survey

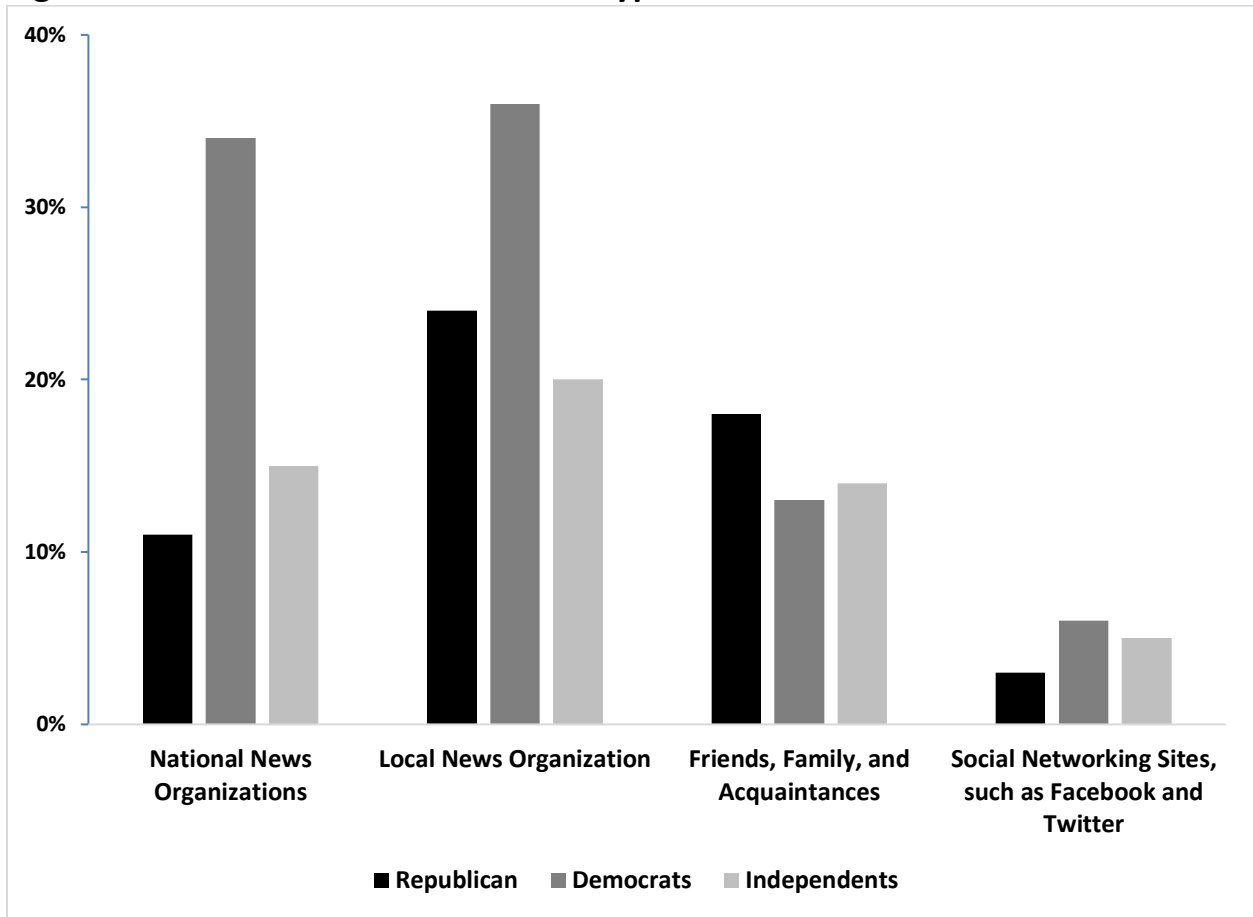
Figure 7: Media Use by General Attitudes toward the Media



Note: Media evaluation question asks, “How much political bias do you see in news coverage? A lot, some, not much or none at all?”

Source: 2010 Media Consumption Survey by the Pew Center for the People and the Press

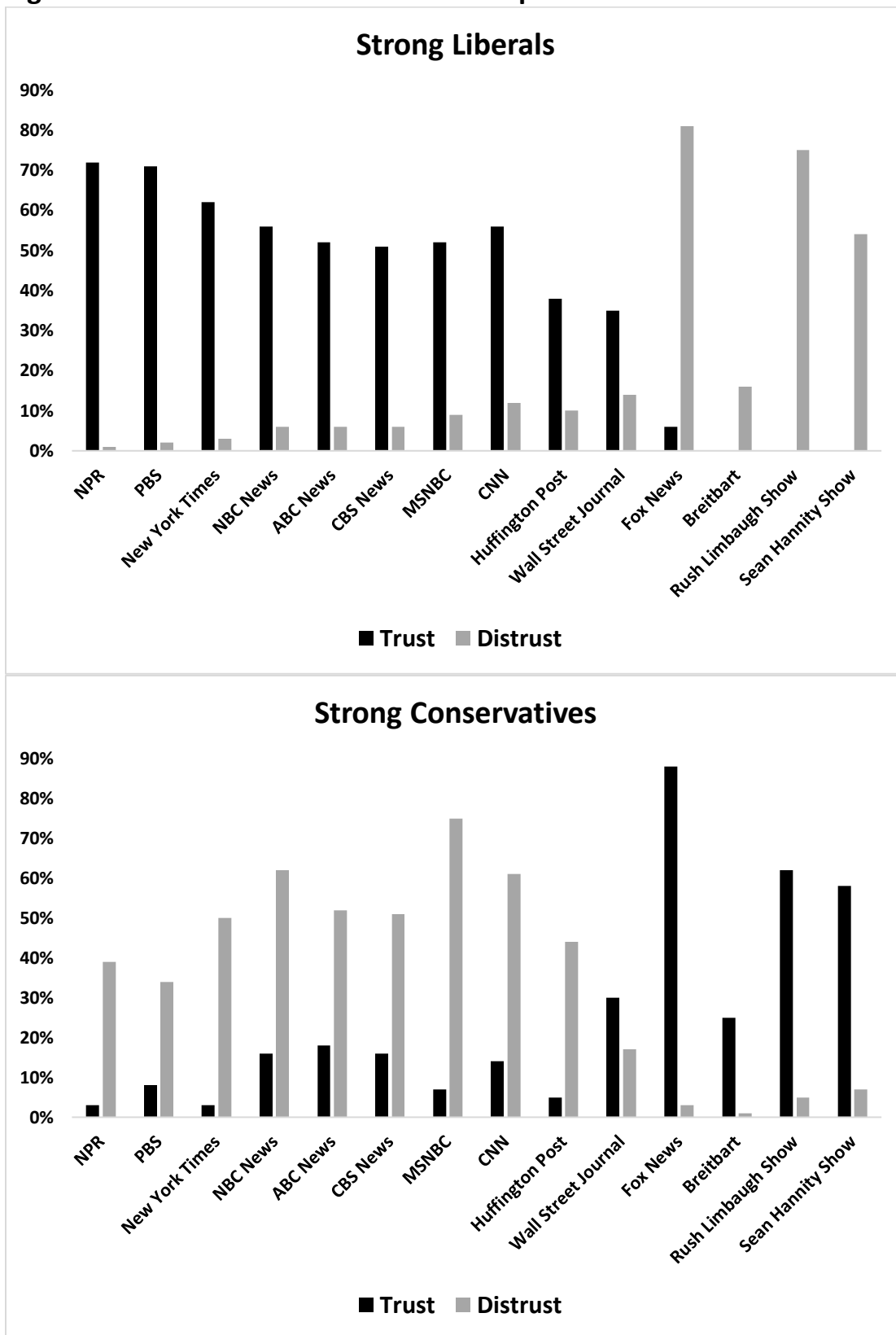
Figure 8: Percent Who Trust Different Types of Information Sources



Note: Chart shows the percentage of adults who "trust the information they get from ____ a lot."

Source: Berthel, Michael, and Amy Mitchell. 2017. "Americans' Attitudes About the News Media Deeply Divided Along Partisan Lines." Pew Research Center Report. Survey conducted Jan 12-Feb 8, 2017. n= 4,339.

Figure 9: Percent Who Trust or Distrust Specific News Outlets



Note: Strong liberals and strong conservatives are defined based on a series of policy questions. The former have consistently liberal views on these questions and the latter have consistently conservative views.

Source: "Appendix C: Trust and Distrust of News Sources by Ideological Group" in Mitchell, Amy, Jeffrey Gottfried, Jocelyn Kiley, and Ketherine Eva Matsa. 2014. "Political Polarization & Media Habits: From Fox News to Facebook, How Liberals and Conservatives Keep Up with Politics." Pew Research Center Report. Survey was conducted March 19 to April 29, 2014. n=2,901.

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⁴⁰ Institutions included in the average calculation are all institutions, other than the press, where confidence was probed in every GSS survey from 1973 to 2008: major companies, organized religion, education, the executive branch, organized labor, medicine, television, the Supreme Court, the scientific community, Congress, and the military.

⁴¹ Independents who lean toward one of the parties are coded as members of that party. Those who identify as pure independents are excluded from this figure.

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