

**ATTITUDES TOWARD THE NEWS MEDIA AND POLITICAL COMPETITION  
IN AMERICA**

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## Abstract

As an institution, the news media are held in low regard by the American public. Fewer people express confidence in the press than in almost any other societal institution. This dissertation considers two main questions. First, what shapes the public's attitudes toward the news media as an institution? Second, what are the consequences of those attitudes for how the public acquires information about national conditions and uses that information to reward and punish political leaders? I find evidence that negative public attitudes toward the institutional news media are caused by both elite criticism of the media and the style of news coverage. These opinions about the media then influence how individuals acquire political information and form electoral preferences. Those with more negative attitudes are more resistant to new information about the state of the nation, instead relying more on their partisan predispositions. These more polarized beliefs lead to voting preferences that also more strongly reflect party attachments. Despite these (arguably) negative consequences, increasing public trust in the media is difficult. Using a formal model, I show how political parties' desire to increase their public support, the tendency of their rhetoric to influence only their own identifiers and the tendency of negative attitudes toward the press to increase partisan preferences create an incentive for party elites to criticize the media. Given that one cause of negative public attitudes toward the press is the result of competition among political parties, negative attitudes toward the press are partially a natural result of a free and competitive political system.

To my parents, Susan Cartmell and Lawrence Ladd

## Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	vi
1. Americans' Changing Relationship with the Press	1
2. Sources of Public Attitudes toward the News Media	39
3. Attitudes toward the News Media and the Acquisition of Political Information	86
4. Attitudes toward the News Media and Voting Behavior	162
5. Party Competition and Incentives for Elite Rhetoric	191
6. Conclusion: The Extent of the Problem and the Prospects for Change	218
References	224

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# Chapter 1

## Americans' Changing Relationship with the Press

## The News Media in America

I remember being sent, as a child, from Louisiana on summer visits to my grandparents in New Jersey. My grandfather, who was a pediatrician in the town of Perth Amboy, would sit in his easy chair on Sundays reading the [*New York*] *Times* in a spirit not dissimilar to that of someone taking the sacrament. After finishing one article, he'd begin the next—who was he to decide what, of the material the *Times*' editors had chosen to publish, he had the right to skip? Quite often, the aural accompaniment to this exercise was the soothing music of WQXR, the *Times*' radio station, which between segments of classical music would occasionally air interviews with *Times* correspondents and critics—men, I inferred from their calm, distinguished voices, with neat Vandyke beards, their heads wreathed in contemplative clouds of pipe smoke.

Nicholas Lemann (2005)

...the notion of a neutral, non-partisan mainstream press was, to me at least, worth holding onto. Now it's pretty much dead, at least as the public sees things...It's hard to know now who, if anyone, in the "media" has any credibility.

Howard Fineman (2005)

"Why is everyone mad at the mainstream media?" asks the subtitle of a recent article by Nicholas Lemann (2005). The news media play a crucial and widely acknowledged role in the American democratic process (Cater 1959; Cook 1998; Schudson 2002), yet animosity between the press and politicians, political operatives and the public has seemingly never been stronger. Reflecting on the last presidential election year, Lemann (2005) writes, "...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."

Americans have a long tradition of satirizing their political leaders, institutions, and issues of the day. One illustration of this is the record of political cartoons that have depicted aspects of American politics since at least the controversy over the Stamp Acts to the present day (Hess and Northrop 1996). In one manifestation of this feature of

American culture, since it debuted in 1975, skits parodying politicians have been a regular feature of the popular television comedy show “Saturday Night Live” (Shales and Miller 2002). The show’s parodies of Presidents and the quadrennial presidential debates have become cultural traditions almost akin to presidential press conferences and the debates themselves. In another example of this type of satire, hosts and performers on late night talk shows make politicians a frequent object of critique. During the 2000 presidential campaign, late night comedians made 771 jokes lampooning Gov. George W. Bush and 494 at the expense of Vice President Al Gore (Graber 2002, 3-4).

In the 2000s, a new comedy show became popular whose content differed in an interesting way from most other American political satire. In 1999, Jon Stewart became the host of a show on the cable channel Comedy Central called “The Daily Show.” He changed the show from one that focused mostly on general comedy to one emphasizing more political topics. The show received relatively (for cable) high ratings, was praised by television critics, and was featured in positive cover stories in *Newsweek* and *Entertainment Weekly* magazines. In a significant departure, most of the biting satire on “The Daily Show” focuses on the political news media, rather than directly on politicians. As “Saturday Night Live” traditionally featured impersonations of politicians, “The Daily Show” impersonates TV news anchors, reporters, and pundits, depicting them as clueless, self-important buffoons (Peyser 2004; Wilson-Smith 2004). What changed in American political culture that made this type of political satire so popular and critically praised?

The generation of leaders that founded the United States clearly thought that a functioning political press was necessary for an effective democratic government where individual freedoms were preserved. The very first amendment to the Constitution

specifies that “Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom... of the press.” Its prominence in this first amendment is shared with freedom of religion, speech, peaceable assembly, and petitioning government for redress of grievances. But if a free press is essential in a democracy, what desirable functions does it serve? James Curran (2005) lays out four normative ends the press ought to serve in the modern American political system. These include aiding in representation by giving voice to different groups, in deliberation by providing a forum for discussion, in the preservation of the system by enforcing societal norms of proper conduct, in preventing bad governmental behavior by serving as a watchdog to expose it when it occurs, and in electoral accountability by broadly informing the public about the actions of government and events in the wider world. The first two of these involve the press reporting on the actions of nongovernmental actors. The third involves coverage and critique of both government and nongovernmental figures. The final two both involve informing the public about the content and consequences of behavior by government and other political leaders. While serving the first three functions may be helpful in a democracy, these informational roles have been traditionally seen as the most essential functions of the news media.

In Doris Graber’s (2002, 6-13) popular textbook on the American media, she says that the media can perform four main functions in society. The first two are clearly positive: surveillance and interpretation. They are two aspects of one process, informing the public and telling them what that information means. The third, socialization, could have positive or negative connotations, depending on what values and traditions are being instilled. The fourth possible function, manipulation, could also have both positive and negative connotations. Graber includes in this category any activity that is initiated by the

journalist for the purposes of affecting the political process. This would include both investigative reporting such as Woodward and Bernstein's (1974) famous articles exposing Watergate as well as propaganda designed to induce support for certain politicians or parties regardless of the facts.

It is the ability of the media to inform the public, represented by Curren's last two purposes and Graber first two functions, that makes the news media an indispensable part of a modern democratic system. In serving this role, it helps solve a basic difficulty that large, complex societies have in maintaining a responsive, accountable government. As Walter Lippmann (1997 [1922]) pointed out in the early twentieth century, the people and their government interact very differently in modern democracies than classical democratic theorists envisioned they would. The chief problem is the size and scope of political events. Whereas a citizen in a Greek city-state could observe firsthand the workings of government and the consequences of the actions of political leaders, the modern citizen cannot. The demands of everyday life and, more importantly, the size and scope of nation-states prevent citizens from observing events directly. More recently, Diana C. Mutz (1998) depicts American citizens as interacting with a "generalized other" representing the aggregate state of the nation. Rather than making political decisions based on their personal experience, they use information about society as a whole, acquired through the mass media (Mutz 1992, 1998). In playing this role, the news media is a political institution as important to the functioning of democracy as the other branches of government (Cater 1959; Cook 1998).

Given the importance of its role in American political system, why is the press so disliked by the mass public and politicians? Furthermore, does this hostility toward the

institutional media affect their ability to fulfill their most important function of informing the public? To start to answer these questions, it helps to understand how the political news media developed over time into a distinct political institution. The press played a very different role in the political system at the founding the American republic than they did in the twentieth century or do today. Until recently, most of American political history has witnessed consistently increasing levels of autonomy and institutionalization among the political news media.

### **The Formation of the News Media into a Political Institution**

While their role was very different than it is today, the news media were important players in the very first conflicts under the new American constitutional system. George Washington won the first Presidential election in 1788 (and reelection in 1792) without notable opposition. But early in his administration, conflict developed between Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton. Their conflict would create the first American political parties, the Federalists (supporting Hamilton) and the Democratic Republicans (supporting Jefferson).

At this time, journalism was practiced almost exclusively through newspapers and the industry was very decentralized. Cities typically had many small newspapers competing for readers, often in the double digits (West 2001, 9). These papers were not generally independent, but advocated for and disseminated the views of specific political actors. In one example typical of the era, Hamilton, John Jay and James Madison used *The Independent Journal* in New York to publish a series of articles, later called *The Federalist Papers*, advocating for the new constitution. Newspapers were seen as simply another tool for politicians to use to compete for public opinion. The job of journalists

and publishers was mostly to produce effective propaganda. Consequently, while their job required some skill, they were not independent actors in the political struggle and received much less prestige than those who were (West 2001, 9). When Alexis de Tocqueville observed that “The journalists of the United States are usually placed in a very humble position with a scanty education and a vulgar turn of mind” (Mott 1950; cited in West 2001, 20), he was reflecting popular consensus at the time.

In the dispute between the Federalists and the Democratic Republicans, which reached a boiling point in the Presidential elections of 1796 and 1800 between John Adams and Jefferson, both sides used newspapers extensively to advocate for their cause. The Federalists published *The Gazette of the United States* to advocate their views, while Jefferson supported *The National Gazette* and later the *Philadelphia General Advertiser* as rival papers that promoted his more strictly republican views (Evensen 2002, 260). Papers such as these were expensive for the time and did not circulate widely. Newspaper readers were approximately 2 percent of the population, those who were the wealthiest and most well connected (West 2001, 19). These newspapers also contained, relative to the present day, a heavy emphasis on politics. Political news and opinion (at the time little distinction was made) constituted about 50 percent of the content of city papers and 70 percent of rural papers (Baldastry 1992; cited in West 2001, 18).

The custom of using newspapers primarily as party organs continued through the Jacksonian era. In the 1828 presidential election, Andrew Jackson reportedly established a \$50,000 fund to finance newspapers that would advocate for him (Tebbel and Watts 1985; cited in West 2001, 19). But even at this time the nature of the business was beginning to change. New papers arose in the 1830s that were much less expensive and

designed to appeal to a more mass audience. With the arrival of the “penny-press” (so-called because papers cost a cent a day or four dollars for a year’s subscription), for the first time news vendors began selling papers on the street rather than catering to a more exclusive clientele (West 2001, 19).

This was the beginning of the evolution of the newspaper business into a large-scale commercial enterprise whose product was read by a large cross-section of the population. The invention of the telegraph and the building of a national network of railroads made communication much easier, lowering the costs to newspapers of gathering and disseminating the news (27-8). Large circulation papers had very different financial incentives from those that tried to persuade political elites and were rewarded with government contracts and patronage appointments. For the commercial press, the main way to make money was not from political pork, but through subscriptions and advertising, both of which required the maintenance and expansion of circulation. From the early days of the penny press, these papers, much more than their partisan predecessors, emphasized human interest and local crime stories on the front pages. Political news was given less prominent placement, and less coverage overall (West 2001, 20). At the same time, newspapers with independent editors and broader circulation became more common. Independence from politicians allowed for the rise of editors with high profiles and distinctive styles. Editors like James Watson Webb of the *New York Courier and Enquirer*, James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald*, Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune* and Henry James Raymond of the *New York Daily Times* each had their own unique style and political prejudices. Papers like these, which had mostly been founded by their prominent editors, reflected their philosophy of what journalism



should be, focusing on particular issues (slavery in the case of Greeley), using a unique writing style, or occasionally feuding with other editors (Webb and Bennett) (West 2001, 29-31). What these papers shared was a more accessible, sensationalist style and a business model that relied on large circulations.

The late nineteenth century was the height of what Darrel West calls “the commercial media.” As mass circulation newspapers continued to thrive, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst built large media empires. Starting by owning the *St. Louis Dispatch* and *San Francisco Examiner*, respectively, both had tremendous success increasing circulation and soon bought up many more papers. This was done through a style of highly “sensationalist coverage, big headlines and colorful graphics” that came to be known as “yellow journalism” (West 2001, 43). These papers often went beyond passively reporting the news to creating their own. They published gossip and started progressive crusades against misbehavior in government and industry (44). An extreme and famous example of this is coverage of the 1898 Spanish-American War. Hearst, wanting a war with Spain to increase circulation, ran dramatic and factually dubious stories of Spanish atrocities in Cuba for months. In a famous remark, he told his Cuban correspondent, “You furnish the pictures and I will furnish the war” (45). When the USS Maine exploded in Havana harbor for an unknown reason, almost all “yellow” newspapers blamed the Spanish and demanded war. As a result of the news coverage, Congress and President McKinley felt tremendous public pressure and declared war. Historians often speculate that without the pro-war journalism from Pulitzer and Hearst, the five month war, in which the United States conquered Cuba and the Philippines, might never have happened (Keller 1969; cited in West 2001, 45).

Compared to the government-subsidized, party-controlled, narrowly read, relatively stodgy newspapers of the early republic, the turn-of-the-century news media was almost unrecognizable. By the year 1900, 19.8 percent of the population subscribed to a newspaper (compared with 2.6 in 1840) and papers relied on advertising for over two-thirds of their revenue (West 2001, 27, 42).

The twentieth century saw another revolution in the style of news coverage. Throughout the nineteenth century almost all newspapers had been “partisan” in the broader sense of the word. In a way similar to political opinion magazines of today, opinion mixed with fact fluidly and it was unsurprising for a paper to push a particular point of view (McGerr 1986; West 2001; Evensen 2002). But this began to change. By the late 1800s, prominent editors such as E. L. Godkin (who edited the *New York Evening Post* and *The Nation*) described journalists’ main goal as “to get accurate news” (Evensen 2002, 263) even though his own papers shamelessly crusaded “against American imperialism, government corruption and unsound money” (Alterman 1999, 26). When Adolph Ochs purchased the “failing and demoralized” *New York Times* in 1896 and became the first notable newspaper publisher to buck the journalistic conventions of the time, he announced his objectives:

It will be my earnest aim that the *New York Times* give the news, all the news, in a concise and attractive form, in language that is parliamentary in good society, and give it as early, if not earlier, than it can be learned through any other reliable medium; to give the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of any party sect or interest involved; to make the columns of the *New York Times* a forum for the consideration of all questions of public importance, and to that end invite intelligent discussion from all shades of opinion (Schudson 1978, 110-111).

The Times' highly anomalous publishing philosophy, which "emphasized decency as much as accuracy" (112), produced a sharp increase in circulation, concentrated among the highly educated, particularly businessmen (Schudson 1978; Alterman 1999).

This move by the *Times* foreshadowed some of the ways the Progressive era would transform journalism. The Progressive movement of the 1900s and 1910s was defined by the belief that "partisan politics should be removed from the governmental process and that government administration should be professionalized" (West 2001, 54). During this time, investigations by journalists exposed government and industry scandals that prompted calls for progressive reforms (West 2001, 54). These investigations, called "muckraking," showed that the press could serve the perceived public interest by informing the public. But the press would not just be an enabler of progressive reforms, they would be an object of those reforms as well.

Journalism was shaped by the progressive notion that those with expertise and education could solve societal problems. As a result of this idea, many occupations developed professional standards or education requirements (Schudson 1990). At the turn of the century, almost all reporters and editors did not attend college, but worked their way up from "entry-level typesetting jobs" (West 2001, 50). In the early twentieth century Joseph Pulitzer himself became a strong advocate for a higher level of education among reporters and editors. Pulitzer not only publicly advocated for better education for journalists, he left \$2 million in his will to found Columbia's School of Journalism and the Pulitzer Prize (West 2001, 50).

The style of coverage also changed. Progressive thinking led to advocacy for what Michael Schudson calls "the ideal of objectivity" (1978; 1990). Prior to the 1920s,

journalists did not use the term “objective.” Some referred to concepts such as “unbiased,” “uncolored,” and “realist” (although few newspapers followed these tenets) which meant simply laying out facts and trusting that the truth would emerge (Streckfuss 1990, 973; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001, 72-73). It appears that the term “objectivity” was imported from the emerging social sciences, which at this time were becoming heavily influenced by “scientific naturalism” (Streckfuss 1990, 975). Scientific naturalism maintained that there are no truths other than what can be “scientifically” (by which they meant empirically) demonstrated. Epitomizing this new movement, the University of Chicago’s social science building, dedicated in 1929, had inscribed above its entryway the statement: “When you cannot measure your knowledge is meager and unsatisfactory” (975). The chief advocate for a more scientific and empirical journalism was Walter Lippmann. With the publication of his 1920 book, *Liberty and the News*, he started the task of “turning newspaper enterprise from a haphazard trade into a disciplined profession” (1995 [1920], 71). He wrote that,

We need, first, to know what can be done with the existing news structure, in order to correct its grosser evils. How far is it useful to go in fixing personal responsibility for the truthfulness of news? Much further, I am inclined to think, than we have ever gone... While it is not necessary, or even desirable that every article should be signed, each article should be documented, and false documentation should be illegal. An item of news should always state whether it is received from one of the great news-agencies, or from a reporter or from a press bureau (Lippmann 1995 [1920], 65-66).

Later he commented,

With this increase in prestige must go a professional training in journalism in which the ideal of objectivity is cardinal. The cynicism of the trade needs to be abandoned, for the true patterns of journalistic apprenticeship are not the slick persons who scoop the news, but the patient and fearless men of science who have labored to see the world as it really is. It does not matter that the news is not susceptible of mathematical statement. In fact,

just because news is complex and slippery, good reporting requires the exercise of the highest scientific virtues (74).

The first use of the term “objective” in a journalism textbook was Nelson Antrim Crawford’s *The Ethics of Journalism*, published in 1924. He drew heavily on Lippmann’s writings and the scientific notion of objectivity (Crawford 1924, 178; cited in Streckfuss 1990). Over the course of the 1920’s, Lippmann served as editor of the *New York World* and advocated for his views of the profession, frequently speaking to the annual meetings of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (Streckfuss 1990, 980-1). By 1927, the dean of the School of Journalism at the University of Oregon would comment that,

If journalism means anything more than a mere trade and a technique, it must be based upon some depth of understanding. If it is, or is to become, a real profession – one of the learned professions – the thing the competent journalist must understand is the scientific bases of current life... (Allen 1927; cited in Streckfuss 1990).

With help from Lippmann, the style of newspaper coverage continued its evolution through the 1920s. While most papers continued to publish editorials, these were now separated from the news pages (West 2001, 53). As Harlan Stensaas (1986) shows in his content analysis of newspapers over time, coverage became increasingly fact-focused from the 1865 through 1934, at which point over 80 percent of articles focused on facts while only 20 percent featured opinions. By the mid 1930s, an ideal of objectivity relatively similar to that held by contemporary mainstream journalist had taken hold. The extent of the progress is evident from the change in Walter Lippmann’s assessment. In 1931 he wrote in a satisfied tone:

The most impressive event of the last decade in the history of newspapers has been the demonstration that the objective, orderly, and comprehensive presentation of news is a far more successful type of journalism today than the dramatic, disorderly, episodic type (Lippmann 1931, 439; cited in Streckfuss 1990).

Contemporary notions of objectivity seem to be a merger of the progressive idea of scientific empiricism advocated by Lippmann with the upper-class staidness and respectability advanced by Adolph Ochs and the *New York Times*.

As John Zaller (1999b, 30-3) notes, one definitional characteristic of professions is the maintenance of codes of conduct and barriers to entry independent of employers. In this way, as journalists became professionalized, they tended to report the news according to professional standards of objectivity, which were uniform across the country, rather than being affected by the opinions and style of each editor or publisher. As West (2001) writes, “journalists defined a new role for themselves that liberated them not only from outside parties and advertisers, but even from the owners and publishers within the communications industry” (53). The way this professionalization still shapes reporters’ conduct is evident in the text, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001), which states the profession’s standards at the turn of the millennium. It declares that “[j]ournalism’s first obligation is to the truth” (37). In the chapter titled “Who Journalists Work For” they state “[j]ournalism’s first loyalty is to citizens” (51) rather than to media owners or their customers. In this way reporters should “serve as an independent monitor of power” (112). Even as the ideologies of reporters and cultural trends have varied over time, these professional norms have continued to be a significant constraint on how reporting is done. Don Wycifff, public editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, recently put it bluntly: “we may be liberals, but we have ideals of objectivity to which we aspire” (Lemann 2005).

Several other factors may have increased the homogenization of the style of news coverage. The increasing number of newspaper syndicates and wire service stories may

have played some role. In addition, as advertising revenue became more central to newspapers' financial well being, they may have produced less potentially controversial stories in order to avoid offending any advertisers (Baldastry 1992; cited in West 2001, 54).

At the same time that the style of coverage was becoming more uniform, the structure of the news business was also changing dramatically. The number of newspaper readers continued to increase rapidly, even more quickly than the population. Total newspaper circulation in the United States increased from 3.1 million in 1880 to 15.1 million in 1900 to 27.8 million in 1920 to 39.6 million in 1930 (Emery and Emery 1984, 399). But while readership and total ad revenues continued to increase, the number of newspapers actually declined from 1910 through 1930. The percentage of daily papers that had no competitor in their city rose from 17.9 in 1900 to 35.1 in 1920 to 51.6 in 1930 (399). This pattern would continue throughout the twentieth century. By 1992 only 2 percent of American cities would have two or more newspapers (West 2001, 57). Where once the newspaper business consisted of many small papers competing in a variety of news styles, it was increasingly made up of a few large papers with a more uniform news style and professionalized reporters.

The rise of radio in the 1920s and 1930s further standardized news reporting. With the introduction of radio networks, for the first time news was broadcast over large regions of the country and nationally. The percentage of American households with a radio went from 46 percent in 1930 to 82 percent in 1940 (West 2001, 56). The opportunity to reach so many people with reports “encouraged journalists to wring partisan and commercial excesses out of their programming...” (West 2001, 53). During

World War II, radio helped create national media celebrities like William Shirer, who reported from Berlin, and Edward R. Murrow, who was lauded for his reports from the Battle of Britain (West 2001, 56).

But radio would soon be eclipsed by television as Americans' dominant source of news, further increasing the nationalization of news and the celebrity of national reporters. In 1959, 57 percent of Americans cited newspapers as a main source of news, compared to 51 percent for television and 34 percent for radio. By 1986, only 36 percent used newspapers, 66 percent used television and 14 percent used radio for their news (West 2001, 58).

The mid-twentieth century was something of a golden age for the news media as a respected, independent, political institution. Professional norms of objectivity and independence were thoroughly ingrained in the culture of journalism. National television news and most newspapers had relatively little competition. In the case of network news broadcasts, not only were there relatively few television news competitors, there were few television competitors of any sort. Typically the news programs on the only three networks all aired at the same time, so viewers could either watch news or turn off the set (Prior n.d.). Anchors of the network newscasts, men like David Brinkley and Walter Cronkite, were not just well known but highly respected. Cronkite himself was considered "the most trusted man in America" (Cronkite 1996, 209; cited in West 2001, 64). Reporters as a whole had become "one of the best-educated groups in America" (Lichter et al. 1986, 21-22; cited in West 2001, 57). A 1961 survey of Washington reporters found that 81 percent had college degrees (Rivers 1962; cited in West 2001, 57). By 1978 the number had climbed to 93 percent (Hess 1981, 159; cited in West 2001,



57). For better or worse, the media establishment became an accepted part of the political process. This institution, which “encompassed not only newspapers but national news magazines and network television and radio, occupied a dignified position” in American society (Lemann 2005, 3). The press had become, in Douglass Cater’s (1959) words, “the fourth branch of government.” Politicians developed a consensus that “without the press, political success was not possible” (West 2001, 65). Or, in Timothy Cook’s (1998, 2) words, the news media became “a coherent intermediary institution without which the three branches established by the Constitution could not act and could not work.” It seemed that “[N]o other outside participants in the political system accumulated as much influence as journalists” (West 2001, 65).

What little diversity there was among the different newspapers and radio and television networks that covered politics was minimized because they all adhered to the same professional norms and culture. Timothy Cruse criticized this phenomenon as “pack journalism” (1973). He found that in addition to professional standards, a “herd” mentality “ensured that elite outlets would guide the coverage of other news organizations” (West 2001, 93). Independent studies that analyzed the content of major network news coverage of the 1972, 1976 and 1992 presidential campaigns found that coverage was remarkably similar across networks (Hofstetter 1976; Patterson 1980; Just et al. 1996; cited in West 2001, 93). The 1992 study also found that coverage in city newspapers and on local television was very similar across the country (Just et al. 1996; cited in West 2001, 94).

By the end of the twentieth century, the news media would become more fragmented, with some outlets turning away from the professional norms of the

institutional media. However, the media continue to play a central role in the political process, and as Kovich and Rosenstiel's (2001) text makes clear, many journalists, particularly at national newspapers and television networks, still adhere to the same professional standards. At the same time, new sources of news have developed that do not necessarily follow the lead of the elite news outlets. These include talk radio, "soft news" (see Baum 2002, 2003) programs that provide political news on shows with an entertainment focus, cable television news and talk shows, and various websites (West 2001, 84-95).

However, even in a fragmented media environment, institutional news media still exist and the notion of a media establishment (whether admired or reviled) is still alive in the public mind. There is a certain similarity between this and the development of the U.S. Congress. As Eric Schickler (2001) has shown, new congressional institutions do not sweep away and replace the old. Rather, in a process he calls "disjointed pluralism," new structures are created in addition to the old, so both exist in parallel, shaping congressional functioning. Similarly, new forms of media have risen up and grafted on top of the existing institutional news media. While the institutional press have certainly not been unaffected by the expanded and fragment media environment, they still exist, with a structure and style distinct from their newer counterparts.

In the twentieth century, at the same time the news media was becoming more institutionalized, polling technology was, for the first time, allowing for more valid measurement of public opinion (Converse 1987). To understand the causes and consequences of public opinion about the media, it helps to first know (as best we can with the available data) how these attitudes have changed over time.

## **Patterns in Trust in the News Media**

The main focus of this dissertation will be on examining the relationship between the American people and the institutional news media. In particular, I will look at how public attitudes toward the institutional news media have changed over time and the consequences of that change for how Americans use the news to acquire political information and form political preferences. As the previous section showed, the American news media developed as an identifiable political institution in the early to middle twentieth century. The technology for valid public opinion polling began to be developed in the 1930s but was of low quality until the late 1940s (Converse 1987; Berinsky 2004). Polls measuring public attitudes toward the news media from the middle of the century are sporadic and almost never use the same question wording repeatedly over time. This complicates inferences about changes in public opinion over time (Mueller 1973). But a brief review provides at least a fuzzy picture of the public's views on the subject.

Many poll questions about the media in the 1930s and 1940s tended to focus on freedom from censorship. They generally found modest support. A 1936 Gallup poll found that 52 percent of the public thought “the press should have the right to say what it pleases about public officials” (Erskine 1970-1971, 631). A 1939 Roper poll on behalf of Fortune magazine asked the public, “Do you feel that the press has abused its freedom in any way?” Only 21 percent of respondents said “yes” while 64 percent said “no” (634). A 1941 Gallup poll found that 58 percent of Americans thought “newspapers should be allowed to take sides in their editorials during election campaigns” compared to 34 percent who opposed it (632). The National Opinion Research Center asked in 1943 and

1946 whether “In peacetime, do you think newspapers should be allowed to criticize our form of government?” and found 66 and 64 percent support respectively (632).

Other early polls asked about the partisan slant of press coverage. In 1937, Gallup found that 47 percent of their respondents thought newspapers they read were “fair in their treatment of political news” while 38 percent thought they were unfair (635). But the same year, the short question “Is the press fair?” prompted 66 percent to answer yes in a Roper poll (635). But just two years later, a 1939 Gallup poll found that only 29 percent thought that “newspapers are fair in their treatment of political news” while 61 percent thought they were “unfair” (635). When Gallup asked respondents in 1946 whether “you think the newspapers you read are fair or not fair in their reporting of the following news, excluding the editorials?” more people thought news was “fair” than unfair in every category of news: “News about Russia” (44 to 31 percent), “Political news” (45 to 35 percent), “Labor news” (49 to 31 percent), “News of Britain” (50 to 26 percent), and “New of international affairs” (52 to 23 percent) (635).

Poll respondents felt that if the press had any biases, they tended to favor Republicans. In 1938, among those in a Gallup poll who read a daily newspaper, 27 percent said their paper “usually support[ed] President Roosevelt” while 42 percent said their paper opposed him (Erskine 1970-1971, 639). In 1939, when Roper asked, “Is your newspaper for or against the New Deal?,” 27 percent of respondents said in favor and 34 percent said their paper was opposed (639). In 1941, Gallup asked if the newspaper respondents read regularly “gave both Roosevelt and Wilkie an even break in its headlines and news accounts of the presidential election.” Of the 36 percent of

respondents who answered no, 76 percent thought their paper favored Wilkie while 19 percent thought their paper favored Roosevelt (639).

While all of these early polls must be taken with caution, there are certain consistent patterns across these early polls that are likely indicative of real attributes of public opinion at the time. Commercial polling firms in the 1930s and 1940s used “quota control” and other sampling methods that modern survey researchers consider heavily vulnerable to bias and were abandoned by around 1950 (Berinsky 2004). From that point on, polling firms used probability sampling methods very similar to those employed today. However, there are several things to note about these early results. The modestly favorable overall ratings that the press received in most (but not quite all) polls from this era are similar to, but somewhat less positive than the ratings in the few (more valid) polls done in the 1950s and early 1960s. Also, the apparent perception that newspapers opposed Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal was at least consistent with his own perceptions. He called the press of his day “200 percent Republican” (Shafer 2003).

For some reason, there was very little polling on the subject of the news media in the late 1940s through the 1950s. If there were more polls on this topic during this time, I have been unable to find many. It is notable that the years when no one thought to even ask about public attitudes toward the news media were also years of relatively minimal political polarization at the national level (Hetherington 2001; McCarty et al. forthcoming). As we will see, there is an important connection between polarization and public trust of the media. In one exception, the 1956 National Election Study (NES) asked respondents: “Now talking just about newspapers. In reporting the news about the campaign and the candidates, do you feel the newspapers were equally fair to both sides

or not?” 66 percent of respondents thought newspapers were fair while only 27 percent thought they were unfair. Of those who said newspapers were unfair, 71 percent thought they favored Eisenhower and the Republicans while only 10 percent said they favored Stevenson and the Democrats (Erskine 1970-1971, 638-640).

Opposition to censorship still remained lukewarm in the 1960s. In 1961, 55 percent of respondents opposed “placing greater curbs or controls, on what newspapers print” in a Gallup poll with only 31 percent in favor (634). However in the same poll only 39 percent opposed the same restrictions for television and radio stations with 49 percent in favor (Erskine 1970-1971, 634). But most people appear to have viewed the establishment media as fair. In two Roper polls in June and November of 1964, 71 and 61 percent of respondents thought that network programs were fair and did not “generally favor one political party over another.” Those believing network programs unfair were only 12 and 17 percent in the two surveys (637). In the same two polls, only 19 and 18 percent respectively thought “television programs dealing with candidates and issues in your area” were unfair, while 42 and 48 percent thought their local newspaper was unfair (636-7).

While it is difficult to tell for sure because polls do not use consistent question wordings over time, it seems that by the end of the 1960s and early 1970s there was already some decline in public evaluations of the news media. Hazel Erskine (1970-1971, 630) speculates that a dip in public approval of the press was caused by Vice President Spiro Agnew’s biting criticism. Defending the Nixon administration, Vice President Agnew called reporters “nattering nabobs of negativism” and “pointy-headed intellectuals” (West 2001, 65). There does seem to be a perceptible change in the

opinions expressed in polls after the criticisms. By December 1969, when a Gallup poll asked “There has been much talk about whether TV networks deal fairly with all sides in presenting the news dealing with political and social issues. How do you feel about this ... do they deal fairly with all sides or do they tend to favor one side?”, only 40 percent said networks were fair while 42 percent said networks favored one side (637). When asked the same question about newspapers, only 37 percent thought they were fair while 45 percent thought they showed favoritism (636). In March 1970, Harris asked whether Vice President Agnew “is right to criticize the way the TV networks cover the news” and found that 56 percent thought he was right. Only 26 percent disagreed (638).

By the early 1970s, for the first time a polling organization began probing public attitudes about the press over time using the same question wording. The first organization to do this was the National Opinion Research Center, as part of their General Social Survey (GSS). Starting with the 1973 survey and in every one subsequent except in 1985, the GSS has included a battery probing confidence in a variety of societal institutions. The section begins, “I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as 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?” One of those institutions is “the press.” Figure 1-1 shows the average level of confidence among all respondents in the 1973 GSS. The amount of confidence in the press was very similar to that in other institutions, except for the scientific community which was more highly regarded and organized labor which was less. Furthermore, Figure 1-2 shows, while there were differences in confidence in the press between Democrats and

Republicans, the differences are relatively small, with both parties' confidence levels similar to the averages for other institutions.

This was during the Watergate scandal, when reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post* uncovered a massive campaign of “dirty tricks” by the Nixon White House, including the use of illegal methods to sabotage its political opponents. Their investigation eventually led to President Nixon's resignation (Bernstein and Woodward 1974). Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider (1987) claim that during this period the news media and organized religion were respected by the public as “guiding’ institutions, outside the normal political and economic order...” (Cook et al. 2000, 1). In West's (2001, 64) interpretation,

In uncovering massive government deceit in Vietnam and Watergate, this era of objective media became the glory period of American journalism. Reporters presented themselves as fighting for truth and justice, and citizens responded by according tremendous credibility to the media messengers.

But since that time, public evaluations of the press have become dramatically more negative. So much so that by 1996, James Fallows (1996) would bluntly declare, “Americans hate the press” (cited in Cook et al. 2000, 2). An important benefit of data from a survey like the GSS (as opposed to the earlier commercial surveys that asked about the news media), is that it asks questions in the same format over many years, allowing one to directly compare the public's responses over time. As Figure 1-3 illustrates, confidence in the press declined dramatically in the 30 years since the GSS began surveying on this topic. Starting in 1998 and in every subsequent GSS, average confidence in the press has been lower than for any other institution in the question battery (Cook and Gronke 2001, Figure 2; Gronke and Cook 2002, 10). And as Figure



1-4 shows, confidence in the press declined among both Democratic and Republican identifiers (see also Cook et al. 2000, 31; Gronke and Cook 2002, 19). While, as in 1973, confidence is a bit higher among Democrats than among Republicans, among both groups of partisans confidence in the press was lower than the average levels for all other institutions. To more fully show the trend over time, Figure 1-5 graphs confidence in the press over time along with the average level of confidence in the eight other institutions that were included in this battery for the entire time series. Attitudes toward the press display a distinct downward trend that departs from the trend in average confidence (See also Cook, Gronke, and Rattliff 2000).

### **Measuring Attitudes toward the News Media as an Institution**

It is important at this point to step back and consider how to measure attitudes toward the news media. In this dissertation, I am specifically interested in attitudes toward the news media as a political institution. As shown above, by the middle of the twentieth century, the institutional media had developed both identifiable and rather uniform standards of behavior, playing a role comparable to other political institutions. Psychologists conventionally define an attitude as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly and Chaiken 1993). In this case the attitude object is the institution itself. This is not as concrete an object to evaluate as a particular media outlet such as a newspaper, local television station or cable network. However, I argue that it does have an understandable meaning to journalists, political actors and the mass public. Also, public attitudes about this object move in identifiable and explainable patterns, suggesting that these survey responses are not simply “nonattitudes” (Converse 1964). Finally, as I will show,

attitudes toward the institutional media have important consequences for political learning and preference formation.

If we accept that attitudes toward the news media as an institution are real and at least potentially important, how should we measure them? Over time, different surveys have used several different question wordings. As a consequence, in this dissertation I will use a number of different question wordings in different analyses to measure overall evaluations of the institutional news media. I have already shown data from the GSS, which asks about “confidence” in “the people running these institutions,” one of which is the press. One benefit of this question is that it even mentions the word institution specifically. A potential weakness is that some people may associate the word “press” only with the printed media. However, the fact that they are told this is an “institution” probably sways people to think of the profession as a whole. While the news media more broadly are an institution, it seems odd to consider just the printing and publishing business as an important societal institution.

I also use several other question wordings to measure evaluations of the news media as an institution. In several instances, I use data from the National Election Study (NES), which in its 1996, 1998, and 2000 surveys asked respondents “How much of the time do you think you can trust the media to report the news fairly (just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, or almost never)?” In a laboratory-style experiment, I ask subjects to assess the “accuracy and unbiasedness” of “the news media” on a 100 point scale. While all of these questions ask about the media in general, rather than particular outlets, how do I have confidence that they are all measuring the same

underlying attitudinal disposition? A reason to have some confidence comes from the NES data.

On a number of occasions the NES has asked the same respondents for their evaluations of the news media using different question wordings, either in the same survey or in different years as part of a panel study. The 1998 NES is particularly useful in this regard. In the course of the survey, respondents were asked three different questions about the news media. Each was asked whether they “trust[ed]” the media, with the same wording used in 1996 and 2000. The survey also asked them to give a “feeling thermometer” rating of the “news media.” Finally, as part of a special module on the Monica Lewinsky scandal, they were asked whether they “approve or disapprove of how the news media is handling these allegations that President Clinton lied under oath about his affair with Monica Lewinsky” As Table 1-1 illustrates, responses to these three questions are highly correlated. For example, those who expressed more trust in the media and those who approved of media coverage of the Lewinsky scandal both had much higher average ratings of the news media. Those trusting the media “just about always” gave an average thermometer rating of 70.6, while those trusting “almost never” gave an average rating of 29.1. While the question regarding media coverage of the Lewinsky scandal is much more specific, ratings are still significantly related to media thermometer ratings, with those approving strongly of scandal coverage having an average thermometer of 65.3 while those disapproving strongly giving an average rating of 44.6. Given this, it is unsurprising to see that media trust and Lewinsky scandal evaluations are themselves correlated. Among those who trust the media “almost never,” 80.3 percent strongly disapproved of Lewinsky coverage. But for those who report

trusting the media “just about always,” only 49.2 percent disapprove strongly of the Lewinsky coverage.

While no other NES survey asked different questions about the media in the same survey, there are a couple of instances when respondents were asked different questions about the media in different waves of a panel study. The 1993 NES pilot study, as part of the 1992-1996 panel study, asks respondents to report their level of agreement with the statement, “Media coverage of politics often reflects the media’s own biases more than facts.” One can compare these responses to the level of trust in the media the same respondents report in the 1996 survey. Even though these questions have very different wordings (the 1993 question focusing particularly on bias while the 1996 question calling for a more general evaluation) and were asked over three years apart, responses were significantly negatively correlated. Table 1-2 shows a cross-tabulation of responses in 1993 with responses in 1996. The 2000-2002 NES panel study also offers another opportunity to compare responses both over time and with different question wordings. The 2000 survey asked the “trust” question while the 2002 survey included “the news media” in its battery of feeling thermometer questions, as in the 1998 survey. Table 1-3 shows how thermometer ratings in 2002 differed depending on the level of trust the respondents had expressed in 2000. Despite the huge changes that had occurred in the American political landscape over these two years (including the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a war in Afghanistan, and the buildup to a second war in Iraq), responses to these two different questions calling for an evaluation of the media are very consistent. Those trusting the media “just about always” in 2000 had an average

thermometer rating of 60.8 in 2002, while those trusting the media “almost never” had an average rating of 39.3 two years later.

Answers to different questions probing media evaluations tend to be related to each other, even when they use very different wording and are collected years apart. This gives me confidence that public attitudes toward the media are reasonably well developed, not the product of intense ambivalence or a lack of thought on the subject. It suggests that, even though when discussed collectively the media as an institution are an abstract concept, it is discussed and debated enough in public discourse for people to have well developed attitudes. Finally, and most importantly, it suggests that the decline in public evaluations of the press documented clearly in the GSS data may signify an important change in American public opinion and maybe in the American political process more broadly.

### **Dissertation Overview**

In the remainder of this dissertation, I attempt to develop a better understanding of the role public attitudes toward the institutional news media play in the American political process. In chapter 2, I consider a variety of different possible causes of public opinion about the news media. Using several different datasets, I find that explanations based on elite rhetoric and the style of news coverage are most consistent with available data. In chapter 3, I examine the effect of attitudes toward the media on political learning. Again using a series of different datasets, I find that negative attitudes toward the news media make people more resistant to new information about national conditions and instead rely on their partisan predispositions to form their beliefs. In chapter 4, I look at how these differences in political learning influence voting behavior and find that people

who dislike the institutional media are also more likely to vote based on partisanship rather than current national conditions. In chapter 5, I examine one variable, elite political rhetoric, that chapter 2 indicates has an effect of trust in the media. Using a formal model, I find that the tendency of distrust of the press to cause resistance to new information creates an incentive for generally negative elite party rhetoric about the press. In the sixth and final chapter, I briefly consider whether any feasible reforms could increase public trust in the news media.

**Table 1-1: Comparing Responses to Different Questions Measuring Attitudes toward the News Media in 1998**

<b>Trust in Media in 1998</b>	<b>Average Media Thermometer in 1998</b>	<b>N</b>
just about always	70.6	61
most of the time	57.5	403
only some of the time	43.6	633
almost never	29.1	157

Regression coefficient of trust on thermometer: .0048 (.0003)  
 Pearson's r-correlation: .446

<b>Media Coverage of Clinton Scandal 1998</b>	<b>Average Media Thermometer in 1998</b>	<b>N</b>
approve strongly	65.3	92
approve not strongly	52.7	140
disapprove not strongly	48.1	214
disapprove strongly	44.6	792

Regression coefficient of opinion of scandal coverage on thermometer: .003 (.0004)  
 Pearson's r-correlation: .231

<b>Media Coverage of Clinton Scandal</b>	<b>Trust in Media in 1998</b>			
	almost never	only some of the time	most of the time	just about always
disapprove strongly	80.2 %	69.0 %	51.6 %	49.2 %
disapprove not strongly	14.0 %	19.5 %	16.0 %	11.5 %
approve not strongly	3.2 %	7.6 %	20.8 %	9.8 %
approve strongly	2.6 %	4.0 %	11.5 %	29.5 %
N	157	632	399	61

Regression coefficient of opinion of scandal coverage on trust: .350 (.035)  
 Pearson's r-correlation: .274

**News Media Evaluation Questions in the 1998 NES:**

“How much of the time do you think you can trust the media to report the news fairly (just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, or almost never)?”

“I'd like to get your feelings toward some of our political leaders and other people who are in the news these days. I'll read the name of a person and I'd like you to rate that person using something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person and that you don't care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. If we come to a person whose name you don't recognize, you don't need to rate the person. Just tell me and we'll move on to the next one. ...News Media.”

“Do you approve or disapprove of how the news media is handling these allegations (that President Clinton lied under oath about his affair with Monica Lewinsky)? Do you approve/disapprove strongly or not strongly?”

**Table 1-2: Media Attitudes Over Time and With Different Question Wordings  
1993-1996**

Trust in Media in 1996	Perception of Media Bias '93			
	agree strongly	agree somewhat	disagree somewhat	disagree strongly
just about always	2.6%	4.7%	9.1%	9.1%
only some of the time	17.2%	37.3%	50.9%	40.9%
most of the time	60.1%	53.9%	36.4%	45.5%
almost never	20.2%	4.1%	3.6%	4.6%
Average Score (0-1)	0.34	0.48	0.55	0.52
N	233	169	55	22

Regression coefficient of trust in 1996 on perception of bias 1993: -.266 (.037)

Pearson's r-correlation: -.310

Wording of 1993 bias question: "Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: Media coverage of politics often reflects the media's own biases more than facts."

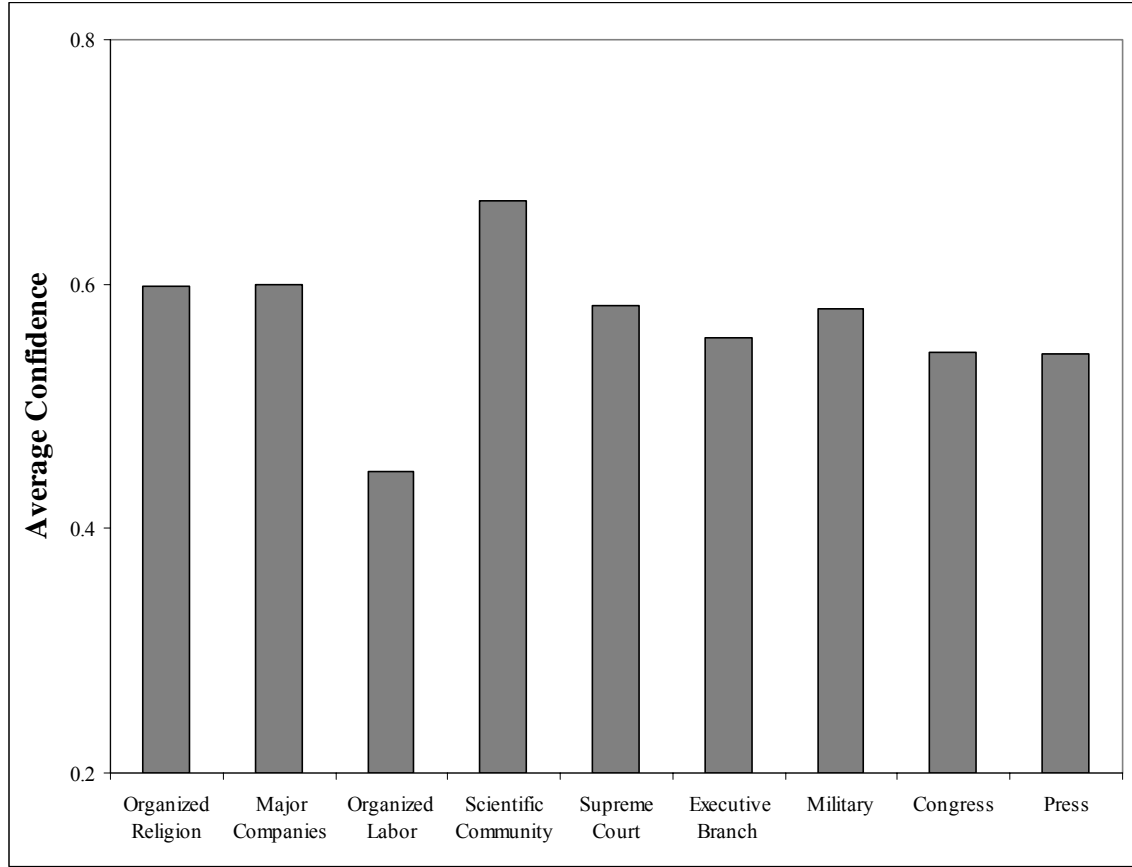


**Table 1-3: Media Attitudes over Time and with Different Question Wordings 2000-2002**

<b>Trust in Media in 2000</b>	<b>Average Media Thermometer in 2002</b>	<b>N</b>
just about always	60.8	58
most of the time	57.6	410
only some of the time	49.3	425
almost never	39.3	85

Regression coefficient thermometer in 2002 on trust in 2000: .249 (.025)  
Pearson's r-correlation: .309

**Figure 1-1: Confidence in American Institutions in 1973**

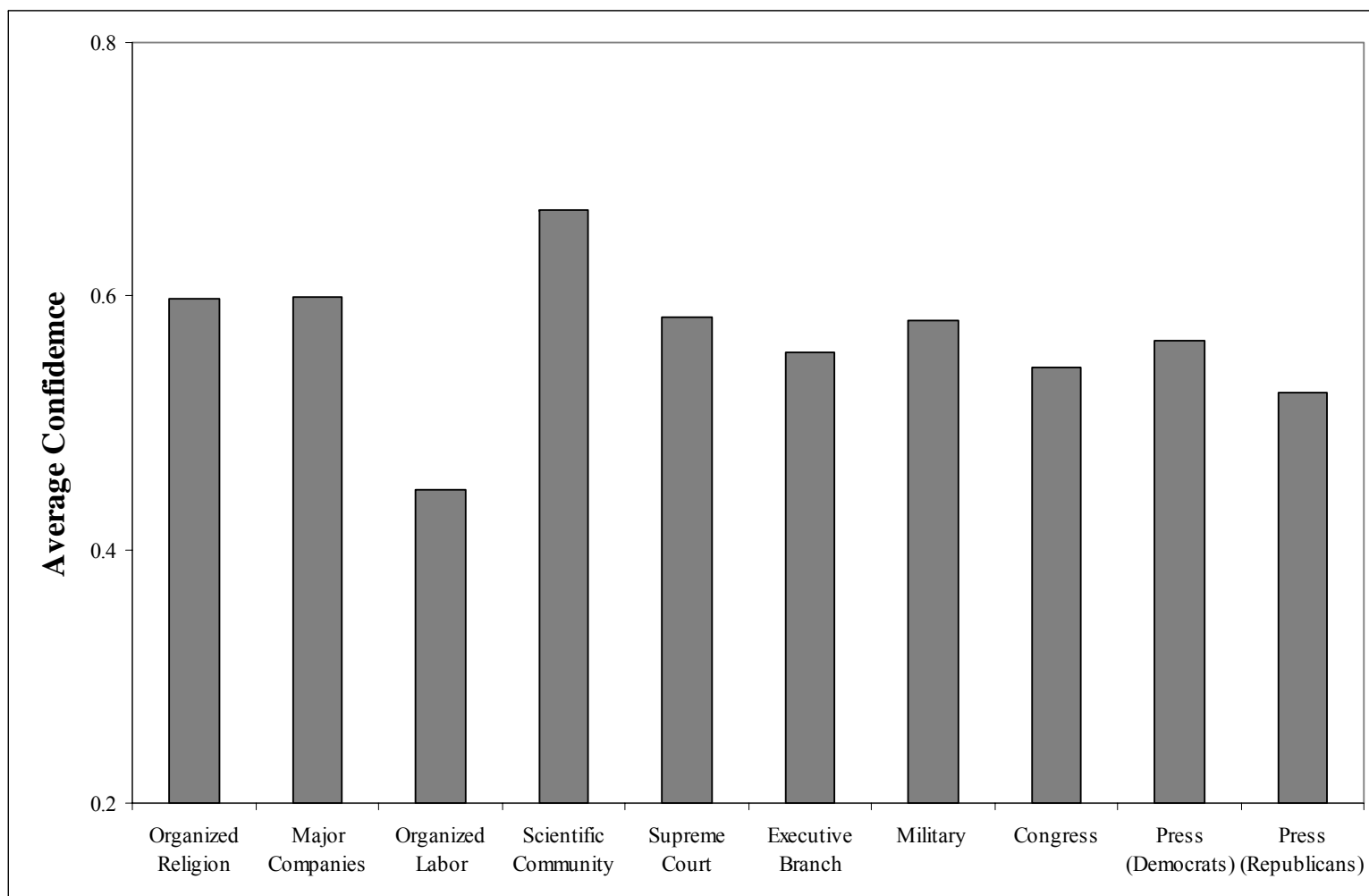


**Confidence in Institutions Coding**

A Great Deal	1
Only Some	0.5
Hardly Any	0

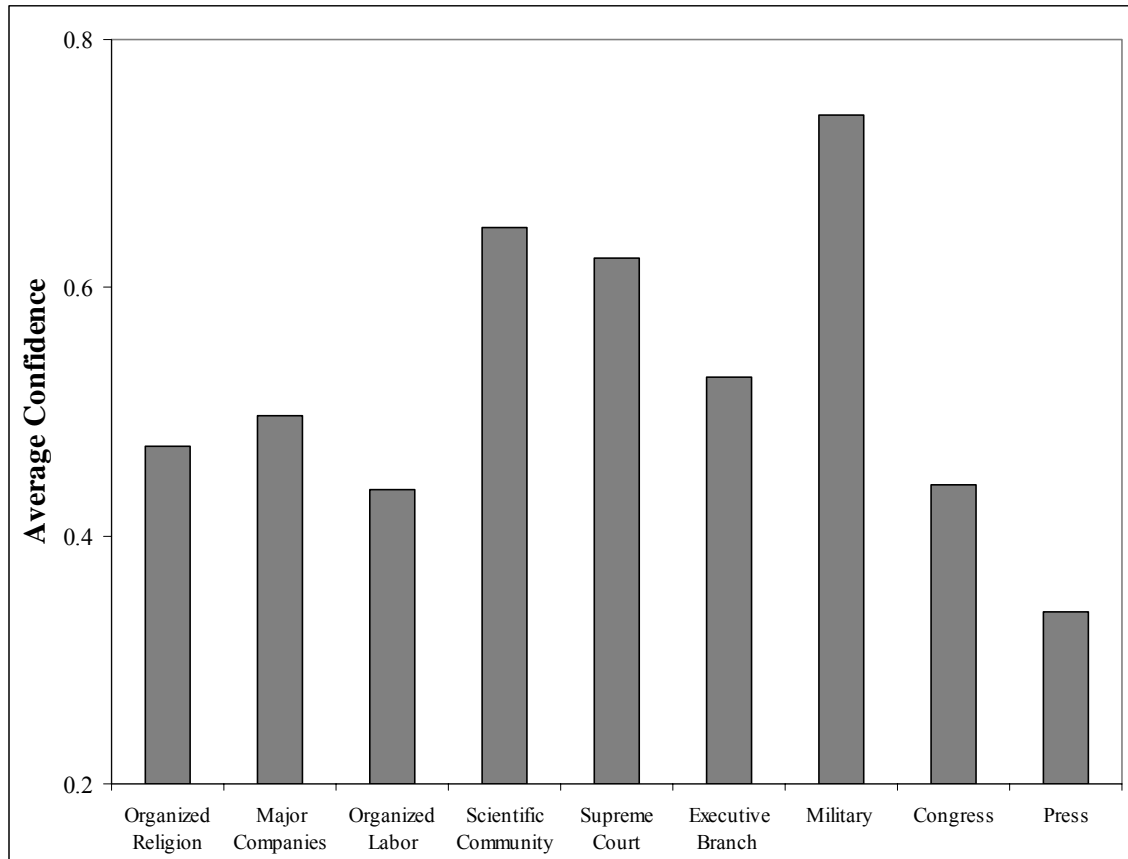
Source: 1973 GSS

**Figure 1-2: Confidence in American Institutions in 1973 (with Press Separated by Party Identification)**



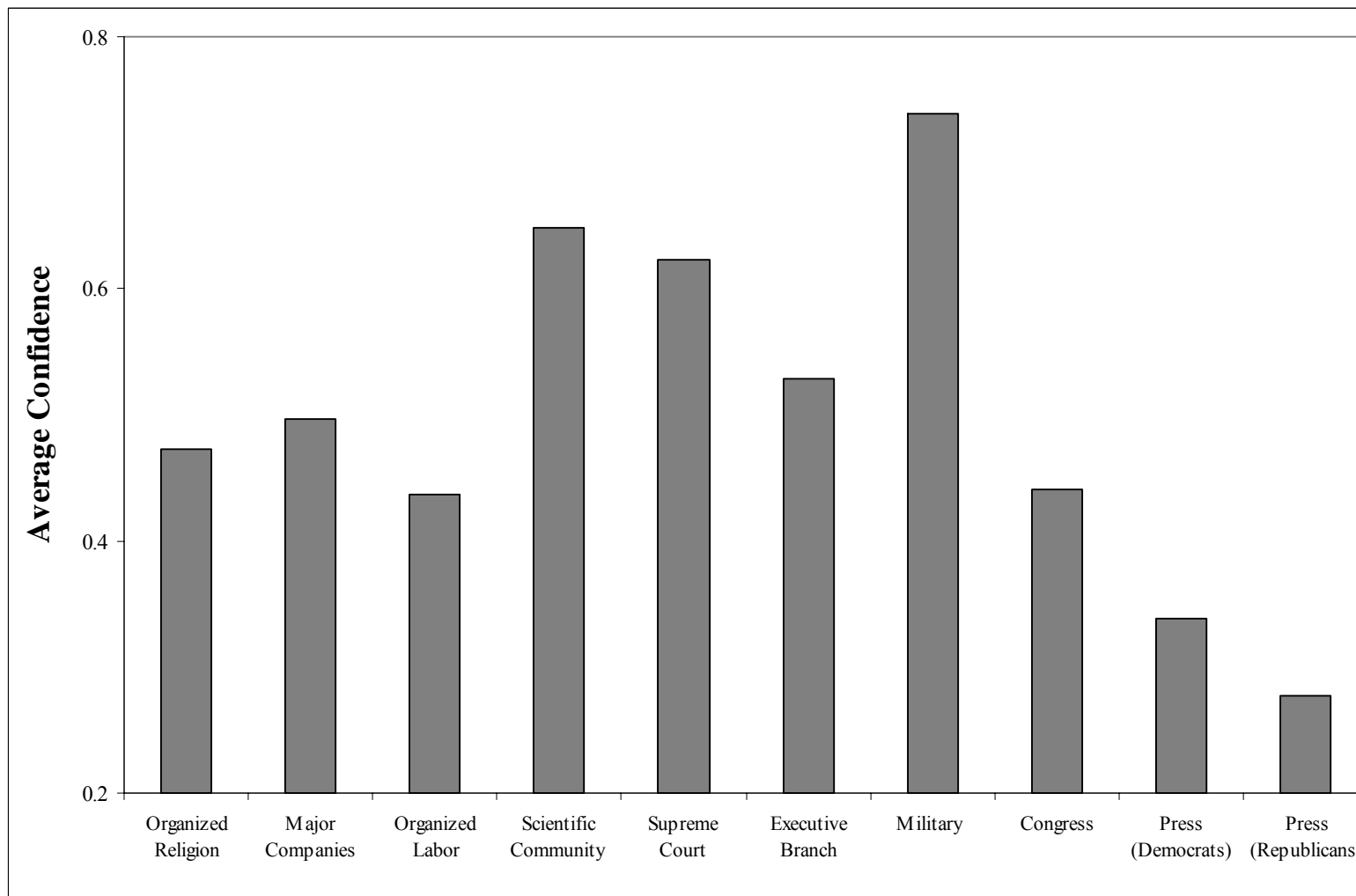
Source: 1973 GSS

**Figure 1-3: Confidence in American Institutions in 2002**



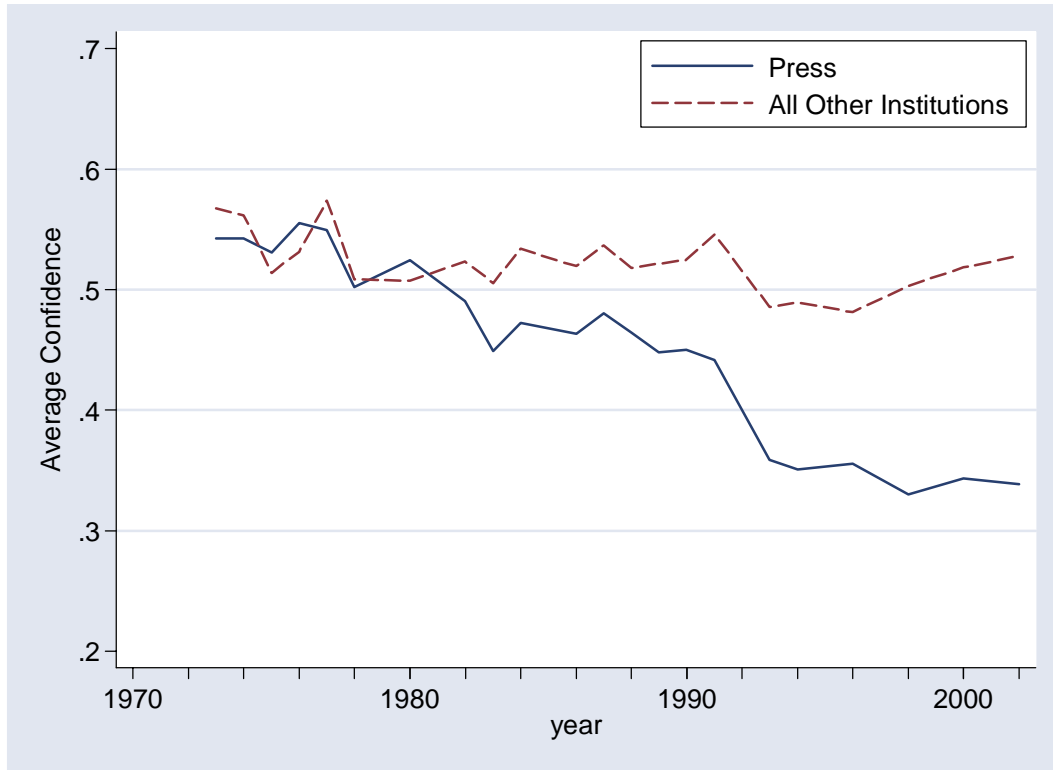
Source: 2002 GSS

**Figure 1-4: Confidence in American Institutions 2002 (with Press Separated by Party Identification)**



Source: 2002 GSS

**Figure 1-5: Confidence in the Press and Other Institutions 1973-2002**



Institutions included in the average calculation are all institutions that when included in the GSS confidence battery from 1973 to 2002: organized religion, major companies, organized labor, the scientific community, the Supreme Court, the executive branch, the military and Congress.

## Chapter 2

### Sources of Public Attitudes toward the News Media

In all due respect, I'm not so sure it's credible to quote leading news organizations about – oh, never mind.  
George W. Bush, Third Presidential Debate (Commission on Presidential Debates 2004)

We lack a solid understanding of what causes public attitudes toward the news media. Prior research in this area has suffered from a number of deficiencies. Researchers in different fields of study, including psychology, political science, communications and journalism, have often failed to address each other's hypothesized causes. There has been too little dialogue across fields, preventing researchers from addressing alternative explanations. Also, previous work on this topic has alternated between studying attitudes toward particular media outlets and the news media as an institution without acknowledging the differences between these attitude objects. The result has been a variety of interesting hypotheses, but no consensus on what factors shape the public's evaluations.

In this chapter, I attempt to build a better understanding of how public opinion about the press as an institution is formed. While the causes of attitudes toward particular news sources are a worthy topic, I set them aside for now. I begin by outlining possible causes that are suggested by prior research. In doing this, I look at variables other scholars claim affect attitudes toward the press as an institution, particular news outlets, or public opinion in general. These different potential influences are not mutually exclusive. They may each influence opinion about the news media to some extent. But they are theoretically distinct and therefore (in theory) data analysis should be able to isolate their distinct influence. Below, I use available data to assess, as well as possible, the extent to which these different variables affect attitudes toward the media.

### **Style of Coverage: Negativity, Conflict, Sensationalism**

The first possible source of public attitudes toward the press is the style of press coverage. The way the press covers the news may alienate the public in a number of ways. News



coverage of politics tends to focus on the negative (Sabato 1991; Jamieson 1992; Patterson 1993; Cappella and Jamieson 1997). There is a professional norm among journalists that rewards negative coverage of politicians and punishes the authors of positive coverage. Reporters whose coverage is too positive are scorned by their peers as “shills” or “in the tank” (Cappella and Jamieson 1997, 31). Partially as a result of this, the press tends to play the role of “critic of the established order” (Cook and Gronke 2001; Gronke and Cook 2002, 9). Americans tend to dislike disagreement and criticism in political processes and institutions (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 2002). So it may be that direct observation of negative, contentious press coverage creates public antipathy toward the press. Thomas Patterson (1993) cites some evidence in favor of this explanation. Over the past 35 years, while the public has increasingly disliked the press, the tendency of reporters to focus on negative aspects of political candidates has increased. In the 1968 presidential campaign news stories contained about twice as much “favorable” coverage of major-party presidential candidates as “unfavorable.” Coverage became increasingly negative so that by 1992 the vast majority of campaign coverage was “unfavorable” to the candidates (20).

One specific way that the news media portray political leaders in a poor light and emphasizes conflict is by focusing on the “game” of politics rather than on the substance of public policy debates (Jamieson 1992; Patterson 1993). News focuses on the selfish political motivations of politicians rather than on the substance on policy proposals (Cappella and Jamieson 1997). In addition to the cynical motivations of politicians, coverage tends to focus on the candidates’ styles, personal attributes and scandals, as well as polls and the campaign horse race (Bartels 1988; Bennet 1988; Patterson 1993). Patterson finds that coverage has increasingly used the “game schema” to describe political campaigns over the past 35 years. While in the 1968 presidential campaign the majority of articles used a “policy schema” to frame the story, by

1992 more than 80 percent of stories employed a “game schema” and less than 20 percent used a “policy schema to describe the campaign (74). People may have grown to dislike the press because of its increasing focus on sensationalism and conflict rather than on the substance of policy debates.

In Graber’s (1984) in-depth interviews with a small group of citizens over the course of a presidential campaign, she finds one of their chief complaints about coverage is “the oversimplified treatment of all news” (105). They complain that “the facts they really wanted to know were ignored by news stories” (103). Graber differs from other researchers in attributing negative reactions to misperceptions of news content. She finds that news reports actually do contain the more substantive information that voters claim to crave. However people either do not notice or do not show interest in more issue-focused coverage (Graber 1984; Zaller 1992, 7).<sup>1</sup> So Graber agrees that it is citizens’ direct perceptions of the style of news coverage that causes them to dislike the press, though she points out that higher quality news is easily available.

If the perception of negativity, conflict, and sensationalism in news coverage causes people to dislike the news media, one would expect to find several patterns. One would expect, over time, attitudes toward the press to be correlated with the style of news reporting, becoming more negative as reporting takes its modern form. In this modern period, one might find that those exposed to more news coverage have more negative evaluations of the news media, because they will observe more, or (as Graber argues) perceive more, negative coverage. In particular, one would expect exposure to news in the modern period to cause more negative evaluations when the programs being watched are negative, conflictual, and focused on the

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<sup>1</sup> The tendency to remember coverage whose style they dislike may be caused by people’s general tendency to remember the negative more than the positive (see Lau 1985). On the other hand, it may be that people do prefer to watch less substantive reports (Zaller 1999b) even if they claim not to.

“game.” However one would not expect these negative reactions to be related to the recipients’ partisan predispositions.

### **Content of Coverage: Ideological Bias**

A second possible source of people’s attitudes towards the news media is their perceptions of the ideological orientation of the coverage. The public may dislike the press because the coverage favors ideologies or parties that they dislike. Journalists, opinion leaders, and even academics often claim that news coverage contains varying levels of ideological bias (Hofstetter 1976; Lichter et al. 1986; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Hertsgaard 1988; Olasky 1988; Lee and Solomon 1991; Cohen and Sullivan 1995; Goldberg 2002; Kuypers 2002; Niven 2002; Kohn 2003; Goodman 2004; Groseclose 2004). It is possible that some members of the public dislike the press because they notice these alleged biases and conclude that the press is working against their political interests.

The public may perceive bias even when none exists. Psychologists document the tendency of individuals with different opinions on a topic to all perceive news reports as biased against their views (Vallone et al. 1985; Gunther 1988; Perloff 1989; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1993; Duck et al. 1998; Christen et al. 2002). In contrast, those without strong prior views tend to view the same coverage as free of bias (Perloff 1989). This is often referred to as the “hostile media phenomenon” (Vallone et al. 1985). In one illustration, laboratory subjects with pro-Israel opinions and subjects with pro-Palestinian opinions both view the same news report on a massacre in Beirut. Afterwards subjects in both groups tend to think that the news report is biased against their predispositions (Vallone et al. 1985; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1993).

Survey studies also find that those with more intense preferences or personal involvement in an

issue are more likely to perceive press reports as biased against them (Vallone et al. 1985; Gunther 1988; Gunther 1992; Duck et al. 1998).

Laboratory researchers identify three main causes of this “hostile media phenomenon”: prior beliefs about media bias, divergent beliefs about world events and biased perception causing subjects to remember portions of the reports they disagreed with (Vallone et al. 1985; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1993). The fact that prior beliefs about bias produce divergent perceptions is not an explanation for media evaluations, but rather an illustration of a limitation of this research design.<sup>2</sup> For some of the subjects, their attitudes about media bias were set prior to the treatment and were unaffected by it. For other subjects, perceptions of bias were created because those with different predispositions didn’t just have different opinions but different beliefs about the world. In assessing bias, they seem to have compared news reports to their own prior perceptions of reality. So each side sees moderate press coverage as biased when compared with their beliefs. Finally, for some subjects perceptions of bias were driven by their tendency to remember more the portion of news reports that they disagreed with. In general, citizens are more likely to remember political messages that they disagree with (Lau 1982, 1985), creating the perception that the news contains mostly messages contrary to one’s predispositions.

To the extent that perceptions of hostile ideological bias influence media evaluations, one would expect several patterns. Those with different predispositions may react differently to news exposure. When news content is biased against one’s predispositions, exposure ought to increase negative feelings towards the press. When news content is slanted toward one’s predispositions, one may have a more positive reaction to news coverage. But it is also possible that, because of

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to suggest that another research design would be any better at determining the causes of hostile media judgments among all subjects. Survey studies are even less useful for this purpose.

perceptual biases, the recipients of media favoritism may still see coverage as hostile and react negatively to media exposure.

### **Elite Opinion Leadership**

A third possible cause of public attitudes towards the press is elite opinion leadership. The opinions of partisans on a wide variety of issues tend to be strongly influenced by the positions of party elites (Zaller 1991, 1992, 1994; Miller 1999; Cohen 2003; Roch 2005). Here I use the term “elites” to refer not just to politicians but to all “persons who devote themselves full time to public affairs,” including “politicians, higher level government officials, journalists, some activists and many kinds of policy specialists” (Zaller 1992, 6). In one dramatic example, there was general support for the Vietnam War during its early years. Political leaders and citizens of all affiliations generally supported the war. However, later in the war, after liberal leaders began actively opposing it, liberals in the mass public who were politically aware enough to follow the elite messages became opposed to the war (Zaller 1991; 1992, 102-3). Similarly during the buildup to the Gulf War in 1990, all politically aware members of the public, especially the politically aware, tended to support the war effort. However, in January 1991, following a contentious congressional debate on a war resolution that most Democratic legislators voted against, politically aware Democrats turned sharply against the war (Zaller 1994). In another example, analyses of panel studies show that when citizens’ opinions do not match the stances of the party they identify with, citizens’ opinions tend to move into conformity with the party (Miller 1999). Furthermore, this type of elite opinion leadership is generally consistent with studies of “cue-taking,” where poorly informed citizens base their political choices on endorsements by like-minded political elites (Brady and Sniderman 1985; Sniderman et al. 1991; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Whatever the precise mechanism, the

rhetoric of political leaders seems to have a strong effect on the political views of those who share their predispositions.

It is possible that the public's attitudes toward the news media are influenced by what elite opinion leaders say about the press. There is some reason to believe that political elites do send out strong messages outlining what their followers ought to think about the press. Mark P. Watts and his colleagues (1999) examined attitudes about media bias and the content of campaign coverage during the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential election campaigns. In their content analysis, they monitored not just how the candidates were depicted, but also reporting on claims of media bias by the campaigns and opinion commentators. Using aggregate results from commercial polls over time, they found that during the campaigns perceptions of bias were more strongly related to this media "self coverage" than to the content of coverage of the candidates.

Others have found that political engagement, which can expose citizens to elite messages (Zaller 1992), is strongly related to perceptions of newspaper bias. When engagement is controlled for, the actual content of newspaper reports has no detectable effect of perceptions of newspaper bias (Gunther 1992). Perception of news bias also tends to be correlated with the amount of discussion with ideologically similar individuals, but not with political discussion in general (Eveland and Shah 2003). Analyses of elite discourse during the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential campaigns found numerous attacks on the media, mostly from Republican elites, and possibly with the goal of causing journalists to cover them more favorably (Domke et al. 1999; Watts et al. 1999; see also Alterman 2003).

Based on this evidence, there is reason to suspect that elite rhetoric may influence public attitudes toward the press. It is important to note that these elite messages may be simply pointing out bias, sensationalism, or negativity that is present in news coverage. However, in

cases where the public only realizes the flaws in press coverage when elite opinion leaders point them out, I classify this as elite opinion leadership rather than the public's own reaction to viewing the news.

To the extent that elite opinion leadership is a source of public attitudes towards the press, one would expect to find several patterns. Citizens' attitudes toward the press will respond to the rhetoric of elites in the party they identify with. Of these, politically aware individuals will be most exposed to political discourse and therefore most responsive to the rhetoric of corresponding political elites.

### **An Over-Time Analysis**

One way to test various possible causes of attitudes toward the media is to look at variation over time. As Chapter 1 documents, attitudes toward the press have become dramatically more negative over the past 40 years. Using the General Social Survey (GSS), Figure 2-1 shows the average confidence among Democratic identifiers, Republican identifiers, and all respondents from 1973 to 2002.<sup>3</sup> To provide a frame of reference, I include vertical lines on the graph indicating years when the party of the president changed: 1976, 1980, 1992, and 2000. It indicates there was a general downward trend among all people regardless of partisanship. In fact, both party groups move in similar ways over much of the time series with a few notable exceptions. At almost every point, confidence in the press is higher among Democrats than among Republicans. In addition, there are several time periods, such as the late 1970s and late 1980s, in which the parties move in different directions, their average confidence levels becoming more similar or more different.

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this chapter, I include independents who admit to leaning toward one of the two major parties as identifying with that party.

One might expect all the different influences outlined here to have stronger effects on those who are more exposed to media content. As noted above, political awareness is associated with greater exposure to news and a greater receptivity to messages from party elites. As a first cut at examining this hypothesis, in Figure 2-2, I graph confidence in the press among partisan grouping while also separating respondents into those with a high school education or less and those with more than a high school education. While far from unambiguous, this does seem to suggest that, while all education levels move in similar patterns, some changes are more pronounced among those with more education.

To see whether average confidence among partisans is affected by elite rhetoric of party elites, I attempt to roughly measure Democratic and Republican elite rhetoric over this time period. I do this by measuring the amount of criticism of the media in a conservative and a liberal magazine: the *National Review* and the *Nation*, respectively. I measure the total number of articles criticizing the news media in each year minus the number praising the media, with each article weighted by the number of pages it occupied in the magazine. It includes all articles that use the word “media” or “press” to refer to journalism or particular journalist(s), and expresses praise or criticism.

I expect this to be only a rough measure of elite criticism in any particular year. The two magazines, the *National Review* and the *Nation*, are chosen largely based on convenience. They both have available searchable, full-text databases of all their articles going back to the early 1970s. They both also consistently represent one side of the ideological and partisan divide over time.<sup>4</sup> So I expect these to be only crude measures of elite rhetoric at any point in time,

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<sup>4</sup> I briefly considered using *The New Republic* as a way of tracking liberal elite rhetoric. However, it has on several occasions had editors who steered the magazine temporarily in a conservative direction (Alterman 1999).



sometimes being more critical and sometimes less, sometimes being an early indicator of changes in overall rhetoric and sometimes being slow to adopt the change in tone. As a partial remedy, I smooth these measures by making their value in each year equal to the average level of criticism in that year, the next two and the two previous. Figure 2-3 shows how the raw and smoothed versions of this measure of elite criticism vary over time. Several things stand out. Just as in the public opinion data confidence is lower among Republicans at each time point, in these data Republican rhetoric (as represented by the *National Review*) is more critical of the press at every time point. Just as public confidence in the press among both parties declines noticeable in the early 1990s, elite press criticism from both sources increases during the early 1990s. In one notable departure, while criticisms from both sources decline a bit in the late 1990s and early 2000s, confidence in the press does not rebound in these years.

To see if there is a connection between the confidence of partisans and the rhetoric of corresponding elites, I regress the average confidence level in each partisan group in each year on the (smoothed) level of criticism from corresponding partisan elites in that year. The results, reported in column 1 of Table 2-1, show a strong relationship between the average confidence of partisans and the rhetoric of party leaders. Column 2 shows that the apparent effect of elite rhetoric is not caused simply by party differences in confidence. Instead, when you account for differences in elite rhetoric, Republicans no longer have less confidence in the press. The effect is slightly positive.

It is still possible that the relationship between elite rhetoric and confidence in the press is a spurious artifact created by other excluded variables. One alternative cause, outlined above, is the change in the style of coverage. News became more sensationalist and negative at the same time that confidence in the press was declining. To control for this, I include Patterson's (1993)

measure of overall media negativity, shown in Figure 2-4, as an explanatory variable. Since Patterson only collected this data from 1972 through 1992, this requires me to exclude the years 1994-2002 from the analysis. Because the changing news style hypothesis predicts similar effects on both parties, the style variable in each year is the same for both parties. In addition, overall confidence in all institutions declined over this time period (Lipset and Schnieder 1986; Cook and Gronke 2000). It is possible that confidence in the press is influenced by changes in confidence in general. To account for this, I include the average level of confidence in all institutions except the press as a control variable.

Column 3 in Table 2-1 shows that, when these two additional explanatory variables are included, the effect of elite rhetoric drops substantially in magnitude but is still of notable size and significantly different from zero. The estimated effect of average confidence is large but imprecisely estimated, not significantly different from zero by conventional standards.

Patterson's measure of media negativity does have a strong relationship to press confidence. The coefficient is large, negative, and distinguishable from zero.

A possible cause that I have not controlled for here is ideological bias in press coverage. To the best of my knowledge, there is no established measure in the academic literature of bias in press coverage over time. As a rough approximation, I include the amount of "press-initiated criticism" of their party's presidential candidate in the last presidential election, as measured by Zaller (1999). Figure 2-5 shows graphically how this measure varies over time. It is possible that the people react against press criticism of their party's candidate by disliking the press. This variable may also serve as a rough proxy for recent levels of overall partisan bias in the news. I include this variable in the model predicting average confidence among partisan groups. The

results, reported in column 4 of Table 2-1, show that this measure of partisan bias is not significantly related to confidence in the press.

Based on this over-time analysis of aggregate levels of confidence in the press, the two variables that are discernibly connected to confidence are party elite rhetoric and the style of news coverage. Both of these effects are modest in size. Among all respondents, the average confidence declined by .20 in the 0-1 scale from 1973 to 2002. The effect of changing from the level of Republican media criticism in 1981 (.14) to its peak in 1995 (.65) is .08. The effect of changing from the level of Democratic criticism in 1981 (.01) to its level in 1995 (.19) is .03. In the case of Patterson's measure of overall media negativity, the effect of moving from the level in 1972 (.43) to the level in 1992 (.62) is .04.

Some of the hypothesized influences on attitudes toward the media should be more likely to reach those who are more politically aware, because these individuals are both more exposed to news media coverage and more receptive to influence from party elites. One good way to measure political awareness is with a short battery of questions measuring objective political knowledge (Zaller 1992; Price and Zaller 1993). However, the GSS does not contain such a measure. In its absence, one useful but somewhat less valid substitute is education.

I expect the effect of elite rhetoric and style of media coverage to be greater among those who are highly exposed to news and political discourse. To test this I use pooled over-time individual-level GSS data. I estimate an ordered probit model, predicting confidence in the press. A constrained model, in which confidence is only a function of criticism from party elites, presented in column 1 of Table 2-2, shows a strong, significant relationship. Column 2 shows the

results when I include the interaction between elite rhetoric and education.<sup>5</sup> The results indicate that, as expected, elite criticism more strongly depresses confidence in the press among more politically aware partisans.

The model in column 3 includes party identification, average confidence (in all institutions other than the press), Patterson's measure of media negativity, and Zaller's measure of the amount of press-initiated criticism of the candidate of their party in the last presidential election.<sup>6</sup> With these controls, the effect of elite party criticism is still negative among the more highly educated.<sup>7</sup> As in the aggregate data, the effect of overall media negativity is negative. However, at the individual-level, Democratic identification is clearly associated with confidence in the press, while at the aggregate-level, there was essentially no effect when all explanatory variables were included. Also, average confidence has a statistically significant, positive relationship to press confidence, while at the aggregate level the relationship is not statistically significant at conventional levels. Finally, negative coverage of one's party's candidate in the last campaign also does seem to have a small negative effect on confidence in the press.

In the fourth column of Table 2-2, I check whether the effect of media negativity and past partisan coverage depends on citizens' level of education. In both cases, when the interaction with education is added to the model, neither the main effect nor the interaction term is

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<sup>5</sup> The education variable is the number of year in school and originally ranges from 1 to 20. In this analysis, I use this variable divided by 20, so that it ranges from 0 to 1.

<sup>6</sup> As in the aggregate analysis, pure independents who do not report leaning toward one party or the other are excluded.

<sup>7</sup> In the models in columns 4 and 5, the main effect of elite criticism becomes positive even though the interaction between elite criticism and education is negative. This positive main effect indicates that criticism increases confidence in the press among those with zero years of education. However, because there are very few respondents with this little education, this is essentially an out of sample prediction. At the point where there actually are significant numbers of respondents (about a sixth grade education) the effect of elite rhetoric is indistinguishable from zero.

statistically significant. There is not enough information in these data to determine if these effects depend on one's education.

So the individual-level analysis confirms findings that the style of press coverage and party rhetoric influence the public's attitudes toward the press. In addition, at the individual-level, average confidence, party identification, and education are associated with confidence in the press. Finally, consistent with previous literature on elite opinion leadership, the effect of party elite rhetoric is strongest among those high in education.

The size of ordered probit coefficients is not directly interpretable. To give a sense for how the effect of elite rhetoric varies, I simulate first differences at different levels of education, based on the model presented in column 3. In an ordered probit model, explanatory variables have different effects on the probability of the dependent variable being in each category. In this instance, I simulate the effect on the probability of a citizen having "a great deal" of confidence, the highest category. For someone with a tenth grade education, moving from the level of Republican criticism in 1981 (.14) to the level in 1995 (.65) reduces their probability of having "a great deal" of confidence by .01 with a standard error of .02 when all other explanatory variables are set to their means. This effect is not statistically distinguishable from zero. In contrast, for someone with 4 years of graduate education, this change reduces the probability of having "a great deal of confidence" by .12 with a standard error of .01 when all other explanatory variables are again held at their means. Similarly, for someone with a tenth grade education, changing from the level of Democratic criticism in 1981 (.01) to the level in 1995 (.18) reduces the probability of having "a great deal" of confidence in the press by only .003 with a standard error of .01. For someone with four years of graduate education, this change decreases the probability of having "a great deal" of confidence by .07 with a standard error of .01.

In summary, the aggregate level data suggests that over-time changes in party elite rhetoric and the style of news coverage influence over-time changes on the public's confidence in the press. Individual-level data support the elite-rhetoric hypothesis by showing that highly politically aware individuals are most influenced by changes in elite rhetoric. It also shows that, at the individual level, confidence in the press is correlated with general confidence, party identification, and the amount of media criticism of their party's candidate in the last presidential election.

### **Political Awareness and Media Evaluations in the NES 1996-2000**

One other possible source of data for examining these questions is the National Election Studies (NES). Unlike the GSS, the NES has not asked respondents to evaluate the news media as an institution over an extended period of time. They did, in three surveys in 1996, 1998 and 2000, ask respondents "How much of the time do you think you can trust the media to report the news fairly? Just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, or almost never?" Table 2-3 shows the responses. Consistent with other surveys, only a small portion of the public has a great deal of trust in the media's ability to deliver the news. About 6 percent of the public trusts the press to report things fairly "just about always." Almost sixty percent of the public trusts the news media "only some of the time" or less.

Because the NES only asks this question in these three years, one cannot see whether responses vary over time with the explanatory variables considered above. But one way to make use of this data is to see if the relationship between responses to this question and political

awareness are consistent with any of the major hypothesized causes of attitudes toward the media.<sup>8</sup>

During this period, the overall style of media coverage was more negative than in previous decades. Elite party criticism was (for both parties) higher than in previous decades but in absolute terms Republican elites were more critical than Democratic elites. Those with high levels of political knowledge are not only more likely to be exposed to media content, but also more likely to understand the implications of political messages, and thus follow the lead of like-minded political elites when they communicate through the media (Zaller 1992, 21). So to the extent that direct observation of the style of news creates negative reaction, the more highly aware could be expected to dislike the press more regardless of party. To the extent that elite rhetoric is driving these attitudes, one would expect opinion divergence among more politically aware individuals, with Republicans having less trust than Democrats. I do not have a satisfactory measure of the direction and extent of partisan media bias. The proxy I used in the previous section was the level of “media initiated criticism” (Zaller 1999) of the parties’ presidential candidates in the last presidential election. 1996 is the last election for which these data are available. In that year there was significantly more media initiated criticism of Democratic President Bill Clinton than of Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole.<sup>9</sup> If the direct observation of media bias influences attitudes toward the press, one would expect identifiers with the two major parties to have different attitudes toward the press, with those of

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<sup>8</sup> The only previous study I know of that uses the NES to study causes of public opinion toward the media is Bennett et al. (2001). They show that trust in the media is correlated with presidential and congressional approval ratings, traditional morality, and distrust of other people. However, since they only present correlation evidence from cross-sectional surveys, the direction of causation is unclear.

<sup>9</sup> Zaller (1999b) plausibly attributes this difference to anti-incumbent and anti-frontrunner tendencies in press coverage. But whatever the cause of the anti-Clinton coverage, that should not change its potential to offend Democrats more than Republicans.

the party the press favors having more positive opinions. If, as Zaller's (1999) measure of bias in 1996 indicates, the press favors Republicans, then Republicans should have significantly more positive attitudes. If, instead, the media favors Democrats, then Democratic identifiers should have more positive attitudes. One would expect these differences to be largest among those who are most politically aware because they will be most exposed to the bias in the news.

Figure 2-6 breaks down the percentage of Democrats and Republicans who trust the media "most of the time" or "always" by their level of political knowledge. It shows that Democrats and Republicans evaluate the news media differently as they become more politically aware. Among those with low political awareness, the difference between Democratic and Republican identifiers is small, with slightly more trust evident among Democrats. Trust among both groups declines at roughly equal rates as one moves from low to middle levels of political awareness. But from middle to high political awareness, partisans diverge in their evaluations of the press. Republicans continue to trust the media less as their political knowledge increases, while Democrats trust the media more as they move to the highest levels of political knowledge.

This same pattern is evident when I estimate regression models predicting trust in the media among Democrats and Republicans. I code trust in the news media on a 0 to 1 scale (see Table 2-3). Table 2-4 shows the coefficient estimate when I regress media trust on political knowledge (also scaled from 0 to 1) and political knowledge squared, separately for both Democratic and Republican identifiers. Among Democrats the main effect of political knowledge is negative but the effect of its squared term is positive. Among Republicans the main effect is negative but the squared term is small and not statistically distinguishable from zero. These results produce the predicted values displayed in Figure 2-7. The results are very similar to those evident in Figure 2-6.



This pattern is consistent with the hypothesis that elite messages influence attitudes towards the press, where Republican messages about the press are in this time period more negative than Democratic messages, as our measure of elite rhetoric indicates. Divergent elite messages about the press could produce the divergent opinions among partisans who are most exposed to political discourse. However, this pattern could also be consistent with the hypothesis that the ideological direction of news coverage shapes attitudes towards the press if, at the time this data was collected, media coverage was biased in favor of the Democratic Party. The data are least consistent with the hypothesis that the style of media coverage influences public attitudes towards the press. If this was the case, one would expect news exposure to have the same effect on people regardless of their partisan predispositions. However, political awareness tends to have opposite effects on Democratic and Republican identifiers.

### **Talk Radio Exposure and Media Evaluations**

Another way to investigate the sources of attitudes toward the news media as an institution is to move away from looking at the effects of exposure to news media messages in general and examine a particular news medium. Several attributes of talk radio make it especially useful for documenting the specific effect of elite party rhetoric on attitudes toward the media. Commercial political talk radio stands out from other news media in that it has an identifiable partisan perspective. Almost all political talk radio hosts advocate conservative and Republican political positions.<sup>10</sup> Talk radio is also notable for its confrontational style. The programming format tends to rely heavily on arguments and a conflictual approach to political discussion. The host will argue with guests or callers, or most often will verbally attack political figures he or she

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<sup>10</sup> The “Air America” talk radio network began broadcasting on 2004 with the goal of providing an explicitly liberal and pro-Democratic point of view. Because the data examined here were collected prior to that date, the assumption that most talk radio broadcasts conservative views is appropriate.

disagrees with (Davis and Owen 1998; Barker 2002). The mainstream news media is also a frequent object of biting criticism (Pfau et al. 1998; Barker and Knight 2000; Barker 2002). A content analysis of the popular Rush Limbaugh program from 1993 through 1995 found that the mainstream media was the second most frequent “issue” discussed on the show (Barker and Knight 2000, 168).

The fact that political talk radio has this distinct format provides a unique opportunity for testing differing explanations for why the public dislikes the press. Since talk radio transmits the messages of Republican and not Democratic elites, to the extent that partisan opinion leaders shape opinions toward the press, one would expect exposure to talk radio to cause Republicans to have more negative views toward the news media as an institution. But we would not expect all Republicans to be influenced equally. As outlined above, those who are more politically knowledgeable are not only more attentive to political news in general, but they are also more likely to receive and accept the messages of partisan opinion leaders when exposed to them (Zaller 1991; 1992, 21). So to the extent that opinion leadership shapes attitudes toward the press, one would expect politically knowledgeable Republicans to be most influenced. In contrast, because talk radio is mostly devoid of messages from liberal opinion leaders, one would not expect talk radio exposure to persuade Democratic identifiers at all through the mechanism of elite opinion leadership.

The other potential causes of attitudes towards the press, such as observation of the style or bias of coverage, produce a variety of different predictions for the effect of talk radio exposure. Listeners may or may not see talk radio as part of the news media “institution.” If listeners do not see talk radio as part of the institutional news media, the content of talk radio would provide no first-hand information as to the news media’s style of coverage or ideological

bias. But if people do see talk radio as part of the institutional news media, then listening would only increase their perceptions that the media is confrontational, negative and sensationalist. So to the extent that observation of the style of media content affects trust in the press, one would expect exposure to talk radio to have either no effect or to cause all listeners (regardless of their political predispositions) to dislike the press. Finally, in the case of ideological bias, if people see talk radio as part of the institutional media, then listening to talk radio would cause Republicans to be exposed to more media messages consistent with their predispositions and Democrats to be exposed to messages opposed to their predispositions. If anything, talk radio exposure would cause Republicans to like the press more and Democrats to like the press less.

To test these predictions, I need to estimate the effect of talk radio exposure on public attitudes towards the press. The NES data examined above are particularly useful for this task. One reason is that they include a question measuring exposure to talk radio. People were asked, “There are a number of programs on radio in which people call in to voice their opinions about politics. Do you ever listen to political talk radio programs of this type?” If they said yes, then they were asked how often they listened. The distribution of responses to this question is presented in Table 2-5.

Further investigation reveals that exposure to talk radio and trust in the news media are modestly negatively correlated. They have a Pearson’s R correlation of  $-.08$ . Figure 2-8 displays the relationship graphically. The figure indicates the average level of trust in the media on a 0 to 1 scale at each level of talk radio exposure. The trend gently slopes downward, indicating a negative correlation. But while this negative relationship is consistent with prior research (Barker and Knight 2000), the correlation itself does not demonstrate that talk radio is causing listeners to trust the media less. It is quite possible that causation could go in the other direction. People who

have more negative evaluations of the institutional news media may be more likely to seek out a less conventional source of news like talk radio. This reciprocal causation could bias estimates of the effect of talk radio exposure on trust in the media in the negative direction.

One potential way to eliminate this endogeneity bias is by using instrumental variables or two-stage least squares regression. To use this method, one must find another variable, called an instrument, which satisfies certain assumptions. The first is that the covariance between the instrument and the explanatory variable must not be zero. The second assumption is that any effect of the instrument on the dependent variable must be through the explanatory variable (Hanushek and Jackson 1977, 243; Kennedy 2003, 159; Wooldridge 2003, 484). Fortunately, these data contain a variable with the potential to satisfy these assumptions. In 1996 and 2000 the NES asked respondents how many miles they drive in their car in a typical day. To see if this variable satisfies the first assumption by being correlated with talk radio exposure, Figure 2-9 displays the average talk radio exposure on a 0 to 1 scale for various levels of daily driving. While the number of miles driven daily is a continuous variable, I have grouped it into seven categories in this Figure. It shows that talk radio listenership increases somewhat as one spends more time driving in the car each day.<sup>11</sup>

The second assumption, that the miles driven each day affects trust in the media only through talk radio exposure, is not testable (Wooldridge 2003). However, the number of miles driven each day seems sufficiently distant from politics that I will proceed using this assumption. Later, I will return to discuss this assumption and related concerns.

I proceed by estimating the effect of talk radio exposure on trust in the media by instrumental variables regression, with the miles driven each day as an instrument for talk radio

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<sup>11</sup> This relationship is statistically significant, as is shown in Table 2-6 and Table 2-8.

exposure. Table 2-6 shows coefficient estimates from the instrumental variables regression. The first column shows the results from the purging regression, in which talk radio exposure is regressed on miles driven to work. The results illustrate again that talk radio listening is moderately yet significantly related to the number of miles driven. The second column shows the results of the main regression, in which trust in the media is regressed on the predicted values of talk radio exposure generated from the purging regression.<sup>12</sup> The results suggest that among the population as a whole talk radio exposure has a small negative effect on trust in the media. The effect is marginally statistically significant ( $p = .098$ ).

However, because several of the hypothesized explanations for public opinion toward the news media make different predictions depending on people's predispositions, I run the analysis separately, grouping individuals by their partisan predisposition and level of political sophistication. The first two columns of Table 2-7 show the estimated effect for Democrats and Republicans who are in the lower half of the political knowledge scale. The estimated effects in these groups tend to have large standard errors. Because of this high degree of uncertainty, none of the coefficients are statistically distinguishable from zero. The coefficient estimates and standard errors for those in the upper half of the political knowledge scale are shown in the right half of Table 2-7. The effect of political talk radio is not significantly different from zero for politically aware Democrats but there is a statistically significant, negative effect on Republicans' trust in the media. Since trust in the media is coded on a 0 to 1 scale the difference between each response category is .25. The coefficient on talk radio exposure is -.330 for politically aware Republicans. That means that listening to talk radio every day rather than never,

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<sup>12</sup> In this estimation and in two-stage least squares generally, the standard errors of the instrumented variable are adjusted because the predicted values of that variable leave an important part of the stochastic component of that variable out of the standard error calculation (Kennedy 2003, 175; Wooldridge 2003, 500).

causes these listeners to become more than one category less trusting of the media. To illustrate these results, in Figure 2-10 I graph the estimated effect of talk radio and the 95% confidence interval on that effect for less and more politically knowledgeable partisan groupings. It illustrates that the only group whose attitudes toward the press are detectably influenced by talk radio is politically knowledgeable Republicans.

For these results to be accurate, one must assume that the instrument (in this case miles driven each day) affects the dependent variable (trust in the media) only through the explanatory variable (talk radio exposure). As stated above, this assumption is not testable. However, a related concern is that other variables that are correlated with automobile driving could be directly related to trust in the news media. If this was the case it could bias estimates of the effect of talk radio. To alleviate this concern I estimate the instrumental variable regression model while controlling for other factors which could be related to driving and trust in the media. Variables that are related to an individual's life circumstances, distance from home to work, access to public transportation, and the amount of driving that is a part of his or her job are of particular interest. To account for these factors I control for education, income, whether the person is currently employed, the type of area the person lives in, and the type of profession he or she is in. For education and income, I include dummy variables for each level in the survey, leaving the lowest levels as the excluded categories.<sup>13</sup> Employment status is measured with a single dummy variable indicating whether the person is currently employed. The NES groups communities into three categories, urban, suburban or rural. I include dummy variables for whether the person lives in an urban or a suburban community and leave rural communities as

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<sup>13</sup> In cases where dummy variables are used to indicate a variety of categories, the variable indicating one of the categories must be excluded from the equation to prevent the variables from being perfectly collinear with each other.

the excluded category. The NES separates people's professions into six separate categories: professional or managerial workers; clerical workers; service workers; laborers other than farmers; farmers, foresters and fishermen; and homemakers. I include dummy variables for the first five of these and leave homemakers as the excluded category.

I estimate the model with these controls on the whole dataset and report the results in Table 2-8. The results are similar to the full model without the controls presented in Table 2-6. Among the whole sample the estimated effect of talk radio is small and not statistically significant. I again estimate the model separately according to respondents' partisanship and political knowledge. Table 2-9 shows the results for partisan groupings in each half of the political knowledge scale. The inclusion of controls makes the coefficient estimates for talk radio exposure much less precise. While the coefficients have become larger, the standard errors have grown by an even greater magnitude. The result is that, despite large coefficients, we again cannot be certain of any effect among the low knowledge groups. In the case of high knowledge groups, the size of the standard errors has also noticeably increased. Strikingly however, the inclusion of controls does not change the direction of the talk radio exposure coefficient for any grouping.<sup>14</sup> My substantive conclusions remain the same. With controls included, the only group in which the effect of talk radio is statistically significant is still politically knowledgeable Republicans. The coefficient among this group is almost exactly the same, going from  $-.330$  to  $-.327$ . While the inclusion of controls does reduce the precision of the estimate, we can still be 95 % confident that the effect is less than zero ( $p=.046$ ). Figure 2-11 displays the talk radio exposure coefficients and 95 % confidence intervals for each of the four different groups when controls are included in the models. They confirm the finding that the only group talk radio has a

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<sup>14</sup> Compare Table 2-9 with Table 2-7.

detectable effect on is politically knowledgeable Republicans. Listening to talk radio every day decreases trust in the media by between one and two response categories.

This pattern is consistent with the elite opinion leadership explanation for attitudes towards the press. The effects of talk radio exposure precisely fit expectations if the public is influenced by opinion leaders and Republican elites transmit negative messages about the institutional press through talk radio. The highly argumentative, sensationalist, conservative messages on political talk radio did not have a discernable effect on the media evaluations of Democrats, independents, or politically unsophisticated Republicans. Only politically aware Republicans responded to the messages. These results certainly do not rule out the possibility that direct observation of the style or ideological bias of the news media influence attitudes toward the press. It is possible that people do not consider talk radio to be part of the institutional media, and as a result exposure to talk radio does not influence their perceptions of the style and bias of media coverage, while direct observation of other news sources may, as indicated by the over-time analysis of GSS data. But in the case of political talk radio, it appears to influence trust in the media through elite opinion leadership.

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this chapter, I outlined several possible causes of public attitudes toward the press as an institution, including direct observation of the style and bias of media coverage and opinion leadership by party elites. In summarizing the results, I will take each potential cause in turn. In the case of elite party opinion leadership, each type of data examined here supports the proposition that this is an important force shaping attitudes toward the news media. Elite rhetoric and the media trust of party identifiers are related over time, with those most receptive to these types of messages responding most strongly. In addition, talk radio



exposure is related to media attitudes in ways that suggest it is a conduit for Republican elite messages. In the case of direct observation of the style of news coverage, there is some evidence that this also affects attitudes toward the media to some degree. The chief evidence in favor of this is that Patterson's measure of the style of news coverage is correlated over time with attitudes toward the news media. Finally, in the case of direct observation of the direction and extent of bias in news coverage, the evidence is least conclusive. The chief impediment is that there is no widely accepted measure of partisan bias in the news media over time. I have used a measure of media coverage of presidential campaigns as one measure of this concept and found that it correlates only weakly with confidence in the press over time. Also, the patterns of political awareness and trust in the media in the NES in the late 1990s are consistent with either elite opinion leadership or reaction to direct observation of media bias against the Republican Party. Overall, the evidence on this hypothesis is weak and deserves more study with better measures. Based on the data in this chapter, I conclude that the evidence indicates that elite opinion leadership is at least one of the sources of the opinions Americans hold about the news media as an institution, while direct observation of the style of news coverage may also have an effect.

**Table 2-1: The Influence of Elite Rhetoric on Partisans' Confidence in the Press**

Predicting Average Press Confidence Among Partisans				
Criticism from Party Elites	<b>-0.31</b> (0.04)	<b>-0.42</b> (0.05)	<b>-0.16</b> (0.07)	<b>-0.16</b> (0.07)
Party (Republican=1)		<b>0.06</b> (0.02)	<b>0.003</b> (0.02)	<b>0.001</b> (0.02)
Average Confidence (All other institutions)			<b>0.43</b> (0.30)	<b>0.42</b> (0.31)
Media Negativity (Patterson's Measure)			<b>-0.23</b> (0.07)	<b>-0.24</b> (0.07)
Media Criticism of Party Candidate in Last Campaign (Zaller's Measure)				<b>-0.05</b> (0.12)
Intercept	<b>0.49</b> (0.01)	<b>0.48</b> (0.01)	<b>0.39</b> (0.18)	<b>0.40</b> (0.18)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.50	0.56	0.58	0.57
Standard Error of Regression	0.05	0.05	0.03	0.03
Years Included - Democrats	1973-02	1973-02	1973-92	1973-92
Years Included - Republicans	1975-02	1975-02	1975-92	1975-92
Number of Observations	58	58	38	38

Entries are ordinary least squares regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The unit of analysis is each partisan group in each year. The dependent variable is average confidence among each partisan group in each year. "Criticism from Party Elites" is the number of articles criticizing the media (weighted by the number of pages each article occupied) in the *National Review* or the *Nation* magazine divided by 100. This variable is conservative rhetoric for Republican identifiers and liberal rhetoric for Democratic identifiers. "Media Negativity" is the percentage of campaign coverage that is negative, as coded by Patterson (1993) divided by 100. In years between presidential campaigns, values for Patterson's "media negativity" measure are imputed based on the assumption that there is a linear trend between election years. "Negative Network Coverage of Party Candidate in Last Campaign" is the percentage of network TV news coverage that included "press-initiated criticism" of the party's candidate in the last presidential election as coded by Zaller (1999b) divided by 100. The years included are different for Democrats and Republicans because of limitations of the content analysis. Issues of the *National Review* were not coded from 1973 and 1974.

**Table 2-2: The Role of Education in Facilitating Reception of Elite Messages**

Predicting Confidence in the Press				
Criticism From Party Elites	<b>-1.28</b>	<b>-0.48</b>	<b>1.24</b>	<b>1.10</b>
	(0.04)	(0.18)	(0.37)	(0.39)
Elite Criticism X Education		<b>-1.16</b>	<b>-2.59</b>	<b>-2.35</b>
		(0.27)	(0.54)	(0.58)
Education		<b>-0.06</b>	<b>0.23</b>	<b>0.79</b>
		(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.36)
Party Identification			<b>-0.26</b>	<b>-0.27</b>
			(0.04)	(0.04)
Average Confidence			<b>2.41</b>	<b>2.41</b>
(All other institutions)			(0.05)	(0.05)
Media Negativity			<b>-1.17</b>	<b>-0.54</b>
(Patterson's Measure)			(0.10)	(0.44)
Media Negativity X Education				<b>-1.02</b>
				(0.69)
Media Criticism of Party Candidate in Last Campaign (Zaller's Measure)			<b>-0.63</b>	<b>-0.17</b>
			(0.20)	(0.81)
Negative Party Candidate Coverage X Education				<b>-0.74</b>
				(1.24)
$\tau_1$	<b>-0.82</b>	<b>-0.85</b>	<b>-0.28</b>	<b>0.06</b>
	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.23)
$\tau_2$	<b>0.75</b>	<b>0.71</b>	<b>1.50</b>	<b>1.84</b>
	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.23)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.02	0.08	0.08
Log-likelihood	-29199.07	-29094.53	-15330.61	-15329.37
GSS Surveys Included - Democrats	1973-02	1973-02	1973-91	1973-91
GSS Surveys Included - Republicans	1975-02	1975-02	1975-91	1975-91
Number of Observations	30,044	29,966	17,180	17,180

Entries are ordered probit coefficients with standard errors in parenthesis. The unit of analysis is the survey respondent in pooled General Social Survey data. "Criticism from Party Elites" is the number of articles (smoothed) criticizing the media in the year of the GSS survey (weighted by the number of pages each article occupied) in the National Review or the Nation magazine divided by 100. This variable is conservative rhetoric for Republican identifiers and liberal rhetoric for Democratic identifiers. "Media Negativity" is the percentage of campaign coverage that is negative in the year of the GSS survey, as coded by Patterson (1993) divided by 100. In years between presidential campaigns, values for Patterson's "media negativity" measure are imputed based on the assumption that there is a linear trend between election years. "Negative Network Coverage of Party Candidate in Last Campaign" is the percentage of network TV news coverage that included "press-initiated criticism" of the party's candidate in the last presidential election as coded by Zaller (1999b) divided by 100.

**Table 2-3: Trust in the Media**

	Percent	Number of Obs.	Coding
just about always	5.9 %	255	1
most of the time	35.0 %	1,523	.75
only some of the time	48.9 %	2,127	.5
almost never	9.2 %	401	.25
never (volunteered)	0.9 %	41	0
Total	100 %	4,347	

Source: NES 1996, 1998, 2000

**Table 2-4: Regression Models Predicting Trust in the News Media**

	Democrats	Republicans
Political Knowledge	<b>-0.18</b> (0.04)	<b>-0.14</b> (0.05)
Political Knowledge <sup>2</sup>	<b>0.19</b> (0.05)	<b>0.05</b> (0.05)
Constant	<b>0.64</b> (0.01)	<b>0.61</b> (0.01)
Standard Error of Regression	0.1875	0.1895
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.02
Number of Observations	2199	1664

Source: NES 1996, 1998, 2000

**Table 2-5: Exposure to Talk Radio**

	Percent	Number of Obs.
every day	5.3 %	163
most days	4.8 %	149
once or twice a week	8.3 %	255
only occasionally	18.5 %	572
don't listen	63.1 %	1,948
Total	100 %	3,087

Source: NES 1996, 2000

**Table 2-6: Estimating the Effect of Talk Radio with Instrumental Variables**

Purging Regression: Predicting Talk Radio Exposure		Main Regression: Predicting Media Trust	
Miles Driven to Work	<b>0.0008</b> (0.0001)	Talk Radio Exposure (Instrumented)	<b>-0.1685</b> (0.1019)
Constant	<b>0.1549</b> (0.0062)	Constant	<b>0.6262</b> (0.0184)
Std. Error of Regression	0.284	Std. Error of Regression	0.191
Number of Observations	2947	Number of Observations	2947

Source: NES 1996, 2000

**Table 2-7: Instrumental Variables Regression Models for Different Groups**

	Low Knowledge		High Knowledge	
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
Talk Radio Exposure (Instrumented)	<b>0.3663</b> (0.5230)	<b>0.1785</b> (0.2902)	<b>-0.0004</b> (0.1931)	<b>-0.3304</b> (0.1407)
Constant	<b>0.5874</b> (0.0702)	<b>0.5553</b> (0.0518)	<b>0.6212</b> (0.0319)	<b>0.6217</b> (0.0363)
Std. Error of Regression	0.2150	0.2051	0.1773	0.1865
Number of Observations	679	462	809	676

Source: NES 1996, 2000



**Table 2-8: Estimating the Effect of Talk Radio with Instrumental Variables with Control Variables**

Purging Regression: Predicting Talk Radio Exposure		Main Regression: Predicting Media Trust	
Miles Driven Each Day	<b>0.0007</b> (0.0002)	Talk Radio Exposure (Instrumented)	<b>-0.0973</b> (0.1349)
Educ. Gr. 9-12	<b>-0.0165</b> (0.0403)	Educ. Gr. 9-12	<b>0.0504</b> (0.0267)
Educ. High School or Equiv.	<b>0.0357</b> (0.0364)	Educ. High School or Equiv.	<b>0.0522</b> (0.0246)
Educ. Some College	<b>0.0389</b> (0.0378)	Educ. Some College	<b>0.0441</b> (0.0256)
Educ. BA or Equiv.	<b>0.0377</b> (0.0399)	Educ. BA or Equiv.	<b>0.0596</b> (0.0269)
Income 17-33 %	<b>-0.0068</b> (0.0227)	Income 17-33 %	<b>-0.0095</b> (0.0150)
Income 34-67 %	<b>-0.0091</b> (0.0214)	Income 34-67 %	<b>-0.0334</b> (0.0141)
Income 68-95 %	<b>0.0344</b> (0.0238)	Income 68-95 %	<b>-0.0304</b> (0.0169)
Income 96-100 %	<b>0.0212</b> (0.0348)	Income 96-100 %	<b>-0.0227</b> (0.0234)
Employed	<b>-0.0096</b> (0.0160)	Employed	<b>-0.0129</b> (0.0105)
Urban	<b>0.0434</b> (0.0166)	Urban	<b>0.0131</b> (0.0123)
Suburban	<b>0.0417</b> (0.0150)	Suburban	<b>-0.0092</b> (0.0113)
Professional	<b>0.0476</b> (0.0289)	Professional	<b>0.0034</b> (0.0201)
Clerical Worker	<b>0.0184</b> (0.0291)	Clerical Worker	<b>0.0093</b> (0.0194)
Service Worker	<b>0.0252</b> (0.0282)	Service Worker	<b>0.0001</b> (0.0191)
Laborer	<b>-0.0010</b> (0.0535)	Laborer	<b>0.0063</b> (0.0354)
Farmer	<b>0.1566</b> (0.0603)	Farmer	<b>-0.0663</b> (0.0462)
Constant	<b>0.0635</b> (0.0433)	Constant	<b>0.5867</b> (0.0300)
Std. Error of Regression	0.281	Std. Error of Regression	0.186
Number of Observations	2000	Number of Observations	2000

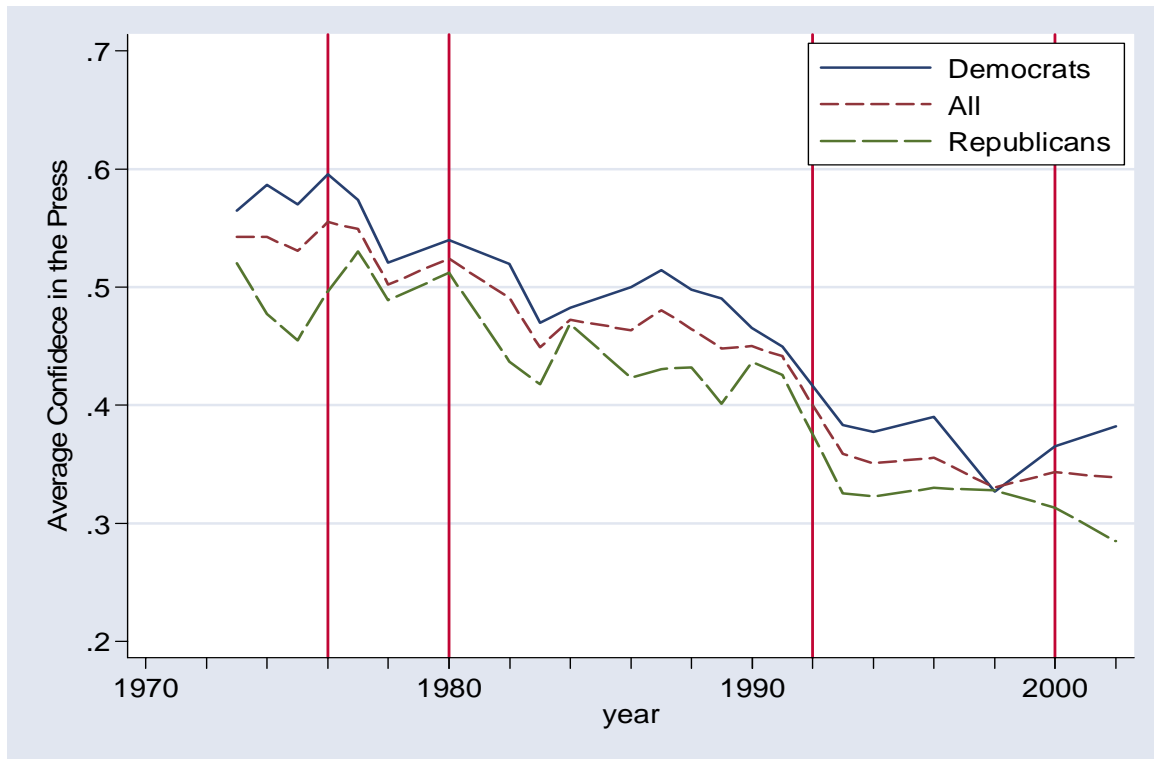
Source: NES 1996, 2000

**Table 2-9: Instrumental Variables Regression Models for Different Groups**

	Low Knowledge		High Knowledge	
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
Talk Radio Exposure (Instrumented)	<b>0.8426</b> (0.9818)	<b>0.5950</b> (0.5578)	<b>-0.0534</b> (0.2684)	<b>-0.3270</b> (0.1637)
Educ. Gr. 9-12	<b>0.0513</b> (0.0880)	<b>-0.1279</b> (0.1361)	<b>0.0551</b> (0.0507)	<b>-0.0598</b> (0.1154)
Educ. Hish School or Equiv.	<b>0.0036</b> (0.1213)	<b>-0.1435</b> (0.1285)	<b>0.1029</b> (0.0427)	<b>-0.0504</b> (0.1118)
Educ. Some College	<b>-0.0203</b> (0.1264)	<b>-0.1084</b> (0.1290)	<b>0.0750</b> (0.0468)	<b>-0.0484</b> (0.1119)
Educ. BA or Equiv.	<b>-0.0034</b> (0.1304)	<b>-0.1001</b> (0.1310)	<b>0.0994</b> (0.0454)	<b>-0.0473</b> (0.1126)
Income 17-33 %	<b>-0.0132</b> (0.0414)	<b>0.0265</b> (0.0741)	<b>0.0393</b> (0.0279)	<b>-0.0135</b> (0.0408)
Income 34-67 %	<b>0.0141</b> (0.0869)	<b>-0.0019</b> (0.0679)	<b>0.0181</b> (0.0315)	<b>-0.0141</b> (0.0367)
Income 68-95 %	<b>-0.0468</b> (0.0801)	<b>-0.0733</b> (0.0739)	<b>0.0217</b> (0.0337)	<b>-0.0002</b> (0.0361)
Income 96-100 %	<b>0.0309</b> (0.1050)	<b>-0.0787</b> (0.0988)	<b>0.0240</b> (0.0553)	<b>0.0058</b> (0.0456)
Employed	<b>-0.0132</b> (0.0512)	<b>-0.0706</b> (0.0629)	<b>0.0018</b> (0.0199)	<b>0.0066</b> (0.0235)
Urban	<b>-0.0718</b> (0.0707)	<b>0.0694</b> (0.0475)	<b>0.0046</b> (0.0269)	<b>0.0006</b> (0.0257)
Suburban	<b>-0.0942</b> (0.0602)	<b>0.0187</b> (0.0407)	<b>0.0054</b> (0.0259)	<b>0.0132</b> (0.0202)
Professional	<b>-0.1377</b> (0.1662)	<b>0.0312</b> (0.0816)	<b>-0.0180</b> (0.0477)	<b>0.0507</b> (0.0367)
Clerical Worker	<b>-0.0065</b> (0.0871)	<b>0.0394</b> (0.0880)	<b>-0.0297</b> (0.0523)	<b>0.0639</b> (0.0388)
Service Worker	<b>-0.1146</b> (0.1288)	<b>0.0532</b> (0.0750)	<b>-0.0276</b> (0.0470)	<b>0.0491</b> (0.0391)
Laborer	<b>-0.0422</b> (0.1232)	<b>0.3331</b> (0.2157)	<b>0.0075</b> (0.0879)	<b>0.0632</b> (0.1036)
Farmer	<b>-0.0674</b> (0.1206)	<b>-0.1017</b> (0.1511)	<b>-0.1625</b> (0.1043)	<b>0.0683</b> (0.0957)
Constant	<b>0.6735</b> (0.1007)	<b>0.5872</b> (0.1227)	<b>0.5382</b> (0.0543)	<b>0.6073</b> (0.1170)
Std. Error of Regression	0.2781	0.2598	0.1755	0.1863
Number of Observations	418	240	632	511

Source: NES 1996, 2000

**Figure 2-1: Confidence in the Press by Party Identification**

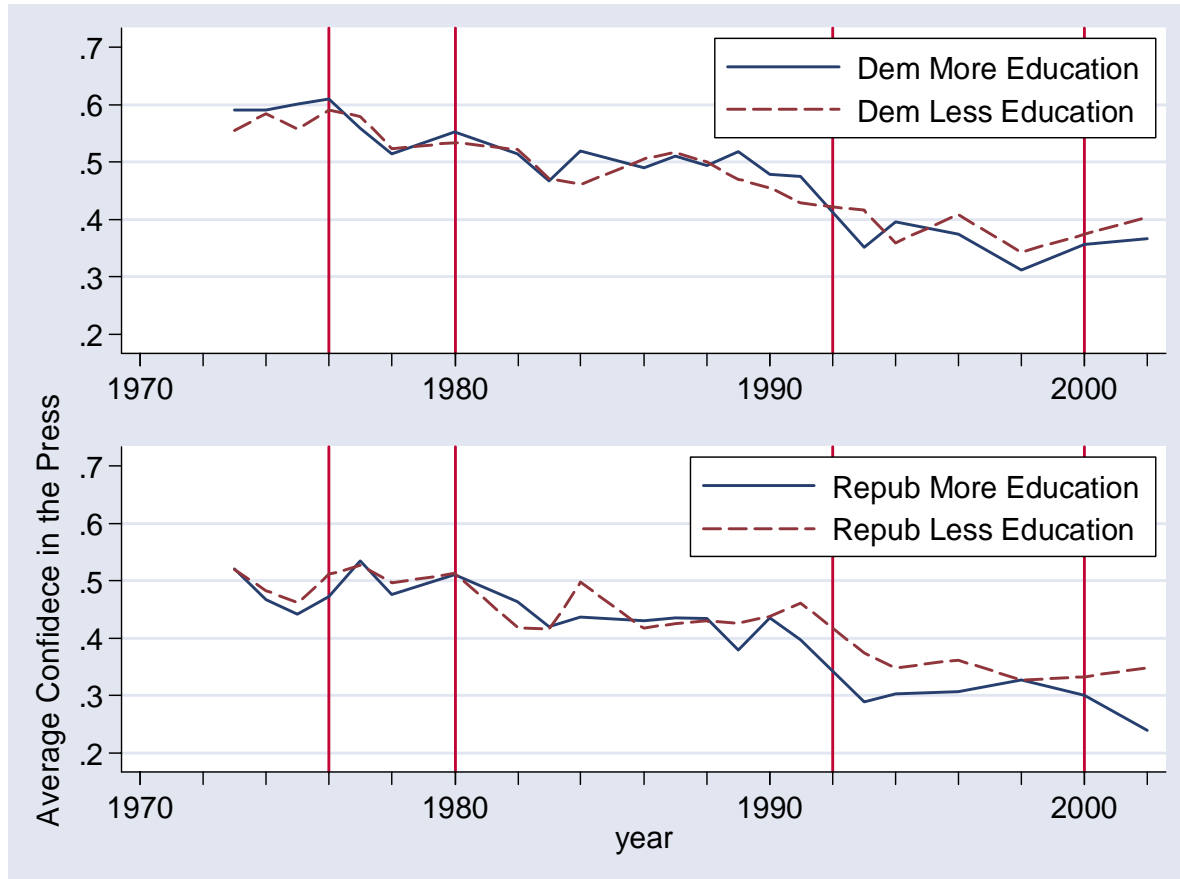


**Confidence in Institutions Coding**

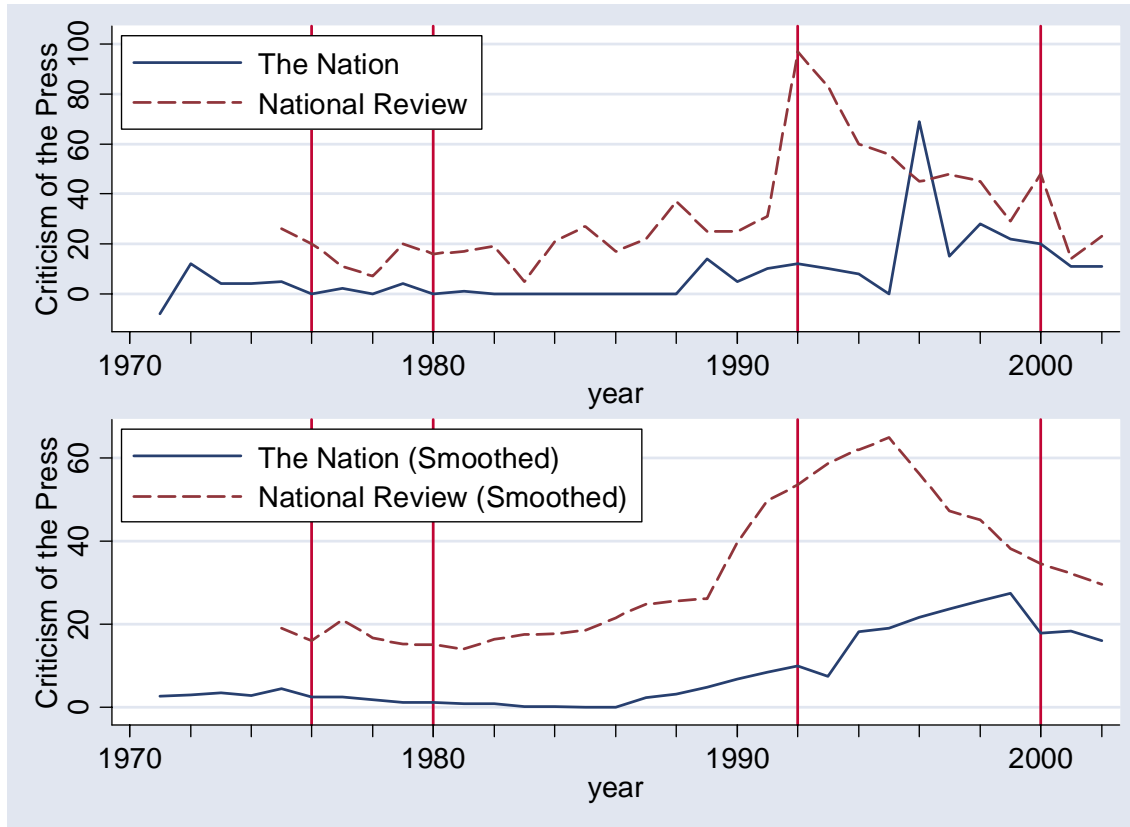
<b>A Great Deal</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Only Some</b>	<b>0.5</b>
<b>Hardly Any</b>	<b>0</b>

Source: GSS 1973-2002

**Figure 2-2: Confidence in the press by Party Identification and Education**

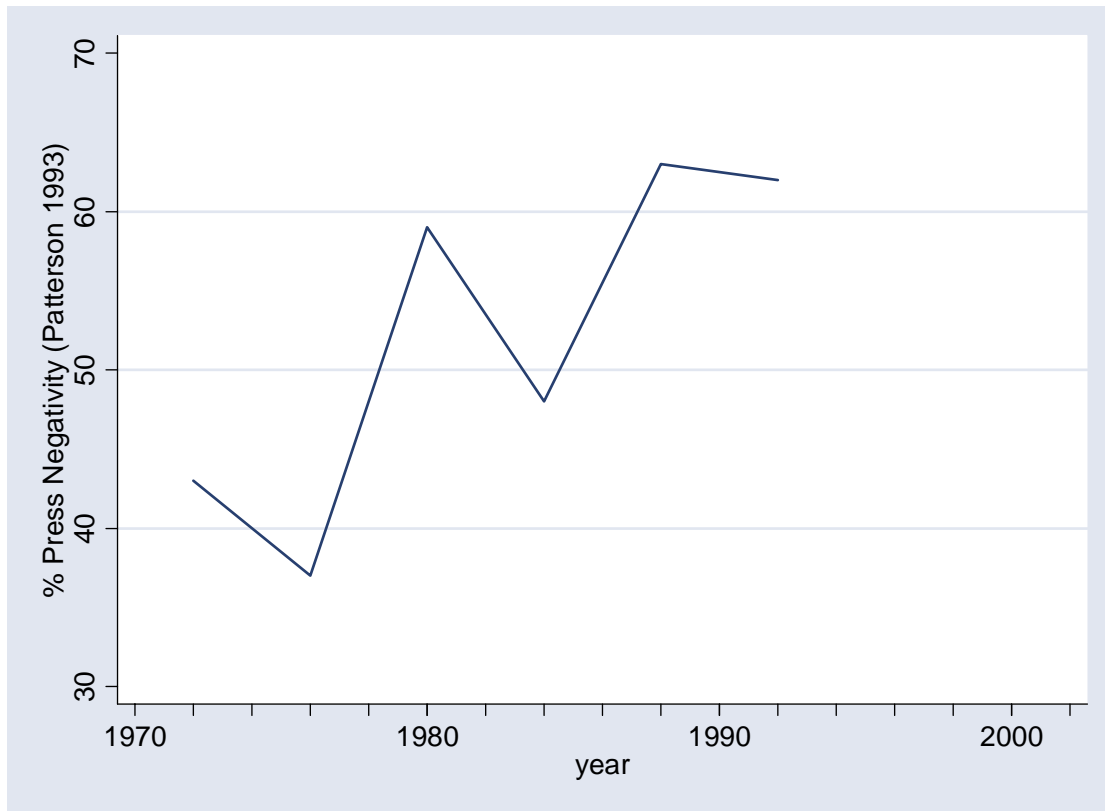


**Figure 2-3: A Measure of Elite Criticism of the News Media**

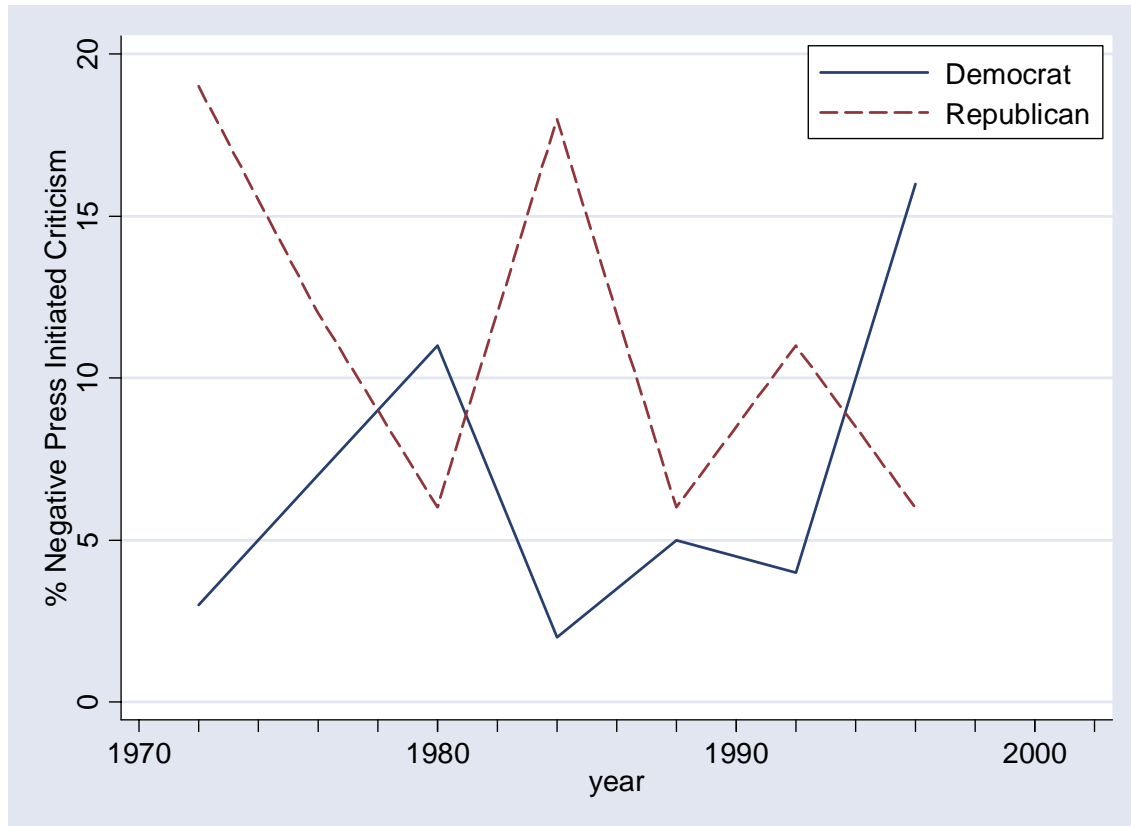


Source: Author's Coding

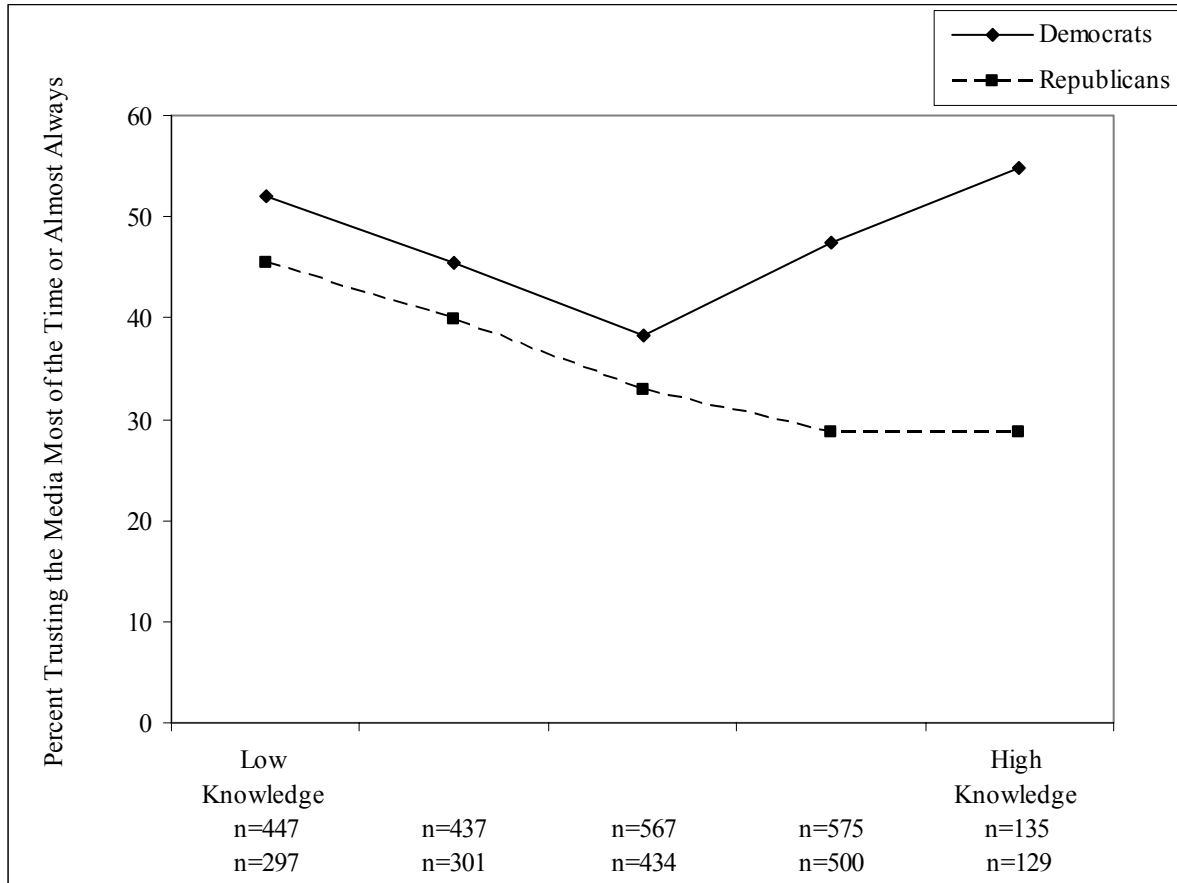
**Figure 2-4: Percentage of Press Coverage of Presidential Candidates in the Negative Style as Measured by Patterson (1993)**



**Figure 2-5: Press-Initiated Criticism of Presidential Candidates on Network News in Zaller (1999)**



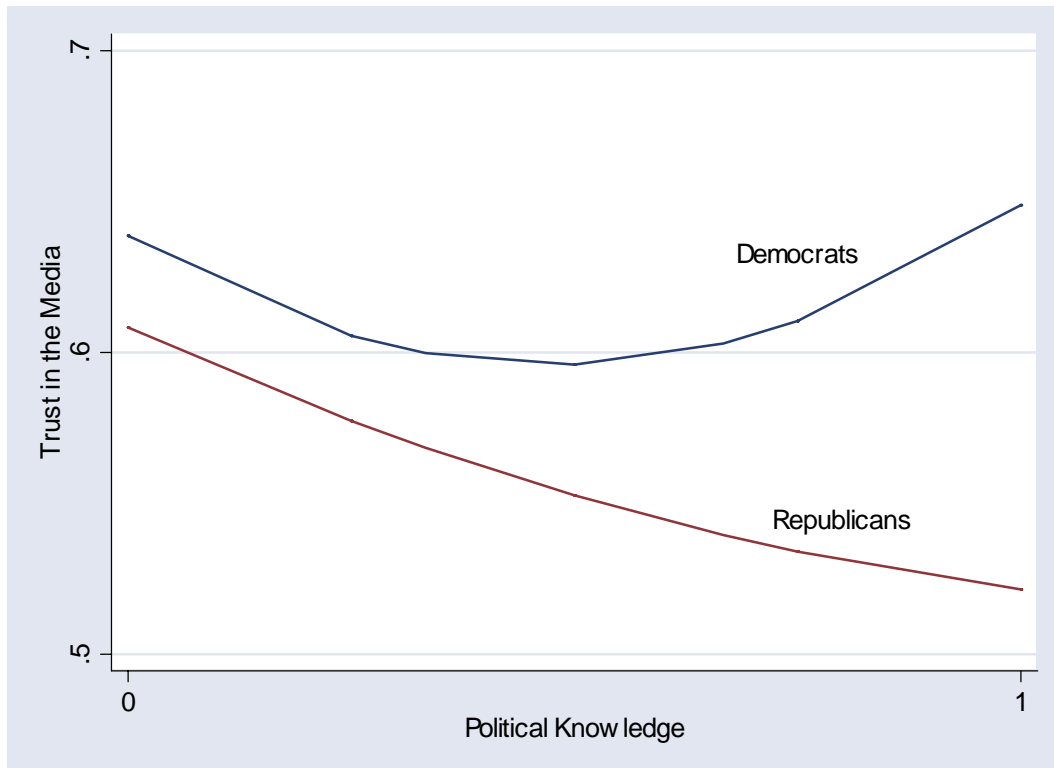
**Figure 2-6: Trust in the Media by Political Awareness and Partisan Predisposition**



Source: NES 1996, 1998, 2000

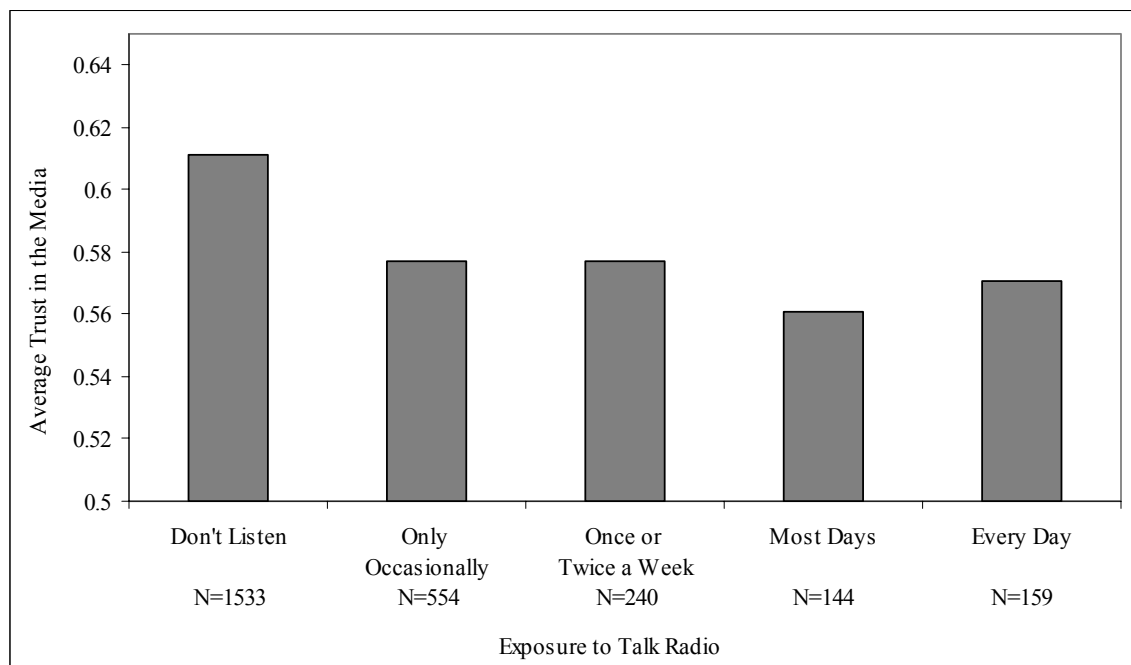


**Figure 2-7: Predicted Trust in the Media by Political Awareness and Partisanship**



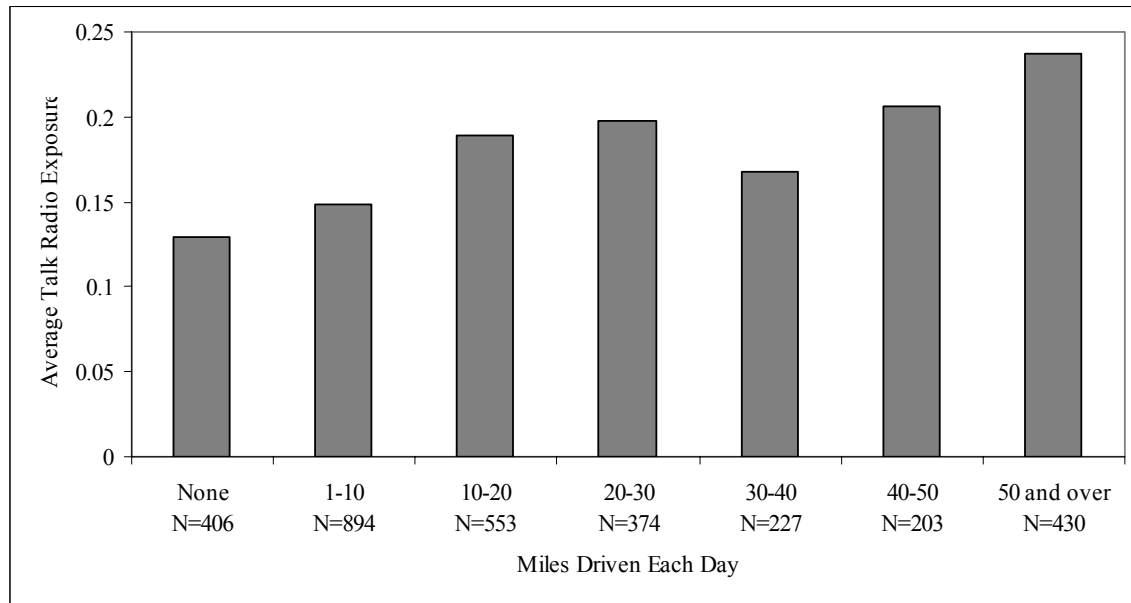
Predicted values based on the results in Table 2-4.

**Figure 2-8: Talk Radio Exposure and Media Trust**



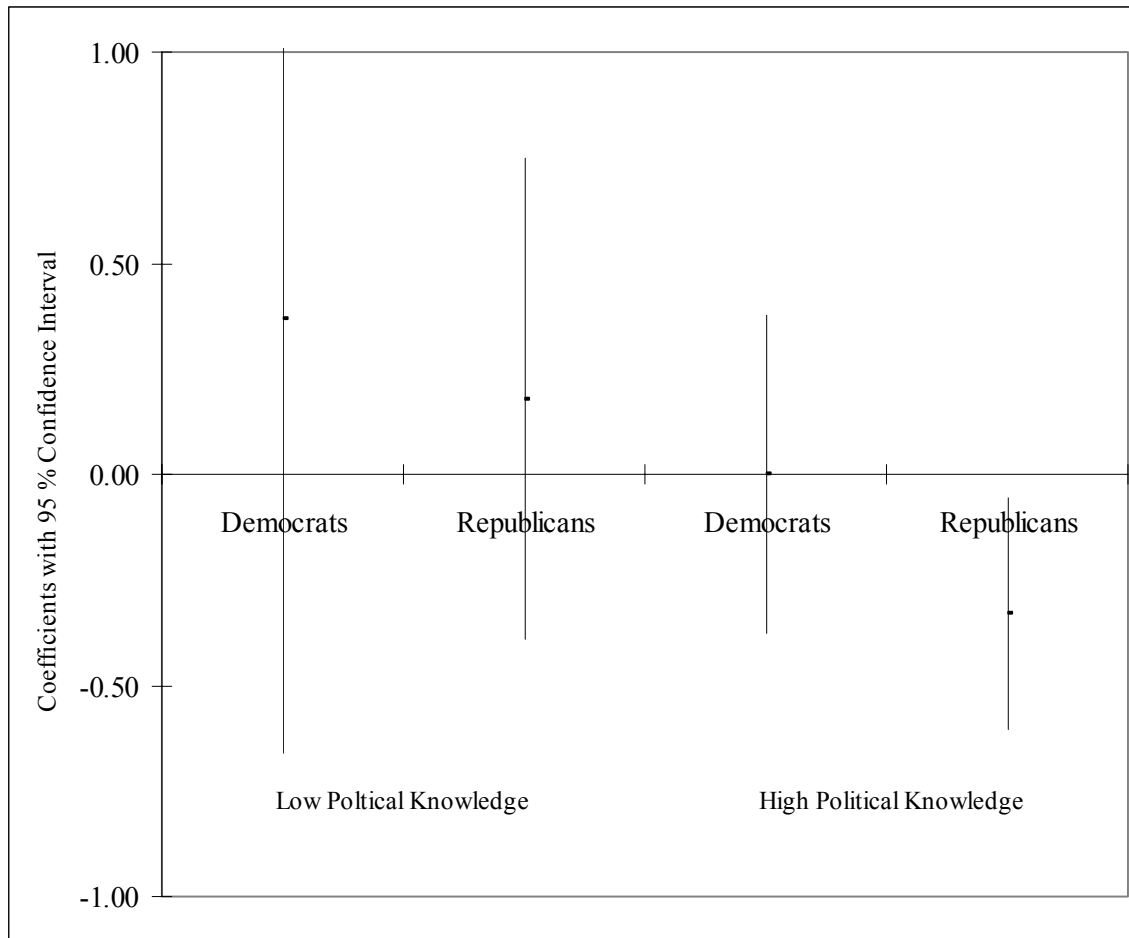
Source: NES 1996, 2000

**Figure 2-9: Miles Driven and Talk Radio Exposure**

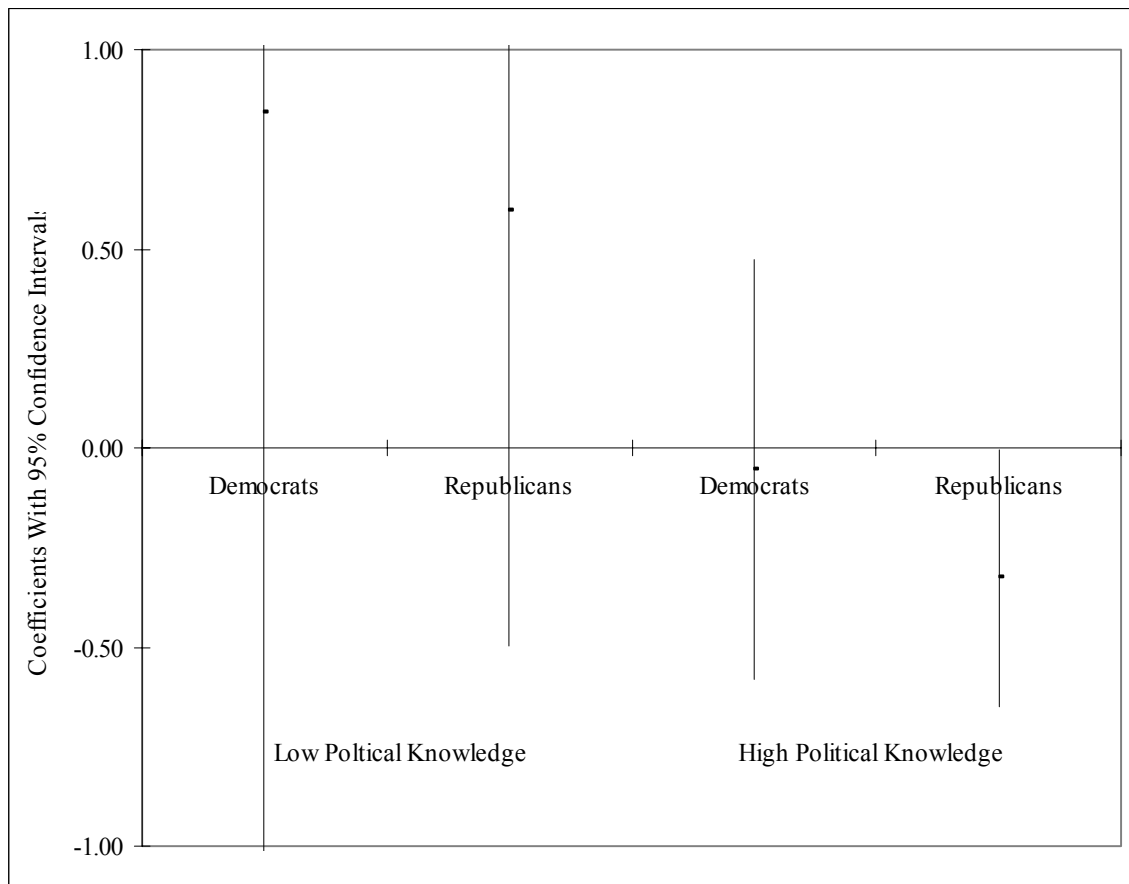


Source: NES 1996, 2000

**Figure 2-10: Effect of Talk Radio on Media Trust among Those with Different Predispositions**



**Figure 2-11: Effect of Talk Radio on Media Trust with Controls**



## Chapter 3

### Attitudes toward the News Media and the Acquisition of Political Information

## News Media Influence on Public Opinion

In modern democracies, ordinary citizens are called upon to make choices among policies and among candidates. Rarely can these citizens directly observe either the behavior of candidates or the macro-level content and consequences of government policies. In order to gain information about the political world, ordinary citizens rely on other entities to transmit information to them. As Zaller (1992, 6) put it,

To an extent that few like but none can avoid, citizens in large societies are dependent on unseen and usually unknown others for most of their information about the larger world in which they live.

The news media have become the main conduit for transmitting politically relevant information to the mass public. John Petrocik (1995, 136) noted that,

The press is consequential because voters need information about candidates in order to make a choice that corresponds to their preferences. Limits on what a person can know and experience make the press the source of that information for most of us.

Even when information originates from another source, it is very often conveyed to the public through the press. As Lippmann (1997 [1922]) characterized the problem, if citizens are to evaluate the performance of elected leaders, they must construct “pictures in their heads” of, for example, overseas wars or the state of the macroeconomy. These pictures in their heads constitute what Lippmann calls the pseudo-environment. It is constructed from second-hand descriptions of world events, primarily from the press. Because people are unable to observe the actual environment, they can only reward and punish politicians for their behavior, acting as a “rational god of vengeance and reward” (Key 1968), based on this pseudo-environment. If the pseudo-environment is an accurate depiction of the actual environment, then modern democracies should work well. Lippmann’s primary concern was that the press would create

inaccurate pseudo-environments. In other words, it would produce a false picture of reality that would prevent citizens from holding their government accountable.

While Lippmann's fundamental concern is as relevant today as it ever was, I point to a different concern. Lippmann correctly points out that if the public depends on institutions like the press to get its "pictures" of world events, the public is very susceptible to manipulation. But if citizens lose faith in the press as a source for constructing their pseudo-environment, it is not clear they have available any other ways to obtain more accurate beliefs about the world. Distrusting the press as a source of political information does not solve citizens' basic dilemma. They still cannot observe firsthand relevant political events.

This chapter is motivated by concern over what happens when citizens, as they have in the United States, lose confidence in the institution they rely on to construct their pictures of the larger world, namely the news media. I look to understand what those consequences may be by using a variety of different research designs to carefully examine the influence of attitudes toward the news media as an institution on how people acquire politically relevant information about the larger world.

While Lippmann presented an engaging theoretical account of how the press shapes the public's picture of the world, he did not marshal any quantitative evidence to support his account. The scholarly investigations that followed had difficulty documenting powerful news media influence. Only recently have empirical studies found media power to be more "massive" than minimal (Zaller 1996; Kinder 1998).

When the new technology of survey research allowed scholars to study the attitudes of citizens in a more systematic manner, one of the first subjects they examined was the power of the mass media over public opinion. The early results were disappointing for those who expected



to find massive media influence. In the 1940 and 1948 presidential election campaigns, Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at Columbia University used panel surveys to examine opinion change in selected geographic areas. In 1940, they interviewed a sample of potential voters in Erie County, Ohio, in up to seven waves over the course of the campaign (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948). In 1948, they studied a sample of voters in Elmira, New York, again using repeated interviews over the course of the campaign (Berelson et al. 1954). One of their main goals was to document the influence of “propaganda” on voters’ choices (Bartels 2001, 3). In this regard, their results were surprising. Self-reported exposure to mass media, such as newspapers and party propaganda, as well as content analysis of news sources, proved unhelpful in explaining the preferences of voters. The panel studies revealed that most voters had fairly well-defined loyalties to particular parties and candidates. Exposure to political messages from the news media tended mostly to reinforce those predispositions, only rarely to swaying voters from them (Bartels 2001, 3).

Their findings that the news media had “minimal effects” on public opinion became a consensus view for decades among scholars of public opinion and political communication (see for example Klapper 1960; Patterson and McClure 1976). This consensus was reinforced over the years by studies that either confirmed the small importance of the news media or often largely ignored it (Graber 2002). The continued failure of political scientists to find evidence that the news media affected public opinion prompted Larry Bartels to declare that, “The state of research on media effects is one of the most notable embarrassments of modern social science” (1993, 267).

Eventually the scholarly consensus on the relationship between the press and public opinion changed. Researchers first began studying how the media could influence public opinion

using laboratory experiments into what they called “priming.” Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder conducted a series of experiments in which they demonstrated that when subjects are shown news reports on a particular topic, their subsequent political evaluations tend to be based on their opinions on that particular topic more than on topics the reports have not emphasized (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). In this way, news coverage seems to change the bases of political evaluations. For example, when Iyengar and Kinder showed subjects news reports about national defense, the subjects tended to increasingly base their evaluations of President Reagan on his handling of national defense (67). Subsequent studies have also documented the news media’s ability to prime certain issues in the minds of citizens. While some of these are laboratory studies, others use surveys to document apparent priming outside the lab (Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Johnston et al. 1992; Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Iyengar and Simon 1994; but see Lenz 2004). These survey-based studies generally examine interviews conducted both before and after heavy media coverage of a particular event (the Iran-Contra scandal and the first Gulf War are two examples), and find that after coverage of the event, public evaluations of political figures are much more strongly related to opinions on that issue than they were previously.

But the press can shape public opinion in a number of ways other than priming. A second, yet similar way in which the news media can influence public attitudes is through framing. Framing refers to instances where the press changes public opinion on an issue by describing that issue in a way that makes salient certain aspects or interpretations of it (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Iyengar 1991; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Nelson et al. 1997; Kellsted 2000). In one demonstration of this effect from a laboratory study, subjects were more tolerant of the right of the Klu Klux Klan to hold a political rally if newspaper reports framed the

controversy as a civil liberties question. Subjects were less tolerant if it was framed as an issue of public order (Nelson et al. 1997).

A third way that the news media influence public opinion is by sending strong direct persuasive messages on a particular topic. Zaller (1992; 1996) found numerous examples where public opinion over time mirrored elite messages that were conveyed through the news media. When opinion leaders send clear messages through the media, public opinion on that issue tends to change. He found that citizens are particularly influenced when messages in the news media come from elites who share their political predisposition. Zaller concluded that “What matters for the formation of mass opinion is the relative balance and overall amount of media attention to contending political positions” (Zaller 1992, 1). In another example, Benjamin Page and his colleagues (1987) found that changes in aggregate public opinion on political issues tended to be correlated with the direction of media commentary on those issues.<sup>15</sup> In a final example, Bartels (1993) examined citizens’ evaluations of presidential candidates over the course of the 1980 presidential election campaign. Using a panel survey that interviewed a national sample of the public at least three times during the course of the campaign, he found that news media exposure altered citizens’ evaluations of the candidates.

A fourth way the news media influence public opinion is by providing politically relevant information that then becomes the basis for people’s political judgments. Information about the world is strongly related to political opinions. People use information about the state of the country to make retrospective evaluations of incumbent officeholders (Key 1968; Fiorina 1981). In particular, the state of the national economy influences whether citizens vote for or against the incumbent president (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Fiorina 1981; Markus 1988, 1992; Hetherington

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<sup>15</sup> For another example using an innovative content analysis methodology see Fan (1988)

1996; Mutz 1998; Zaller 2004). More broadly, a number of researchers have found that more politically informed people have systematically different preferences on a range of political topics (Bartels 1996; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Althaus 1998; Gilens 2001).

In an important example of the media providing influential information, Marc Hetherington (1996) found that in 1992, those who reported high levels of media exposure had significantly more negative retrospective evaluations of the economy than those who reported less media exposure. Furthermore, these negative retrospective economic evaluations were themselves associated with a much lower probability of voting to reelect President George H. W. Bush.

In addition to candidate evaluations, there is evidence that information from the press can affect other types of political opinions as well. To demonstrate this, Martin Gilens (2001) conducted an experiment embedded in a national public opinion survey. In the guise of a question, he gave certain respondents information (purported to be from news reports) about the national crime rate and the portion of the federal budget spent on foreign aid. He found that when respondents are given information about the lower-than-expected crime rate, their opinions regarding prison construction and the death penalty become more liberal. In addition, when respondents are given information about the lower-than-expected portion of the federal budget spent on foreign aid, they become more likely to support increasing the foreign aid budget. So it seems that new information can change evaluations of candidates and a variety of other political preferences.

To review, in the last 25 years researchers have documented how the news media can shape public opinion through priming, framing, strong direct messages, and by providing information about the political world. It is difficult to know precisely why attempts to document

the power of the news media over public opinion were futile for so long before becoming successful and abundant. But the change is certainly related to advances in theoretical conceptualization, research design and statistical methodology. It is also possible that the power of the news media has increased to some degree since the time of the Columbia studies in the 1940s.

### **The Role of Source Credibility in Persuasion Theory**

Yet these findings, when considered alongside data showing increasingly negative public attitudes toward the press, make one wonder whether those who distrust the press are just as influenced as those who don't. There are strong theoretical reasons to expect those who hate the news media to be less influenced by it. To show why, I briefly review the most prominent theories of persuasion.

Persuasion is central to numerous social processes. Most theories of persuasion suggest that the attitudes of the recipient toward the sender play an important role in determining how influential the persuasive message is (Druckman and Lupia 2000). These attitudes are generally known as source credibility. Scholars across the fields of political science, psychology, and economics all claim source credibility is a critical variable in determining when persuasion takes place.

An influential theory of attitude change is the three step, receive-accept-sample model conceived by William McGuire (1969) and adapted by John Zaller (1992). In this model, people first receive a message, then decide whether to accept the message, then, when they are called upon to express an opinion, they sample from the various messages (or considerations) that they have accepted in order to construct their opinion (see also Taylor and Fiske 1978; see also Zaller and Feldman 1992). Zaller identifies three types of resistance to persuasive messages. The one

that depends on source credibility is what he calls "partisan resistance."<sup>16</sup> This occurs at the stage when people choose to accept or reject a message. According to Zaller, partisan resistance refers to a person refusing to accept a message because it comes from a source with a different partisanship or ideology (Zaller 1992, 121). In this model of persuasion, source credibility matters because people resist persuasion from sources that don't share their respective political predispositions. In contrast, they are more accepting of messages from sources they believe share their predispositions.

A second theory of persuasion is actually a family of two similar theories from the field of psychology. Both the elaboration-likelihood model (Petty and Cacioppo 1986) and the heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken 1980; Eagly and Chaiken 1993) are "dual-process" theories of persuasion (Chaiken and Trope 1999) and have very similar ways of describing the importance of source credibility. In dual-process models of persuasion, source credibility is a heuristic. When people have the desire or ability to analyze the content of a message, they decide whether to be persuaded based mainly on the quality of the arguments. But in instances when people don't have the desire or ability to analyze the content of a message, they use heuristics such as the credibility of the speaker as the basis for deciding whether to be persuaded. In experiments testing these theories, source credibility is often operationalized by manipulating the expertise of the source. When subjects are not motivated or able to evaluate the content of the arguments, the expertise of the source determines whether they accept the arguments and are persuaded.

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<sup>16</sup> The other two types of resistance are inertial resistance, which takes place at the sampling stage, and countervailing resistance, which involves the reception and sampling stages (Zaller 1992, 121).

A third theory of persuasion consists of the so-called “cheap talk” models and other signaling models of persuasion (Crawford and Sobel 1982; Gilligan and Krehbiel 1987, 1989; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). While these theories vary in their specifications, they uniformly predict that source credibility will be a key factor in determining if people are influenced by informative messages. The key source criteria in these models are whether the source is knowledgeable and has the same interests as the one receiving the message. In political science research, having the same interests is often translated to mean having the same ideology (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1987, 1989; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Studies in which people use cues from elites who share their ideology as information shortcuts when forming their opinions are of a similar intellectual lineage and posit a similar source credibility criterion (Popkin 1991; Sniderman et al. 1991; Lupia 1994). So in political science contexts, signaling models generally predict that persuasion is more likely to occur when the source is viewed as knowledgeable and of a similar ideology to the recipient.

While these theories of persuasion differ in important ways, they share the prediction that public attitudes towards the source of a persuasive message play a role in determining if that source can persuade the public. The only possible exception to this is in the case of dual-process theories of persuasion, where source attributes do not play a role when individuals are in “high involvement” situations. But Zaller (1992) makes a strong and convincing case that, in the context of modern American politics, virtually the entire population should be expected to process information by the heuristic route. The vast majority of the public is neither involved nor interested enough by the standards of Chaiken and Petty and Cacioppo’s experiments. As Zaller puts it, in American politics “The stakes are theoretically high, but people find it hard to stay

interested” (1992, 47).<sup>17</sup> Given this, it is fair to say that all theories of persuasion reviewed here predict that source credibility is central in determining if political persuasion takes place.

Considering the voluminous research on both media persuasion and source credibility, there has been surprisingly little work connecting the two. Only two empirical studies have done this. One examines the effect of attitudes toward the press in general on media priming. The other looks at the effect of the credibility of specific news sources on media framing. Joanne Miller and Jon Krosnick (2000) examined the role of opinions about the news media in a priming experiment. They gave subjects newspaper stories on a particular topic and then tested whether they subsequently evaluated the president based on that issue rather than others. They found that only those who were politically informed and viewed the news media favorably (as accurate and unbiased) experienced priming. For those who either disliked the news media or were uninformed about politics, the experimental treatment did not change the basis of their evaluation of the president.

In his examination of framing, James Druckman (2001) tested whether these effects are moderated by the credibility of the particular media source. Similar to Nelson et al. (1997), Druckman gave subjects news stories about a Klu Klux Klan rally where the story was either framed as a civil liberties or a public order issue. When subjects were told that the story was from the *New York Times*, their opinion on whether the rally should be permitted was significantly altered by how the story was framed. In contrast, when subjects were told the story came from *The National Inquirer*, there were no framing effects.

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<sup>17</sup> On the lack of engagement of the public in politics, see Campbell et al. (1960, ch. 8), Converse (1964), Zaller (1992, ch. 2), and Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996). This lack of interest could be a very rational response, considering that they are very unlikely to individually effect national policy (Downs 1957).



So source credibility has been shown in some instances to moderate both priming and framing effects. While these areas could certainly benefit from more study, they are not my interest here. In the last chapter, I have looked at how elite opinion leadership (transmitted through various media sources) is one of the forces shaping opinions about the press as an institution. Here I focus on how those evaluations of the institutional media moderate the fourth type of news media persuasion: news messages that transmit to the public information about the state of the world. I focus on this type of media influence for several reasons. First, as I explain in the next section, I believe the process of learning about national conditions is particularly likely to be affected by public attitudes toward the press as an institution, rather than attitudes toward specific news outlets. Second, the role of source credibility in this type of media persuasion has not been previously examined. Finally, the media's role as information source is central to democratic theory. As Lippmann forcefully pointed out, if the public is to have any control over its elected office holders it needs accurate information about the state of the world.

In developing expectations about source credibility and the transmission of news media messages, one difficulty is that, while most theories of persuasion agree that perceived source attributes are important, they differ in what type of attributes are most critical. For example, the signaling models and the receive-accept-sample model suggest that perceptions of whether the source has a similar ideological orientation are primary. Dual-process psychological theories and signaling models suggest that the perceived expertise and knowledgability of the source are also important. However, since the main motivation is to examine the impact of the general lack of confidence in the institutional news media, my goal here is to theorize about the consequences of having generally negative versus generally positive attitudes toward the press. As reviewed above, prior research indicates that there has been a general move from more positive to more

negative evaluations of the press over the past thirty-five years. There is no indication in prior research that this movement has been more dramatic on certain dimensions of evaluation. So any attempt to understand the consequences of this trend should examine evaluations of the press on a general negative-to-positive continuum.

In attempting to do that, I observe that the different types of evaluations emphasized in the different theories of persuasion, such as similar ideology, expertise, and knowledgability, measure in different ways the extent to which the source can be trusted to provide accurate information. A simple expectation that is broadly consistent with the role source credibility plays in these varied theories is the following: *All else equal, I expect people to learn more from informative media messages when they have positive attitudes toward the news media than when they have more negative attitudes.* This simple, intuitive prediction motivates my empirical investigations. Before proceeding to those analyses, I formalize this prediction in a Bayesian decision theory model.

### **A Model of Information Acquisition and Some Predictions**

The choice to use Bayes' rule to model the reception by the public of informative messages from the media deserves explanation. I have already reviewed a variety of different theoretical frameworks in which one could think about the relationship between source credibility and news media persuasion. But in developing my own hypotheses about the effect of source credibility on the transmission of information from the media to the public I adapt a simple Bayesian decision theory model of persuasion to think about source credibility. This model has already been used by Bartels (1993) to theorize about the effect of news media messages on the public, by Achen (1992; 2002a) and Gerber and Green (1998) to theorize about

party identification, and by Martin Zechman (1979) to think about retrospective voting. None of these previous studies have looked particularly at source credibility.

This theoretical framework has a number of advantages. First, it encompasses the general prediction regarding positive versus negative source evaluations that is common to all of the psychological theories that deal with attitudes toward the source: specifically that more positive attitudes toward the source cause the persuasive message to be more influential. The derivations below show that this prediction is inherent in the Bayesian model.

The second advantage is that this model allows for a very explicit connection between the theoretical model of message reception and the predicted consequences of attitudes toward the source. Because the empirical implications of the theory can be mathematically derived, there should be less disagreement over which predictions are implied by the theory and which are not. Furthermore, when empirical implications are generated this way, new predictions may emerge that would not have arisen solely from intuition.<sup>18</sup>

The third advantage is that, unlike a full game theoretic model, decision theory does not require us to assume that the senders or receivers of information are necessarily strategic actors. While institutional news media outlets certainly direct their actions towards achieving certain goals, obtaining certain political outcomes are not primary goals. As chapter 1 explained, mainstream journalists have professional norms that favor certain types of behavior like informing the public and being independent of parties and politicians. As journalists are interested in professional advancement (Zaller 1999b) they will pursue the goals dictated by these professional norms. News organizations themselves may have different goals such as ratings and (ultimately) profits (Zaller 1999b). Finally, while citizens certainly have goals (or

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<sup>18</sup> On testing less intuitive implications of formal models, see Krehbiel (1991).

“preferences”) some evidence suggests that the public, at the mass-level, does not pursue those goals strategically. As Morris P. Fiorina (1990; 1996; 2000) has argued, the cognitive effort required, combined with the low probability of influencing outcomes, makes strategic behavior by the mass public quite uncommon, and, in a sense, irrational itself. In contrast, signaling models in politics tend to assume that the information sender and receiver have particular political preferences and behave strategically in pursuit of those preferences. In the case of news media messages, this seems unrealistic.<sup>19</sup> Instead, my model, because it is decision theoretic and not game theoretic, allows me to assume that the news media is not engaged in strategic interaction with the public in an attempt to influence its political beliefs and opinions. In the context of this model, I can assume that media messages are fixed and simply see how changes in citizens’ evaluations of source credibility affect the reception of those messages.

Despite these stated advantages, the Bayesian model is certainly a simplification of the actual processes I imagine are involved here. For one thing, I suspect that those who distrust the institutional media may be less influenced by its informative messages both because they resist the messages they receive from it and because they chose alternative, more partisan sources for news. This is similar to game theoretic “cheap talk” models, where people are not influenced by those who do not share their interests, but it is left vague whether they receive the messages but choose to ignore them or don’t listen at all. By intentionally using a model that is a stylized version of reality yet captures important aspects of it, I am adopting what Clarke and Primo (2005) call the “semantic” style of theorizing.<sup>20</sup> As they describe semantic theorizing, “The

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<sup>19</sup> For an attempt to develop a game theoretic model of media persuasion where media organizations have political preferences, see Bovitz et al. (2002).

<sup>20</sup> They contrast this to the hypothetico-deductivist approach advocated by Riker (1977; Riker 1990).

question we should ask of this model is not whether it is ‘true,’ but rather, is it similar in certain aspects, and for certain uses, to a system in the real world” (Clark and Primo 2005, 12).

This is in many ways similar to the method employed by David Mayhew (1974) in his book *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. Mayhew famously used a very simple assumption about the motivations of legislators – that they are “single-minded seekers of reelection” (5) – to generate great insights into legislative behavior. Later Mayhew justified this methodology by saying,

It is a caricature. I knew that at the time, and I planned the book that way on the assumption that pushing a simple argument to its limits can have explanatory utility. (2001, 251)

My goal here is similar. I intend to take a stylized model of the role of source credibility in news media influence, the Bayesian model, and push it to its limits by testing its implications in various circumstances and with various datasets. The utility of this approach is ultimately for the reader to decide. But I believe this is a powerful method because it illustrates the role of source credibility in moderating the influence of the news media in a variety of contexts. Possibly, future researchers, seeking to build more accurate models of the role of source credibility in learning from the media, can build from this simple theory to develop more complex and realistic models of the reception of informative media messages.<sup>21</sup>

In this model I assume there is a public where each individual’s prior belief, before receiving a message, is represented as a normal distribution with mean  $B_{it-1}$  and precision  $P_{it-1}$ , where  $P_{it-1}$  is equal to the inverse of the variance of the distribution ( $P_{it-1} = 1/\sigma_{it-1}^2$ ). The media’s message is also represented as a normal distribution with mean  $M_i$  and precision  $P_{im}$ , where  $P_{im}$  is equal to the inverse of the variance of this distribution ( $P_{im} = 1/\sigma_{im}^2$ ). I can now combine each

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<sup>21</sup> On the usefulness of formal models for helping empirical work to produce accumulated knowledge over time, see Achen (1999; 2002b).

individual's prior belief and the media's message to produce that individual's subsequent (or posterior) belief. According to Bayes' rule, each individual's posterior belief is proportional to the product of these two normal distributions (Gill 2002, 11). When these distributions are multiplied, they produce another normal distribution. I call the mean of this posterior distribution  $B_{it}$  and the precision  $P_{it}$  (where again  $P_{it} = 1/\sigma_{it}^2$ ). In this distribution, the mean and variance of an individual's posterior belief are a function of the individual's prior belief and the media's message such that

$$\mathbf{3-1 : } B_{it} = \frac{B_{it-1}P_{it-1} + M_iP_{im}}{P_{it-1} + P_{im}}$$

and

$$\mathbf{3-2 : } P_{it} = P_{it-1} + P_{im}$$

(Zechman 1979, 308; Achen 1992, 202-3; Bartels 1993, 268; 2002a, 122; Gill 2002, 91; Gelman et al. 2004, 49).<sup>22</sup>

In applying this model to the reception of media messages, I interpret the term  $P_{im}$ , the perceived precision of the media's message, to be a function of the individual's overall evaluation of the news media. When an individual has a very positive attitude toward the news media, I expect  $P_{im}$  to be larger than when an individual has a negative attitude toward the press. Given this assumption, we can see that each person's subsequent belief ( $B_{it}$ ) is a weighted average of his or her prior belief ( $B_{it-1}$ ) and the media message they receive ( $M_i$ ). Each person's prior belief is weighted according to its precision ( $P_{it-1}$ ) and the message is weighted according to his or her attitude toward the press ( $P_{im}$ ). It is easy to see that when one approaches the most negative possible evaluation of the press ( $P_{im} \rightarrow 0$ ), then Equation **3-1** reduces to  $B_{it} = B_{it-1}$  and

<sup>22</sup> In the Bayesian literature, this is sometimes called the "normal-normal" model because it represents both the prior belief and the message as normal distributions.

one's beliefs are completely unaffected by the message. As P increases, the influence of the message over the subsequent beliefs increases. One can see this by rearranging Equation 3-1 to see how the distance between the message, prior beliefs, and subsequent beliefs are a function of the other variables.

$$3-3: \quad B_{it} - B_{it-1} = \frac{(M_i - B_{it-1})P_{im}}{P_{it-1} + P_{im}}$$

$$3-4: \quad B_{it} - M_i = \frac{(B_{it-1} - M_i)P_{it-1}}{P_{it-1} + P_{im}}$$

Equation 3-3 and Equation 3-4 show that, holding other things constant, as attitudes towards the press become more positive ( $P_{im}$  increases) the individual's subsequent belief ( $B_{it}$ ) gets further away from his or her prior belief ( $B_{it-1}$ ) and closer to the message ( $M_i$ ).

It is clear that if we interpret  $P_{im}$  as a function of each person's evaluation of the news media, then this model generates predictions regarding source credibility that are both intuitive and generally consistent with the predictions other academic theories have regarding source credibility. To put it simply, when people like the news media, I expect them to be highly affected by informative media messages. When people dislike the news media, I expect people to resist media messages and instead retain their prior beliefs. A benefit of this formal model is that, in addition to incorporating the general predictions of other theories regarding the role of source credibility, one can use the model to generate less intuitive predictions. These auxiliary predictions of the theory allow one to test the theory using a wider variety of data. For example, I examine the tendency of the beliefs of individuals to converge over time, if they are exposed to the same persuasive message.

Imagine two individuals, one a Democrat and the other a Republican. Assume they have different beliefs about some unknown parameter. In this example it will be how the economy

will do under a Democratic president. Prior to this president taking office the beliefs of these two individuals are divergent. The Democrat expects the economy will do well and the Republican believes the economy will do poorly. We can formalize this by assuming the Democrat has prior beliefs  $B_{D,t-1}$  and the Republican has prior beliefs  $B_{R,t-1}$  and that  $B_{D,t-1} > B_{R,t-1}$ . Then, the president serves his or her term and the two people receive a message from the media about how the economy actually did perform during the term. If I assume that both individuals receive the same message ( $M_i = M$ ), one can see that no matter what the content of the message they receive, the theory predicts that receiving the same message will cause their beliefs to get closer together. As Bartels (2002a, 268) shows, holding constant the certainty of their prior beliefs ( $P_{t-1} = P_{D,t-1} = P_{R,t-1}$ ) the posterior beliefs of these two after receiving the signal will be

$$3-5: \quad B_{D,t} = \frac{B_{D,t-1}P_{t-1} + MP_{im}}{P_{t-1} + P_{im}}$$

and

$$3-6: \quad B_{R,t} = \frac{B_{R,t-1}P_{t-1} + MP_m}{P_{t-1} + P_{im}}$$

After some algebraic simplification, the distance between the posterior beliefs of these two individuals is

$$3-7: \quad B_{D,t} - B_{R,t} = \frac{(B_{D,t-1} - B_{R,t-1})P_{t-1}}{P_{t-1} + P_{im}}$$

Since  $P_{t-1} / (P_{t-1} + P_{im})$  is by construction less than one, one can see that the message will always move their beliefs closer together (Bartels 2002a, 268). More important from the perspective of this paper is that the degree of convergence is a function of the precision of the prior beliefs ( $P_{t-1}$ ) and the precision of the message ( $P_{im}$ ) (Bartels 2002a, 268). So, based on my



assumption that the perceived precision of the message is a function of attitudes towards the press, one is left with the prediction that after receiving a news media message there will be more belief convergence among those with positive evaluations of the press than among those with negative evaluations of the press. In this example, I expect at the conclusion of the presidential term that the Democrat and the Republican will have more similar perceptions of economic performance if they trust the news media than if they distrust the news media.

I have now outlined a Bayesian model of news media-based learning and the role of source credibility in that process. The model allows one to deduce several empirical predictions. One is intuitive: people's beliefs will move more towards a media message if they trust the news media. Another is less obvious: there will be more belief convergence among those with positive attitudes towards the press. In the sections below I attempt to test these predictions.

What types of informative messages might have their effects moderated by public evaluations of the news media as an institution? There are many potentially persuasive political messages in the press. Some arguments come directly from politicians. Other arguments come from opinion journalists such as columnists or television pundits. Here my chief interest is in public attitudes toward the press *as an institution*. I suspect that these attitudes will be most relevant for informative messages that are reported by many news outlets, reported in relatively similar ways in each, and given particular coverage by the mainstream, institutional press.

Information about broad national conditions seems to fit this description. Most people acquire their information about the state of the country through the news media (Zaller 1992; Hetherington 1996; Mutz 1998). Even when they learn about national conditions through social communication, the information originates from the press (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Katz 1957; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). So when an individual confronts new

information of this type, such as the state of the economy, war and peace, etc., I expect attitudes toward the press to be paramount.

The next four sections of this chapter test the theoretical predictions with three very different datasets. Each analysis examines how people learn about national conditions and how that learning is affected by their attitudes toward the news media as an institution. The first looks to see whether partisans who distrust the media do have more polarized beliefs about the world. The second examines changes in perceptions to see if those who distrust the press are more resistant to new information. The last two sections probe deeper to find what mechanisms cause these patterns. The third uses an experiment to see whether distrust of the press induces message resistance, even when all subjects receive exactly the same message. The fourth and final section looks to see whether distrust of the institutional press also moves people to expose themselves more to partisan sources of information.

### **Cross-sectional Survey Evidence: Perceptions of National Conditions**

I first turn to the 2000 National Elections Studies (NES) survey. In that year, the NES asked a randomly chosen half of its respondents to report how national conditions had changed since President Bill Clinton took office in 1993. Most of these conditions can be considered “valence” issues (Stokes 1966b), such as economic growth and freedom from war, which people prefer regardless of their ideology. The particular subjects probed in the 2000 survey include the federal budget deficit, national economic performance, crime, the moral climate, and national security.<sup>23</sup> All these questions directly reflect on whether things have gone well or poorly during

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<sup>23</sup> The 2000 NES also asked a sixth question in this battery. It asked for people’s perceptions of how the level of government assistance to the poor had changed since 1992. This question is different from the five that I examine because it is not a valence issue. Unlike valence issues, one would not expect everyone in the public to agree whether assistance to the poor should increase or decrease. For example, Democrats may think more aid to the poor is good and that things will

the Clinton presidency. This provides an opportunity to test for the relationship between attitudes toward the media and belief convergence predicted in Equation 3-7. It seems reasonable to assume that prior to Clinton taking office, Democrats expected national conditions under Clinton to be better than Republicans expected them to be. If one assumes that Republicans and Democrats received the same message from the media ( $M_i = M$  for all  $i$ ) about the actual state of the nation over these eight years and hold constant the precision of people's prior beliefs ( $P_{it-1} = P_{t-1}$  for all  $i$ ), one should expect more belief convergence among Democrats and Republicans who trust the media than among those partisans who distrust the media.

Bartels (2002a) examined these perceptions of national conditions during Clinton's term and found significant partisan differences. Not only did partisans differ, they differed in ways that were consistent with their predispositions: Democrats thought things had gone relatively better during the Clinton administration than Republicans did.<sup>24</sup> I expect this difference between partisans in their perceptions of national conditions to be greater when they have negative opinions of the press. Fortunately, the 2000 NES survey obtained respondents' evaluations of the news media by asking, "How much of the time do you think you can trust the media to report the news fairly (just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, or almost never)?" I expect based on Equation 3-7 that partisan differences in perceptions of national conditions will be smaller among those who trust the media than among those who distrust the media. To test

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go well under Clinton. So they expect that aid to the poor will increase under Clinton. Republicans, on the other hand, may think assistance to the poor is bad and expect that things will go badly under Clinton. So they also expect assistance to the poor to be higher under Clinton. So we would not expect to find partisan divergence in perceptions of how assistance to the poor changed under Clinton. The data are consistent with this prediction. There is no significant partisan divergence in perceptions of aid to the poor (Bartels 2002a), even among those who distrust the news media.

<sup>24</sup> Bartels also examined a similar battery of questions in the 1988 NES survey that elicited respondents' perceptions of how national conditions had changed during the Reagan presidency. The same partisan differences appear in these data (Bartels 2002a, Table 3).

this prediction, Figure 3-1 through Figure 3-5 compare the mean perceptions of Democrats and Republican in these five areas. They show separate comparisons for those who report trusting the media less (“only some of the time” or “almost never”) and those trusting the media more (“most of the time” or “just about always”). The results show support for the prediction in four of the five issue areas. The only area in which partisan differences are not reduced concerns crime. On the deficit, the economy, the moral climate, and national security, partisans who trust the media have perceptions that are closer together than do partisans who distrust the media. Those who distrust the media appear to rely more on their partisan predispositions when constructing their beliefs about the world.

To confirm this result, I estimate a series of ordered probit models in which perceptions of these five national conditions are specified as a function of party identification, trust in the media, and the interaction between the two. The key parameter of interest is the coefficient measuring the interaction between party identification and trust in the media. This measures how partisan differences in beliefs vary depending on media trust. I expect the main effect of party identification to be negative, indicating that Republicans have more negative perceptions of national conditions under Clinton. But I expect the interaction between party identification and media trust to have a positive coefficient, indicating that trust in the media reduces partisan differences in perception. It is important to measure these relationships while controlling for political knowledge. An important assumption in the convergence prediction of Equation 3-7 is that the precision of each individual’s prior belief is held constant. Since precision of belief and the amount of information one has are equivalent concepts in the Bayesian framework, one way to satisfy this assumption is to control for each respondent’s level of political information (Achen

1992, 207) . To do this, the models in Table 3-1 control for the main effect of political knowledge and the interaction between political knowledge and party identification.

The coefficient estimates in Table 3-1 are consistent with the patterns observed in Figure 3-1 through Figure 3-5. On every subject except crime, the coefficient on the interaction between party identification and trust in the media is positive, indicating that the beliefs of Democrats and Republicans are more divergent when they distrust the press. The interaction coefficient is not statistically significant at conventional levels ( $p=.22$ ) in the economic perceptions model when political information is included as a control in the model. While the size of the coefficient is unaffected, controlling for political knowledge increases the standard error.<sup>25</sup> This indicates that in this case there is not enough information in these data to determine whether trust in the media reduces partisan divergence while holding political knowledge constant. Later in this section, I use more data to examine economic perceptions in greater detail.

Because these questions ask how respondents perceive the state of the world, rather than their preferences among policies or candidates, some of them have objectively correct answers. For the deficit, the national economy, and the crime rate, one can compare national statistics with respondents' perceptions. Assuming that the news media transmits messages that correspond with national conditions, this allows for another test of the source credibility model. Based on Equation 3-4, I expect that, after receiving a media message, those who trust the media will have beliefs that are closer to the message than those who don't trust the media. So I expect partisans' perceptions of national conditions to not only be closer together when they have positive feelings toward the press, but also to be closer to the correct answer.

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<sup>25</sup> Without controlling for the political knowledge interaction, the interaction between party identification and trust in the media is marginally significant at  $p=.076$ .

In 1992 the federal budget deficit was \$290.4 billion compared with a \$236.4 billion surplus in 2000. So the correct answer was that the deficit was “much smaller,” coded as 1 on the 0 to 1 scale. In the case of economic performance, in 1992 the United States Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew by 5.6 percent and the unemployment rate was 7.5 percent. In 2000, the United States GDP grew by 5.9 percent and the unemployment rate was 4.0 percent. So the correct answer regarding the economy was either “somewhat better” or “much better,” coded as .75 and 1 respectively. In the case of the crime rate, between 1992 and 2000 the crime rate declined 27 percent from 5,661 to 4,124 crimes per million people. So the correct answer was that the crime rate was “somewhat better” or “much better,” coded as .75 and 1 respectively (United States Census Bureau 2002, 305, 417, 367, 183). One can test whether perceptions are closer to reality when people trust the press by turning back to Figure 3-1, Figure 3-2, and Figure 3-5. They show some evidence that not only do partisans’ perceptions of these national conditions tend to get closer together when they trust the news media. They also tend, in cases where an objectively “correct” answer exists, to get closer to that answer. On perceptions of the deficit, most of the movement is among Republicans, who perceive the deficit as getting better the more they trust the media. Democrats’ perceptions change much less because their partisanship predisposes them to think that the deficit would improve under a Democratic administration. On the subject of the economy, both Democrats and Republicans perceive better performance when they trust the press. On the subject of the crime rate, the movement is predominantly among Democrats. Democrats who trust the media perceive that the crime rate has gotten better than those who distrust the media do. Among Republicans, trust in the media appears to be unrelated to crime perceptions. So the data in these three areas suggest a general

movement of perceptions toward objective national statistics as people have more trust in the media.

I now turn my attention back to economic perceptions. While the analysis of perceptions of economic performance during the Clinton presidency indicated greater partisan convergence when respondents trusted the media, there was not enough data in the half of the 2000 NES sample who were asked this question to determine if the difference was statistically significant while controlling for political knowledge. One way to test more definitively whether economic perceptions follow this same pattern is to examine another survey question measuring retrospective economic perceptions that is asked more often. In 1996, 1998, and 2000 the NES asked its entire sample the following two-part retrospective economic question: “Now thinking about the economy in the country as a whole, would you say that over the past year the nation's economy has gotten better, stayed the same or gotten worse? Would you say much better (worse) or somewhat better (worse)?”<sup>26</sup> My predictions for this question are the same as for the retrospective perceptions of the whole Clinton presidency. I expect partisans to expect economic performance to conform to their partisan orientation, and then to be influenced to varying degrees by information from the news media indicating the actual economic conditions in the year before the election. In each of these years, economic performance was very good. Annual growth in Gross Domestic Product in 1996, 1998 and 2000 was 5.7, 5.3 and 5.9 percent, respectively (United States Census Bureau 2002, 417). Considering that actual economic conditions were very similar in these three years, I pool these data to examine the perceptions of partisans who had more or less trust in the media.

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<sup>26</sup> This question has been asked in similar form in every NES election survey since 1980. But because trust in the media was only asked in 1996, 1998, and 2000, I only use these years in my analysis.

Figure 3-6 compares the mean perceptions of how the economy had performed in the past year among Democrats and Republicans who trust the media “only some of the time” or “almost never” and those trusting the media “most of the time” or “just about always.” It shows the same pattern as in perceptions of Clinton’s entire term. Republicans and Democrats exhibit less partisan divergence when they trust the media. It also shows that those who trust the media more tend to converge upwards, toward the correct answers of “somewhat better” (.75) and “much better” (1). Because these data include the entire sample from three NES election surveys, one can more precisely test whether the apparent convergence among those who trust the media is statistically significant while controlling for political knowledge. To do this, I estimate an ordered probit model similar to those in Table 3-1, predicting retrospective economic perceptions of the past year. The resulting coefficient estimates, presented in Table 3-2, show that Republicans have generally more negative perceptions than Democrats, indicated by the large negative coefficient on partisan identification. But the interaction between party identification and media trust has a significant and positive coefficient, even when controlling for the interaction between political knowledge and party identification. Using this larger dataset, it is clear that there is more divergence in partisan perceptions of the economy when citizens distrust the news media.

In summary, data measuring evaluations of the news media and perceptions of national conditions are consistent with the idea that evaluations of the press moderate the influence of media messages on public beliefs. The data are consistent both with the prediction in Equation 3-4, regarding the proximity between subsequent beliefs and media messages, and the prediction in Equation 3-7, regarding the degree of convergence of subsequent beliefs.



These data have limitations. Being cross-sectional, they measure people's opinions at only one point in time. Although the patterns at this one point in time are consistent with my predictions, it is possible that some other unknown process caused the observed patterns. An attractive alternative is that causation goes in the opposite direction. It is quite plausible that polarized beliefs cause distrust of the institutional media rather than the reverse. One way to gain insight into the direction of causation is by looking at temporal order. To gain more confidence that distrust of the media is a cause of the patterns presented in this section, next I analyze how people's perceptions change over time using a panel study.

### **Panel Survey Evidence: Terrorism and War from 2000 to 2002**

In the time between the 2000 presidential election and the 2002 congressional election, several dramatic events occurred, including the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the war in Afghanistan, and the build-up to war in Iraq. While these were all prominent events, few individuals experienced them directly. The vast majority of the public learned about these events through the news media. Luckily for those interested in studying the effect of these events on public opinion, the NES interviewed a panel of the same respondents at the time of both the 2000 presidential election and the 2002 congressional election. To see how media coverage of these national security crises affected public beliefs about national security, I examine questions asked of the same respondents in 2000 and 2002 that probed the extent to which they were "worried about conventional war" and "worried about nuclear war."

Table 3-3 shows that aggregate opinion on both of these two questions changed in the expected direction. Between the fall of 2000 and the fall of 2002, people became more concerned about both types of war. The percentage who were very or somewhat worried about conventional war increased from 44 to 84 percent. Similarly those who were very or somewhat worried about

nuclear war increased from 43 to 74 percent. It seems safe to assume, based on our knowledge of world events and a brief examination of the data between the fall of 2000 and the fall of 2002, that respondents received a message (or many messages) from the media indicating the threat of war had increased. In the context of my theory, respondents' prior beliefs indicated they were relatively less worried about war. Furthermore the message from the news media indicated that they ought to be more worried about war. With the content of respondents' predispositions and the media message defined this way, the predictions regarding attitudes towards the press are clear. I expect those with positive attitudes toward the news media to have beliefs closer to the media message (Equation 3-4) and further away from their prior beliefs (Equation 3-3). Holding constant their prior beliefs, I expect those with negative attitudes toward the news media to be less worried about war in 2002 than those who have positive attitudes toward the media.

To test this, I compare changing perceptions of war among those with more trust in the media and those with less. I scale worry about war on a 0 to 1 interval, with 1 indicating "very worried," .5 indicating "somewhat worried" and 0 indicating "not worried at all." Table 3-4 compares how the average score of panel respondents changed depending on their trust in the media. Among all panel respondents, concern about conventional war increased from a score of .313 to .575, a change of +.262. However, those who trusted the media "most of the time" or "just about always" experienced a larger increase of +.308. In contrast, those who trusted the media "only sometimes" or "just about never" increased their worry about conventional war by just +.219. Concern about nuclear war shows a similar pattern. Those who were more trusting of the media increased their concern by +.299, while those who were less trusting increased their level of worry by +.221.

As a further test, I estimate simple regression models in which worry about war in 2002 is a function of worry about war in 2000 and trust in the media (also measured in 2000).<sup>27</sup> The results presented in Table 3-5 indicate that, controlling for how worried they were in 2000, those who trusted the media were more worried about both types of war in 2002. However, this simple model has several deficiencies. First, it does not control for other attributes that might alter how people changed their perceptions about war. In particular the two key theoretical assumptions I make when predicting the effect of source credibility are that prior information and the content of the message are both held constant ( $M_i = M$  and  $P_{it-1} = P_{t-1}$  for all  $i$ ). A second concern is that the NES questions measuring worry about war, possibly because they have only three response categories, tend to have a high level of measurement error. In the 1992-1996 NES panel, the questions measuring worry about nuclear and conventional war had reliabilities of .48 and .42 respectively. In a multiple regression, severe measurement error in any explanatory variable can bias its own and other coefficients in any direction (Achen 1983).<sup>28</sup>

To account for these two potential problems, I estimate errors-in-variables regression models in which worry about war in 2002 is a function of worry about war in 2000, trust in the media, and a series of control variables. To hold constant respondents' prior levels of information, I control for political knowledge and strength of party identification. To hold constant the content of the message, I control for their exposure to network news, newspapers, and talk radio. To make sure that trust in the media isn't serving as a proxy for general political predispositions, I control for party identification. To use the errors-in-variables regression model, one must know the reliability of all explanatory variables. This requires a three wave panel

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<sup>27</sup> The model is estimated by ordinary least squares with Huber-White robust standard errors.

<sup>28</sup> On accounting for measurement error in survey data generally, see Achen (1975; 1983) and Bartels (1993).

where the survey question is asked in each wave. I use the 1992-1996 NES panel to estimate the reliabilities of all but two explanatory variables. Both trust in the media and talk radio exposure were not asked in their 2000 formats until the 1996 NES survey. Since the reliabilities of these questions are unknown, I perform robustness checks, running the model with an assumed reliability of trust in the media and talk radio exposure, each ranging from .6 to 1. These different assumptions have very little effect on the substance of the results. Table 3-6 presents the weakest results of any of these robustness checks, where trust in the media and talk radio exposure are assumed to have reliability of 1.

The results from the errors-in-variables regression in Table 3-6 are strikingly similar to the results from the nonparametric comparisons in Table 3-4. Both show that those who trust the media increased their worry about war more than those who distrusted the media by about .1. Specifically, the coefficients on trust in the media in the models predicting worry about conventional and nuclear war are .127 ( $p=.064$ ) and .106 ( $p=.040$ ) respectively.

As mentioned above, responses to the worry about war questions are coded on a 1 point scale, so the difference between each category is .5. This means that if two people were equally concerned about both conventional and nuclear war in 2000, but one had high trust in the press and the other low trust in the press, in 2002 the person with high trust would, on average, be about a fifth of a category more concerned about both types of war.

These results support the proposition that attitudes towards the press moderate the news media's influence over public perceptions. One benefit of this panel survey is that it has a high level of external validity. It is measuring opinion change in the real world, so we know that the results are generalizable to real world settings. However, there can be remaining doubts about the internal validity of statistical analyses based on data like this. The problem is that in a real

world setting, one can never control for all possible confounding variables. It is always possible that the control variables are insufficient measures of the forces that need to be held constant, allowing a lurking variable to create spurious results. Equally important, even if distrust in the media is causing resistance to new messages, it could be doing it through two possible mechanisms: direct resistance to messages received and exposure to more partisan, less mainstream news sources.

To clear up some of this uncertainty, I use an experiment to test how exposure to the same message has different effects depending on one's attitude toward the media. In this way I can see whether some of the patterns in the two previous sections result from actual resistance to messages rather than just selective exposure. An experiment does sacrifice the external validity associated with the panel and cross-sectional survey data in order to gain greater internal validity. But since experiments make it easier for the researcher to hold relevant variables constant, there is less risk of confounding variables affecting the results.

### **Experimental Evidence: The Occupation of Iraq**

This experiment is based on a previous study where new political information is shown to induce persuasion. I use Gilens' (2001) research on information effects on policy preferences, reviewed above, as a model for the design of my study. However, my experiment deals with information about U.S. military occupation in Iraq rather than crime and foreign aid.

Undergraduate students at Princeton University were recruited to participate in an internet survey. Between January 12 and February 2, 2004, 902 students completed the survey. In the course of the survey, by simple random assignment, each subject was assigned to one of two possible conditions. Half the subjects were told that recently "the news media has reported that there have been a total of 2,572 American casualties in the U.S. military effort in Iraq." They

were then asked whether they had seen the story. This was the most up to date casualty statistic at the time the questionnaire was written (Brookings Institution 2003).<sup>29</sup> A second group of students (the control group) were simply told that recently “the news media has reported on the current state of the US military effort in Iraq” and were asked if they had seen the story. I expect that relative to the control group those given information about the number of U.S. casualties would have more negative perceptions of the U.S. military effort in Iraq. To test this prediction, later in the survey the students were asked to evaluate how “the U.S. military effort in Iraq is going” and whether they thought the U.S. “made the right decision or the wrong decision” in going to war. National opinion polls at this time showed generally positive perceptions of the war. Table 3-7 and Table 3-8 shows results from a poll by the Pew Center for the People and the Press conducted several weeks before my experiment. In that survey, 70 percent of respondents thought the Iraq occupation was going either “very well” or “fairly well.” In addition, 62 percent said that using military force in Iraq was “the right decision.”

The main purpose of my experiment is not to measure how information attributed to the news media alters political attitudes and perceptions, rather how attitudes toward the news media itself moderate these effects. To this end, as mentioned above, all of the information was attributed to “the news media.” Furthermore, earlier in the survey, respondents were asked to evaluate the accuracy and unbiasedness of news media coverage on a 100 point scale. I expect that receiving information about casualties in Iraq would make people’s perceptions of the Iraq operation more negative. Based on Equation 3-4, I expect that, among those receiving the

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<sup>29</sup> When I (and the Brookings data) use the term casualty we use the term in the conventional sense, meaning a soldier who can no longer serve due to death, injury or other battlefield incapacitation. The Merriam Webster Dictionary (2003) defines casualty as “a military person lost through death, wounds, injury, sickness, internment, or capture or through being missing in action.”

treatment, those with relatively more positive attitudes towards the press would have relatively more negative perceptions of U.S. military operations in Iraq.

To test this prediction, I model subjects' perceptions of how well the Iraq military effort is going and whether it was a mistake as a function of whether they received the casualty information. To see whether this effect varies depending on respondents' attitudes towards the press, I also estimate the interaction between respondents' rating of the media and whether they received the causality message. The resulting parameter estimates are presented in Appendix 3-B.<sup>30</sup> One variable used to construct this interaction term (receiving the casualties message) is experimentally manipulated. This ensures that there is no correlation between those who received the media message and other (omitted) explanatory variables. However, the other variable used to construct the interaction term (the news media thermometer) is only quasi-experimental (Campbell and Stanley 1966).<sup>31</sup> Because I rely on the real-world variation in news media evaluations, it is possible that these evaluations are serving as a proxy for other attributes. To rule this out, the statistical models in Appendix 3-B control for the interaction between party identification and receiving the casualty message and the interaction between self-reported ideology and receiving the casualty message. In this experiment the content of the message is held constant ( $M_i = M$ ) for all respondents in the treatment group. Also, because this is a sample of Princeton undergraduates, subjects' level of education and prior political information is held relatively constant. The assumption that prior information is constant ( $P_{it-1} = P_{t-1}$ ) seems reasonable.

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<sup>30</sup> The models are estimated by ordinary least squares with Huber-White robust standard errors.

<sup>31</sup> For a diagram of the experimental design, including its quasi-experimental elements, see Appendix C.

The results show that the subjects responded differently to the casualty message depending on their attitude toward the press. This finding is robust even when controlling for respondents' partisan identification and ideology (see Appendix 3-B). Figure 3-7 and Figure 3-8 illustrate these results. Figure 3-7 shows the expected effect of receiving the casualties message on beliefs about how the Iraq occupation is going for those who give the news media a rating of 20 and 80. Figure 3-8 shows the same comparison, except that the dependent variable is whether the respondent believes that using force in Iraq was the right decision. The results for both dependent variables show the same pattern. Among those in the control group, those with positive evaluations of the media have beliefs about Iraq that are much more in line with the general public as a whole. Control group subjects who liked the media, consistent with the dominant media messages of the time, tended to believe that the Iraq occupation was going better and was not a mistake. However, consistent with my expectations, the new casualty information attributed to the media induced their perceptions of the Iraq occupation to become more negative. While those with positive attitudes toward the press responded to the casualty message, those with negative attitudes toward the press did not. Not only did they resist, but they reacted against the message by becoming slightly more positive in their perceptions of Iraq. Both prior to and during the experiment, those favorably predisposed to the news media were swayed by media messages while the unfavorably predisposed were very highly resistant. This shows the way in which attitudes toward the press can induce more or less receptivity, even when individuals are exposed to the same message.

In addition to different responses to messages they do receive, attitudes toward the media may change which messages one is exposed to in the first place. To see if this is the case, I look at some survey data measuring exposure to different types of news sources.



## Cross-sectional and Panel Survey Evidence for Selective Exposure

A first cut at determining the connection between exposure to different media outlets and attitudes toward the media as an institution reveals some correlation evidence. The relationship between exposure to mainstream news outlets and trust in the press is unclear at best. For example the Pearson's r-correlation between confidence in the press and newspaper readership is a meager .068 in the 2000 GSS. Regressing newspaper exposure on confidence produces a coefficient of .083 and a standard error of .086.<sup>32</sup> The 2002 GSS asked respondents how many hours they watched television in an average day, but this also is only very weakly correlated with confidence in the press, with a correlations coefficient of .054 and a regression coefficient of .015 with a standard error of .078. The NES shows a positive but very weak connection between trust in the media and mainstream news exposure. In the 2000 NES, network news exposure and media trust are correlated at .069. Although the regression coefficient of .111 has a standard error of .041 and is thus almost statistically significant at conventional levels ( $p=.07$ ), the size the relationship is still small. However, more partisan, less institutional media outlets seem to have slightly large and more precisely estimated relationships with media trust. For example, in the 2000 NES, talk radio exposure is negatively correlated with trust in the media, with a correlation coefficient of -.135 and a regression coefficient of -.159 with a standard error of .030.

These data hint at some patterns. The relationship between trust in the news media and exposure to more mainstream news sources (like newspapers and network television) is usually very small. But the relationship between trust in the media and the less institutional, more partisan talk radio format is more clearly negative. Those who dislike the media as an institution tune in less to institutional news sources, but they augment those outlets by also searching out

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<sup>32</sup> All regression coefficients reported in this section are based on models where all variables range from 0 to 1.

alternative sources for information. Is a lack of trust in the institutional media causing people to search for different sources of news? Or is it that these alternative news outlets persuade individuals to dislike the mainstream media with a steady stream of criticism? As chapter 2 reviewed and documented, criticism of the mainstream press is one of the main topics on partisan media like talk radio. But does causation also go in the other direction?

One way to get greater leverage on the effect of trust in the media is to look at news exposure over time. Unfortunately, the NES has never asked its question about talk radio exposure in the same format across different waves of a panel study. However, the GSS offers some opportunity in this regard. In 2001, the GSS reinterviewed some of the respondents from its 2000 survey. While confidence in the press was not asked in the 2001 wave, it was asked in 2000 and several questions about news exposure were asked in both waves. The news exposure questions probe exposure “in the past two years.” This means that those asked in the 2000 GSS would include 1998 through early 2000, while the questions in the 2001 reinterviews would cover 1999 through early 2001. This allows one to see how the increase in news exposure that comes with a presidential election campaign is related to confidence in the press. The main (and serious) limitation with these data is that most of the news exposure questions were asked only to subsamples of those who were reinterviewed. So the number of subjects in some of these analyses is quite small.

Table 3-9 shows how average responses to the question probing newspaper exposure change over time among the approximately half of the reinterview respondents who were asked this question, broken down according to the confidence in the press they expressed in 2000. There is no discernable relationship between change in newspaper readership and confidence in the press. Table 3-10 confirms this finding by estimating an ordered probit model where

newspaper exposure reported in 2001 is a function of newspaper exposure in 2000, confidence in the press and (in column 2) a series of control variables. It finds that confidence in the press has no discernable effect on 2001 newspaper exposure.

A small subset (about 200) of the panel respondents were randomly selected to be asked whether they used the internet to search for “government” and “political” information. In Table 3-11, one can see that change in use of the web for these types of information does seem to be related to confidence in the press. Both types of internet usage increase among those with “hardly any” or “some” confidence in the press but not at all among those with “a great deal” of confidence. Table 3-12 shows estimates from an ordered probit model where 2001 web exposure is a function of 2000 web exposure, confidence in the press and control variables. The effect of confidence in the press on changing web usage for “government” information is still negative and statistically significant when controls are included for party identification, self-reported ideology, education, and average confidence in other institutions. The effect of confidence in the press on changing web usage for “political” information is not as robust to control variables. When all controls except average confidence are included, the estimated effect of confidence in the press becomes smaller and no longer statistically significant at conventional levels. Furthermore, when average confidence is included as a control, the coefficient on confidence in the press gets very small and slightly positive. While web use for “government” information over time does seem to be affected by press confidence, an effect on web use for “political” information is not detectable in these data.

In another part of the survey, the GSS asked all respondents in both 2000 and 2001 whether in the past two years they had “looked for information about the views or background of a candidate for political office.” As one might expect, the portion of people reporting searching

for information about political candidates increased in the survey after the presidential campaign. But, as Table 3-13 shows, the extent of this increase depends on one's confidence in the institutional press. Among those expressing "a great deal" of confidence in the press, the portion looking for candidate information increased 7 percent (from 6 percent to 13 percent). But among both those with "only some" and "hardly any" confidence, the number looking for candidate information increased by 14 percent. Table 3-14, which uses a probit model predicting whether one looked for candidate information in 2001 with whether one looked for information in 2000, confidence in the press, and control variables, shows that the negative relationship between confidence and looking for information is statistically significant and mostly robust to controls. The only control variable that notably affects the relationship is average confidence. When it is included, the coefficient on confidence in the press is still negative, but about three-fourths the size and not statistically significant at conventional levels ( $p=.20$ ).

Among those who did report searching for information about political candidates, a very small subsample (about 60) of the 2002 reinterviewees were selected to be asked whether they search in particular places. Of particular interest, they asked whether respondents had searched for information in "general news magazines like Time, Newsweek, and US News" and in a "special magazine or newsletter with a particular policy interest or perspective." Table 3-15 compares the average level of searching for candidate information in both these types of magazines as reported in 2000 and 2001 broken down by respondents' confidence in the press, among those who reported searching for candidate information about political candidates and were randomly selected to receive this question. The small sample size makes drawing conclusion very difficult. In the case of mainstream political magazines, there is not much

relationship between confidence in the press and change in information seeking.<sup>33</sup> However, there appears to be a relationship between change in use of magazines with a “policy interest or perspective” and confidence in the press. Those who had “hardly any” confidence in the press increased their use of these more partisan magazines, while those with only some confidence slightly decreased their usage.<sup>34</sup> Table 3-16 shows results from ordered probit models predicting magazine usage in 2001 as a function of usage in 2000, confidence in the press, and control variables. The coefficient representing the effect of confidence in the press on changing mainstream magazine usage is negative but much smaller than its standard error. In contrast, the coefficient representing the effect of confidence in the press on changing partisan magazine usage is much larger, statistically significant, and robust to the inclusion of control variables. While these data on magazine usage to search for political candidate information must be used very cautiously because the sample size is so small, the patterns here are reflective of patterns across several other questions.

The effect of confidence in the press on media usage over time appears to depend on the type of news outlet. In the case of mainstream, institutional sources of news like newspapers and general news magazines, those with low confidence in the press do not differ in their use of these media over time. What does differentiate those with low confidence in the press is that they are more likely to actively search out additional sources of political information. They are more likely to search for information about political candidates in general, to use the internet to search

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<sup>33</sup> There appears to be a sharp reduction in use of mainstream magazines among those with a great deal of confidence in the press, but because this category only includes 3 respondents, I don't give it much weight.

<sup>34</sup> As in the case of mainstream magazines, there are not enough respondents (3) with “a great deal” of confidence to meaningfully interpret their change in usage.

for information about government, and when searching for candidate information, to gravitate towards magazines with a particular policy agenda.

### **Conclusion: Attitudes toward the News Media and the Pictures in Our Heads**

Lippmann (1997 [1922]) outlined a basic problem that all modern democracies face in ensuring that citizens can hold government accountable. Citizens are unable to acquire firsthand the information that they need to evaluate the conduct of government officials. Instead they must rely on the press to construct “pictures in their heads” of the content and consequences of political leaders’ actions. Lippmann mainly saw this as a problem because it allows the media to mislead the public by projecting a distorted vision of reality. He also saw that without any information, citizens would also have great difficulty controlling a democratic government. This is why he tried to reform journalism into a more accurate information source for citizens.

In this chapter I show that, whether or not the press is providing an accurate picture of the world, if citizens lose faith in the press, as they seem to have in the United States, the prospects for an informed and responsive citizenry could also be impaired. Those who distrust the press as an institution are more resistant to new information about the state of the country. This occurs through two different mechanisms. Those who distrust are less influenced by the informative messages that they receive from the mainstream press and they are more likely to augment these sources by searching out information from less conventional, more partisan sources of news. The result of this is that these individuals are not simply less informed, but less informed in systematic ways that reflect and reinforce their partisan predispositions. In this way, increasingly negative public attitudes toward the institutional media create a public more polarized in its political beliefs and preferences, and whose beliefs are more hardened, more immune to changes

in the world landscape. Next I examine the implications of this greater immunity for the central way that Americans hold their political leaders accountable, elections.

**Table 3-1: Predicting Perceptions of Change in National Conditions Since 1992**

	Deficit	Economy	National Security	Moral Climate	Crime
Party Identification	<b>-0.999</b> (0.314)	<b>-1.057</b> (0.311)	<b>-1.842</b> (0.324)	<b>-1.855</b> (0.317)	<b>-0.293</b> (0.299)
Party Identification X Media Trust	<b>1.126</b> (0.503)	<b>0.609</b> (0.501)	<b>2.628</b> (0.516)	<b>1.172</b> (0.498)	<b>-0.175</b> (0.480)
Media Trust	<b>-0.019</b> (0.313)	<b>0.101</b> (0.319)	<b>-0.262</b> (0.299)	<b>0.108</b> (0.299)	<b>0.599</b> (0.296)
Party Identification X Political Knowledge	<b>-0.687</b> (0.423)	<b>-0.773</b> (0.459)	<b>-0.846</b> (0.385)	<b>0.125</b> (0.415)	<b>0.016</b> (0.394)
Political Knowledge	<b>1.479</b> (0.256)	<b>1.950</b> (0.295)	<b>0.422</b> (0.195)	<b>-0.289</b> (0.232)	<b>1.190</b> (0.233)
$\tau_1$	<b>0.578</b> (0.569)	<b>0.569</b> (0.566)	<b>-1.685</b> (0.197)	<b>-1.167</b> (0.186)	<b>-0.615</b> (0.181)
$\tau_2$	<b>-0.014</b> 0.014	<b>-0.014</b> 0.043	<b>-0.968</b> (0.186)	<b>-0.445</b> (0.183)	<b>-0.047</b> (0.180)
$\tau_3$	<b>0.261</b> (0.247)	<b>0.247</b> (0.247)	<b>0.346</b> (0.185)	<b>0.839</b> (0.186)	<b>0.805</b> (0.182)
$\tau_4$	<b>0.079</b> (0.167)	<b>0.167</b> (0.173)	<b>1.118</b> (0.194)	<b>1.513</b> (0.200)	<b>1.918</b> (0.190)
Log-likelihood	-956.02	-859.65	-962.57	-917.31	-1065.85
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.05	0.08	0.07	0.07	0.04
Number of Observations	688	740	721	731	730

Source: 2000 NES Election Survey

Table shows ordered probit coefficients with standard errors in parenthesis. All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1.



**Table 3-2: Predicting Retrospective Perceptions of the National Economy in the Past Year**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Party Identification	<b>-0.680</b> (0.045)	<b>-1.069</b> (0.149)	<b>-1.123</b> (0.172)
Party Identification X Media Trust		<b>0.724</b> (0.242)	<b>0.848</b> (0.244)
Media Trust		<b>-0.052</b> (0.141)	<b>-0.048</b> (0.141)
Party Identification X Political Knowledge			<b>-0.103</b> (0.155)
Political Knowledge			<b>0.512</b> (0.088)
$\tau_1$	<b>-1.821</b> (0.036)	<b>-1.867</b> (0.094)	<b>-1.867</b> (0.094)
$\tau_2$	<b>-1.325</b> (0.032)	<b>-1.356</b> (0.092)	<b>-1.356</b> (0.092)
$\tau_3$	<b>-0.090</b> (0.027)	<b>-0.111</b> (0.091)	<b>-0.111</b> (0.091)
$\tau_4$	<b>0.929</b> (0.030)	<b>0.908</b> (0.092)	<b>0.908</b> (0.092)
Log-likelihood	-6332.85	-5727.05	-5727.05
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.02	0.02
Number of Observations	4675	4242	4242

Source: 1996, 1998, and 2000 NES Election Surveys

All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1. Table shows ordered probit coefficients with standard errors in parenthesis.

**Table 3-3: Descriptive Statistics**

	<b>2000</b>	<b>2002</b>
<b>Worried about Conventional War</b>		
very worried (1)	10.4%	34.0%
somewhat worried (.5)	43.2%	50.0%
not worried at all (0)	46.4%	16.0%
N	694	1,336
Mean	0.320	0.590
<b>Worried about Nuclear War</b>		
very worried (1)	8.0%	25.7%
somewhat worried (.5)	35.6%	48.7%
not worried at all (0)	56.3%	25.8%
N	859	1,342
Mean	0.258	0.489

Source: 2000 and 2002 NES Surveys

**Table 3-4: Change in Worry about War by Trust in the Media**

	Conventional War '00	Conventional War '02	Difference	N
Low Media Trust	0.331	0.550	+ 0.219	219
High Media Trust	0.293	0.601	+ 0.308	208
All	0.313	0.575	+ 0.262	427
	Nuclear War '00	Nuclear War '02		
Low Media Trust	0.258	0.478	+ 0.221	299
High Media Trust	0.261	0.559	+ 0.299	261
All	0.259	0.516	+ 0.257	560

Source: 2000-2002 NES Panel Study.

Cells display the average level of worry about war in each group. Trust in the media is measured in the 2000 wave of the study. Those in the low media trust category responded that they trusted the media “only sometimes” or “almost never.” Those in the high media trust category responded in the same survey that they trusted the media “most of the time” or “just about always.” The questions measuring worry about war are scaled to range from 0 to 1 as shown in Table 1. The questions probing worry about war were asked to the entire sample in the 2002 survey but only half the sample in the 2000 survey. Only respondents who answered these questions in both waves are included in this table.

**Table 3-5: Simple OLS Regression Model of the Dynamics of Worry about War**

Predicting “Worried About Conventional War” ‘02		Predicting “Worried About Nuclear War” ‘02	
Worried About Conventional War ‘00	<b>0.247</b> (0.049)	Worried About Nuclear War ‘00	<b>0.431</b> (0.044)
Trust in the Media '00	<b>0.179</b> (0.066)	Trust in the Media '00	<b>0.185</b> (0.057)
Intercept	<b>0.411</b> (0.040)	Intercept	<b>0.316</b> (0.033)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.06	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.16
Number of Observations	427	Number of Observations	560

Source: 2000-2002 NES Panel Study

All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1. Table shows ordinary least squares regression coefficients with Huber-White robust standard errors in parentheses.

**Table 3-6: Errors-in-Variables Regression Model of the Dynamics of Worry about War**

Predicting “Worried About Conventional War” ‘02			Predicting “Worried About Nuclear War” ‘02		
Worried About Conventional War ‘00 (estimated reliability: .42)	<b>0.582</b> (0.122)	<b>0.674</b> (0.143)	Worried About Nuclear War ‘00 (estimated reliability: .48)	<b>0.786</b> (0.091)	<b>0.776</b> (0.093)
Trust in the Media ‘00 (robustness of results checked with reliabilities .6 to 1)	<b>0.144</b> (0.078)	<b>0.124</b> (0.089)	Trust in the Media ‘00 (robustness of results checked with reliabilities .6 to 1)	<b>0.116</b> (0.057)	<b>0.111</b> (0.062)
Political Knowledge (estimated reliability: .82)	<b>0.138</b> (0.088)	<b>0.121</b> (0.090)	Political Knowledge (estimated reliability: .82)	<b>-0.271</b> (0.071)	<b>-0.277</b> (0.074)
Strength of Party Identification (estimated reliability: .67)	<b>0.082</b> (0.077)	<b>0.074</b> (0.077)	Strength of Party Identification (estimated reliability: .67)	<b>0.130</b> (0.055)	<b>0.122</b> (0.055)
Network News Exposure (estimated reliability: .56)	<b>0.019</b> (0.094)	<b>0.020</b> (0.094)	Network News Exposure (estimated reliability: .56)	<b>0.209</b> (0.060)	<b>0.219</b> (0.061)
Newspaper Exposure (estimated reliability: .65)	<b>-0.016</b> (0.078)	<b>-0.057</b> (0.081)	Newspaper Exposure (estimated reliability: .65)	<b>-0.017</b> (0.051)	<b>-0.017</b> (0.052)
Talk Radio Exposure (robustness of results checked with reliabilities .6 to 1)	<b>-0.055</b> (0.060)	<b>-0.065</b> (0.060)	Talk Radio Exposure (robustness of results checked with reliabilities .6 to 1)	<b>-0.079</b> (0.048)	<b>-0.082</b> (0.050)
Party Identification (estimated reliability: .89)	<b>-0.228</b> (0.054)	<b>-0.230</b> (0.054)	Party Identification (estimated reliability: .89)	<b>-0.111</b> (0.041)	<b>-0.113</b> (0.042)
Average Trust (in Government and People) (estimated reliability: .60)		<b>0.222</b> (0.135)	Average Trust (in Government and People) (estimated reliability: .60)		<b>0.014</b> (0.085)
Intercept	<b>0.350</b> (0.093)	<b>0.250</b> (0.118)	Intercept	<b>0.223</b> (0.064)	<b>0.225</b> (0.072)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.20	0.21	R <sup>2</sup>	0.40	0.40
Standard Error of Regression	0.31	0.31	Standard Error of Regression	0.28	0.28
Number of Observations	418	416	Number of Observations	550	543

Source: 2000-2002 NES Panel Study

All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1. Table shows errors-in-variables regression coefficients with standard errors in parenthesis. In cases where the reliability of explanatory variables could be estimated using an existing three-wave panel study such as the 1992-1996 NES panel study, I use those datasets to calculate the question’s reliability using the procedure outlined by Heise (1969) to estimating the reliabilities. This is equivalent to reliability estimates produced by the Wiley and Wiley (1970) method for the second wave of the three wave panel. No three-wave panel study exists to use to estimate the reliability of trust in the media and talk radio exposure. In these cases, I performed robustness checks to see how the results varied with different assumed reliabilities. The reported results assume a reliability of .9 for these variables. I performed robustness checks, ensuring that the effect of trust in the media was substantively the same if these questions are assumed to have any reliability from .6 to 1

**Table 3-7: Perceptions of Iraq Occupation in January 6-11, 2004 National Poll**

How Well is the U.S. Military Effort in Iraq Going?	
very well	23%
fairly well	47%
not too well	18%
not at all well	7%
don't know	5%

Source: Pew Center for the People and the Press (2004)

**Table 3-8: Opinion of Decision to Go to War in January 6-11, 2004 National Poll**

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Do you think the U.S. made the right decision or the wrong decision in using military force against Iraq?	
right decision	62%
wrong decision	28%
don't know	11%

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Source: Pew Center for the People and the Press (2004)

**Table 3-9: Confidence in the Press and Change in Newspaper Readership**

Confidence in the Press '00	Newspaper Readership '00	Newspaper Readership '01	Change	N
hardly any	0.655	0.696	+ 0.041	231
only some	0.718	0.727	+ 0.009	230
a great deal	0.720	0.755	+ 0.035	50

Source: 2000 GSS and 2001 Reinterviews.

Newspaper readership is coded from 0 to 1 with the following categories: never (0), less than once a week (.25), once a week (.5), a few times a week (.75), everyday (1).



**Table 3-10: Dynamics of Newspaper Readership '00-'01**

Predicting Newspaper Readership in '01		
Newspaper Readership '00	<b>2.901</b> (0.211)	<b>2.760</b> (0.235)
Confidence in Press	<b>-0.0002</b> (0.159)	<b>0.153</b> (0.190)
Party Identification		<b>0.356</b> (0.212)
Ideology		<b>-0.024</b> (0.294)
Education		<b>0.315</b> (0.464)
Average Confidence		<b>-0.364</b> (0.388)
$\tau_1$	<b>0.111</b> (0.125)	<b>0.145</b> (0.402)
$\tau_2$	<b>0.653</b> (0.126)	<b>0.732</b> (0.387)
$\tau_3$	<b>1.396</b> (0.144)	<b>1.517</b> (0.391)
$\tau_4$	<b>2.196</b> (0.168)	<b>2.299</b> (0.400)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.21	0.20
Log Likelihood	-563.95	-445.11
Number of Observations	511	408

Source: 2000 GSS and 2001 Reinterviews.

All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1. Table shows ordered probit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

Table includes respondents who were interviewed in both waves of the panel.

**Table 3-11: Confidence in the Press and Change in Web Usage for Government and Political Information**

Confidence in the Press '00	Web for Government Info '00	Web for Government Info '01	Change	N
hardly any	0.312	0.391	+ 0.080	92
only some	0.290	0.310	+ 0.020	100
a great deal	0.259	0.222	- 0.037	18
	Web for Political Info '00	Web for Political Info '01		
hardly any	0.150	0.223	+ 0.073	91
only some	0.167	0.190	+ 0.023	100
a great deal	0.222	0.222	+ 0.000	18

Source: 2000 GSS and 2001 Reinterviews.

World Wide Web usage in the past 30 days is coded from 0 to 1 with the following categories: never (0), 1 to 2 times (.333), 2 to 5 times (.666), more than 5 times (1).

Table includes respondents who were interviewed in both waves of the panel and were randomly selected to receive the web usage question battery in each wave.

**Table 3-12: Dynamics of Web Usage for Government and Political Information '00-'01**

	Web for Government Information '01		Web for Political Information '01		
Usage in '00	<b>0.876</b> (0.222)	<b>0.637</b> (0.251)	<b>1.349</b> (0.260)	<b>1.335</b> (0.293)	<b>1.313</b> (0.301)
Confidence in Press	<b>-0.524</b> (0.232)	<b>-0.559</b> (0.297)	<b>-0.238</b> (0.278)	<b>-0.123</b> (0.295)	<b>0.063</b> (0.330)
Party Identification		<b>0.564</b> (0.288)		<b>0.640</b> (0.319)	<b>0.759</b> (0.340)
Ideology		<b>-0.521</b> (0.433)		<b>-0.177</b> (0.494)	<b>-0.362</b> (0.548)
Education		<b>1.771</b> (0.676)		<b>0.940</b> (0.746)	<b>1.295</b> (0.746)
Average Confidence		<b>0.502</b> (0.691)			<b>0.375</b> (0.712)
$\tau_1$	<b>-0.116</b> (0.132)	<b>1.408</b> (0.630)	<b>0.590</b> (0.134)	<b>1.550</b> (0.626)	<b>2.062</b> (0.700)
$\tau_2$	<b>0.715</b> (0.139)	<b>2.266</b> (0.637)	<b>1.129</b> (0.144)	<b>2.083</b> (0.630)	<b>2.625</b> (0.695)
$\tau_3$	<b>1.132</b> (0.149)	<b>2.650</b> (0.637)	<b>1.519</b> (0.169)	<b>2.495</b> (0.613)	<b>3.005</b> (0.695)
Log Likelihood	-256.28	-214.66	-194.03	-182.94	-162.74
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.04	0.05	0.06	0.07	0.08
Number of Observations	210	179	209	197	179

Source: 2000 GSS and 2001 Reinterviews.

All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1. Table shows ordered probit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

**Table 3-13: Confidence in the Press and Change in Whether One Looked for Candidate Information**

Confidence in the Press '00	Looked for Candidate Info '00	Looked for Candidate Info '01	Change	N
hardly any	9%	22%	+ 14%	767
only some	6%	20%	+ 14%	879
a great deal	6%	13%	+ 7%	191

Source: 2000 GSS and 2001 Reinterviews.

**Table 3-14: Dynamics of Looking for Political Candidate Information**

Predicting Looked for Candidate Info '01			
Looked for Info '00	<b>0.735</b> (0.117)	<b>0.560</b> (0.122)	<b>0.556</b> (0.130)
Confidence in Press	<b>-0.251</b> (0.103)	<b>-0.214</b> (0.110)	<b>-0.162</b> (0.127)
Party Identification		<b>0.179</b> (0.120)	<b>0.115</b> (0.129)
Ideology		<b>0.072</b> (0.163)	<b>0.120</b> (0.180)
Education		<b>2.505</b> (0.280)	<b>2.511</b> (0.293)
Average Confidence			<b>-0.089</b> (0.271)
Intercept	<b>-0.810</b> (0.049)	<b>-2.645</b> (0.229)	<b>-2.574</b> (0.261)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.03	0.08	0.07
Log Likelihood	-905.12	-701.21	-701.21
Number of Observations	1837	1404	1404

All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1. Table shows probit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

**Table 3-15: Confidence in the Press and Change in Magazine Usage for Political Information**

Confidence in the Press '00	Mainstream Political Magazines '00	Mainstream Political Magazines '01	Change	N
hardly any	0.440	0.540	+ 0.100	25
only some	0.466	0.569	+ 0.103	29
a great deal	0.667	0.333	- 0.333	3
	Partisan Political Magazines '00	Partisan Political Magazines '01		
hardly any	0.240	0.520	+ 0.280	25
only some	0.328	0.310	- 0.017	29
a great deal	0.000	0.000	0.000	3

Source: 2000 GSS and 2001 Reinterviews.

Usage of magazines for information about political candidates in the past 2 years is coded from 0 to 1 with the following categories: not at all (0), 1 or 2 times (.5), 3 or more times (1).

Table includes respondents who were interviewed in both waves of the panel, were randomly selected to receive the question battery investigating whether and how they searched for candidate information, and indicated that they had searched for candidate information.

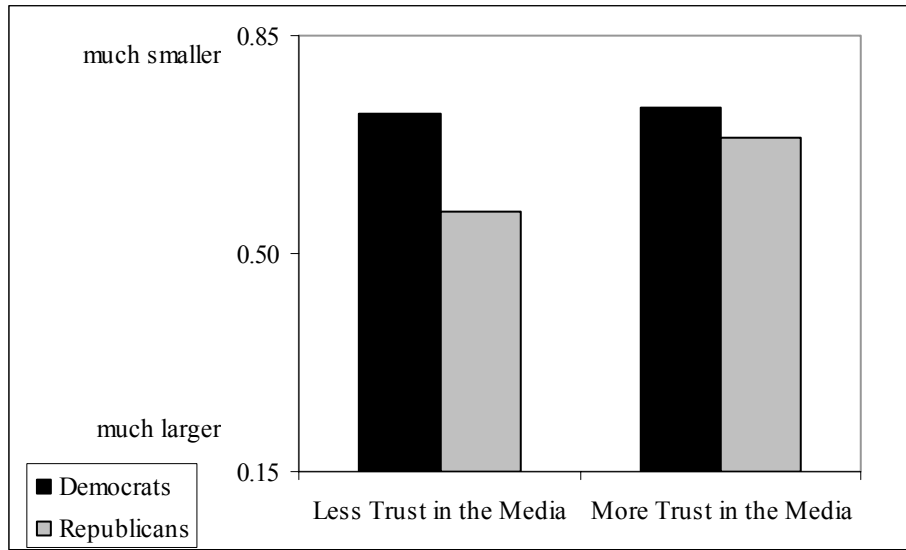
**Table 3-16: Dynamics of Magazine Usage for Political Information '00-'01**

	Mainstream Political Magazines '01		Partisan Political Magazines '01	
Usage in '00	<b>1.880</b> (0.501)	<b>2.511</b> (0.586)	<b>0.905</b> (0.493)	<b>0.492</b> (0.601)
Confidence in Press	<b>-0.382</b> (0.626)	<b>-0.579</b> (0.780)	<b>-1.506</b> (0.572)	<b>-1.189</b> (0.656)
Party Identification		<b>0.238</b> (0.758)		<b>0.952</b> (0.729)
Ideology		<b>-0.199</b> (1.383)		<b>0.254</b> (1.031)
Education		<b>-0.003</b> (1.425)		<b>0.352</b> (1.411)
Average Confidence		<b>-1.562</b> (1.234)		<b>0.641</b> (1.409)
$\tau_1$	<b>0.389</b> (0.288)	<b>-0.271</b> (1.431)	<b>-0.062</b> (0.264)	<b>1.128</b> (1.394)
$\tau_2$	<b>0.850</b> (0.324)	<b>0.282</b> (1.432)	<b>0.352</b> (0.281)	<b>1.583</b> (1.401)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.17	0.26	0.09	0.14
Log Likelihood	-47.07	-36.12	-50.61	-41.26
Number of Observations	57	49	57	49

Source: 2000 GSS and 2001 Reinterviews.

All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1. Table shows ordered probit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

**Figure 3-1: Change in Deficit Since 1992**

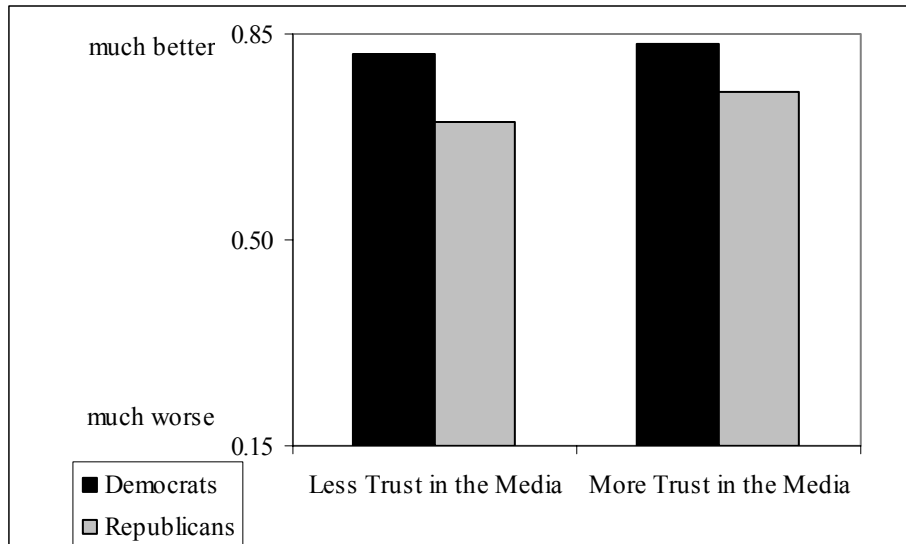


Source: 2000 NES Election Survey

Bars represent mean perceptions for each grouping. The number of respondents in each category varies between 110 and 162.



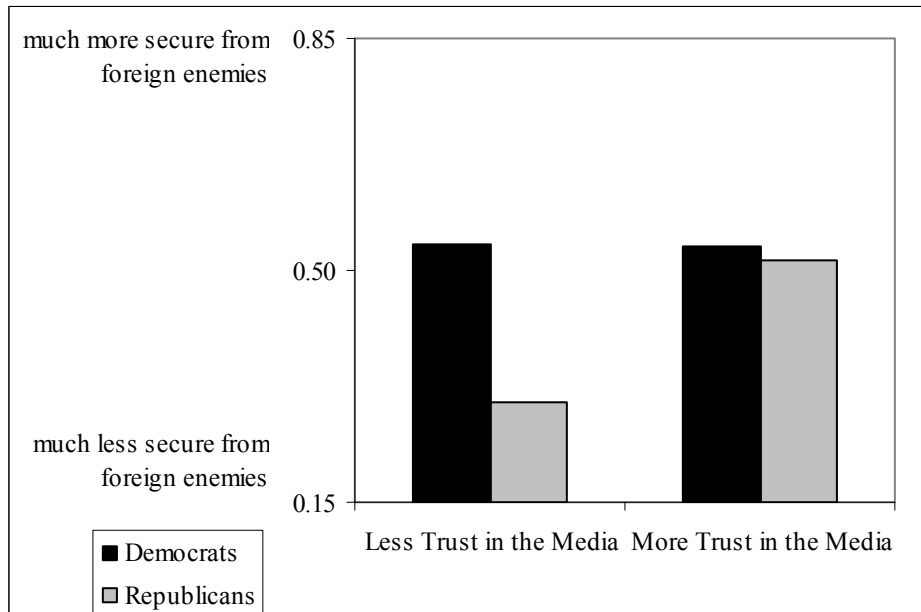
**Figure 3-2: Change in Economy Since 1992**



Source: 2000 NES Election Survey

Bars represent mean perceptions for each grouping. The number of respondents in each category varies between 118 and 195.

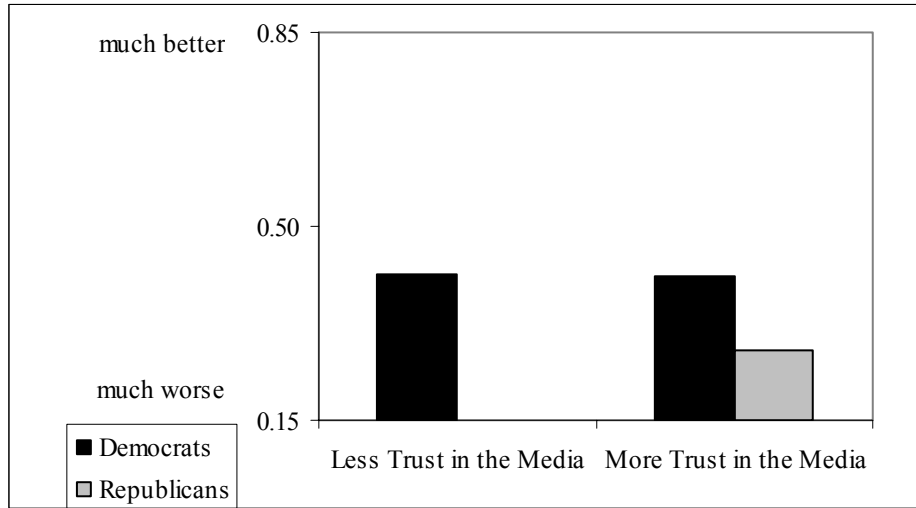
**Figure 3-3: Change in National Security Since 1992**



Source: 2000 NES Election Survey

Bars represent mean perceptions for each grouping. The number of respondents in each category varies between 115 and 187.

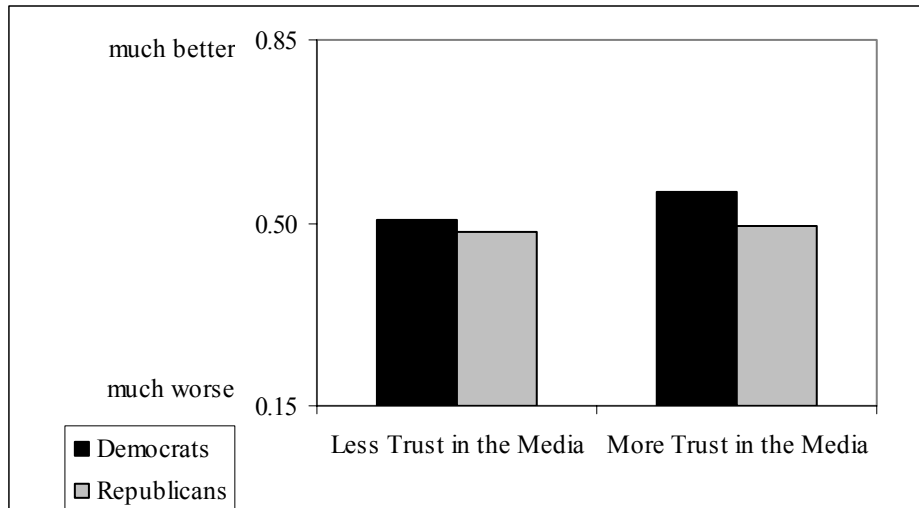
**Figure 3-4: Change in Moral Climate Since 1992**



Source: 2000 NES Election Survey

Bars represent mean perceptions for each grouping. The number of respondents in each category varies between 118 and 189. Perceptions of the moral climate among Republicans with less trust in the media are .15 precisely.

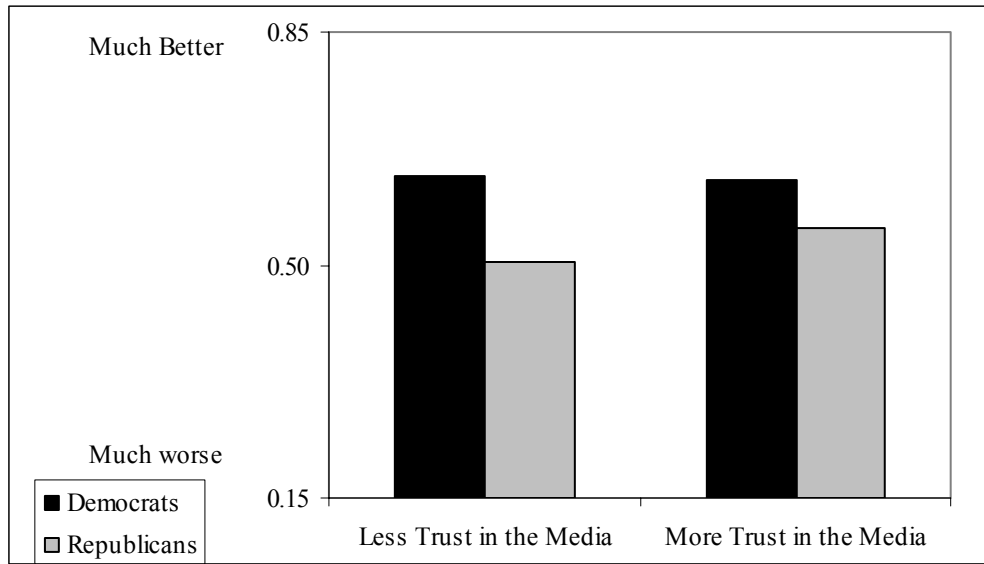
**Figure 3-5: Change in Crime Rate Since 1992**



Source: 2000 NES Election Survey

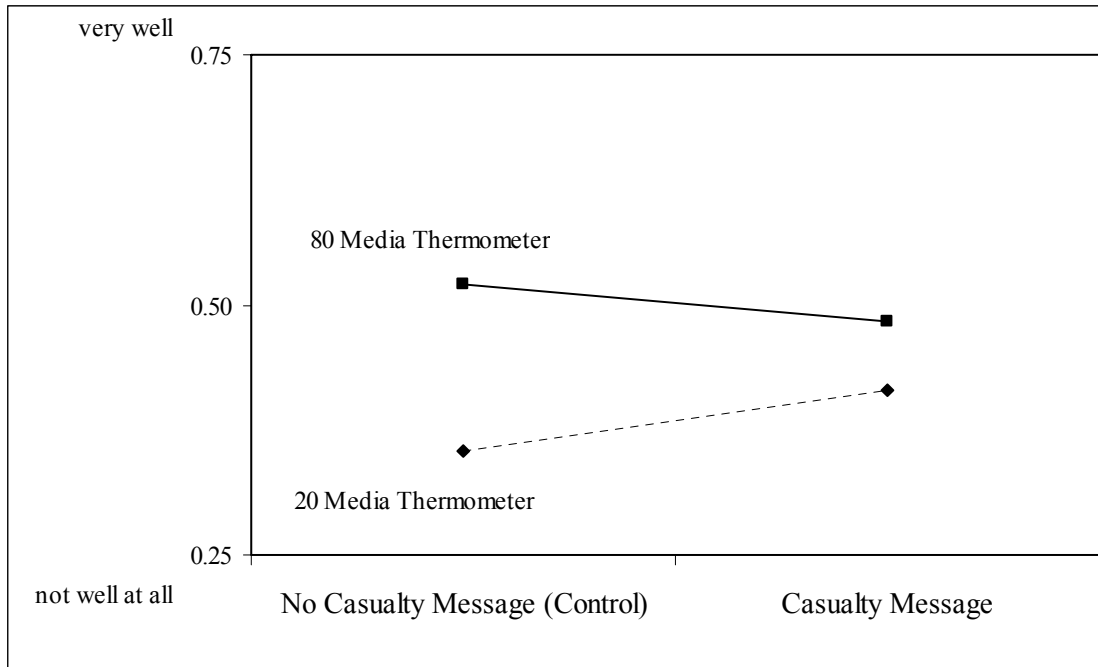
Bars represent mean perceptions for each grouping. The number of respondents in each category varies between 116 and 193.

**Figure 3-6: The National Economy in the Past Year (1996, 1998, 2000)**



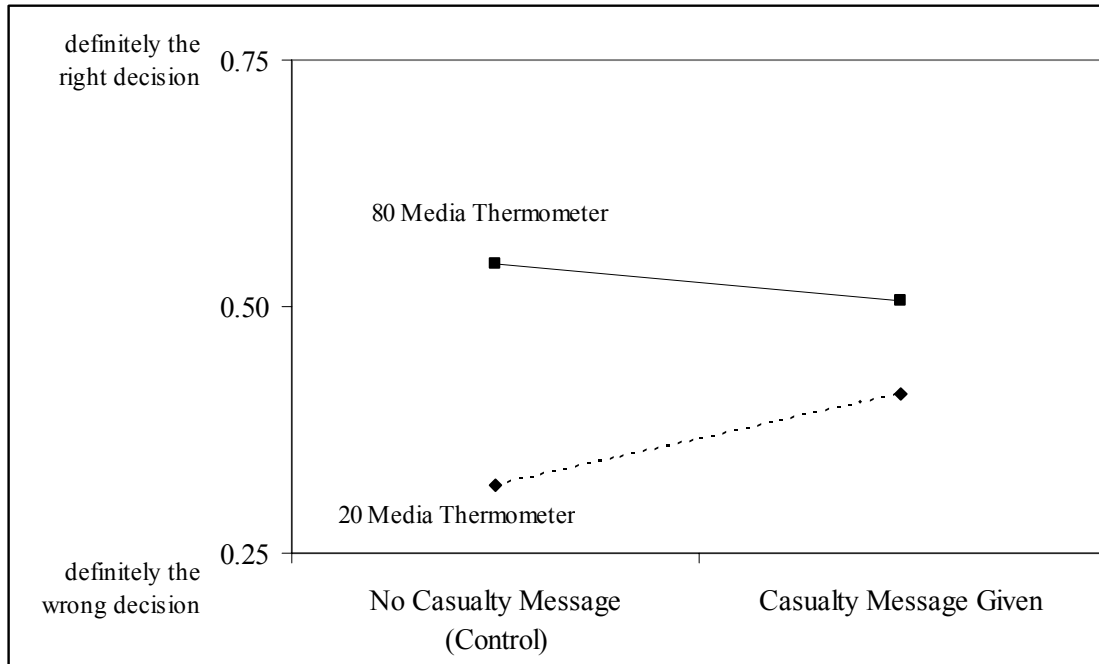
Source: 1996, 1998, and 2000 NES Election Surveys  
Bars represent mean perceptions for each grouping. The number of respondents in each category varies between 577 and 1173.

**Figure 3-7: How Well is the Military Effort on Iraq Going?**



Source: Experiment conducted January 12 through February 2 using Princeton University undergraduates. Figure shows expected effects based on the parameter estimates in Appendix 3-B.

**Figure 3-8: Was Using Force in Iraq the Right or Wrong Decision?**



Source: Experiment conducted January 12 through February 2 using Princeton University undergraduates. Figure shows expected effects based on the parameter estimates in Appendix 3-B.

## Appendix 3-A: Perceptions of National Conditions

### Descriptive Statistics for Variables Used in Analysis of Perceptions of National Conditions in 2000

Party Identification	Frequency	Percent
strong Democrat	155	18.13
weak Democrat	143	16.73
leans Democrat	132	15.44
independent	91	10.64
leans Republican	111	12.98
weak Republican	104	12.16
strong Republican	119	13.92
Total	855	100

Trust in Media	Frequency	Percent
almost never	58	7.93
only some of the time	330	45.14
most of the time	295	40.36
just about always	48	6.57
Total	731	100

Political Knowledge	Frequency	Percent
0	266	36.34
0.25	209	28.55
0.33	1	0.14
0.5	159	21.72
0.75	60	8.2
1	37	5.05
Total	732	100

Budget Deficit Since 1992	Frequency	Percent
much smaller	240	29.52
somewhat smaller	248	30.5
about the same	203	24.97
somewhat larger	78	9.59
much larger	44	5.41
Total	813	100

Economy Since 1992	Frequency	Percent
much better	372	42.42
somewhat better	261	29.76
about the same	185	21.09
somewhat worse	37	4.22
much worse	22	2.51
Total	877	100



US Secure From Foreign Enemies	Frequency	Percent
much more secure	71	8.31
somewhat more secure	144	16.86
not changed very much	379	44.38
somewhat less secure	153	17.92
much less secure	107	12.53
Total	854	100

Crime Rate Since 1992	Frequency	Percent
much better	82	9.51
somewhat better	244	28.31
stayed about the same	260	30.16
somewhat worse	138	16.01
much worse	138	16.01
Total	862	100

The descriptive statistics above represent those respondents in the 2000 NES survey who were selected to receive the question battery probing retrospective perceptions of the national conditions over the past 8 years. Approximately half of the NES sample was randomly selected to receive this question battery.

### **Descriptive Statistics for Variables Used in Analysis of Retrospective Perceptions of the Economy in 1996, 1998, and 2000**

Party Identification	Frequency	Percent
strong Democrat	819	19.31
weak Democrat	760	17.92
leans Democrat	601	14.17
independent	406	9.57
leans Republican	495	11.67
weak Republican	615	14.50
strong Republican	546	12.87
Total	4,242	100

Trust in Media	Frequency	Percent
never (volunteered)	40	0.94
almost never	393	9.26
only some of the time	2,067	48.73
most of the time	1,494	35.22
just about always	248	5.85
Total	4,242	100

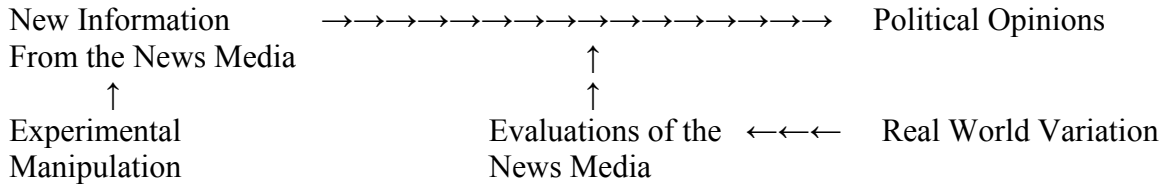
Political Knowledge	Frequency	Percent
0	900	21.22
0.25	808	19.05
0.3333	5	0.12
0.5	1,099	25.91
0.6667	8	0.19
0.75	1,147	27.04
1	275	6.48
Total	4,242	100

Economy in the Past Year	Frequency	Percent
Much worse	286	6.74
Somewhat worse	392	9.24
Stayed same	1,798	42.39
Somewhat better	1,277	30.10
Much better	489	11.53
Total	4,242	100

The descriptive statistics above represent those respondents in the 2000 NES survey who were used in the analysis presented in Model 3 of Table 2.

## Appendix 3-B: Perceptions of the Occupation of Iraq

### Outline of Study Design



### Predicting “How Well is the Military Effort in Iraq Going?”

	Model 1	Model 2
Casualty Message	<b>0.0262</b> (0.0213)	<b>0.0025</b> (0.0197)
Casualty Message X Media Thermometer	<b>-0.2059</b> (0.0977)	<b>-0.1637</b> (0.0838)
Media Thermometer	<b>0.3536</b> (0.0706)	<b>0.2773</b> (0.0592)
Casualty Message X Party ID	<b>0.4235</b> (0.0156)	<b>0.0878</b> (0.0890)
Party ID		<b>0.2184</b> (0.0665)
Casualty Message X Ideology		<b>-0.1493</b> (0.0958)
Ideology		<b>0.3594</b> (0.0701)
Intercept	<b>0.4235</b> (0.0156)	<b>0.4930</b> (0.0144)
Standard Error of Regression	0.2578	0.2236
R <sup>2</sup>	0.04	0.28
Number of Observations	889	882

Table shows coefficients estimated by ordinary least squares regression with Huber-White robust standard errors in parenthesis. All explanatory variables are scaled to range from -.5 to .5. The dependent variable is scaled to range from 0 to 1.

Dependent Variable: How well is the United States military effort in Iraq going?

1	Very Well
0.667	Fairly Well
0.333	Not Very Well
0	Not Well at All

### **Predicting “Was Using Force in Iraq the Right Decision?”**

	Model 1	Model 2
Casualty Message	<b>0.0467</b> (0.0252)	<b>0.0148</b> (0.0221)
Casualty Message X Media Thermometer	<b>-0.2806</b> (0.1147)	<b>-0.2211</b> (0.0937)
Media Thermometer	<b>0.4892</b> (0.0788)	<b>0.3757</b> (0.0616)
Casualty Message X Party ID		<b>0.1001</b> (0.1102)
Party ID		<b>0.2345</b> (0.0789)
Casualty Message X Ideology		<b>-0.1946</b> (0.1127)
Ideology		<b>0.5585</b> (0.0763)
Intercept	<b>0.4109</b> (0.0182)	<b>0.5090</b> (0.0159)
Standard Error of Regression	0.3062	0.2512
R2	0.06	0.37
Number of Observations	889	884

Table shows coefficients estimated by ordinary least squares regression with Huber-White robust standard errors in parenthesis. All explanatory variables are scaled to range from -.5 to .5. The dependent variable is scaled to range from 0 to 1.

Dependent Variable: Do you think the United States made the right decision or the wrong decision in using military force in Iraq?

1	Definitely the Right Decision
0.667	Probably the Right Decision
0.333	Probably the Wrong Decision
0	Definitely the Wrong Decision

## Descriptive Statistics for Variables Used in Experimental Analysis of Perceptions of the Occupation of Iraq

Military Effort in Iraq Going	Freq.	Percent
not well at all	120	13.47
not very well	351	39.39
fairly well	370	41.53
very well	50	5.61
Total	891	100

Iraq Right Decision	Freq.	Percent
definitely the wrong decision	168	18.86
probably the wrong decision	303	34.01
probably the right decision	301	33.78
definitely the right decision	119	13.36
Total	891	100

Casualty Message (Experimental)	Freq.	Percent
control group (no message)	451	50
treated group (message)	451	50
Total	902	100

News Media Thermometer	Freq.	Percent
0-25	77	8.47
26-50	227	24.97
50-75	416	45.76
76-100	189	20.79
Total	909	100

Party Identification	Freq.	Percent
strong Democrat	66	7.45
weak Democrat	186	20.99
leans Democrat	231	26.07
independent	149	16.82
leans Republican	151	17.04
weak Republican	76	8.58
strong Republican	27	3.05
Total	886	100

Ideology	Freq.	Percent
extremely liberal	52	5.87
liberal	276	31.15
slightly liberal	199	22.46
moderate; middle of the road	130	14.67
slightly conservative	135	15.24
conservative	82	9.26
extremely conservative	12	1.35
Total	886	100

## Experimental Web Survey Questionnaire

Q1. We'd like you to rate on a scale from 0 to 100 whether you think the news media reports the news accurately and fairly. Zero means very unfavorable, and 100 means very favorable. Fifty means you do not feel favorable or unfavorable. You may use any number from 0 to 100.

Where on this scale would you rate the accuracy and fairness of news media reporting?

Rating: \_\_\_\_\_

[There are 2 different experimental conditions in the remainder of this survey. Each subject has a .5 probability of being in each condition.]

Q2. [**Condition 1 only**] We are interested in how well the news media gets information out to the public. There are so many news stories these days that most people have trouble following them all. We want to ask about a story the news media has reported to see if you happened to hear about it. Recently, the news media has reported that there have been a total of 2,572 American casualties in the U.S. military effort in Iraq. Have you seen this story?

1. Yes
2. No

Q2. [**Condition 2 only**] We are interested in how well the news media gets information out to the public. There are so many news stories these days that most people have trouble following them all. We want to ask about a story the news media has reported to see if you happened to hear about it. Recently, the news media has reported on the current state of the US military effort in Iraq. Have you seen this story?

1. Yes
2. No

Q3. Do you approve of the recent construction of a new public library in downtown Princeton?

1. Strongly Approve
2. Approve
3. Disapprove
4. Strongly Disapprove

Q4. How well is the United States military effort in Iraq going?

1. Very Well
2. Fairly Well
3. Not Too Well

4. Not Well at All

Q5. Do you think the United States made the right decision or the wrong decision in using military force in Iraq?

1. Definitely the Right Decision
2. Probably the Right Decision
3. Probably the Wrong Decision
4. Definitely the Wrong Decision

Q6. Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?

1. Strong Democrat
2. Democrat
3. Lean Towards Democrats
4. Independent
5. Lean Towards Republicans
6. Republican
7. Strong Republican

Q7. When it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate or middle of the road, slightly conservative, conservative, or extremely conservative?

1. Extremely Liberal
2. Liberal
3. Slightly Liberal
4. Moderate; Middle of the Road
5. Slightly Conservative
6. Conservative
7. Extremely Conservative

## Appendix 3-C: Media Usage

### Descriptive Statistics for Variables Used in Analysis of Change in Media Use from 2000 to 2001

Confidence in the Press	Frequency ('00)	Percent
hardly any	231	45.21
only some	230	45.01
a great deal	50	9.78
Total	511	100

Party Identification	Frequency ('00)	Percent
strong Democrat	141	14.29
weak Democrat	180	18.24
leans Democrat	123	12.46
independent	189	19.15
leans Republican	95	9.63
weak Republican	142	14.39
strong Republican	117	11.85
Total	987	100

Ideology	Frequency ('00)	Percent
extremely liberal	39	4.1
liberal	119	12.5
slightly liberal	104	10.92
moderate	371	38.97
slightly conservative	139	14.6
conservative	148	15.55
extremely conservative	32	3.36
Total	952	100

Years of Education	Frequency ('00)	Percent
0 to 9	58	5.80
10 to 12	365	36.50
13 to 16	449	44.90
more than 16	128	12.80
Total	1000	100

Newspaper Readership	Frequency ('00)	Percent	Frequency ('01)	Percent
never	41	8.02	48	9.39
less than once a week	76	14.87	41	8.02
once a week	60	11.74	80	15.66
a few times a week	122	23.87	106	20.74
every day	212	41.49	236	46.18
Total	511	100	511	100



Question Wording: “How often do you read a newspaper – every day, a few times a week, once a week, less than once a week, or never?”

Web for Government Information	Frequency ('00)	Percent	Frequency ('01)	Percent
never	96	45.71	89	42.38
1-2 times	67	31.9	63	30
3-5 times	21	10	24	11.43
more than 5 times	26	12.38	34	16.19
Total	210	100	210	100

Question Wording: “In the past 30 days, how often have you visited a web site for ... government information?”

Web for Political Information	Frequency ('00)	Percent	Frequency ('01)	Percent
never	155	74.16	139	66.51
1-2 times	20	9.57	32	15.31
3-5 times	19	9.09	16	7.66
more than 5 times	15	7.18	22	10.53
Total	209	100	209	100

Question Wording: “In the past 30 days, how often have you visited a web site for ... political information?”

General News Magazines	Frequency ('00)	Percent	Frequency ('01)	Percent
not at all	21	36.84	22	38.6
1 or 2 times	19	33.33	8	14.04
3 or more times	17	29.82	27	47.37
Total	57	100	57	100

Question Wording: “In the past 2 years...have you looked for information about the views or background of a candidate for political office? If yes, please tell me if you looked for such information from...articles in general news magazines like Time, Newsweek, or U.S. News?”

Magazine with a Particular Perspective	Frequency ('00)	Percent	Frequency ('01)	Percent
not at all	33	57.89	31	54.39
1 or 2 times	17	29.82	8	14.04
3 or more times	7	12.28	18	31.58
Total	57	100	57	100

Question Wording: “In the past 2 years...have you looked for information about the views or background of a candidate for political office? If yes, please tell me if you looked for such information from...special magazine or newsletter with a particular policy interest or perspective?”

Looked for Candidate Information	Frequency ('00)	Percent	Frequency ('01)	Percent
No	1,708	92.98	1,463	79.64
Yes	129	7.02	374	20.36
Total	1,837	100	1,837	100

Question Wording: “In the past two years, that is, between 1998 [1999] and 2000 [2001] have you looked for information about the views or background of a candidate for office?”

## Chapter 4

### Attitudes toward the News Media and Voting Behavior

## The Voting Decision

And so I'm very hopeful that they [the media] actually will get out there, and they actually will spend some time with the people, because those same people are the people who voted for George Bush and "said screw you, major media."

Peter Johnson (On the Media from NPR 2004)

Few political processes have been studied more extensively than the individual voter's election choice. It was the focus of some of the first academic studies using survey research and has since been examined using a wide variety of methodologies. While a widely accepted, definitive model of the voting process is still elusive, several empirical regularities are quite robust. The first is that voters have strong psychological orientations toward the major political parties. These party attachments are relatively stable over time and shape voters' decisions in powerful ways. Second, despite party identification's powerful influence, voters can be persuaded to vote contrary to their identification if given persuasive reasons to do so.

When voters are confronted with a new or unfamiliar election choice, they tend to initially fall back on their "standing decision" (Key 1961) among the parties. In this way, party identification serves as a heuristic, allowing voters to make decisions about candidates when they have little other information to guide them (Conover and Feldman 1989; Rahn 1993). While new information about the relative benefits of competing candidates does not eliminate the effects of party identification, it may persuade some voters to abandon their standing decision and vote for another candidate. As I discuss in previous chapters, potential voters receive most of their information about politics from the news media (Zaller 1992; Hetherington 1996; Zaller 1996; Lippmann 1997 [1922]; Mutz 1998). Even when citizens acquire information through social networks, the

messages usually originate from the press (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Katz 1957; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Examining the voting decision allows one to observe the extent to which citizens rely on their predispositions or are swayed by informative media messages.

In this chapter I extend the theoretical model of political learning outlined in chapter 2 to voting behavior. I have already shown that how people update their beliefs about the political world depends on their attitudes toward the news media as an institution. This chapter examines whether this phenomenon affects citizens' choices among candidates. I test whether their resistance to new information prevents voters who distrust the press from updating their election decisions, causing them instead to rely on their partisan predispositions.

### **The Role of Party Identification in the Voting Decision**

The most powerful force affecting an individual's vote choice in a presidential or congressional election is his or her party identification. But what exactly is party identification? The most influential articulation of the central role of party attachments in the voting decision is the seminal book, *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960).<sup>35</sup> The authors describe party identification as a "firm but not immovable attachment" (148). As a psychological trait, it is "characterized more by stability than by change – not by rigid, immutable fixation on one party rather than the other, but by a persistent adherence and resistance to contrary influence" (146). Observing the very strong relationship between party identification and the vote, they assert:

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<sup>35</sup> One of the authors first examined party identification in an earlier article, Belknap and Campbell (1952).

Few factors are of greater importance for our national elections than the lasting attachments of millions of Americans to one of the parties. These loyalties establish the basic division of electoral strength within which the competition of particular campaigns takes place (Campbell et al. 1960; cited in Bartels 2001).

The authors note that while stable partisan attachments serve as the starting point for electoral choice, voters can also be influenced by more transitory forces, such as national conditions or the personalities of particular candidates (Campbell et al. 1960; Stokes 1966a).

The order in which these factors affect the decision is represented in the authors' metaphor of a "funnel of causality" (ch. 2). Factors such as party identification are higher in the funnel, more distant from the decision itself but able to affect the variables further down the funnel. Among these more proximate causes are the transitory forces mentioned above. When a voter faces the next election choice, he or she tends to use party identification as a starting point. New information can alter party identification, but the effect is small. It takes extremely dramatic or long lasting messages to fundamentally alter the partisan balance in the electorate (531-535).

Over time, subsequent scholars have disputed various aspects of *The American Voter's* depiction of voter psychology. Of particular relevance here, its depiction of party identification has been disputed in several related ways. First, researchers have debated the instrumental content of party identification. In *The American Voter*, party identification is depicted more as a product of socialization than as a conscious choice. Its observations that party attachments tend to be passed down from generation to generation (see also Jennings and Niemi 1981) and to be relatively stable over time led to the implication that party identification was not a particularly rational decision. Not

surprisingly, those interested in developing rational choice models of voting have been among those challenging this depiction. These revisionists think of party identification as a more purposeful choice among the parties. Morris Fiorina (1977) argues that party identification might be a sensible way for voters to vote based on their interests without expending unnecessary effort acquiring information about each election contest.<sup>36</sup> In this way, it serves as a “running tally” of the costs and benefits the voter receives from the parties (Fiorina 1977, 1981). Christopher Achen (1992) further extends this line of reasoning by showing that conceptualizing party identification as a running tally updated in a Bayesian manner is consistent with many of the empirical regularities first observed in *The American Voter*, such as its tendency to become more stable as people age and to be more likely to change when voters’ social and economic circumstances change.

This type of theorizing leads to a related controversy over *The American Voter*’s assertion that party identification is stable over time and only weakly affected by contemporary evaluations of party performance, positions, and candidates. If party identification is largely a rational calculation of the relative costs and benefits of the two parties, one would expect it to be more influenced by contemporary events. The nonparametric empirical analysis in *The American Voter* was not sufficient to convince subsequent scholars that the strong relationship between party identification and other perceptions and attitudes was solely the result of the former’s influence. To sort out the direction of causation, subsequent studies have tried analyzing election surveys using more sophisticated statistical models, with limited success. Recursive statistical models tend to find that party identification plays a dominant role in shaping all other opinions

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<sup>36</sup> On the irrationality of expending effort to acquire political information see Downs (1957)

and beliefs (Goldberg 1966; Miller and Shanks 1996). But these models simply beg the question by assuming at the outset that causation flows from party identification to other attitudes rather than the reverse. One potential solution is to use non-recursive, structural equation models that attempt to estimate the reciprocal effects between party identification and other attitudes. However, attempts to estimate models of this type have produced contradictory results. The main trouble is that these models still require the researcher to assume that some political opinions are exogenous. Arbitrary differences in these unrealistic assumptions tend to lead to differing conclusions (Bartels 2001), with some models showing that causation mostly flows from party identification to beliefs, opinions, and candidate evaluations (Markus and Converse 1979), and some showing the reverse (Jackson 1975; Page and Jones 1979; Fiorina 1981).

More powerful research designs, particularly those using panel surveys, have tended to shed more light on this question than the various models that use cross-sectional data. For example, Warren Miller (1999) used a series of panel surveys from the National Election Studies (NES) and the Kent Jennings and Richard Niemi's (1981) political socialization panel survey to examine whether party identification or other opinions were more likely to change when they were in conflict. He demonstrated, using a series of cross-tabulations, that for almost all groups of voters, over time, political opinions are more likely to change to match partisanship, rather than the reverse. Also, Alan Gerber and Donald Green (1998) examined a series of NES panel surveys using a Kalman filter statistical model to examine the stability of party identification over time. They found that party identification was much more stable over time than conceptions of it as a "running tally" imply.

Another possible challenge to the claim that party identification is stable and relatively unaffected by short term forces comes from studies examining aggregate, rather than individual-level data. At the aggregate level, the proportion of the population identifying with the two parties tends to fluctuate, moving in response to perceptions of the economy and evaluations of the president (MacKuen et al. 1989; Erikson et al. 2002). However, this movement in response to national conditions tends to be modest in size and relatively slow. Aggregate movement in party identification is small when measurement error (solely random fluctuation) is accounted for (Green et al. 1998, 2002).

Recently, Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler (2002) have advocated the traditional view of party identification while adding their own evidence and a new understanding of just what this psychological attachment is. They see party identification as a kind of social group identification. Partisans identify with the type of people popularly associated with one party or another. This provides a more substantive definition of party identification, without contesting the basic empirical findings that it is strongly influential, stable, but can be temporarily overcome by short-term considerations.

Despite challenges to almost every aspect of *The American Voter's* account of party identification, research in this area has come full circle. The accumulated evidence broadly supports the original depiction of the way party identification and contemporary messages affect the vote. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler summarize by saying, “The group affinities of the electorate tend to endure, whereas the special conditions that help propel a candidate to an unusual margin of victory seldom do” (227). In the next section I turn my attention to these “special conditions” that influence voting.



## Contemporary Influences on the Vote

While *The American Voter* casts partisanship at the center of its depiction of voter psychology, the authors also emphasize the importance of more transient political attitudes and beliefs on voting behavior. In retrospect, it would have been difficult for them to ignore current perceptions, considering that the book is based on survey data from two presidential elections (1952 and 1956) in which the Republican candidate won despite the Democrats' large aggregate advantage in party identification (Bartels 2001). They accounted for this by arguing that Republican candidate Dwight Eisenhower's tremendous personal popularity convinced many Democrats and independents to support him.

Although scholars have focused on candidates' personal attributes and issue positions as potential causes of voting decisions, they have had trouble documenting these effects. The most important limitation is that it is very difficult to measure perceptions of candidates in any other way than simply asking the voters. Unfortunately, most voters answer survey questions about political candidates in ways that rationalize their voting decision (Berelson et al. 1954; Brody and Page 1972; Page and Brody 1972; Rahn et al. 1994; Bartels 2002b).<sup>37</sup> This problem could be alleviated if one could measure the personal appeal of candidates' personalities and ideologies independent from voters' self-reports. This is quite difficult to do in practice. In an attempt to determine if more moderate presidential candidates were more appealing to voters, Steven Rosenstone (1983) polled political science faculty to determine the one-dimensional ideological

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<sup>37</sup> Simply asking survey respondents directly whether candidate attributes influenced their voting decision is just as problematic. People are notoriously bad at introspecting about what factors affect their decision-making (Nisbett and Wilson 1977).

position of candidates. But since these professional ratings could also be endogenous to election outcomes, this method has not caught on (but see Bartels and Zaller 2001; Zaller 2004). As a result, it is difficult to know, based on current evidence, whether perceptions of candidate attributes have any effect on voting behavior.

A contemporary influence on the vote that has proved easier to document is the state of the national economy. Voters tend to reward presidential candidates of the party in the White House when the economy is doing well and punish them when the economy is sluggish.<sup>38</sup> This is a clear pattern at the aggregate level (Key 1968; Rosenstone 1983; Lewis-Beck 1990; Bartels 1992; Gelman and King 1993; Hibbs 2000; Bartels and Zaller 2001). Survey researchers have also examined the individual-level effects of perceptions of the economy. They find that personal perceptions of the state of the national economy are highly related to vote choice (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Fiorina 1981). However, these reported perceptions are as likely as other survey responses to be rationalizations (Kramer 1983). But unlike candidate qualities, there are many available objective measures of the state of the economy. This makes it possible to estimate the effect of the economy on individual voting behavior in pooled cross-sectional survey data using objective measures of the economy as explanatory variables, rather than respondents' own self-reports. Gregory Markus did this, pooling NES presidential election surveys from 1956 through 1988. He used the annual percentage change in real disposable income in the year of the election, as reported by the National Bureau of Economic

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<sup>38</sup> The aggregate performance of congressional candidates of the president's party is also correlated with the state of the economy (Kramer 1971; Tufte 1975). However, this seems to be more a result of the strategic behavior of quality congressional candidates than a direct effect of the economy on vote choice (Jacobson and Kernell 1981; Jacobson 1989).

Research, as a measure of economic performance. His results confirm that national economic conditions have a strong influence on the presidential vote. Each 1 percent increase in real disposable income per capita is associated with a two percent increase in the probability that a voter would vote for the incumbent (Markus 1988, 1992).

While the evidence that economic conditions influence the vote is strong, the search for other contemporary influences has been surprisingly futile (Bartels 1992). One might think that messages from the candidates and their campaigns, sent both through the press corps and through paid advertising, would influence voters by causing them to think about personal attributes of the candidates. The widespread perception that campaign messages consist of “meanness, superficiality and irrationality” (268) drives this expectation. However, it seems that campaigns increase the influence of national conditions rather than priming more trivial concerns. Studies measuring changes in voter preferences during presidential campaigns find that the main influence of campaign coverage is to make the current state of the economy more salient in voters’ minds (Gelman and King 1993; Bartels forthcoming). The main way that current political news influences voters is by sending signals about the state of the economy.

In summary, the evidence suggests that voting decisions are affected by two major factors. First, they are influenced by long-term party loyalties. Second, they are affected by more transitory signals about the relative quality of the two parties, the most established being the current state of the national economy. These predispositions and contemporary information are combined to form a vote preference. *The American Voter’s* summary of the voting process still seems basically correct:

Undoubtedly in many of our national elections the forces on the vote have very largely been reflections of long term party loyalties. But we know

that party identification is not the sole influence on how the voter appraises the things he is acting toward. In some elections the public's evaluations of the current elements of politics may not agree with its predominant partisan allegiances, and when they do not, in a system where the standing balance of party identification is not too uneven, the difference between evaluations of current political objects and long term partisan loyalties may be wide enough to elect the candidate of the minority party (529).

Of particular importance is the causal relationship between these two factors and the vote. As I point out above, numerous survey-reported attributes, including perceptions of candidates and the national economy, tend to be rationalizations, rather than causes, of voting decisions. In the voting models I use below, I assume that the explanatory variables (the state of the national economy and reported party identification) are exogenous. Unlike other possible explanatory variables, there are strong reasons to believe that these are, in fact, exogenous.

### **A Theoretical Model of Electoral Choice**

In formalizing my expectations of how attitudes toward the press will affect voters' decision-making, I extend the Bayesian learning model outlined in chapter 2 to the election context. The model is mathematically identical to the one already outlined. What is different is that it shows how the reception of information affects electoral choice. As before, the model represents a simplification of the psychological processes that constitute voter decision-making. But it does encompass the most important and reliable empirical regularities of voting behavior: that party identification provides an initial baseline for candidate choice, but voters can sometimes be swayed from their party identification by contemporary issues such as the state of the economy.

I represent each voter's initial preference among the candidates as a normal distribution with mean  $PID_i$  and precision  $P_{iPID}$ . The voter then receives a message from

the news media giving the voter new information about the relative quality of the candidates, such as the state of the economy. This message is represented as a normal distribution with mean  $M_i$  and precision  $P_{iM}$ . The voter then combines the initial candidate preference with the new information to form a voting decision. The final voting preference is another normal distribution with mean  $V_i$  and precision  $P_{iV}$ . The voting decision is related to party identification and the media message such that:

$$4-1 : V_i = \frac{P_{iD}P_{iPID} + M_iP_{iM}}{P_{iPID} + P_{iM}}$$

and

$$4-2 : P_{iV} = P_{iPID} + P_{iM}$$

(Zechman 1979, 308; Achen 1992, 202-3; Bartels 1993, 268; 2002a, 122; Gill 2002, 91; Gelman et al. 2004, 49).

The voting decision is a weighted average of voters' party identification and a news media message about the relative quality of the two candidates. It is important to note that unlike previous Bayesian models of electoral choice (Zechman 1979; Achen 1992), here voters do not update their party identification in response to campaign information. Rather, I see party identification as the starting point of the electoral decision that is then influenced by campaign information. In this model, current messages can have powerful effects on candidate evaluations independent of their more minimal effects on long-term partisanship (Green et al. 2002).

Because the state of the economy is the most well established contemporary influence on the vote, I use it to measure the content of the message transmitted by the news media. As in chapter 2, I interpret  $P_{iM}$ , the weight given the media message, as

being a function of voters' attitudes toward the press. This leads to several straightforward predictions regarding the effect of attitudes toward the press. By rearranging Equation 4-1, we can see that the larger  $P_{iM}$  is, the farther voting preferences will be from party identification (Equation 4-3). By rearranging terms again, we can see that larger values of  $P_{iM}$  should also be associated with voting preferences that are closer to the media message (Equation 4-4). These equations also illustrate that these relationships should only be found if one holds constant  $P_{iPID}$ , the precision of voters' party identification and  $M_i$ , the content of the new information.

$$4-3 : V_i - PID_i = \frac{(M_i - PID_i)P_{iM}}{P_{iPID} + P_{iM}}$$

$$4-4 : V_i - M_i = \frac{(PID_i - M_i)P_{iPID}}{P_{iPID} + P_{iM}}$$

This model leads to clear predictions for the role of attitudes toward the press in voters' decision-making. When voters dislike the press, their voting behavior should be more strongly related to their party identification and less strongly related to contemporary messages such as the state of the economy.

### **Trust in the Media and Partisan Voting**

To test these predictions, I examine survey data from the National Election Studies (NES) and the General Social Survey (GSS). While each survey has limitations, they both allow me to test the predictions I have outlined above. The main limitation of the NES is that it only asked respondents whether they trust the media in the 1996, 1998, and 2000 election surveys. Because these three surveys only include three congressional elections and two presidential elections, one is unable to look at the effect of national economic conditions over time. But one can still use these surveys to examine the effect

of trust in the media on partisan voting for President and Congress. The GSS has conducted national surveys in almost every year since 1972. In years following presidential elections (usually in the spring), it asks respondents which candidate they voted for, which party they identify with, and how much confidence they have in the press as an institution. These data provide an opportunity to test my predictions regarding attitudes toward the press and the effect of party identification and economic conditions on the vote. The GSS does not ask respondents about their congressional votes.

To test my predictions, I first estimate a probit model of presidential voting in 1996 and 2000, where the vote is a function of party identification, trust in the media and the interaction between trust in the media, and party identification. My prediction is that the interaction term's coefficient will be negative, indicating that voters who distrust the media are more influenced by their partisanship. As the theoretical model in the previous section makes clear, when estimating the effect of attitudes toward the press, it is important to control for the certainty of a respondent's party identification. A variable to measure this is respondents' level of objective political knowledge, determined by a brief battery of questions, such as identifying who the vice president is and which party is the majority in the House of Representatives. This serves as a good measure of the certainty of political predispositions (Zaller 1992).<sup>39</sup> So I also estimate the model with political knowledge and the interaction between political knowledge and party identification as control variables. Table 4-1 presents the resulting coefficient estimates.

The results support my prediction regarding the effect of trust in the media on partisan voting. The interaction between party identification and trust in the media has a

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<sup>39</sup> It is also consistent with the notion in the Bayesian framework that the precision of an individual's prior beliefs is equivalent to his or her level of information.

negative and statistically significant coefficient, indicating that greater trust in the media reduces the effect of party identification on the vote. Since the substantive sizes of probit coefficients are not directly interpretable, I simulate first differences using the CLARIFY computer program (King et al. 2000; Tomz et al. 2003). Setting political knowledge at its mean, I simulate the effect of moving from a weak Democratic to a weak Republican identifier if one trusts the media “just about always,” and find that this increases one’s probability of voting for the Republican presidential candidate by .656 (std. err.=.048). In contrast, when I run the same simulation for someone who trusts the news media “just about never,” the shift in party identification increase one’s probability of voting for the Republican by .836 (std. err.=.030). Clearly party identification has a large effect on the presidential vote. But the effect is larger when voters do not trust the media.

Next I estimate the same model, this time predicting votes for the House of Representatives. Table 4-2 presents the resulting coefficient estimates. Again the effect of party identification is always large. But it is significantly greater when one distrusts the media. The role that trust in the media plays in moderating the effect of party identification is substantively the same when one controls for political knowledge. Again holding political knowledge constant at its mean, I simulate the effect of moving from being a weak Democrat to a weak Republican if one trusts the media “just about always.” I find that it increases one’s probability of voting for a Republican congressional candidate by .503 (std. err.=.030). In contrast if one trusts the media “just about never,” this movement in party identification increases one’s probability of voting Republican by .637 (std. err.=.047). Those who distrust the media are more likely to rely on their partisanship when deciding whom to support for Congress.



## Replicating the Analysis with Panel Data

An observer who believes that party identification is strongly influenced by contemporary campaign messages may have reason to doubt these results. Achen (1992) points out that if a respondent's party identification changes in response to campaigns, one must measure it before the campaign to determine its true effect on vote choice. As explained above, I believe this problem to be minimal because of the large amount of evidence suggesting that party identification is very stable over time. But to make sure, it would be useful to see if the results in Table 4-1 and Table 4-2 are consistent even if party identification is measured prior to the current campaign. Using party identification measured in the NES pre-election survey is not sufficient because it is conducted during the campaign rather than before it (Achen 1992, 208).

A panel survey that measures party identification several years before the current election would solve this problem. Unfortunately there are very few panel surveys that include questions about respondents' attitudes toward the media. One exception is the 1992-1996 NES panel study. The 1996 wave of this study asked respondents whether they trusted the media. Using this data, I can model voting decisions in 1996 as a function of party identification measured in 1994 and trust in the media measured in 1996, with political knowledge measured in 1994 as a control variable. Table 4-3 presents the coefficient estimates for the same model of presidential and congressional voting used in Table 4-1 and Table 4-2. The results are inconclusive but highly suggestive. The key coefficient in these models measures the interaction between party identification and media trust. In both the presidential and congressional vote equations, this coefficient is negative, as expected, and slightly larger in magnitude than in Table 4-1 and Table 4-2.

However, the standard errors on these coefficients are much larger than in the 1996-2000 pooled data. This is probably caused by the much smaller sample size in this panel study, less than 40 percent of the number of respondents in Table 4-1 and Table 4-2. As a result, the p-values range from .13 to .16 across these four models. The results suggest that trust in the media has the same moderating effect on party identification if party identification is measured several years before the current election. But because of the limited sample size in this panel, one cannot be certain of the results.

A second panel study that could be used to address this concern is the 2000-2002 NES panel study. This study allows one to measure both party identification and trust in the media two years prior to the election. Table 4-4 presents the coefficient estimates from this model, specified the same as the models in Table 4-1 through Table 4-3. The results are essentially the same as those produced by the 1994-1996 panel data. The number of respondents is just a fourth of the number in the congressional voting model in Table 4-2. The interaction term between party identification and media trust has a negative coefficient as large as the coefficient in Table 4-2, but as a result of the smaller sample size the standard error is much larger, preventing it from being significant at conventional levels.

In summary, while the effect of trust in the media on partisan voting is not statistically significant when using panel data, the trouble appears to be the added uncertainty created by a smaller number of respondents. While we cannot be certain, the evidence suggests that the effects of trust in the media are the same whether or not the explanatory variables are measured before the campaign.

### **Confidence in the Press, Party Identification, and Economic Voting**

Next I examine how attitudes toward the press alter the bases of the voting decision using pooled, cross-sectional survey data from the GSS. I pool survey data from the first GSS survey conducted after each presidential election since the GSS began in 1972.<sup>40</sup> Using a probit model, I model the presidential vote as a function of party identification and national economic conditions.<sup>41</sup> Following Bartels and Zaller (2001) I measure national economic conditions with the percentage change in personal income per capita, as reported by the Bureau of Economic Analysis, United States Department of Commerce.<sup>42</sup> Unlike the previous analyses in this chapter, here vote choice is coded so that 1 indicates a vote for the candidate of the incumbent party and 0 indicates a vote for the party in opposition. Similarly, party identification is recoded so that 1 indicates strong identification with the incumbent party and 0 indicates strong identification with the opposing party. Using interaction terms, I test how the effects of both party identification and economic conditions are moderated by voters' confidence in the press. GSS surveys do not have questions measuring objective political knowledge, so instead I control for respondents' levels of education as a proxy.

Table 4-5 displays the results. The first column shows the results when I examine only how confidence in the press moderates the effect of party identification in these data. It shows, consistent with Table 4-1's analysis of NES data, that party identification

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<sup>40</sup> The 1984 presidential election is excluded because the GSS survey following this election did not ask respondents how much confidence they had in the press.

<sup>41</sup> I cannot check to see if the results from this model would be the same if party identification and confidence in the press were measured prior to the election campaign because the GSS surveys were not panel studies. However, I interpret the results in the previous section as suggesting that doing this would have little effect on the results.

<sup>42</sup> A recent analysis by Achen and Bartels (2004) shows that personal income growth in the second and third quarter of the elections year is the only period that influences election outcomes. However, I find that in the GSS data each of the first three quarters of the election year have some effect on vote choice.

is more influential among those with less confidence in the press. The second column shows that the result is robust when controlling for respondents' education. The equation in column 3 includes the effects of party identification and recent economic performance. For reasons that will soon become clear, rather than have one variable that measures income growth in the year of the election (Markus 1988, 1992), I estimate separately the effect of the first two quarters of the election year and the third quarter.<sup>43</sup> The results show that economic performance in both the first two quarters and the third quarter influence the propensity of voters to support the incumbent party. The fourth column in Table 5 includes interactions between confidence in the press and both party identification and economic conditions. The results are generally consistent with my expectations although more nuanced than I expected. As in previous results, positive attitudes toward the press appear to decrease the effect of party identification. On the other hand, confidence in the press seems to moderate the influence of economic conditions at different times in different ways. The coefficient on the interaction between confidence in the press and income growth in the first two quarters is negative but statistically indistinguishable from zero.<sup>44</sup> However, the coefficient on the interaction between third quarter income growth and confidence in the press is positive and distinguishable from zero. This indicates that those with more confidence in press are more influenced by economic conditions in the quarter immediately preceding the

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<sup>43</sup> The fourth quarter of the election year does not conclude until after the election has taken place. Statistics on economic performance during this quarter are not available until early in the next year. Because of this, there is no reason to believe that this final quarter could affect voting behavior.

<sup>44</sup> I checked to see if the interaction would be significant for one of these first two quarters, but it is not. If one estimates the effect of income growth in the first two quarters separately and the interactions between both of these variables and confidence in the press, both interaction coefficients are negative but not significant.

election. They may also be less influenced by economic conditions in previous quarters but we cannot be sure.<sup>45</sup>

Since the substantive sizes of probit coefficients are not directly interpretable, I simulate first differences based on the results in column four, using CLARIFY (King et al. 2000; Tomz et al. 2003). The effect of party identification varies in ways very similar to the NES data. Holding economic conditions at their means, I simulate the effect of moving from a weak Democrat to a weak Republican for someone who has “a great deal” of confidence in the press. It increases his or her probability of voting for the Republican candidate by .630 (std. err.=.025). In contrast, for someone who has “hardly any” confidence in the press the same shift increases his or her probability of voting Republican by .737 (std. err.=.056).

Now I turn my attention to the effect of third quarter economic conditions. I simulate the effect of changing from the economic conditions in 1992, when per capita income grew at an annual rate of .17% in the third quarter, to the conditions in 1972, when per capita income grew at an annual rate of 7.17% in the third quarter, on one’s probability of voting for the incumbent president, holding party identification and previous economic conditions constant at their means. For someone who has “a great deal” of confidence in the press, changing from 1992 to 1972 economic conditions increases his or her probability of voting for the incumbent by .328 (std. err.=.047). However, for someone who has “hardly any” confidence in the press, the same

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<sup>45</sup> I cannot control for education while estimating all the interaction terms in column 4. There are already three interaction terms, which are all highly collinear. When three more interactions terms are added, measuring the interaction between education and party identification, income growth in the first two quarters and income growth in the third quarter, all the standard errors become very large. There is not enough information in these data to estimate so many interaction terms

improvement in economic conditions increases his or her probability of voting for the incumbent by only .166 (std. err.=.051).

The effect of recent economic messages on voters seems to depend on voters attitudes toward the press. Those who have confidence in the press are responsive to economic messages about the relative competence of the two parties. Those with less confidence in the press are much less affected by economic conditions and more influenced by their partisanship.

### **Confidence in the Press and the Increase in Partisan Voting Since 1972**

The finding that lower confidence in the press increases the effect of party identification on voting provides a plausible explanation for a recent trend. As I discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, public confidence in the news media has declined dramatically in the past thirty-five years (Cook et al. 2000; Cook and Gronke 2001; Gronke and Cook 2002). At the same time, the relationship between party identification and presidential voting has been growing stronger (Miller 1991; Bartels 2000). Figure 4-1 contrasts these two trends. On the right vertical axis and graphed with a dashed line are probit coefficients reflecting the relationship between party identification and presidential voting in the GSS for each election since 1972. The results are very similar to those produced by Bartels (2000) using NES data and a somewhat more complicated statistical procedure. It shows that the relationship between party identification and presidential voting has increased substantially since the early 1970s. On the left vertical axis and graphed with a solid line is the average confidence in the press (on a 0 to 1 scale) in the GSS sample over these same years. Consistent with Cook, Gronke and Rattliff (2000), I find that confidence in the press has declined over this period. Both the decline in confidence in the press and the

increase in the effect of party attachments on the vote over time are statistically significant.<sup>46</sup>

Simulating first differences, I find that in 1972, changing from a weak Democrat to a weak Republican increases one's chances of voting for the Republican candidate by .590. In 2000, the same change increases the probability voting Republican vote by .734. At the same time the average confidence in the media has declined from .543 (on a 0 to 1 scale) after the 1972 election to .339 after the 2000 election.

Considering that less confidence in the media tends to induce more partisan voting, it is natural to wonder how much of the increase in the effect of party identification over the past 35 years can be accounted for by the decline in public confidence in the press. To calculate this, I simulate (based on the parameter estimates in the fourth column of Table 4-5) the effect of taking 1972 voters and adjusting their confidence in the press downward to 2000 levels to see how the effect of party identification changes. This transformation reduces the substantive effect of partisanship by .029 in probability. Dividing this by the difference in the effect of partisanship between 1972 and 2000, I find that about 20.39 % of this difference can be accounted for by the decline in confidence in the press. While surely not the only cause, more negative attitudes toward the press seem to be an important source of the recent increase in partisan presidential voting.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>46</sup> I test the relationship between time and confidence in the press by regressing confidence on the calendar year. I test the relationship between time and partisan voting by estimating a probit model where the vote is a function of party identification and the interaction between party identification and the calendar year.

This chapter shows how the effects of attitudes toward the press on political learning, documented in detail in the previous chapter, manifest themselves by changing the way Americans make voting decisions. Those who have positive attitudes toward the news media are more willing to accept new information about the state of the political world, specifically the recent state of the national economy. In contrast, those who distrust the press resist new information. As a result, their political choices are shaped less by the current state of the country and more by their own partisan predispositions.

The direct effects of declining confidence in the press on the democratic process are stark. As the electorate becomes more inclined to ignore the information it receives, the activities of politicians in government have less effect on the number of votes they receive on election day. Instead, a growing proportion of the electorate is more inclined to ignore the consequences of politicians' behavior and vote based on their partisanship regardless. As more of the electorate consists of either hardened supporters or opponents, the behavior of elected leaders induces fewer rewards and punishments. This situation cannot help but reduce the quality of democratic representation to some degree.

Considering the negative consequences, it is natural to wonder what has caused largely negative public attitudes toward the press and how the situation might be improved. Chapter 2 identifies two causes of greater distrust of the news media: elite criticism of the media and the increasingly cynical, sensationalist style of news coverage. The next chapter considers why elite criticism of the press is so prevalent.



**Table 4-1: Effect of Trust in the Media on Partisan Presidential Voting in the NES**

Probit Model Predicting Presidential Vote		
Party Identification	<b>4.291</b>	<b>4.299</b>
	(0.283)	(0.351)
Party Identification X Trust in the Media	<b>-1.144</b>	<b>-1.203</b>
	(0.520)	(0.526)
Trust in the Media	<b>-0.076</b>	<b>-0.094</b>
	(0.306)	(0.308)
Party Identification X Political Knowledge		<b>0.104</b>
		(0.401)
Political Knowledge		<b>-0.412</b>
		(0.235)
Intercept	<b>-1.947</b>	<b>-1.777</b>
	(0.170)	(0.200)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.54	0.54
Log- Likelihood	-680.83	-676.43
Number of Observations	2141	2141

Source: 1996 and 2000 NES Surveys

**Table 4-2: Effect of Trust in the Media on Partisan Congressional Voting in the NES**

Probit Model Predicting Congressional Vote		
Party Identification	<b>2.827</b>	<b>2.670</b>
	(0.186)	(0.240)
Party Identification X Trust in the Media	<b>-0.774</b>	<b>-0.739</b>
	(0.363)	(0.364)
Trust in the Media	<b>0.085</b>	<b>0.084</b>
	(0.202)	(0.202)
Party Identification X Political Knowledge		<b>0.280</b>
		(0.290)
Political Knowledge		<b>-0.043</b>
		(0.159)
Intercept	<b>-1.157</b>	<b>-1.135</b>
	(0.109)	(0.133)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.31	0.31
Log- Likelihood	-1192.02	-1191.23
Number of Observations	2483	2483

Source: 1996, 1998, and 2000 NES surveys

**Table 4-3: Trust in the Media and Partisan Voting in the 1994-1996 NES Panel**

Probit Model Predicting 96 Vote	Presidential Vote		House Vote	
Party Identification - 1994	<b>4.133</b> (0.628)	<b>3.988</b> (0.637)	<b>3.063</b> (0.532)	<b>2.904</b> (0.549)
Party Identification X Trust in the Media	<b>-1.525</b> (1.028)	<b>-1.470</b> (1.043)	<b>-1.314</b> (0.870)	<b>-1.245</b> (0.899)
Trust in the Media - 1996	<b>-0.534</b> (0.659)	<b>-0.549</b> (0.656)	<b>-0.826</b> (0.492)	<b>-0.887</b> (0.497)
Party Identification X Political Knowledge		<b>1.807</b> (0.665)		<b>1.320</b> (0.568)
Political Knowledge - 1994		<b>-0.508</b> (0.419)		<b>0.133</b> (0.308)
Intercept	<b>-1.633</b> (0.409)	<b>-1.599</b> (0.407)	<b>-0.566</b> (0.306)	<b>-0.511</b> (0.309)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.48	0.49	0.32	0.32
Log- Likelihood	-294.20	-287.87	-378.73	-378.73
Number of Observations	825	822	809	809

Source: 1994-1996 NES Panel Study

**Table 4-4: Trust in the Media and Partisan Congressional Voting in the 2000-2002 NES Panel**

Probit Model Predicting 2002 Congressional Vote		
Party Identification - 2000	<b>2.832</b> (0.419)	<b>2.638</b> (0.473)
Party Identification X Trust in the Media	<b>-0.766</b> (0.758)	<b>-0.806</b> (0.761)
Trust in the Media - 2000	<b>-0.131</b> (0.458)	<b>-0.107</b> (0.458)
Party Identification X Political Knowledge		<b>0.601</b> (0.667)
Political Knowledge - 2000		<b>-0.379</b> (0.389)
Intercept	<b>-1.159</b> (0.269)	<b>-1.042</b> (0.293)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.31	0.31
Log- Likelihood	-277.61	-277.11
Number of Observations	577	577

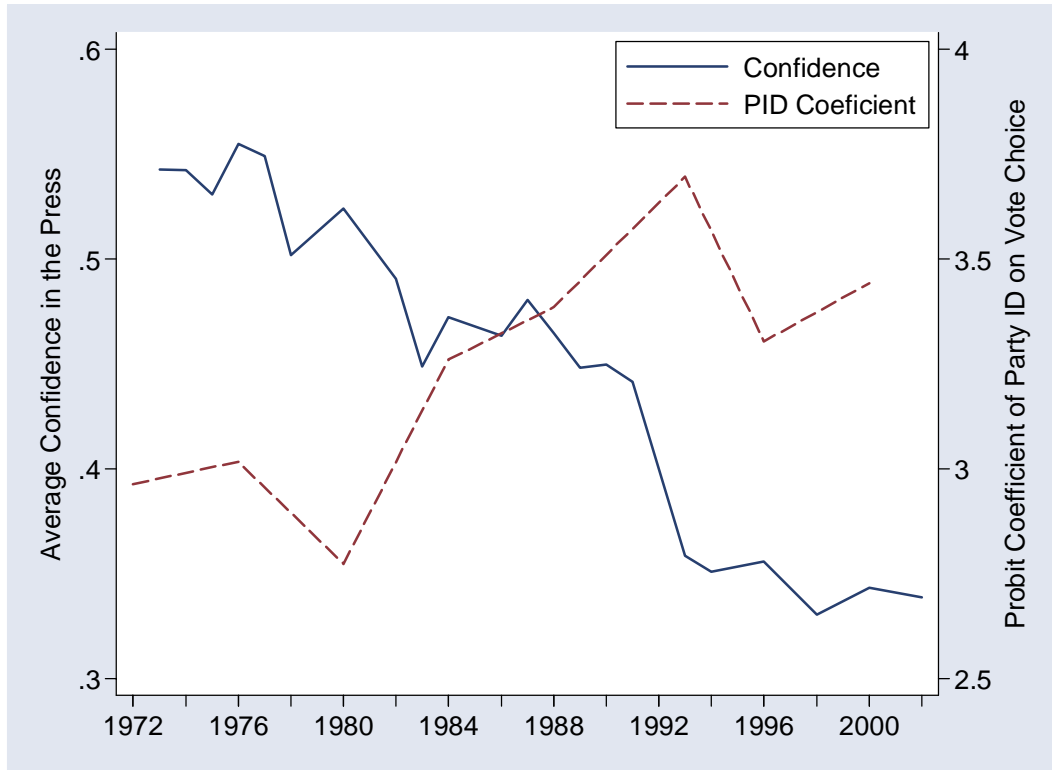
Source: 2000-2002 NES Panel Study

**Table 4-5: Effect of Confidence in the Press on the Bases of Presidential Voting**

Probit Model Predicting Presidential Vote				
Party Identification	<b>3.365</b>	<b>2.163</b>	<b>3.107</b>	<b>3.420</b>
	(0.111)	(0.270)	(0.052)	(0.114)
Party Identification X Confidence in the Press	<b>-0.805</b>	<b>-0.696</b>		<b>-0.681</b>
	(0.191)	(0.193)		(0.202)
Income Growth Q1-2			<b>0.098</b>	<b>0.172</b>
			(0.024)	(0.059)
Income Growth Q1-2 X Confidence in the Press				<b>-0.085</b>
				(0.104)
Income Growth Q3			<b>0.077</b>	<b>0.062</b>
			(0.009)	(0.019)
Income Growth Q3 X Confidence in the Press				<b>0.062</b>
				(0.032)
Confidence in the Press	<b>0.388</b>	<b>0.324</b>		<b>0.111</b>
	(0.107)	(0.108)		(0.183)
Party Identification X Education		<b>1.856</b>		
		(0.385)		
Education		<b>-1.089</b>		
		(0.220)		
Intercept	<b>-1.519</b>	<b>-0.814</b>	<b>-1.714</b>	<b>-1.814</b>
	(0.063)	(0.154)	(0.047)	(0.101)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.38	0.39	0.40	0.40
Log- Likelihood	-2407.93	-2389.53	-3691.22	-2358.66
Number of Observations	5654	5646	8952	5654

Sources: 1973, 1977, 1982, 1989, 1993, 1998 and 2002 General Social Surveys and the Bureau of Economic Analysis, United States Department of Commerce.

**Figure 4-1: Partisan Voting and Confidence in the Press over Time**



Source: 1973, 1977, 1982, 1984, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1998 and 2002 General Social Surveys

## Chapter 5

### Party Competition and Incentives for Elite Rhetoric

## **A Model of Party Competition and Information Acquisition**

In previous chapters, I examined the effect of elite rhetoric on public attitudes toward the news media as an institution and the consequences of those attitudes for how the public acquires political information. I found that those who distrust the media are less influenced by new messages about the state of the country, instead relying more on their partisan predispositions to form their beliefs. In addition, the public's trust in the media is itself shaped by (among other things) the rhetoric of like-minded party leaders. In this chapter, I explore the consequences of these findings for the behavior of the parties themselves. In particular, how might these causal relationships create incentives for certain patterns of elite rhetoric about the trustworthiness of the press?

To do this I present a formal model. It, like any theory, simplifies reality. It takes several empirical findings of the previous chapters as starting assumptions. It then adds a number of other simplifying assumptions to give it enough structure to generate clear predictions. I discussed the veracity of the first two assumptions in the previous chapters. For subsequent assumptions, I both assess whether the existing evidence supports the assumptions and the extent to which the model's predictions are robust to changes in these assumptions.

The main actors in this model are the two political parties. They are rational in at least the technical sense, in that they have preferences and behave based on those preferences. In contrast, the behavior of members of the public is not necessarily determined by the pursuit of fixed preferences. Instead they act according to set rules which are consistent with available empirical evidence and set out in the assumptions. Because they behave according to set rules, rather than strategically pursuing preferences,



they are not rational in either the colloquial or the technical sense. As noted in chapter 3, this set-up is consistent with Fiorina's (1990; 1996; 2000) contention that, while standard rationality assumptions are realistic for elite political actors, evidence strongly suggests they are inappropriate for characterizing the behavior of members of the mass public. One of the main reasons for this stance is that the cost of spending cognitive effort or any other resources to behave strategically will far outweigh the probability that any single citizen will have influence on political outcomes.<sup>47</sup>

The model depends on the idea that citizens have beliefs about the relative performance of two parties, labeled A and B, in some policy domain. These beliefs can be represented in one dimension, where higher values indicate a belief that policy outcomes are better under party A and lower values indicate a belief that outcomes are better under party B. This belief can also be thought of as the citizen's prior party preference on this policy dimension and expected to be shaped by his or her party identification.<sup>48</sup>

It is important to distinguish between these party preferences in policy domains and other opinions (or preferences). In this model, I only refer to policy areas where people generally share the same ultimate goals, such as more economic growth, fewer war deaths and less crime. Donald Stokes (1966b) called these "valence" issues. These are different from preferences on issues such as abortion or government transfer payments, where people disagree on policy ends.

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<sup>47</sup> On the general point that expending effort in politics is irrational see Downs (1957).

<sup>48</sup> This implies that, in this model, unlike many other formal models and psychological theories, the citizens' beliefs and issue-specific party preferences are equivalent.

The main actors in this model are the parties.<sup>49</sup> The foundation of the model is assumptions founded on the empirical patterns and causal inferences from previous chapters. First, based on the relationship of between trust in the media and political learning, I assume,

A1: Parties believe that citizens' posterior beliefs about the relative performance of the two parties in a policy area are a Bayesian weighted average of their prior beliefs and a news media message, with citizens' trust in the news media positively affecting the weight given to the message.

The message the public receives consists of information about valence issues, such as the state of the economy, war and peace, and the nation's fiscal health under the current government. This information helps citizens learn the relative performance of the two parties, with good news enhancing perceptions of the governing party and bad news having the opposite effect.<sup>50</sup> As I noted in previous chapters, I do not assume that this type of Bayesian updating is a perfectly accurate description of the mechanisms (psychological or otherwise) involved here, only that this crude mathematical formula (Bayes rule) is quite consistent with the data. So it seems a reasonable approximation of

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<sup>49</sup> I refer to the parties themselves as actors, but it may be more precise to say that it is the party leaders who behave the way the parties are depicted here. In fact any elite partisan could be expected to behave as the parties do in the model if their preferences, beliefs about the game, and the consequences of their actions are the same as one of the party's in the model.

<sup>50</sup> Because I focus on valence issues, where all citizens agree on what types of policy outcomes are good or bad, the implication of new information for which party is better in a policy area is the same for all citizens. In contrast, on an issue like abortion or income redistribution the type of policy outcome that leads some citizen to prefer a party on that issue will lead other citizens to disapprove of that party.

the parties' beliefs about how media messages and predispositions influence the public's valence preferences.

Based on this assumption, I represent party leaders' beliefs about the location of each citizen's prior preference as a mean ( $B_{kit-1}$ ) with a precision ( $P_{kit-1}$ ), where  $B_{kit-1}$  represents the location of the belief of party  $k$  about the prior preference of citizen  $i$ . Party  $k$ 's beliefs about the location of the message can be represented as a mean ( $M_k$ ) and a precision ( $P_{mki}$ ). According the Bayes' rule, party  $k$ 's belief about citizen  $i$ 's preference is a function of these parameters such that,

$$5-1: B_{kit} = \frac{B_{kit-1}P_{kit-1} + M_kP_{mki}}{P_{kit-1} + P_{mki}}$$

Furthermore, we assume that the weight party  $k$  believes citizen  $i$  gives the message ( $P_{mki}$ ) is positively affected by the citizen's trust in the media.

This leads to my second assumption, which is based on findings from the previous chapter on the relationship between elite rhetoric and public trust in the media. I found that the trust members of the public have in the media is influenced by the rhetoric of party elites they identify with. Incorporating this into the model, I assume,

A2: The two parties each send a signal about the trustworthiness of the news media. They can choose to signal "trust" or "don't trust." The parties believe that citizens' trust in the media will be influenced by the signal given by the party they identify with.

This part of the model is especially different from other formal models in that parties do not have conventional beliefs about voter rationality. Instead, the parties think voters do not behave strategically but automatically adjust the weight given to the message in

response to elite signals, irrespective of citizens' preferences or the possible ulterior motives of the parties. I incorporate A2 into the mathematical model of voter preferences by replacing  $P_{mki}$  with  $P_{mki} - C_i$  where  $C_i$  equals zero if a citizen's party says "trust" and a positive constant when the party signal's "don't trust." To ensure that the precision of the message is never negative, I assume that this positive constant  $C$  is never larger than the prior precision of the message  $P_{mki}$ .

While the main motivation for the model is to see the implications of the first two assumptions, I need to add some additional assumptions to make the model tractable. First, it is important to know the relationship between citizen's party identification and their prior beliefs about the relative quality of the parties on this policy dimension. Here I assume partisanship affects these prior beliefs such that,

A3: There is a monotone correspondence between party identification and prior beliefs about the relative quality of the two parties in the given policy dimension.

By monotone correspondence, I mean that for any two people, if one citizen identifies more strongly with Party A than the other citizen does, his or her party preference on this policy dimension will also be more favorable to Party A. This creates a direct connection between the elites a citizen is influenced by and party preference in this policy domain, with only pure independents (who are between the two groups of partisans in the distribution of priors) being uninfluenced by party messages.

Since parties are the main actors in the model, it is important to specify their preferences. I assume,

A4: Parties A and B prefer, respectively, to maximize and minimize the expected posterior beliefs of the public.

The important question I leave unanswered in this assumption is the relative weight given to the beliefs of different citizens. Below I examine two possibilities. I consider the case where parties only care about the beliefs of the median citizen (see Downs 1957; Black 1958; Davis et al. 1970; Kramer 1978; Calvert 1985). Then I consider the very different case where parties care about the average beliefs of the entire public. I use these two examples to see how the results depend on the relative weight given to centrist and extreme citizens.

As equation 5-1 makes clear, posterior beliefs depend on several variables. To simplify things, I make assumptions about the distribution of some of these variables. Grouping them together, I assume,

A5: Party  $k$  believes that prior trust in the media ( $P_{mki}$ ), and the certainty of prior beliefs ( $P_{kit-1}$ ) are both constant across citizens ( $P_{mki} = P_{mk}$  and  $P_{kit-1} = P_{kt-1}$ ). Party  $k$  believes that prior preferences are uniformly distributed on a scale I arbitrarily label 0-1.

With these assumptions, the formula for party  $k$ 's belief about citizen  $i$ 's mean posterior preference becomes,

$$5-2: \quad B_{kit} = \frac{B_{kit-1}P_{kt-1} + M_k(P_{mk} - C_i)}{P_{kt-1} + (P_{mk} - C_i)}$$

The effect of  $C_i$  on the weight given to the message is clear when this equation is rearranged.

$$5-3: \quad B_{kit} - M_k = \frac{(B_{kit-1} - M_k)P_{kt-1}}{P_{kt-1} + (P_{mk} - C_i)}$$

$$5-4: \quad B_{kit} - B_{kit-1} = \frac{(M_k - B_{kit-1})(P_{mk} - C_i)}{P_{kt-1} + (P_{mk} - C_i)}$$

Equation 5-3 shows that, because  $C_i$  is in the denominator, subsequent beliefs will be further from the message if  $C_i$  is zero than if it is a positive constant. Using equation 5-4, one can also see how increasing  $C_i$  reduces the distance between prior and posterior beliefs. When  $C_i$  is larger  $P_{mk} - C_i$  becomes smaller (but still nonnegative), reducing the value of the fraction  $\frac{(P_{mk} - C_i)}{P_{kt-1} + (P_{mk} - C_i)}$ , which is a factor in equation 5-4. So  $B_{kit} - B_{kit-1}$  is smaller when  $C_i$  is a positive constant rather than zero.

Given this structure, consider the basic logic of the party A's incentives. Based on A4, it would prefer to maximize  $B_{Ait}$  if  $B_{Ait}$  has any effect on the summary statistic of posterior preferences that party A is concerned with. If this is so, and they expect the message to be more favorable to them than the citizen's prior ( $B_{Ait-1} < M_A$ ), party A prefers the message to be more influential and  $C_i$  smaller. However, if the message is more favorable to party B than the citizen's prior ( $M_A < B_{Ait-1}$ ) party A prefers the message to be less influential and  $C_i$  larger. The same incentives are reversed for the leaders of party B, preferring a smaller  $C_i$  when the message is more favorable to party A than the citizen's prior ( $B_{Bit-1} < M_B$ ) and a larger  $C_i$  when the message is more favorable to party B than the prior ( $M_B < B_{Bit-1}$ ). In summary, to the extent that party leaders can control the weight given to the media message, how they want to change that weight will depend on the expected location of the message relative to the citizen's prior.

### The Basic Game

Now that the main assumptions are laid out, consider the following game sequence. Prior to the game, party leaders' beliefs about the location of the media message are taken as given. In the first stage of the game, both parties simultaneously send out a signal about the trustworthiness of the news media. The parties believe that all citizens (nonstrategically) adjust their trust in the media in response to the signal of the party they identify with (as specified in A2). In the second stage, the news media send a signal about the relative policy performance of the two parties in a policy area. Parties believe that citizens then update their party preferences in this policy area based on the location of the message and the weight given to the message (as specified in equation 5-2). Each party's utility is determined by the posterior policy preferences of the public.

With the model set out this way, in the next two sections I examine the nature of party messages about the press in this model, particularly how party messages vary in response to changes in their expectations about the content of future media messages.<sup>51</sup> First I consider the case where a party cares only about the posterior beliefs of the median citizen. Then I consider the case where a party cares about the average posterior beliefs of the public.

### **When Parties Care Only About the Median Citizen**

Consider the case where party A cares only about the preferences of the median citizen. The first thing to note about this circumstance is that, given the assumptions, the receipt of a message by different members of the public is order preserving. The same

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<sup>51</sup> What I refer to as the message ( $M_k$ ) could actually be multiple messages. Because normal distributions are conjugate to one another, an unlimited number of normal distributions could be combined to create one media message distribution and this distribution would summarize party k's expectations about all these contributing distributions.

citizen will be the median before and after receipt of the message. To see how the ordering of individuals is preserved consider two individuals, where the first's prior belief is more favorable to party A than the second's ( $B_{k1t-1} > B_{B2t-1}$ ). Following the same reasoning used in equation 3-7,<sup>52</sup> the distance between these two individual's posterior beliefs will be

$$5-5: \quad B_{k1t} - B_{k2t} = \frac{(B_{k1t-1} - B_{k2t-1})P_{kt-1}}{P_{kt-1} + (P_{mk} - C_i)}.$$

The only way in which the right side of the equation varies across individuals is in the prior beliefs. When  $B_{k1t-1} > B_{B2t-1}$ , then  $B_{k1t} > B_{B2t}$  and the order of individuals' beliefs is preserved.

In this case the message sent by each party depends on the expected effect of the message on the median citizen, who will be the same individual before and after receipt of the message. But it also depends on whether the party believes it can influence the median citizen at all. If the median does not identify with party k, then party k will be indifferent between sending a "trust" or "don't trust" message.

However, if the median identifies with party k, then that party will be able to influence the location of her posterior belief. Taking party A as an example, if it expects the message will be to the left of the median citizen's prior belief ( $M_A < B_{Ait-1}$ ), then party A will prefer to reduce its influence on her by signaling "don't trust." Analogously, if party A expects the message will be to the right of the median citizens ( $M_A > B_{Ait-1}$ ), the party will send a "trust" signal to increase the messages influence. If the message reinforces the median's beliefs ( $M_A = B_{Ait-1}$ ), then party A will be indifferent about which

<sup>52</sup> Here, as in equation 3-7, I hold the precision of prior beliefs constant ( $P_{kt-1} = P_{k1t-1} = P_{k2t-1}$ ).



signal to send. The behavior of party B will be analogous. Figure 5-1 illustrates these results.

### When Parties Care about the Average Belief of the Public

The results are more complicated in the case where parties' utility depends on the average posterior belief among the entire public. Formally, the utility of party A is,

$$5-6: \int B_{Ait} f(B_{Ait}) dB_{Ait}$$

Continuing to take party A as an example, one can expand this expression and express its utility as

$$5-7: \int \int \frac{B_{Ait-1} P_{At-1} + M_A(P_{mA} - C_i)}{P_{At-1} + P_{mA} - C_i} f(B_{Ait}) dC_i dB_{Ait-1}$$

Now, because citizens' prior beliefs correspond monotonically (as I have defined it) to their party identification, those who identify with party A will be all citizens with prior beliefs between some point  $j$  and 1. Since party A's rhetoric can only affect the posterior beliefs of these citizens, the message it sends about the trustworthiness of the media is determined by the relative values of

$$5-8: \int_j^1 \frac{B_{Ait-1} P_{At-1} + M_A(P_{mA} - C)}{P_{At-1} + P_{mA} - C} dB_{Ait-1},$$

where  $C$  is a positive constant, and

$$5-9: \int_j^1 \frac{B_{Ait-1} P_{At-1} + M_A P_{mA}}{P_{At-1} + P_{mA}} dB_{Ait-1}.$$

If equation 5-8 is greater, party A will signal “don’t trust.” If equation 5-9 is larger, it will signal “trust.” These equations are equal when the expected location of the message is equal to the median party A identifier’s prior ( $B_{Ait-1} = j + (1-j)/2$ ). When party A expects the media message to be below  $j + (1-j)/2$ , it will signal “don’t trust.” If it expects the message to be above  $j + (1-j)/2$ , it will signal “trust.” Party B will behave analogously, with it only signaling “trust” when it expects the message to be to the left of the prior belief of its median citizen who identifies with it.

Because the messages sent by the two parties influence mutually exclusive groups of citizens, their choice of signals depends only on their beliefs about the location of the message, not on their beliefs about the rhetoric of the other party. So any circumstance in which both parties’ beliefs and rhetoric match the best responses described here is a Nash (Nash 1950; Morrow 1994) equilibrium.

### **The Case Where Some Citizens are Influenced by Both Parties**

Next, I consider the case where a group of citizens is influenced by the messages of both parties.<sup>53</sup> In this case, the belief of each party about the location of each citizen’s posterior belief about the relative policy performance of the parties is:

$$5-10: \quad B_{kit} = \frac{B_{kit-1}P_{kt-1} + M_k(P_{mk} - C_{Ai} - C_{Bi})}{P_{kt-1} + (P_{mk} - C_{Ai} - C_{Bi})}$$

Here the parties believe that partisans’ trust in the media is influenced by the signal sent by their respective party while independents are influenced by the signals of both parties. Among both party A identifiers and independents,  $C_{Ai}$  will be equal to zero if party A signals “trust” and a positive constant if it signals “don’t trust.” Among party B

<sup>53</sup> In this section, I assume that each party knows the message sent by the other.

identifiers,  $C_{Ai}$  will equal zero regardless of the message sent by party A. Similarly, among party B identifiers and independents,  $C_{Bi}$  will equal zero if party B signals “trust” and a positive constant if it signals “don’t trust.” Among party A partisans,  $C_{Bi}$  equals zero regardless of the signal sent by party B. Here I assume that each party knows the signal sent by the other.

In the case where parties’ utility is determined by the posterior belief of the median citizen, the results change in that parties are no longer indifferent if the median is an independent. If the median is an independent or identifies with party A, party A will send a “don’t trust” signal if the expected message is to the right of the median’s prior ( $M_A < B_{Ait-1}$ ), a “trust” signal if the expected message is to the right of the median’s prior ( $M_A > B_{Ait-1}$ ), and be indifferent if the message location is the same as the median’s prior ( $M_A = B_{Ait-1}$ ). Party A will be indifferent if the median identifies with party B. Analogously, the signal party B sends will depend on the relative position of the message and the median’s prior if the median identifies with party B or is an independent. Party B will be indifferent if the median identifies with party A.

Next I consider the case where each party’s utility depends on the average posterior belief across all citizens. Figure 5-3 shows a uniform distribution of citizen prior beliefs with point  $p$  indicating the border between party B identifiers and independents and point  $j$  indicating the border between independents and Party A identifiers. As before, consider the example of party A. If party B signals “trust”, then party A will behave so as to maximize:

$$5-11: \int_p^1 \frac{B_{Ait-1} P_{At-1} + M_A (P_{mA} - C_A)}{P_{At-1} + P_{mA} - C_A} f(B_{Ait}) dB_{Ait-1} .$$

Party A will signal “don’t trust” when it thinks the message ( $M_A$ ) is less than  $p + \frac{1-p}{2}$

and “trust” when it is greater. The point  $p + \frac{1-p}{2}$  is the median of the combination of

independents and Party A partisans.

If Party B signals “don’t trust,” then this cut-point will change because, all else equal, independents will be less responsive to the message. The cut-point will be where

$$5-12: \int_p^1 \int \frac{B_{Ait-1}P_{At-1} + M_A(P_{mA} - C_{Bi})}{P_{At-1} + P_{mA} - C_{Bi}} f(B_{Ait}) dC_{Bi} dB_{Ait-1}$$

is equal to

$$5-13: \int_p^1 \int \frac{B_{Ait-1}P_{At-1} + M_A(P_{mA} - C_A - C_{Bi})}{P_{At-1} + P_{mA} - C_A - C_{Bi}} f(B_{Ait}) dC_{Bi} dB_{Ait-1} .$$

This will be at some point to the right of  $p + \frac{1-p}{2}$ , labeled q in Figure 5-3. The logic

here is that the cut-point is the point where party A’s signal of “don’t trust” reduces as much upward movement among some citizens as downward movement among other

citizens. To see how party A’s belief about the effect of the media message on individual i depends on other parameters, one can calculate the derivative of  $B_{Ait}$  with respect to  $M_A$ .

This produces

$$5-14: \frac{\partial B_{Ait}}{\partial M_A} = \frac{(B_{Ait-1} + P_{miA})P_{miA}}{(P_{At-1} + P_{miA})^2}$$

which reduces to

$$5-15: \frac{\partial B_{Ait}}{\partial M_A} = \frac{P_{miA}}{(P_{At-1} + P_{miA})}.$$

The important question is how the effect of decreasing  $P_{miA}$  by subtracting  $C_B$  will depend on the prior level of  $P_{miA}$ . To determine that, one can take the derivative of equation 5-15 with respect to  $P_{miA}$ , producing

$$5-16: \frac{\partial(\partial B_{Ait}/\partial M_A)}{\partial P_{miA}} = \frac{P_{At-1}}{(P_{At-1} + P_{miA})^2}.$$

One can see in equation 5-16 that the effect of  $P_{miA}$  of the influence of the message will always be positive and (because  $P_{miA}$  is in the denominator) the relationship will be larger when  $P_{miA}$  is smaller. When party B sends a signal of “don’t trust,” it reduces  $P_{miA}$  by  $C_B$ . This then reduces the power of party A’s distrust signal (represented by  $C_A$  in equation 5-13) to change the influence of the media message among those with priors between  $p$  and  $j$ . By reducing the impact of party A’s signal on centrist citizens, party B’s “don’t trust” signal requires party A’s cut-point to move to the right to ensure that it is the point where party A’s signal (across all citizens) reduces as much upward movement as downward movement.

As before, party B’s incentives and best responses will be directly analogous to party A’s, except reversed. Any situation in which both parties have expectations about the location of the message and rhetoric which matches one of the best responses described above will be a perfect Bayesian equilibrium (Morrow 1994).

### Assessing the Assumptions

A1 and A2 are based on evidence presented in previous chapters. A3 is based on the consistent finding that party attachments shape beliefs about objective national conditions. Campbell et al. (1960, 133) concluded that party identification “raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation.” This finding has been confirmed by numerous other studies, before and since (see for example Berelson et al. 1954; Stokes 1966b; Zaller 1992; Bartels 2002a).<sup>54</sup> A logical question is if, as both A2 and A3 assert, party elites can influence the opinions and beliefs of their members, why cannot parties entirely control their partisan’s beliefs about national conditions through elite opinion leadership? The evidence indicates that party elites’ influence over their partisans is strong but not absolute. As chapter 3 shows, beliefs about national conditions are related to both objective conditions and partisan predispositions. Similarly, elite party rhetoric is only one of several influences on public trust in the media.

A4 is largely consistent with the existing literature that either documents or assumes that political parties exist mainly to acquire and retain political office by courting the support of the public (see the seminal work of Schattschneider 1942; Downs 1957). While other motivations may influence the behavior of party leaders from time to time, it seems reasonable to assume that gaining public support is their main motivation.

A5 groups together several different assumptions. It assumes that prior beliefs about the relative ability of the two parties in the given policy domain are uniformly distributed among those identifying with each respective party. This assumption may be impossible to test because, even if one found survey questions asking the public to

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<sup>54</sup> For a dissenting view, see Gerber and Green (1999) and Green et al. (2002).

evaluate the parties' relative competence in certain policy areas, one could not measure this prior to any media message. However, since I expect these policy preferences to be influenced by partisanship and individual-level partisanship is very stable over time (Campbell et al. 1960; Green et al. 2002), I use the distribution of party identification as a proxy for policy preference. Table 5-1 shows the distribution of party identification in the NES since 1990. The results show some lack of uniformity in the distribution of both Republican and Democratic identifiers. In both parties, there tend to be fewer independent "leaners" than weak and strong identifiers.

One way to determine how nonuniformity in the distribution of prior beliefs will affect the cut-point is to look at the relationship between the distance between the media message and a citizen's prior and that message's influence. Equation 5-15 shows that the effect of the value of the message ( $M_A$ ) on  $P_{Ait}$  is linear in  $M_A$ . In other words, the effect of changes in  $M_A$  does not depend on the value of  $M_A$ . This means that, if there are more strong than weak identifiers, the cut-point will be more centrist.<sup>55</sup>

Similarly to the case of prior beliefs, it may be impossible to test whether prior trust in the media, as defined in this model, is uniformly distributed because survey measures of media trust do not measure it in the absence of elite rhetoric. Also, surveys that probe media "trust" (the National Election Studies) or "confidence" (the General Social Survey) do not also explicitly ask respondents to choose among the parties in particular policy domains. All one can do is again use party identification as a substitute

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<sup>55</sup> To see the logic, take the case of party A. If there are more strong than weak identifiers, the distribution of prior beliefs is skewed left. In this case, (when parties A and B influence mutually exclusive groups) the cut-point will move to the left of the median for the same reason that the mean is to the left of the median in a distribution that is skewed left.

for prior policy preference. Existing surveys show very small differences between weak and strong partisans' media trust. Table 5-2 shows that the percentage of the public that reports trusting the media "most of the time" or "just about always" in NES surveys. While there are notable differences between Democrats and Republicans, within parties the difference between strong and weak identifiers is small, with strong Democrats trusting slightly more often and strong Republicans trusting slightly less often. Even though this evidence shows very little relationship between strength of partisanship and media trust, because it does not really measure the uniformity of media trust in the absence of elite signals, this assumption must be made largely without verification. To see how differences in prior media trust will affect the parties' incentives, one can use equation 5-16. It shows (because  $P_{miA}$  is in the denominator) that greater prior media trust reduces the influence of new changes in trust. So if extremists have less prior trust in the media, party messages will have more effect on their tendency to accept media messages, making the cut-point more extremist (in the case of party A, moving it to the right).

Certainty of prior beliefs is likely not distributed uniformly across the population. The existing literature suggests that strong party identifiers are more certain in their prior beliefs than weak identifiers (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). To see how this affects the parties' incentives, I take the derivative of equation 5-16 with respect to the certainty of citizens' prior beliefs ( $P_{At-1}$ ). This produces

$$5-17: \frac{\partial \left( \frac{\partial \left( \frac{\partial B_{Ait}}{\partial M_A} \right)}{\partial P_{miA}} \right)}{\partial P_{At-1}} = - \frac{2P_{At-1}}{(P_{At-1} + P_{miA})^3} \cdot$$



The important result here is that this quantity is always negative, indicating that the effect of a “don’t trust” signal on the influence of the media message is less when prior certainty is greater. Since the cut point is the point where the “don’t trust” signal has an equal influence on those moving their beliefs down and those adjusting them up in response to the message, to the extent that those with more extreme priors are also more certain about the location of those priors, the cut-point will again be more centrist (in the case of party A, moving it to the left).

In addition to the formal assumptions, the implicit assumption that the party’s expectations about the content of the media message are exogenous is worth discussing. I do not assume that the information source is somehow unbiased or not influenced by ulterior motives. I do assume that, wherever the message is, its location is exogenous to the actions of the parties and the public in the model. This does not necessarily contradict claims that news coverage is systematically biased toward particular styles of coverage or ideological positions (Sabato 1991; Patterson 1993; Zaller 1999b; Groseclose 2004). However, it is inconsistent with work arguing that political competitors can influence news coverage by criticizing (Alterman 2003) or lobbying (Baron 2003) news organizations. Similarly, the model is inconsistent with work positing that news organizations change the content of coverage in response to citizens’ willingness to listen to and accept media messages (Bovitz et al. 2002; Baron 2004). In this model, the parties believe that the message will not change in response to the public’s behavior.

Finally, the several different examples I explore here (varying whether parties care about the median or mean posterior belief or whether they can influence independents) are illustrative of some general properties of this model. The cut-point will

be at a point where the message is more favorable to party k the more weight party k gives to those with more extreme beliefs. This is illustrated by the case when party k is concerned only about the median citizen (where the cut-point is at the median's prior belief) and the case when the party gives equal weight to all citizens who respond to its rhetoric (where the cut-point is at the median identifier's prior). This is also why, if the other party is signaling "trust," the cut-point moves toward the center if a party can influence independent voters. This change reduces the proportion of extremists among those who are influenced by the party's message. Also, in cases where both parties can influence independents, the cut-point becomes more extreme when the other party signals "don't trust" because it reduces the party's signal's influence on independent voters, increasing the relative weight given to belief movement among extremists.

### **The Substantive Implications of These Results**

This chapter has explored the incentives for party rhetoric about the press created by two empirical regularities: people are more influenced by informative messages if they trust the news media and media trust itself is affected by the rhetoric of party elites. Building off these two core assumptions, I have built a simplified model of information acquisition in which citizens' prior beliefs are shaped by partisanship and the parties have preferences over citizens' posterior preferences.

While the precise results do vary to some degree in response to changes in less central assumptions, there are two main results that are generally robust to variation in these minor assumptions, indicating that they are natural consequences of the core assumptions.

First is the relationship between a party's belief about the content of future messages and its rhetoric about the press. Each party's rhetoric about the press will be related to its expectations about future information the public will receive. When a party expects a future media message to be more favorable to it, it will be more inclined to send messages espousing the trustworthiness of the news media. When it expects future messages to be less favorable, it will be more likely to depict the media as untrustworthy.

In addition to this unsurprising result, there is a second, less intuitive finding. I call this the negativity bias in the incentives for rhetoric about the media. Except for a few specific instances, such as when parties care exclusively about the median citizen, the cut-point separating when a party will send positive or negative messages about the media will be on that party's side of the median, often far on that side. This means that a larger portion of the universe of possible messages will prompt negative rhetoric about the press than will prompt positive rhetoric. Even as the precise location of this cut-point varies based on various more minor assumptions, it can never be on the other side of the median citizen's prior. This suggests that there is an overall tendency for the total rhetoric about the press coming from both parties over time to be more negative than positive. For example, if both parties always had the same beliefs about the location of future informative messages, certain expectations would prompt party A to say the media was trustworthy and party B that the median was untrustworthy. Certain expectations would prompt the parties to each send the opposite signal. And (under almost all forms of the model) certain expectations would prompt both parties to say the media was untrustworthy. But there are no circumstances that would ever, under any form of the model, prompt both parties to say the press was trustworthy.

This result is driven by the two primary assumptions. In particular, since parties' rhetoric is most influential in shaping the views of those who are already predisposed to support them, far more often new messages will make these partisan less supportive than more. Since these individuals are by definition highly disposed to support the party, there are many instances in which it is more advantageous to leave them with their current beliefs. However, the long-term consequences of this incentive, if followed by both parties, could be a general distrust and reduced responsiveness among most of the electorate.

**Table 5-1: Distribution of Party Identification in the American Public**

	'90	'92	'94	'96	'98	'00	'02
<b>Strong Democrat</b>	20	18	15	18	19	19	17
<b>Weak Democrat</b>	19	18	19	19	18	15	17
<b>Independent Democrat</b>	12	14	13	14	14	15	15
<b>Independent</b>	10	12	11	9	11	12	8
<b>Independent Republican</b>	12	12	12	12	11	13	13
<b>Weak Republican</b>	15	14	15	15	16	12	16
<b>Strong Republican</b>	10	11	15	12	10	12	14
<b>Number of Respondents</b>	1966	2474	1787	1710	1276	1797	1488

Cell entries are percentages in each category of identification in each year. Percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding and because 1 to 3 percent of respondents in each survey identify as “apolitical.”  
Source: 1990-2002 NES Times Series Surveys

**Table 5-2: Distribution of Trust in the Media across Partisan Groupings**

	Percent Trusting the Media “Most of the Time” or “Just About Always”	Number of Respondents
<b>Strong Democrat</b>	46	827
<b>Weak Democrat</b>	48	767
<b>Independent Democrat</b>	43	605
<b>Independent</b>	39	416
<b>Independent Republican</b>	36	496
<b>Weak Republican</b>	42	620
<b>Strong Republican</b>	25	548

Source: 1996-2000 NES Time Series Surveys

**Figure 5-1: Case Where Party A Care about the Median Citizen's Belief**

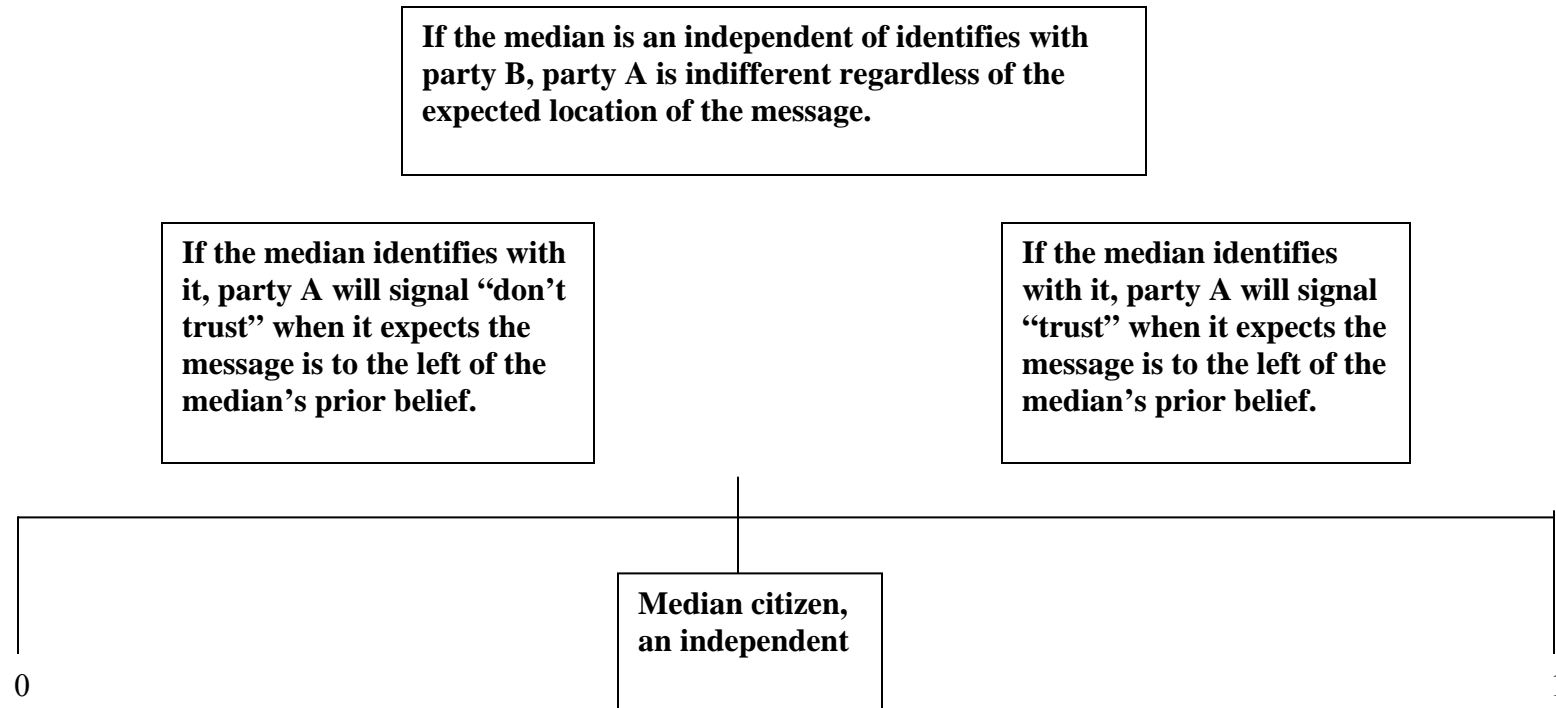


Figure 5-2: Case Where Party A Cares about the Average Citizen's Belief

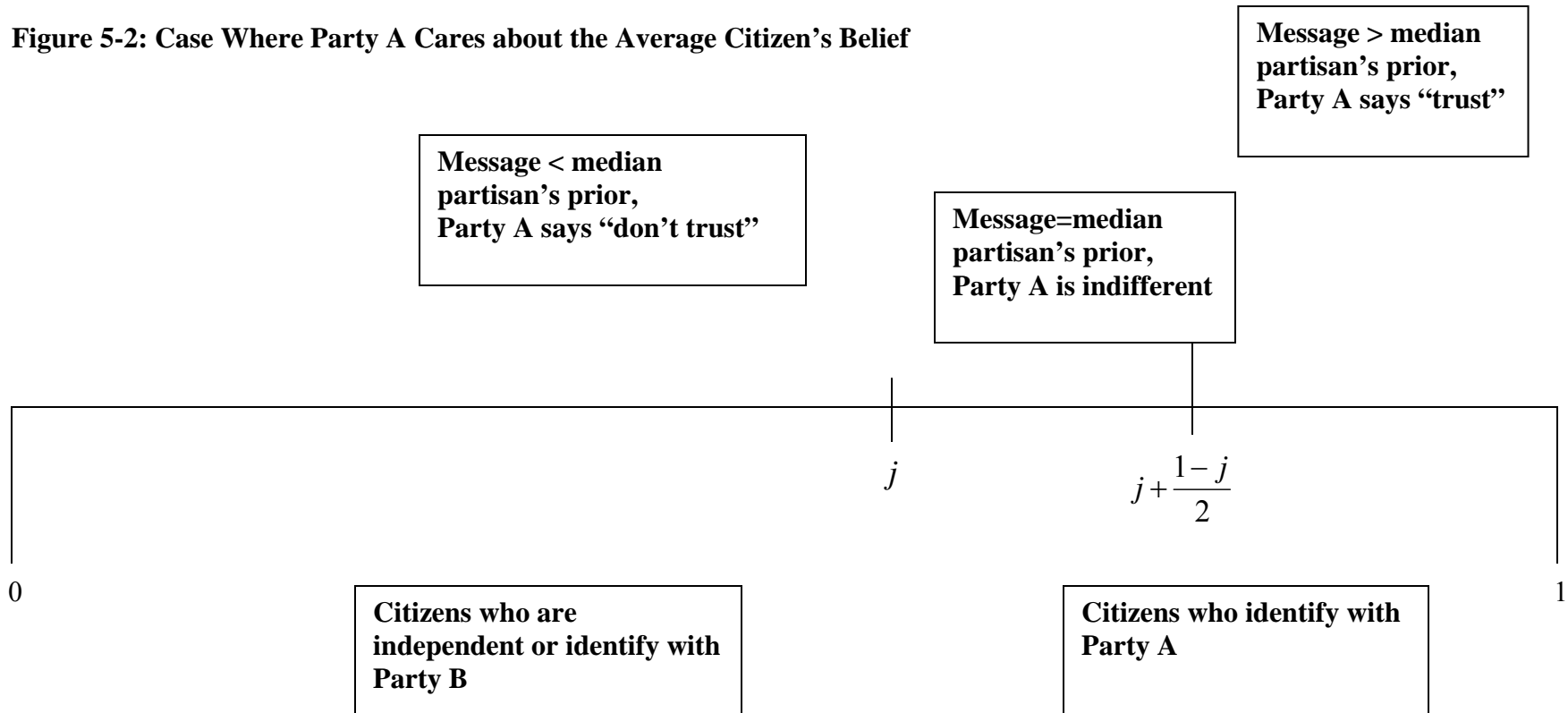
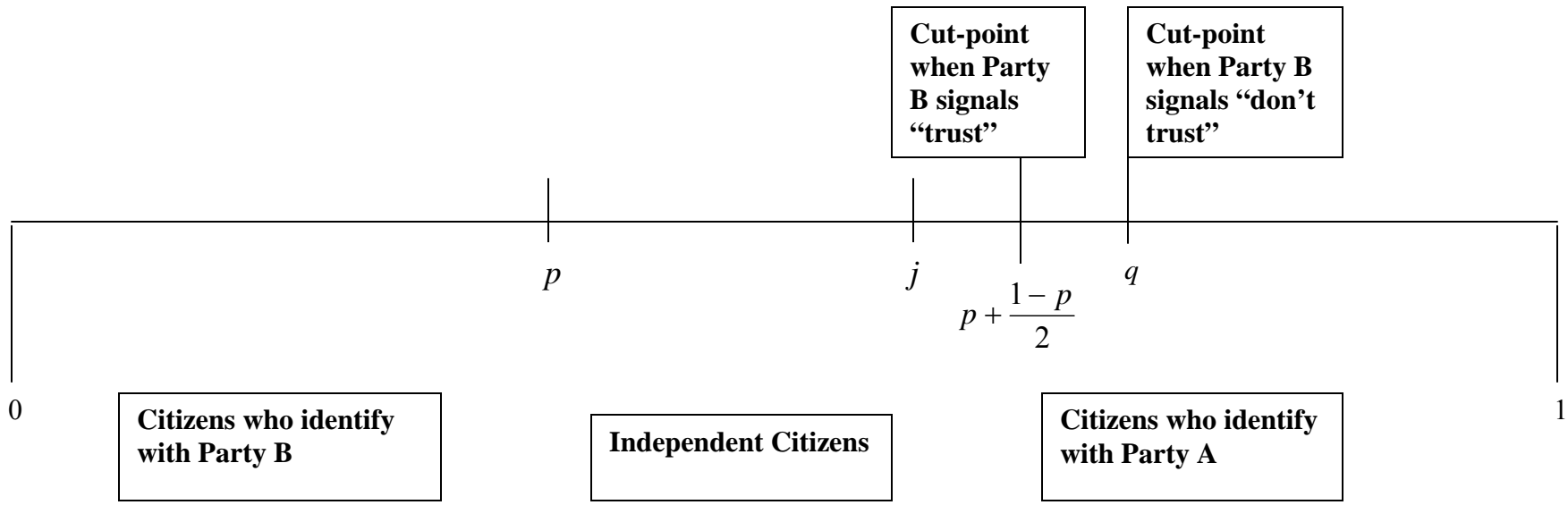




Figure 5-3: Case Where Independents are Influenced by Both Parties' Signals



## Chapter 6

### Conclusion: The Extent of the Problem and the Prospects for Change

A political party is dying before our eyes – and I don't mean the Democrats. I'm talking about the 'mainstream media,' ...  
Howard Fineman (2005)

Recent years have seen an increase in political polarizations of all sorts. This dissertation has documented how increasingly negative public attitudes toward the press play an important part in furthering political polarization in America. By causing people to resist new information about national conditions and instead rely on their partisan predispositions and news outlets that reinforce them, distrust of the institutional news media helps create a mass public with more polarized beliefs and voting patterns.

This trend is worrisome for several reasons. First, as I mention in Chapter 4, when the public is polarized in its political beliefs and preferences and less influenced by new information, politicians will usually have less incentive to court the public's favor. One exception would be if presidential candidates do not care about the size of their victory or loss at the polls. In this case, they may have just as much incentive to court the public, as long as hardened partisans on either side do not grow so numerous that a group of responsive independent voters are not still pivotal in determining the election outcomes. However, if individuals at the median of the party identification continuum have some party attachments (and therefore can have their preferences hardened by distrust of the press) or presidential candidates care about the size of their victories and losses, then the fact that a larger portion of the public will support or oppose them on election day regardless of their behavior will reduce their incentive to produce good national conditions. In addition to the incentives for presidential candidates, a polarized electorate can have a dramatic impact on legislators elected from single member districts. As partisan legislators increasingly feel safe in their districts, representing constituents with

deeply partisan preferences who reliably vote a party line, they will naturally feel less need to moderate their legislative behavior and will increasingly represent the polarized preferences of their districts.

Over time, polarization at the mass-level is correlated with polarized legislative behavior (Bartels 2000; Hetherington 2001; McCarty et al. forthcoming). This is almost certainly a reciprocal causal relationship. In addition to partisan voting patterns increasing legislative polarization in the way described above, elite polarization, by “clarifying the parties’ ideological positions for ordinary Americans,” (Hetherington 2001, 619) increases partisan voting. In addition to the feedback effect of elite-polarization, other factors besides attitudes towards the news media also influence the public’s level of polarization. For example, increasing income inequality also seems to drive mass-level partisanship (McCarty et al. forthcoming). However, as distrust of the media is one contributing factor to polarization, it shares some blame for its consequences.

Among them is the aforementioned change in the incentives of elected leaders. The notion that the electorate will reward politicians who do its will is a central reason why democracy may be preferable to other systems of government. As survey research has revealed that most of the public does not have firm policy preferences on specific issues, most political scientists have abandoned the idea that the electorate supplies mandates giving politicians specific policy instructions (Converse 1964). However, most still believe that the electorate does exert control over representatives by rewarding and punishing them based on national conditions (Key 1968; Fiorina 1981; but see Achen and Bartels 2004). As chapter 4 reviewed, the most well documented form of retrospective

voting is based on the economy, but some studies have found that the electorate also rewards the absence of war and general ideological moderation (see for example Rosenstone 1983; Hibbs 2000; Bartels and Zaller 2001; Zaller 2004). In eroding the tendency of the electorate to reward and punish politicians for their stewardship of the country, mass-level polarization impairs the most normatively appealing feature of democratic government.

Elite-level polarization also has important consequences. In one representative measure, the difference between the voting behavior of the median members (as measured by NOMINATE scores) of the two party caucuses in the House of Representatives are currently as far apart as they have been since the late nineteenth century (McCarty et al. 1997, forthcoming). In a legislative system with super-majoritarian rules like the U.S., polarization among legislators has the potential to increase the gridlock interval (Krehbiel 1998; McCarty et al. forthcoming). This means that the government is increasingly unable to pass new legislation, even if a majority of lawmakers support it. This makes the government less able to collectively respond to both the preferences of the majority of the public and to “external events” (Mayhew 1991, 136) that require new legislation.

Considering that polarization has these undesirable symptoms and distrust of the media is one source of polarization, how might antipathy toward the media be remedied? My analysis in chapter 2 identified two main causes of declining public attitudes toward the press over recent decades: elite criticism of the media and the increasingly cynical and sensationalist tone of news coverage. As I explore in chapter 5, there is a natural negativity bias in elite party rhetoric about the press created by the fact that their rhetoric

has the strongest influence on those who are already strong supporters. Distrust of the press is a consequence of intense political competition for public support, a natural (though problematic) symptom of an active political system. Amy Fried and Douglas B. Harris's (2001, 158) comments on trust in government are at least as relevant to trust in the press:

...public opinion and perceptions of public opinion are political resources, used strategically by elected officials and interests group leaders... These struggles involve leaders who have competing political and policy agendas, and who employ all possible assets to succeed...Distrust clearly involves strategizing for concrete purposes but not Svengali-like powers of elites.

The tendency of news outlets to provide sensationalist coverage is also a product of the incentives of the actors involved. As Zaller (1999b; 1999a) documents, most journalists would prefer to report in the more dry, informative style<sup>56</sup> that wins them professional prestige. When insulated from market pressure, journalists tend to produce this style of news. However, the public is more likely to watch news of lower "quality." Consequently, in circumstances where news outlets must compete for customers, news "quality" suffers as reporters search for more salacious news stories to attract a fickle public (Zaller 1999b, ch. 3; 1999a). In this way, the changing style of news coverage may be a natural consequence of a more open and competitive news industry.

As a product of these two trends, the public's distrust of the media could be considered an example of what economists call a "market failure" (Pindyck and Rubinfeld 2004, 665-671). Actors in society (in this case journalists and political parties), pursuing their own interests, produce an outcome (distrust of the media) that makes

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<sup>56</sup> This style is the modern incarnation of the ideal of objectivity described in chapter 1.

society as a whole worse off. Often societies use government intervention to remedy market failures.

There are several possible government interventions that may provide some remedy. One possibility is for government to increase the subsidization and promotion of high quality news. This is already done on a small level through aid to the Public Broadcasting Service and National Public Radio. Continued subsidies to high quality news outlets or a subsidized information campaign touting the trustworthiness of the news profession generally may be of some help. A second possibility, first proposed by Lippmann (1995 [1920]; 1997 [1922]), would be for the government to operate information bureaus whose sole goal is to disseminate accurate information to the public about the country. While this would not remedy the ailment of media distrust, it could remedy the symptom of an uninformed and polarized public. It would clearly be a sensitive assignment for any government bureaucracy. There is the possibility of using these agencies for propaganda rather than objective data dissemination. Any agency of this type would have to be highly professionalized and insulated from political pressure. While posing challenges, the use of government for this role is not inconceivable. We rely on the government to administer equally sensitive tasks (like elections themselves) on a regular basis. While novel, reforms like these, which are based on government intervention, may be the only way to remedy a problem caused by incentives largely inherent in a free and competitive democratic system.

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