Explaining Media Trust from Partisanship, Ideology and Their Interaction

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Abstract

Public trust with mass media has declined dramatically and constantly since 1970s based on the time-series data from General Social Survey 1975-2010. Since mass media in America has long been accused of liberal bias, this paper first examines the role of ideology and partisanship in influencing media trust. Republicans are less confident with mass media than Democrats. Conservatives show less confidence than Liberals. Then the study examines the interaction between ideology and partisanship to unravel how ideology exerts different influences to people in different parties and with different ideological orientations. The results find that ideological views are more important to Republicans than to Democrats in evaluating media trust. And similarly Conservatives are more inclined than Liberals to adopt ideological scheme. Based on these findings in individual-level analysis, the analysis in aggregate level explains why media trust declines across years. It finds that the important source of the decline is the increasing percentage of conservative Republicans in American society. These findings imply that ideology, partisanship and their interaction are significant impetus to speed up the decline of media trust in American society.

Keywords: media trust, ideology, partisanship, polarization

Introduction

According to the conventional wisdom, media as the Fourth Estate plays a significant role in democratic system as watching, questioning, analyzing and informing. But the management of the alleged feedback of democracy through mass media has been compromised. The function of watching is jeopardized by structuring media practice and journalism routine to cater to political agendas and sacrificing professionalism and objectivity. The mission of questioning has embraced compromise from pressure of commercial power, lobbying of ambitious politicians and penetration of public relations professionals. The burden of analyzing is confronting such a predicament to divert the attention of journalists from paparazzi-style bombing effect back to investigative journalism. And finally the most basic practice of informing is also threatened by fragmentation of media content to maximize commercial interest and malpractice of media guardians to voice presumed bias. From the Fourth Estate to the least-trusted institution, from public defenders to endorsement of special interest, mass media has fallen from grace.

The reaction of American public toward this disgraceful change is a ubiquitous dissemination of distrust toward mass media. Public distrust of the news media is one of the most hazardous political challenges now facing Americans (Crawford, 2006). The public accuses mass media of severe liberal bias, which charges media content for turning left in the liberal-conservative ideological scale. A synthesis of evidence of media bias has been documented systematically and in a seemingly undeniable manner (Baker, 1994; Bozell & Baker, 1990; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996).

Consequently, the ideological bias in mass media is taken for granted as the cause of declining media trust. But the problem is the lack of the bridge between bias in media and the perception of the public. No matter how biased mass media is, different groups of people will

react differently and assign different weights toward the bias. In this study, the groups refer to different camps of political parties or people attached to different ideological views. This paper tries to examine whether people in different parties and with different ideologies show different levels of trust toward mass media, and further unravel how ideology works among different parties and ideological camps. All these individual-level analyses serve to detect the possible reasons why media trust constantly declines in these years. The study will explain the declining trajectory of media trust from social structure in the sense of compositions of partisans and ideological camps in American society.

Previous studies on public trust have captured distinctive trajectories of changing confidence in different institutions. Public confidence with mass media was found to be in stable and substantial decline (Cook & Gronke, 2001; Gronke & Cook, 2007). Comparatively, political confidence toward the executive branch of government, congress, army and judge also shows ups and downs but without consistent declining.

Political confidence as a reflection of political trust has been well documented and explained from social, cultural and political perspectives (Craig, 1993; Dalton, 2000; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995; King, 1997; Nye, King, & Zelikow, 1997). But to what extent the decline in media confidence is a by-product of downward tendency of political trust or a distinctive social phenomenon relatively independent of general trend? If it's former, the conventional factors explaining political trust should facilitate the comprehension of declining confidence in mass media. If it's latter, the central concern should be where the changing forces in the society are located and how these forces interact to shape a distinctive trajectory of media confidence. This paper embraces the latter approach to explain why media confidence shows such a distinctive pattern with stable decline based on changing social structure. The indicators of

changing social structure are partisanship and ideology. The paper will examine how partisanship and ideology influence media trust and how different combinations of partisanship and ideology may generate different effects. Therefore, we can to some extent explain why media trust declines more rapid than political trust in the same social structure and under the same social change.

Literature Review

The first section will review the role of mass media in American society and the accusation of liberal bias of media content. The aim is to justify the appropriateness to link media trust with partisanship, ideology as political characteristics of individuals. Then partisanship and ideology as important concepts in political and media study will be discussed to explain their potential effects on media trust. After considering their direct effect on media trust, the joint effect of the two will be proposed on the basis that ideology plays different roles in different parties and also in different ideological camps. Finally, the discussion will be expanded to aggregate level to elucidate why individual-level propositions has the potential as well as the rationale to interpret the trajectory of media trust.

Left turn of mass media

The ideal of the news media successfully fulfilling a political role that transcends its commercial obligations has been seriously battered. Its power, commercial ambitions and ethical weakness have undermined its institutional standing. There is now a widespread and reasonable doubt that the contemporary news media can any longer adequately fulfill the historic role the press created for itself several hundred years ago (Schultz, 1998).

No matter in the cradle of media origin, or in journalism practice recently, mass media is always bonded with politics, democracy and public. The rationale of mass media as a democratic

institution lies on its role in the management and maintenance of the representative democracy. Habermas entitled the press as a pre-eminent institution in public sphere (1999). Even in the recent decades of falling from grace, mass media is still accused by the public in politics-related terms. Liberal bias is one of the most powerful accusations toward mass media.

The documentation of media bias has proliferated since Efron's pioneering study (1971). Critics accusing the media of severe bias make use of surveys of working journalists, content analysis of stories covered, and anecdotes about stories killed or not pursued to construct the evidence (Sutter, 2001). Although the proposition of liberal bias seems more persuasive based on existing evidence, conservative bias is also proposed as emerging in some circumstances. Liberals blame conservative elites for using the accusation of mass media to promote their own political agenda. It's not the focus of this paper to jump into this swirl or make an argument to confirm which is right. The point here is, no matter liberal bias or conservative bias, they are both politics-related, ideological terms. If mass media is blamed in terms of ideology and politics, we have enough reasons to believe media trust of individuals might be strongly influenced by their political characteristics. In the context of this study, the political characteristics refer to partisanship and ideology.

To establish the relationship between media bias and media distrust in general is much easier than to link media bias, media distrust and political characteristics of individuals such as partisanship and ideology. People may become distrust with mass media just because of any forms of bias in media content, since mass media is assumed to be objective and central. But when it comes to partisanship and ideology, the first linkage that needs to be established is whether the alleged bias is partisan or ideological. If this linkage lacks, it might be very speculative to believe that media trust of people in different parties or with different ideologies

will be influenced by the content without partisan or ideological bias. Fortunately, there are abundant evidences on partisan and ideological bias in mass media. For example, a study by Hackett (1984) found that the most important form of bias in mass media is partisanship. The concepts of structured orientation and ideological effectivity are proposed to be more fruitful than the claim of partisan bias. In this sense, partisanship bias and ideological bias are both significant forms of media bias, and thus can be taken into account in causing the distrust toward mass media.

Partisanship and ideology

Partisanship is one of the powerful indicators in explaining political trust and has been adopted to interpret the public confidence in mass media (Cook & Gronke, 2001). Evidence about the distrust of Republicans toward mass media has also been compiled in previous studies (Ladd, 2012; Tien-Tsung, 2005). Ideology as a concept closely related to partisanship is another significant factor in structuring people's political world. The attachment of individuals to ideology may influence the way they interpret their partisanship and also the way they apply ideological explanations in real world. The conceptualization of ideology reflects the abstraction and the substantive content of individuals' cognitive processing of political information, and also their ways of thinking about politics (Pierce & Hagner, 1982). Left-right self identification in political orientation was found to be the strongest predictor of confidence in some cross-national inquiries (Newton & Norris, 2000). And further, Conservatives are found to be less likely to trust mass media than Liberals. Based on all these previous findings, it's reasonable to formulate the following hypotheses. Although the two hypotheses have gained abundant evidence and also are not the focus of this study, it' still necessary to propose the two main effects as the basis for the subsequent moderation hypotheses.

H1: Partisanship has an effect on media trust. More specifically, Democrats have higher trust with mass media than Republicans.

H2: Ideology has an effect on media trust. More specifically, Liberals have higher trust with mass media than Conservatives.

The focus of the study is the moderation effect of the two. More specifically, the moderation concerns how the combination of partisanship and ideology jointly influences media trust of individuals. Ideology has effects in forming people's attitude toward mass media. People who perceive the ideological orientation of media content as far from their own views tend to show less trust toward mass media. But this tendency might vary according to one's partisanship.

On one hand, Republicans are more ideologically coherent than Democrats. Every political party has its dominant ideology, and simultaneously has partisans attaching to or distant from the dominant ideology. To what extent the majorities in one party show consensus and loyalty to the dominant ideology of this party is an important indicator of ideological cohesion of political parties. The ideological tendency of Republicans has been revealed in early studies. Pierce (1970) found that Republicans have greater proportion of ideologues and the proportion increases greatly from 1956 to 1964.

On the other hand, opposites usually tend to be more passionate to oppose than supporters to show support. Because of the disseminated accusation of liberal bias of mass media, Republicans are apparently in the opposite side, and therefore are more likely to adopt antagonistic schemes toward mass media. Ideological conflict is probably one of the antagonistic schemes.

Taking into consideration the strong ideological cohesion of Republican Party and its position as opposites, it's rather reasonable to speculate the effect of ideology on media trust will

be different in the two parties. This speculation as a hypothesis about moderation effect actually

contains two parts. One is the main effect of ideology on media trust will keep constant in the

two parties, which means that more conservative ones trust media less no matter in Democratic

or Republican party. The other is the direction of the moderation effect. The effect will be

stronger among Republicans based on the above arguments.

H3: Party affiliation will moderate the relationship between ideology and media trust.

H3a: The degree of conservativeness is negatively related to media trust, no matter among

Democrats or among Republicans.

H3b: The effect of ideology on media trust is stronger among Republicans than among

Democrats.

The above hypotheses claim that ideology exerts different influences among different

parties. The subsequent speculation is ideology may exert different influences among different

ideology camps. More specifically, the question is about whether ideological polarization will

have different effects among Conservatives and Liberals.

Conservatives tend to hold more severe liberal bias towards liberals than the conservative

bias that liberals perceive about conservatives (Dautrich & Hartley, 1999). In other words,

Conservatives are more likely to see Liberals as polarized in liberalness. Comparatively, Liberals

are less likely to see Conservatives as polarized in conservativeness. On the other hand, as

proposed by H2, Conservatives have less confidence in mass media than Liberals because of the

perceived liberal bias in mass media. Therefore, it's reasonable to speculate that Conservatives

might be more inclined to emphasize the liberalness in mass media and thus show very low trust

toward mass media.

On the other hand, Conservatives are more motivated than Liberals to construct an

objective and precise measure of media bias. It's similar with the circumstance that Republicans are more motivated to derogate media trust as mentioned above. Objective studies of media bias are disproportionately conducted by conservative scholars (Groseclose, 2011). The increasing claims of media bias come primarily from conservative elites who have proclaimed a liberal bias that is viewed as including the entire media industry (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). In one word, the effect of ideological polarization on media trust is different among Conservatives and Liberals. This is another moderation hypothesis. Similar as the last one, it contains two sub-hypothesis. One is the main effect of ideological polarization. Polarized Liberals should be more likely than less polarized Liberals to trust mass media, because liberalness is the alleged dominant ideology of media content. Comparatively, polarized Conservatives should be less likely than less polarized Conservatives to trust mass media, because more polarized is more distant from the ideology of media content. The other sub-hypothesis indicates the direction of the moderation. Based on previous arguments, the effect of ideological polarization should be stronger among Conservatives than among Liberals.

H4: Ideological orientation will moderate the relationship between ideological polarization and media trust.

H4a: Ideological polarization is positively related to media trust among Liberals. Ideological polarization is negatively related to media trust among Conservatives.

H4b: The effect of ideological polarization on media trust is stronger among Conservatives than among Liberals.

Decline of media trust

Figure 1 illustrates the trajectory of media trust as well as the trend of political trust from 1975 to 2010 based on the longitudinal data of General Social Survey (GSS) from 1975 to 2010.

The contrast between the two trajectories is remarkable. Public confidence toward mass media declines dramatically and constantly even ruling out the influence of political confidence. The comparison indicates that media trust indeed declines by itself rather than results from a general decline of institutional trust.
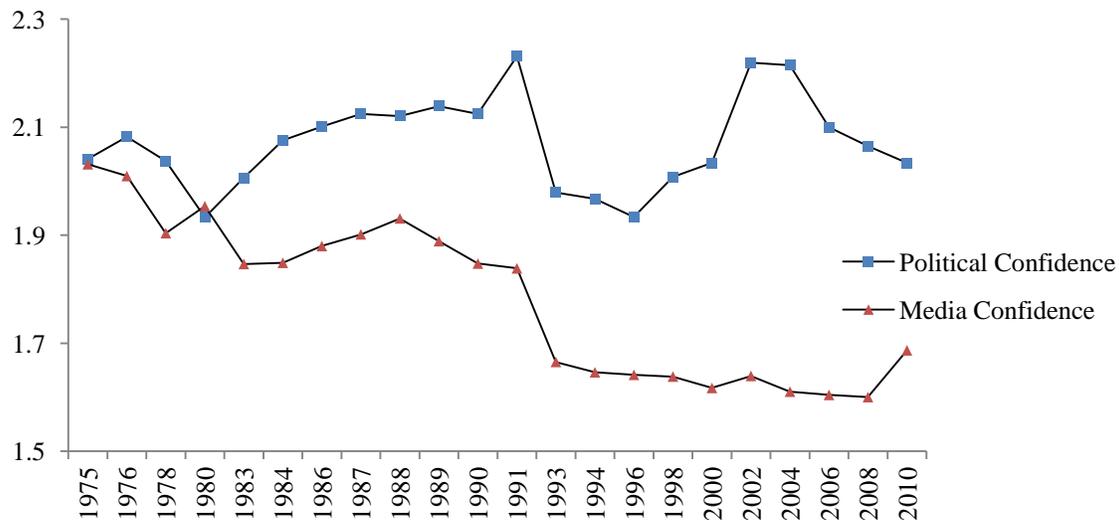

Figure 1 Trends of Media Trust and Political Trust Based on GSS 1975-2010

Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses both confirm the distinctions between media trust and political trust really exist in statistical sense (Cook & Gronke, 2001; Gronke & Cook, 2007; Newton & Norris, 2000). Studies on institutional confidence have proceeded in explaining the causes of distrust (Craig, 1993; Dalton, 2000; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995; King, 1997; Lipset & Schneider, 1983; Newton & Norris, 2000; Norris, 1999). But public trust toward mass media has been found to follow a distinct logic from confidence toward other institutions (Lipset & Schneider, 1983). The mass media as the fourth estate in public's eye may cast doubt on to what extent public confidence in mass media and political institutions can converge and be explained by underlying common factors.

The above hypotheses are all in individual level, which construct the basis to explain the decline in aggregate level. If the main effect and interaction effect of partisanship and ideology as hypothesized above are both the underlying source of media distrust, the social structure in the sense of partisans and ideological camps in each year should be very strong predictor of the declining trend. As conservative Republicans should be the most likely to distrust mass media, the percentage of this group in each year should predict the decline of media trust. This is the generalization of individual-level findings to aggregate level. The gap can't be assumed or neglected. So it's very necessary to propose hypotheses in aggregate level and seek for evidence in the data.

H5: The percentage of conservative Republicans in each year is negatively related to the average trust toward mass media in each year.

Method

As illustrated in Figure 1, public confidence toward mass media will be examined based on the GSS time-series dataset 1975-2010. The survey asks s series of questions on institutional confidence on yearly basis with a few exceptions of two-year interval. With missing values in any of the variables in the following proposed models, the case will be excluded from the analysis. The dataset finally keeps 23232 cases for overall and split analysis. Since three sets of models will be specified to test the hypotheses and also to tackle the research question in aggregate level, the following parts will first introduce the measurements of all the related variables. The proposed models will be specified in the subsequent part. In this way it can avoid the confusion resulted from unclear definition and measurement of variables.

Measurement

Institutional trust is measured by the question of *how much confidence you have toward the*

people running the listed institutions, which include political institutions, media agencies and other organizations. Respondents can choose among *a great deal, only some and hardly any*, which are respectively given value of 100, 50 and 0 as interval scale. Media trust is computed as the mean of confidence toward newspaper and television. Political trust is computed from the average of confidence in executive branch of government, congress, army and judge.

Partisanship is measured by 7-point scale with 1 representing *strong Democrat*, 4 as *independent*, and 7 as *strong Republican*. Cases of independent parties are excluded from the analysis. Partisanship can be considered as composed of two dimensions. One is the specific party affiliation as Democrats or Republicans. The other is party strength as strong, not so strong or independent but leaning partisans. Therefore, the two variables party affiliation and party strength can be computed from partisanship. Party affiliation includes two categories as Democrats with the value of 0 and Republicans with the value of 1. It is dummy coded as *Republicans* with Democrats as the reference. Party strength ranges from 1 to 3 with higher value indicating strong partisanship.

Ideology is measured by 7-point scale with 1 representing *extremely liberal*, 4 as *moderate* and 7 as *extremely conservative*. Ideology can be considered as composed of two dimensions. One is ideological orientation as Conservatives or Liberals. The other is ideological polarization indicating how polarized a conservative or a liberal is. Ideological orientation has three categories as Conservatives, Liberals and Moderates. In the following analysis it will be dummy-coded as two categorical variables with Liberals as the reference group. *Conservatives* represents the contrast between Conservatives and Liberals, and *Moderates* represents the contrast between Moderates and Liberals. Ideological polarization ranges from 0 to 3 with higher value indicating more polarized in the liberal-conservative scale. Moderates have the lowest

score 0 in the scale of ideological polarization.

Some demographic variables will also be included in the proposed models. Gender is recoded as a dummy variable *male* with female as the reference group. Age is considered as a continuous variable. Education is measured by asking the respondents their highest year of school completed.

Model Specification

Before specifying any models, it's necessary to note that all of the following models will include political confidence and survey year in the analysis. Survey year aims at capturing the trend of the trajectory. Political confidence is included to take into account the potential possibility of correlations among all institutional confidence. People who show very low confidence with mass media might show low confidence with other institutions. In other words, the low confidence in mass media probably to some extent results from the tendency of the people to give few credits to all the institutions rather than particularly to mass media. The other reason to include political confidence in the model is to rule out the indirect effect of partisanship and ideology that is mediated through political confidence to media confidence. Previous literature supporting the effect of partisanship and ideology on political confidence has been reviewed before. It's possible that the effect of partisanship and ideology on public confidence with mass media is partly due to their effects on political confidence. By including political confidence in the model, the subsequent analysis can examine the net contribution of the proposed predictors. The test method is step-wise regression, in which blocks of variables will be added into the model step by step. In all of the following models, the step-wise procedure is similar. The block of variables including survey year, political confidence and other demographic variables will be first put into the model. The other variables in each model will be added into the

analysis as the second block. The R square change indicates the net contribution of the second

block of variables over and above the first block.

To test H1 and H2 an overall analysis is first conducted based on the whole dataset.

Basically, this overall model tests the effect of partisanship and ideology on people's confidence

toward mass media. Partisanship as a dummy variable indicates the difference of confidence

between Democrats and Republicans. Ideology as a nominal variable with three categories

indicates the difference of confidence between Liberals, Conservatives and Moderates. Party

strength and ideological polarization are also included in the model. As mentioned above, survey

year, political confidence and demographic variables will be first put into the model with other

variables being added subsequently. The overall model is specified as follow:

$$C_{\text{media confidence}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \,(\text{year}) + \beta_2 \,(\text{political confidence}) + \beta_3 \,(\text{demographics}) +$$

$$\beta_4 \,(\text{party affiliation}) + \beta_5 \,(\text{ideological orientation}) + \beta_6 \,(\text{party strength}) + \beta_7 \,(\text{ideological}$$

$$\text{polarization})$$

H3 proposes that ideology has different effects among Democrats and Republicans.

Therefore, the overall dataset is split into two datasets according to party affiliation. One dataset

includes only Democrats. The other only includes Republicans. The same model will be run

respectively in the two datasets. This model is basically the same as the first model. The only

difference is that, in consideration of parsimony, ideological orientation and ideological

polarization will be combined as one variable ideology. The rationale is the former two variables

are originally computed from ideology, which is an existing variable in GSS dataset. The

measurements introduced above also defend the appropriateness. The method is still step-wise

regression respectively in two datasets. So there will be two sets of regression results

respectively for Democrats and Republicans. The comparison focus is the coefficients of

ideology. The proposed model is as follow:

$$C_{\text{media confidence}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{(year)} + \beta_2 \text{(political confidence)} + \beta_3 \text{(demographics)} +$$

$$\beta_4 \text{(ideology)} + \beta_5 \text{(party strength)}$$

H4 proposes that ideological polarization has different effects among Conservatives and Liberals. The test method is similar as the way to examine H3. The overall dataset is split by ideological orientation, which has three categories as liberal, moderate and conservative. The focus of H4 is the comparison between Conservatives and Liberals. Thus Moderates will be excluded from the analysis. The model mainly aims at examining the effect of ideological polarization with partisanship, political confidence and survey year controlled. Similar as the test of H3, the proposed model will be respectively run in the two datasets. Following is the proposed model:

$$C_{\text{media confidence}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{(year)} + \beta_2 \text{(political confidence)} + \beta_3 \text{(demographics)} +$$

$$\beta_4 \text{(ideological polarization)} + \beta_5 \text{(partisanship)}$$

H5 is an aggregate-level hypothesis, which aims at explaining the decline of public confidence from the percentage of conservative Republicans. Since it's aggregate level across years, public confidence in this test is actually the mean of individual confidences in each year. And the percentage of conservative Republicans is also the percentage in each year with the overall numbers of cases in that year as the basis. Therefore, one year has one data point in this test with one value in the percentage and one value in public confidence. In total, the sample covers 24 years and thus includes 24 data points. The rationale to propose this hypothesis has been interpreted before. It is actually a generalization of as well as a speculation from individual-level hypotheses. Since the study proposes the relationships between partisanship,

ideology and public confidence toward mass media in individual-level, it's reasonable to speculate in aggregate level the compositions of partisanship and ideology in American society may result in the decline of public confidence. According to the hypothesis, the focus of this model should be the percentage of conservative Republicans. So the correlation between the percentage and the average confidence in each year will be calculated first. The percentage of Republicans, the percentage of Conservatives, the average degree of polarization and the average degree of party strength in each year will also be correlated with the average confidence across years. By examining all these correlations can the study confirm the proposed relationship in H5 is the strongest among them. In other words, among all the percentages and other trends, the percentage of conservative Republicans can best explain the decline of public confidence toward mass media in these years.

Comparison of Correlation Coefficients $_{\text{year mean of media confidence}}$ ~ γ_1 (percentage of conservative Republicans), γ_2 (percentage of Republicans), γ_3 (percentage of Conservatives), γ_4 (average ideological polarization), γ_1 (average party strength)

Results

Main Effects of Partisanship and Ideology

Table 1 shows the results of overall analysis of the first model. The overall dataset contains 23,232 cases across 24 years. The results show in parallel the unstandardized and standardized coefficients of each predictor as well as the R square change when the second block of variables are added into the model. Since the variables in the first block are not the central focus, the coefficients shown in the table are the results in the second step after all sets of variables are added into the model. The subsequent analyses in the other two models in individual level will

also be shown in the same way.

[Insert Table 1 in Appendix A here]

The results support both H1 and H2. The negative coefficient of the variable *Republicans* indicates that Republicans are less confident with mass media compared with Democrats (B = -3.909, p < .001). The negative coefficient of the variable *Conservatives* indicates that Conservatives are less confident with mass media than Liberals (B = -6.056, p < .001). Similarly, the negative coefficient of the variable *Moderates* indicates that Moderates are less confident with mass media compared with Liberals (B = -2.925, p < .001). The contrast between Conservatives and Moderates is then examined by changing the reference group in the dummy coding. The difference is also significant. After controlling party affiliation and ideological orientation, the effect of party strength is nonsignificant. Ideological polarization has a very small effect even though it's significant. Survey year is negatively correlated with the dependent variable, which is a reflection of the decline of public confidence toward mass media. Political confidence positively predicts confidence with mass media. Over and above the effects of survey year and political confidence, partisanship and ideology can explain 1.9% variance of media confidence.

Interaction between Ideology and Partisanship

Table 2 shows the results of the second model respectively analyzed in the datasets of Democrats and Republicans. H3 is supported by comparing the coefficients of ideology in the two analyses. The two coefficients are both negative indicating that the more conservative a person is, the lower confidence the person will show to mass media. But the effect size of ideology among Republicans is much larger than that among Democrats ($B_{Democrats}$ = -.687, $B_{Republicans}$ = -3.615). In other words, ideology has much stronger effect on media confidence

among Republicans than among Democrats. This is exactly what H3 proposes. And also, the

difference between the R squares in two analyses is substantial. Ideology and party strength can

only explain 0.3% of the variance in media confidence among Democrats, compared with 2.7%

among Republicans. The proportion of variance explained in Republicans is even larger than the

1.9% variance accounted for by overall analysis. Further, Fisher's z test is conducted to formally

compare the two coefficients. This test basically calculates a z-score based on the zero-order

correlation coefficients of the two variables in each dataset, and the numbers of cases in each

dataset. The test result shows the difference is significant at the level of $p < .001$ ($\gamma_{\text{Democrats}} =$

$-.006$, $N = 13527$; $\gamma_{\text{Republicans}} = -.226$, $N = 9705$).

[Insert Table 2 in Appendix B here]

Interaction between Polarization and Ideology

Table 3 shows the results of the third model respectively analyzed in the datasets of

Liberals and Conservatives. H4 is also supported based on the comparison of the coefficients of

ideological polarization in two analyses. The effect size of ideological polarization among

Conservatives is larger than that among Liberals ($B_{\text{Conservatives}} = -1.906$, $B_{\text{Liberals}} = 1.450$). The

opposite sign of the two coefficients is reasonable. The more polarized in the dataset of Liberals

indicates more liberal and thus more confident with mass media. Comparatively, the more

polarized in the dataset of Conservatives indicates more conservative and thus less confident

with mass media. Therefore, polarization among Liberals should positively predict confidence

toward mass media, but polarization among Conservatives should negatively predict media

confidence. Since the focus of this hypothesis is effect size, the sign of the coefficients will be

neglected in the following test. Based on the absolute value of the two coefficients, Fisher's

z-test shows that these two coefficients is significantly different at the level of $p < .001$ (γ

$_{\text{Conservatives}}$ = -.081, N = 8270; γ $_{\text{Liberals}}$ = .011, N = 6559). But it's necessary to note that the

additional variance that can be explained by ideological polarization is very small in both of the

two datasets.

[Insert Table 3 in Appendix C here]

Aggregate-Level Analysis

As specified in the last model before, the aggregate-level hypothesis H5 is examined based

on the results of a series of correlations. Table 4 shows the correlation matrix between the

average confidence with mass media in each year and the specified aggregate-level variables in

the model. First, the results support H5 that the percentage of conservative Republicans is highly

correlated with the average confidence toward mass media across years (γ = .919, p < .001). The

coefficient is substantially large. Second, the effect sizes of all the other aggregate-level variables

are relatively smaller than that of the percentage of conservative Republicans. The percentages of

Republicans and Conservatives are definitely associated with the average confidence in the

corresponding year. And also the average polarization and average ideology can also predict the

average of media confidence in each year. But these effects are significantly smaller than the

percentage of conservative Republicans. Figure 2 illustrates the trajectories of media confidence

and the trends of the average percentage of Republicans, Conservatives, conservative

Republicans as well as the average polarization. All these variables are standardized to scale in

the same range from 0 to 1. Through standardization these variables become scale-free, and

therefore these four trends can be comparable and matched in one coordinate.

[Insert Table 4 in Appendix D here]

Discussion

Basically, the findings above can be clarified from two directions. In horizontal direction,

the proposed hypotheses cover both main effects and moderation effects. The whole framework

is conceptualized based on the two concepts – partisanship and ideology. H1 and H2 propose the

main effect of the two. H3 and H4 propose the interaction effect of the two. In vertical direction,

the findings cover both individual level and aggregate level. The individual-level hypotheses H1

to H4 confirm the effects of partisanship and ideology in influencing people's confidence toward

mass media, which establishes a basis for constructing aggregate-level hypothesis. H5 broadens

the view of this study by making attempt to explain the trajectory of media confidence.

The implication in horizontal level mainly lies on the elaboration and clarification of the

effects of partisanship and ideology on public confidence toward mass media. The main effects

of the two have been well covered in previous studies. The American society has bear in mind

the liberal bias of mass media and the antagonism of conservatives toward mass media. It's not

surprise to confirm the main effects in this study. But the joint effect of partisanship and ideology

clarifies their influence on public confidence toward mass media. Ideology as a criterion or a

scheme for people to evaluate and form attitudes toward mass media has different effects to

different groups of people. Different parties weight the scheme differently. People categorized in

different camps of ideology weight the scheme differently. In other words, the effect of ideology

is not ubiquitous and not evenly distributed among segments of the society.

An interesting finding based on H4 is that the negative effect of conservativeness is much

stronger than the positive effect of liberalness. This is an alternative explanation of the original

hypothesis. The ideological polarization of Conservatives is the degree of conservativeness,

which is found to negatively predict public confidence toward mass media. The ideological

polarization of Liberals is the degree of liberalness, which is found to positively predict public

confidence toward mass media. But the analysis result shows that the effect of the former is

stronger than the latter. Another interpretation of this finding can be that Conservatives are more likely to adopt ideological scheme when they form the attitude toward mass media. It's analogous to the differential effects of ideology to Democrats and Republicans as proposed in H3. The findings confirm that Republicans are more likely to be influenced by ideological scheme when they evaluate their confidence toward mass media. In this sense, the liberal bias of mass media might be an important impetus to push American society into the antagonism camp. At least it's the case to Conservatives and Republicans.

The implication in vertical level is the explanation of the trend of media trust. The logic is to test whether individual-level findings can be the basis to explain aggregate-level trend. Since in individual-level analysis, Conservative Republicans are the group that shows the lowest trust toward mass media. It's reasonable to speculate that media trust will decline across years if the size of this group of people enlarges. The speculation is confirmed by the analysis. The increasing number of Conservative Republicans is indeed one of the sources of declining media trust in American society.

But the interpretation and generalization of this finding should be very cautious. Because of limited number of data points, the analysis is basically simple correlation between each pair of variables. That could be misleading because no other variables in aggregate level are controlled. On the other hand, the result is not based on regression. We can't know exactly how much variance of media trust on average can be actually explained by the percentage of Conservative Republicans. And also, some of the correlations between those aggregate-level independent variables are rather high. Consequently, the contribution of the percentage of Conservative Republicans will probably be underestimated after other variables are included to supplement the interpretation of media trust. But anyway, the substantially high correlation between the two can

still make a story in contemporary political context, and illuminate our understanding about the

combination effect of partisanship and ideology on constructing people's trust toward media.

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Appendix A

Table 1 *Overall Regression Predicting Media Trust from Partisanship and Ideology*

	DV = Media Trust			
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t
Republicans *(Democrats as reference)*	**-3.909**	.359	-.071	-10.886**
Conservatives *(Liberals as reference)*	**-6.056**	.445	-.107	-13.615**
Moderates *(Liberals as reference)*	**-2.925**	.664	-.052	-4.408**
Party strength	.354	.228	.01	1.552
Ideological polarization	-.86	.32	-.03	-2.685*
Political confidence	.25	.006	.253	41.298**
Survey year	-.457	.016	-.176	-27.992**
Age	-.025	.01	-.016	-2.495
Male *(Female as reference)*	-1.031	.33	-.019	-3.12*
Education	-.869	.058	-.096	-14.945**
Constant	959.929	32.32		29.701**
ΔR^2	1.9%**			
Adj. R^2	14.6%**			

Note. ** $p < .001$ * $p < .01$

Appendix B

Table 2 *Separate Regression among Democrats and Republicans Predicting Media Trust from*

Ideology and Party Strength

	Democrats		Republicans	
	B	Beta	B	Beta
Ideology	**-.687** (.168)[a]	-.034**	**-3.615** (.214)	-.167**
Party strength	1.39 (.292)	.039**	-.595 (.358)	-.016
Political confidence	.258 (.008)	.26**	.235 (.009)	-.174**
Survey year	-.434 (.021)	-.172**	-.464 (.026)	.000**
Age	-.039 (.014)	-.024*	.000 (.015)	-.016
Male (Female as reference)	-1.37 (.434)	-.025*	-.865 (.507)	-.091
Education	-.734 (.076)	-.084**	-.867 (.093)	-.174**
Constant	910.5 (41.91)	**	981.3 (50.7)	**
ΔR^2	0.3%**		2.7%**	
Adj. R^2	12.5%**		16.0%**	

Note. [a] In parentheses are standard errors.

**p < .001 *p < .01

Appendix C

Table 3 *Separate Regression among Liberals and Conservatives Predicting Media Trust from*

Ideological Polarization and Partisanship

	Liberals		Conservatives	
	B	Beta	B	Beta
Ideological polarization	**1.450** (.486)[a]	.035*	**-1.906** (.434)	-.045**
Partisanship	**.043** (.228)	-.002	**-2.158** (.171)	-.135**
Political confidence	.249 (.012)	.248**	.256 (.010)	.261**
Survey year	-.444 (.031)	-.174**	-.472 (.028)	-.177**
Age	.001 (.020)	-.000	-.010 (.017)	-.006
Male (Female as reference)	-.985 (.630)	-.018	-.726 (.552)	-.013
Education	-.743 (.102)	-.088**	-0.889 (.100)	-.097**
Constant	927.0 (61.4)	**	987.8 (55.1)	**
ΔR^2	0.1%		2.0%**	
Adj. R^2	11.7%**		14.6%**	

Note. [a] In parentheses are standard errors.

**p < .001 *p < .01

Appendix D

Table 4 *Correlation Matrix of Variables in Aggregate Level (One Year as One Datapoint)*

N=24	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8
Media trust (V1)	1	-0.763***	-0.601**	**-0.919*****	-0.788***	-0.635***	-0.442*	0.573**
% of Conservatives (V2)		1	0.739***	0.845***	0.523**	0.929***	0.174	-0.391
% of Republicans (V3)			1	0.822***	0.453*	0.598**	0.349	-0.175
% of Conser. Rep. (V4)				1	0.76***	0.681***	0.457*	-0.447*
Polarization (V5)					1	0.273	0.512*	-0.497*
Ideology (V6)						1	0.06	-0.322
Party strength (V7)							1	-0.019
Political trust (V8)								1