

# Dædalus

Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Fall 2022

## Institutions, Experts & the Loss of Trust

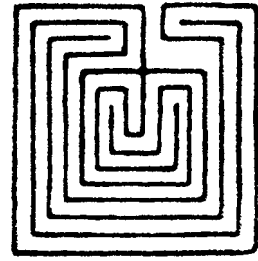


Henry E. Brady & Kay Lehman Schlozman,  
guest editors

with Sheila Jasanoff · Thomas B. Kent  
Robert J. Blendon · John M. Benson  
C. Ross Hatton · Hahrie Han · Colleen L. Barry  
Adam S. Levine · Emma E. McGinty  
Naomi Oreskes · Erik M. Conway · Lee Rainie  
Michael Schudson · Tracey L. Meares · Cary Wu  
Rima Wilkes · David C. Wilson · Robert Wuthnow  
Margaret Levi · Charles Stewart III  
Max Margulies · Jessica Blankshain



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Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

“Institutions, Experts & the Loss of Trust”

Volume 151, Number 4; Fall 2022

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*Inside front cover: (top) A demonstrator questions the results of the election administration for the 2020 U.S. presidential election in front of the Vermont State House, Montpelier, November 7, 2020. © by John Lazenby/Alamy Stock Photo. (bottom) Protestors reject the authority of religion, the Supreme Court, and legislatures in reaction to the Supreme Court’s decision to repeal the right to an abortion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, Washington, D.C., May 14, 2022. Photo by Victoria Pickering. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0) license.*

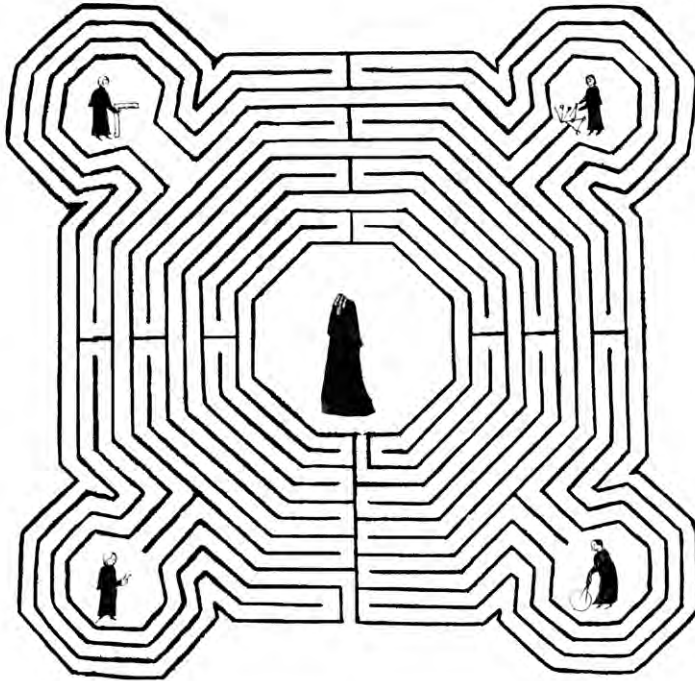
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The pavement labyrinth once in the nave of Reims Cathedral (1240), in a drawing, with figures of the architects, by Jacques Cellier (c. 1550–1620)

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# Introduction

*Henry E. Brady & Kay Lehman Schlozman*

“So when we talk about Skid Row . . . there’s law enforcement agencies that have created a whole lot of trauma. . . .”

—President of Los Angeles Skid Row Neighborhood Council

“We have to have a level of trust just by looking at you [the police], walking, you know, observing you because you got a car, you got a badge, you got a gun.”

—Advocate for Skid Row

“We will get together and do a citizen’s arrest on every single human being that goes against freedom of choice. You cannot mandate, you literally cannot mandate, somebody to wear a mask knowing that mask is killing people. . . . And every single one of you [pointing at Palm Beach County Commissioners] that are obeying the devil’s laws are going to be arrested. And you, doctor, are going to be arrested for crimes against humanity. Every single one of you.”

—Witness at the County Commissioner Workshop on COVID Mask Mandates, Palm Beach County, June 23, 2020

“I voted early and it went well except for . . . can’t really trust the software, Dominion software all over.”

—Participant at the January 6th Demonstration for Trump, Interviewed at the Demonstration<sup>1</sup>

**S**hould we trust major American political, economic, and social institutions when the people associated with those institutions are fallible and even, on occasion, venal or criminal? Do they really operate as trustworthy tribunes of the people? The public is doubtful.

It is well known that trust in American government, especially in Congress and the executive branch, has been declining since the 1960s and 1970s: a period of social ferment, movements for political and social change, an unpopular war, and major government scandal.<sup>2</sup> What is less well known is that the erosion of trust seems now to have spread to many supposedly nonpolitical institutions, including business, journalism, science, police, religion, medicine, and higher education.<sup>3</sup> Concern about the reliability and competence of these institutions is stoked by



news stories – and, more recently, social media attention – reporting malfeasance on Wall Street, errors in the media, fraud and conflicts of interest among scientists, misconduct by police, abuse of children by clergy, conflicting advice from public health experts, and admissions scandals in higher education. Efforts as varied as vaccinating the American public against a raging virus, reforming police departments tainted by racism, validating a presidential election, and addressing climate change have been thwarted by distrust in institutions and experts.

The consequences of lack of trust depend not only on the level of trust and the range of institutions over which it extends but also on the extent to which the fault lines of distrust map onto other political, social, and economic conflicts. In a democracy, political parties function to organize social and economic conflict and make it relevant for politics. The extent to which party competition in the United States involves not just division but distrust has varied across history, but partisan distrust goes back to the nation's founding and the emergence of our first political parties. Jeffersonian Democrats vilified and distrusted “big government” Federalist John Adams when he became president. In turn, the Federalists distrusted Thomas Jefferson once he was in the White House. The culmination of this long history, partisan polarization is currently at its highest point in at least a century.<sup>4</sup>

Partisan polarization over the past half-century has produced significant mutual distrust between the parties. What is perhaps more surprising and more worrisome, the pattern of partisan polarization of trust now maps onto trust in many supposedly apolitical institutions, including those that purport to cultivate and disseminate knowledge and information, provide security and protection, and establish and uphold fundamental social and ethical rules and norms. Where once political partisans had the same level of trust in most nonpolitical institutions except for business and labor, Democrats are now more likely than Republicans to trust higher education, journalism and TV news, public schools, medicine, and science. In turn, Republicans tend to trust the military, the police, and religion more than Democrats do.

Should declining trust and polarized trust in nonpolitical institutions cause concern? Do they portend widening ideological battles, an erosion of institutional legitimacy, an increasing propensity to second guess experts and authorities, and an inability to get things done in society? The development of a partisan divide in trust in nonpolitical institutions places additional hurdles in the path of productive public debate and successful public policy. Governing becomes much more complicated when closed communities that differ on facts, science, morals, the rules of society, and worldview fail to communicate with one another, much less agree on compromise solutions. And institutions embroiled in constant partisan battles are hard-pressed to carry out the tasks they were designed to do. In short, distrust anchored in partisan, institutional, and cultural conflict hampers our capacity to come together to meet common challenges and solve shared problems.

Central to our concerns in this issue of *Dædalus* are what institutions do and why trust matters for their success.<sup>5</sup> Although we can trace some governing, religious, military, medical, and educational institutions back thousands of years, the modern profusion and rationalization of institutions dates to the nineteenth century with the rise of corporations, universities, hospitals, public education, nonprofit organizations, philanthropy, and the professions in response to urbanization, industrialization, and specialization.<sup>6</sup> Scholars tell us that institutions structure, facilitate, and regulate behavior in particular areas of economic and social interactions, among them business, law, religion, education, journalism, the military, medicine, science, and policing.<sup>7</sup> In higher education, for example, there are formal rules and informal norms that vary across universities and across fields of inquiry that define appropriate ways of interacting with students, disclosure of conflicts of interest in conducting scientific research, treatment of evidence that disconfirms hypotheses, and recognition of the contributions of those who assisted with research. Similarly, policing has standards for the training of police officers, the methods used to patrol a city, rules for interacting with the public and with suspects, guidelines for the use of force, and review boards to examine force incidents. All institutions have special rules and procedures that order and discipline them so that they can provide goods and services to people in acceptable ways.

For institutions to be successful, these rules, standards, norms, regulations, training methods, and procedures must be seen as legitimate both by the stakeholders associated with them and by the public at large. Legitimacy can stem from four basic sources, and different institutions rely on different mixes of them.<sup>8</sup> Legitimacy may stem from the political system sharing its *regulatory authority* with an institution – such as the military, police, or a corporation – based upon government’s power of coercion to defend the nation, keep the peace, and to enforce contracts. As long as the institution conforms to the rules established by the government, it draws legitimacy from its relationship to the government in the form of laws or charters. Legitimacy may also come from adherence to *culturally approved and accepted meanings and logics* that are shaped by what is culturally appropriate for each institution, for example, in the practice of medicine, religion, education, and science. It may reside in *moral and normative beliefs* about how those in institutions behave, for example, in professional codes of ethics for law, medicine, religion, higher education, and journalism. Finally, it may come from *pragmatic authority based on efficiency and high performance* in, for example, corporations, science, or banks.

To be seen as trustworthy, an institution must be seen as legitimate in at least one, and usually more than one, way. For example, corporations are legitimate if they stay within regulatory frameworks and do not overstep their authorities by becoming monopolies or watering their stock; if they reflect the standard, cul-

turally acceptable practices for a corporation within a particular society by producing products that conform to cultural models and address cultural needs; if they adhere to the ethical and normative standards for businesses not only by eschewing bribery and other illegal practices but also by treating their employees, suppliers, and customers fairly and ethically; and if they produce an economically successful product. Failing on any of these dimensions risks a corporation's legitimacy, and hence its trustworthiness. Universities must also stay within regulatory frameworks and be financially viable, but evaluations of them are based more upon their cultural acceptability as centers of teaching and learning and their professional standards: their adherence to norms of free inquiry, freedom of speech, and seeking truth. Religious institutions must be especially attentive to their cultural legitimacy and their adherence to ethics and norms. Each institution holds or loses legitimacy according to its own weighting and mix of criteria.

Presumably, if an institution is trustworthy, then people are more likely to trust it, have confidence in it, and accept its advice and decisions as legitimate.<sup>9</sup> They expect that it will do the right thing in an uncertain future with respect to weighty matters that range from protecting their health and safety to providing them with information about public issues.

During the last three years, COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and election controversies brought into bold relief the importance of institutions to our health and well-being. Lack of trust in government, medicine, science, police, and election administration has made it difficult to overcome a pandemic, resolve concerns about public safety, and settle issues regarding an election. While the essays in this volume explore these issues in assorted contexts, a central theme is the challenge to institutional legitimacy given the overall decline in the public's trust and the polarization of that trust between Democrats and Republicans – at a time when we most need expertise and institutional capacity to face crises as one nation.

**O**ur confidence in institutions is based upon both what we know about them and upon what we know about how they know what they know. Using insights gained from the field of science and technology studies (STS), Sheila Jasanoff's essay, "The Discontents of Truth & Trust in 21st Century America," examines the relationship between knowledge and society. Her STS framework asserts that "it is not that expert institutions find and purvey truths from some 'outside' that exists independent of society." Hence "standards of epistemic correctness do not stand outside of politics but are configured through the same processes of social authorization as political legitimacy." The same four criteria that legitimate institutions – regulatory, cultural, normative, and pragmatic authority – also legitimate science and all knowledge. Despite the storybook version of science in which a better-performing theory bests an old one, in fact, what

often matters are such preexisting cultural factors as scientific paradigms or even religious beliefs, such normative concerns as the prestige of a researcher or the status of the methods that are used, and even such factors as the relationship of the researcher or research institute to power.

In order to develop commonly accepted knowledge, Jasanoff explains, societies develop “civic epistemologies,” which “are the stylized, culturally specific ways in which publics expect the state’s [or an institution’s] expertise, knowledge, and reasoning to be produced, tested, and put to use in decision-making.”<sup>10</sup> Doing so involves meeting three challenges: *representing problems* in the world (like climate change and income inequality) in a way that resonates with those who are affected; *aggregating disparate views* from diverse sources and viewpoints to achieve consensus (or “objectivity”) about what causes these problems (such as emissions of greenhouse gases for climate change and technological change and tax policy for income inequality); and *bridging to fill gaps* between what is known and what is needed for problem-solving (for example, simulations to tell us how far greenhouse gas emissions must be cut to prevent a climate catastrophe, or economic models to indicate how to deal with income inequality). Jasanoff tells us that solutions to these problems, especially the aggregation problem, can come from three standpoints: “the view from *nowhere* (sanctioned by the methods of empirical science and quantitative analysis); the view from *everywhere* (sanctioned by inclusive representation and fair deliberation); and the view from *somewhere* (sanctioned by individual witnessing and moral authenticity).” Typically, combinations of these methods are needed in a social process that legitimates knowledge and decision-making, for example, through peer-reviewed research, expert panels, public hearings and comments, media commentary, commissions, and court cases.

**T**he remaining essays explore how well we have legitimated different institutions and the consequences of falling and polarized trust. In “Fifty Years of Declining Confidence & Increasing Polarization in Trust in American Institutions,” Henry E. Brady and Thomas B. Kent summarize the findings from fifty years of data from three repeated surveys that asked about “confidence” in the institutions or the people running them: the Gallup Poll, NORC’s General Social Survey (GSS), and the Harris Poll. Together, these surveys provide information from 1972 on for four political institutions – the presidency, executive branch, Congress, and the Supreme Court – and for sixteen nonpolitical institutions: those associated with the economy such as business, banks, Wall Street, and organized labor; those related to knowledge and information production, including the press and TV news, television, public schools, education, higher education, and science; those enforcing norms and standards such as the police, the military, and religion; and those providing professional services such as medicine and law.<sup>11</sup>

The drop in confidence in political institutions over the past fifty years has been especially pronounced for Congress, significant for the presidency and the executive branch, and more modest but real for the Supreme Court. Less well known are the declines in confidence in nonpolitical institutions. As with the political institutions, the declines have not been uniformly steep. Comparing the period from 1972 to 1979 with the period from 2010 to 2021 shows that average confidence has decreased for fourteen of these nonpolitical institutions, stayed the same for one (science), and increased only for the military. In most cases, the decline proceeded relatively steadily over time. Wall Street, TV news, banks, and the press sustained the most substantial deterioration in confidence – comparable to that for Congress. For public schools, medicine, television, business, and religion, the drop in average confidence was more moderate – comparable in magnitude to those for the presidency and executive branch. The decline in average confidence was even smaller for law, education, and the police – roughly equivalent to that for the Supreme Court. There were still smaller declines for higher education and labor.

In effect, nonpolitical institutions have moved from being trusted quite a lot to being trusted only somewhat. On a four-point scale with responses of “a great deal of confidence,” “quite a lot,” “some,” and “hardly any at all,” in 1972–1979, the American public expressed “quite a lot” of confidence in thirteen nonpolitical institutions. Just three institutions (labor, law, and television) inspired only “some” confidence. By 2010–2021, only six institutions – the military, science, higher education, police, education, and medicine – still enjoyed “quite a lot” of confidence, and ten institutions warranted just “some” confidence. Recent data suggest that Americans probably have only “some” confidence in higher education as well. Thus, Americans have gone from believing that thirteen of sixteen institutions deserved quite a lot of confidence to believing that only five of sixteen merit a lot of confidence, with eleven deserving only some confidence.

Substantial increases in partisan polarization of trust have accompanied the significant declines in trust. In the 1970s, only business and labor showed significant polarization, with Republicans trusting business more than Democrats, and Democrats trusting labor more than Republicans. By the 2010s, assessments of every nonpolitical institution except banks were more polarized – with Republicans especially likely to trust police, religion, business, and Wall Street, and Democrats more trusting than Republicans of TV news, press, labor, television, and public schools.

Considering all the nonpolitical institutions in which trust has fallen – except for Wall Street, banks, business, and labor – shows an interesting pattern.<sup>12</sup> Confidence among partisans of the currently less-trusting party dropped especially precipitously, while the confidence of the other, more-trusting party either declined only slightly or even increased somewhat. In the one case in which trust among partisans of both parties and independents has increased – the military – the re-

sult is largely driven by the substantial increase in confidence among the partisans of the more trusting Republican Party. The changes in trust for the four institutions related to the economy are about the same across the two parties, with little change in trust for labor but significant declines for Wall Street, banks, and business. Finally, confidence among political independents is either lower than that of both Democrats and Republicans or between the levels for the adherents of the two parties. The declines in trust among independents track quite closely those for the entire population.

These data reveal several different patterns of change for nonpolitical institutions. In some cases, changing confidence in a particular institution may be linked to a large-scale event with society-wide consequences; for example, across individuals and groups, a war might affect confidence in the military, or a financial crisis might diminish confidence in banks and Wall Street. In other cases, individual life experiences might have implications for confidence in a particular institution; for example, being the victim of police harassment or the victim of a crime might influence trust in the police. In a quite different pattern, a set of general nonpartisan forces – affecting independents especially strongly – produces an overall decline in trust in almost all nonpolitical institutions. Although different groups, including different party groups, vary in their initial levels of confidence in various nonpolitical institutions, such forces operate more or less uniformly across groups to diminish confidence in institutions. In a still different pattern, there is a partisan interaction. A set of factors leads to a decline in trust among members of one party or the other, depending upon the institution, resulting in polarization in confidence. The forces at work probably interact in complicated ways, and to understand what is going on, we must consider both the multiple forces that have led to a secular decline in trust and those that have led to partisan polarization of trust.

**T**hese changes are worrying, but are these data capturing something real? In her essay “Trustworthy Government: The Obligations of Government & the Responsibilities of the Governed,” Margaret Levi expresses concern about the meaningfulness of survey responses. Answers to questions about confidence in government may simply reflect which party is in power, with supporters of the in-party evincing trust and those of the out-party expressing lack of confidence. This criticism seems quite relevant for trust in government, but it is hard to see how it applies to trust in ostensibly nonpolitical institutions. More to the point, Levi worries that responses to survey questions are not behaviors, just attitudes. She prefers to look at protests, compliance with laws, and other behavioral manifestations of lack of confidence.<sup>13</sup>

Our authors provide abundant evidence that confidence in institutions has behavioral consequences. Brady and Kent show that lack of trust in an institution is

highly correlated with an expressed unwillingness to have kin or friends pursue a career in or marry someone associated with that institution.<sup>14</sup> C. Ross Hatton, Colleen L. Barry, Adam S. Levine, Emma E. McGinty, and Hahrie Han demonstrate that lack of trust in science was related to unwillingness to follow public health guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic, but that greater trust in local government was associated with willingness to follow local public health dictates. Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway argue that distrust in science is associated with rejection of policies to address climate change. Tracey L. Meares indicates that increasing trust in the police “is a better, more efficient, and lower-cost way to achieve crime reduction and law compliance.” Robert Wuthnow shows that trust in religion is a concomitant of church attendance. Max Margulies and Jessica Blankshain find that a proxy for trust – namely, “warmth toward the military” – is positively correlated with willingness to increase defense spending, to use force abroad, to employ more bellicose military strategies, and to evaluate wars positively. In short, survey data appear to be capturing something that is very real.

What then are the general factors that cause changes in trust for institutions? In his essay “What Does ‘Trust in the Media’ Mean?” Michael Schudson focuses on the centrality of changes in journalism, arguing that declines in trust follow from increasing journalistic skepticism about government and other institutions over the past fifty years. The pivotal moment was the Watergate scandal of 1972 to 1974 – the years in which our data begin – that led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon. Schudson tells us that “Journalism has changed substantially at least twice in fifty years, and the technological change of the early 2000s should not eclipse the political and cultural change of the 1970s in comprehending journalism today.” Through studies of media content, Schudson documents the turn from “who-what-when-where” reporting to “how” and “why” reporting in which “skepticism is approved, encouraged, and taught.” He even implicates colleges and universities. More journalists (and more of the public) have a college education, which encourages criticism and skepticism. Furthermore, nonprofit organizations, the twenty-four-hour news cycle, and the internet facilitate continuous monitoring of actions by government and other institutions. Schudson’s diagnosis is a counterpoint to that of Jasanoff. If becoming trustworthy requires the development of civic epistemologies, then journalism’s current mode may undermine these efforts through its constant exposure, criticism, and complaint.

Lee Rainie considers the role of the internet in his essay “Networked Trust & the Future of Media.” The decline in trust and polarization of trust began in the 1970s and 1980s before the internet and social media had become part of American life. The internet began to take off in the mid-1990s with the advent of the World Wide Web, browsers, multiplexing, and fiber optic cables. About 50 per-

cent of Americans used the internet in 2000, half had broadband by 2007, half used social media by 2011, and half had a smartphone by 2013.<sup>15</sup> Although levels of trust began to erode in the 1970s, survey data suggest that, for many institutions, acceleration in the decline in trust and increase in polarization of trust took place at various times between about 1997 and 2020, as the internet became increasingly significant. Watershed events – among them, impeachments, 9/11, the rise of the surveillance state, prolonged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the Tea Party, Occupy, and Black Lives Matter movements – also affected trust, but each was also in part shaped by the growing importance of the internet.

According to Rainie, the internet matters because “every decision a person makes about who or what to trust is a social calculation” so “there is deep intersection between changes in information and changes in social arrangements.” Consequently, “in the age of social media, the members of users’ personal and professional networks are key conduits of civic information and serve as key commentators on that information.” Perhaps because of the creation of these new and less familiar social networks and the concomitant damage to the media from the internet’s cannibalizing of its advertising, “Americans believe the civic information ecosystem is collapsing” and public confidence in social media is very low. Almost two-thirds of the American people believe that social media has a mostly negative effect on where the country is going, and three-quarters of Americans believe that political partisans do not operate in a shared reality or shared moral universe.

Still, it is worth noting, as our authors observe again and again, that broad expressions of distrust in major institutions get at only part of the truth about trust. As Rainie notes,

The same people who say they do not have confidence in the news media in general can also cite news operations they trust, which is often tied to the partisan composition of news organizations’ audiences. Republicans and conservatives particularly gravitate to Fox News, while Democrats and liberals say they trust multiple sources such as CNN, *The New York Times*, PBS, NPR, and NBC News.

Robert J. Blendon and John M. Benson, meanwhile, tell us that, while Americans distrust medicine, they trust the nurses and doctors with whom they interact. And Charles Stewart III remarks that voters trust their local election administration.

**D**eclines in trust may also follow from the actions within specific institutions that violate one or more criteria for legitimacy. In “Religion, Democracy & the Task of Restoring Trust,” Wuthnow paints a vivid picture of how religious institutions have been compromised by corruption and scandal precisely because they are the arbiters of moral virtue, and he discusses attempts to repair lost trust through confessions, independent advisory commissions, and



litigation. None of these is entirely effective as “insincere confessions [are] staged for media consumption,” investigative committees produce “toothless reports that languish in bureaucratic darkness,” and litigation “drags on for years before inconsequential penalties are levied.”

Meares, in “Trust & Models of Policing,” notes that despite their instrumental effectiveness in crime fighting, the police are distrusted by Black adults, which she traces to a history of injustice against African Americans. In their essay “Race & Political Trust: Justice as a Unifying Influence on Political Trust,” Cary Wu, Rima Wilkes, and David C. Wilson argue that trust depends upon perceptions of fairness and social justice and that, given their history, racial and ethnic minority groups judge institutions through that lens:

African Americans experience higher levels of police-stops and incarceration, and this pattern is contextualized against the history of a society that has used police to control, segregate, and denigrate Black people. Because of this history, African Americans do not see stop-and-frisk practices or mass incarceration as indications of government performing well, although many Whites do.

Blendon and Benson suggest that, even though the public trusts doctors and nurses, the high cost of health care is a source of distrust in the medical system. In January 2020, before COVID, the public’s top two domestic priorities among a list of twenty-two possibilities were lowering the cost of health care and reducing prescription drug prices – objectives shared by Democratic and Republican members of the public. In parallel, declining trust in higher education seems to be related to high costs.

In their essay “Specific Sources of Trust in Generals: Individual-Level Trust in the U.S. Military,” Max Margulies and Jessica Blankshain explore trust in the military through five Ps, which are closely related to the four criteria for legitimacy: performance, professionalism, persuasion, personal connection, and partisanship. They find some evidence for performance in wars affecting trust, but “the performance hypothesis has a hard time explaining the GSS high point for post-9/11 military confidence in 2018.” The military gets very high marks for being ethical and professional, but it is not clear how this assessment has driven trust ratings over time. Positive depictions of the military in film and on television suggest that persuasion may help to explain confidence in the military, but the evidence is not definitive. Personal connections to the military are strongly related to confidence in the military. Once again, however, the impact on trust in the military over time is not clear. There are generational differences in confidence in the military, but the most substantial gap is between Republicans and Democrats.

In “Trust in Elections,” Stewart finds two paradoxes in trust for election administration in 2020. The first is that while the “procedures to ensure the trustworthiness of elections held” and “Americans were *more* confident in the electoral

machinery following the 2020 election than they were in 2016,” Americans were also more polarized than ever before. Using data from 2000 to 2019, Stewart finds that a relatively consistent 20 to 40 percent of Democrats were very confident that “votes nationwide were counted properly” (with upticks after Democratic wins and downticks after Republican wins). In contrast, the share of Republicans who were very confident that votes were being counted properly sank from 60 percent in the aftermath of the contentious 2000 election, in which George W. Bush ultimately prevailed, to less than 20 percent in 2018. Moreover, after Biden’s victory in the 2020 election, while 60 percent of Democrats were very confident that votes had been counted properly, only 10 percent of Republicans shared this view.

The second paradox is that, regardless of party affiliation, voters are about 20 to 30 percentage points more likely to say that their own vote was counted correctly. These results suggest that different dynamics drive these two measures, “one based upon direct experience, and the other mediated by political elites.” We see similar patterns for other institutions in which closeness matters: doctors and nurses who provide medical care are trusted, but not the medical system; local governments are trusted but not the federal government; experience in the military or personal acquaintance with someone in the military increases overall trust in the military.

**H**ow and why does partisanship affect trust? It is easy to see why partisanship would be related to trust in government in the American system, in which the American presidency – the most visible symbol of the government – combines the role of head of state with partisan policy-maker, but it is harder to see why it should be associated with trust in nonpolitical institutions. One possible link is through partisan political campaigns to discredit them.

In “From Anti-Government to Anti-Science: Why Conservatives Have Turned Against Science,” Oreskes and Conway argue that probusiness conservatives have done just that for science because scientific findings about the negative impact of business practices on the environment and on public health threaten to limit business activity. Oreskes and Conway chart the progression of this effort. First, conservatives made the case that free enterprise was one of the foundations of American government, that economic freedom undergirded political freedom, and that governmental intervention in business undermined economic freedom. Ronald Reagan encapsulated this argument in his inaugural address in 1981, asserting that “Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem.” He later incorporated into press conferences such quips as “I think you all know that I’ve always felt the nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.”<sup>16</sup> Second, as science began to identify externalities from acid rain, tobacco use, chlorofluorocarbons, and greenhouse gases, concerted efforts were made to cast doubt on these findings and on science

itself. Third, the partisan divide over science was reinforced by the growing partisan divide in religious identity:

As the Republican Party has become identified with conservative religiosity – in particular, evangelical Protestantism – religious and political skepticism of science have become mutually constitutive and self-reinforcing. Meanwhile, individuals who are comfortable with secularism, and thus secular science, concentrate in the Democratic Party.

For Oreskes and Conway, the distrust in science is a spillover from conservative distrust and dislike of government.

Stewart also sees a concerted effort by Republican elites, especially Donald Trump, to discredit election administration by claiming that malevolent bureaucracies (“the deep state”) stole the 2020 election from Trump. In “American Trust in Science & Institutions in the Time of COVID-19,” Hatton and his coauthors find a decline in trust in science during the pandemic as many Republican leaders questioned the advice of experts. “With respect to differences in party affiliation, we find that Republicans reported consistent declines in their trust in science during the pandemic, while Democrats and independents remained relatively stable.” They find that “trust in local elected officials and local and state health departments has remained more immune from politics than other information sources.” Finally, Levi notes that the “ascendant populist parties around the world and Trumpism in the United States have self-consciously ‘weaponized distrust’ of government and indeed of many authorities, including scientific experts and technocrats.”

A different explanation for polarization is that the leaders of these “nonpolitical” institutions may actually be more partisan than in the past. A 2019 survey discussed by Brady and Kent found that respondents attached distinctive partisan and ideological perspectives to the people associated with many “nonpolitical” institutions. Highly religious people, police, bankers, and military generals are seen as typically Republicans, and college professors, journalists, labor union members, public school teachers, and scientists are viewed as Democrats. Only doctors and lawyers are considered to be, on average, neither Republicans nor Democrats. In follow-up work, Kent has found some evidence that at least some of the perceptions may be right. Since 1980, some professions have become more partisan in their political contributions in the same ways found on the surveys.<sup>17</sup> Yet even if there is substance behind these perceptions, we really do not know about how the public has come to these perceptions and why the partisanship of institutional leaders seems to matter so much in the formation of judgments about institutions.

We need a much better understanding of the forces that have precipitated the decline in trust and polarization in confidence. One approach is to look at the separate histories of the various institutions over the past fifty years. These histories have, no doubt, been part of the story. However, the overall erosion of trust

across multiple institutions and the partisan polarization of trust in most institutions suggest that we should look more widely for major social trends that have shaped these outcomes. Three such developments with broad social consequences immediately suggest themselves. One is the increase in economic inequality in America, which has been implicated in the decline of social trust between people, which, in turn, is related to other forms of trust.<sup>18</sup> Another is the massive increase in immigration that has led to much greater diversity in America, a trend that has also been associated with the decline in social trust in local communities, especially when it is combined with substantial residential segregation.<sup>19</sup> And both of these trends have been associated with the pronounced partisan polarization of American politics that has been catalyzed by the rising number of contested partisan primaries, the growth of cable news, and, more recently, the emergence of social media.<sup>20</sup> These trends may have incubated the distrust and misunderstanding that have led us to where we are.

What is the optimal level of trust? It is dangerous to trust institutions when they are not trustworthy, as we have learned from periodic scandals that range from Watergate to the abuse of children by Catholic priests to the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment. “The decline in trust in most institutions that public polling has documented since the 1960s,” Schudson argues, “was a decline from what was arguably much too unquestioning a level of trust. This is clearly true with the federal government, the media, banking, corporate America, organized labor, and organized religion.” Margulies and Blankshain believe that “Both high and low levels of trust in the military can have adverse consequences.” High levels of trust in the military may “upend the hierarchical nature of proper democratic civil-military relations” or give some leaders incentives to “use the military as political shield/weapon when beneficial, which only serves to further elevate the military over civilian institutions and thereby further exacerbate the trust gap.” Levi puts it trenchantly: “When a policy depends on the most up-to-date science, military intelligence, or other expertise, too much trust of experts can lead to tragic mistakes – à la the war in Iraq or the deadline for the withdrawal from Afghanistan – and too little trust can lead to populations resisting what might save their lives – à la vaccines for COVID.” Thus, there are downsides to maximizing trust. Still, there must be a reasonable basic level of trust for our institutions to operate effectively. It seems likely that, at least for some institutions, trust has fallen so low that their operations are impaired. The trick is to achieve an appropriate balance.

Partisan polarization of trust is also a problem if it turns an institution into “just another political institution.” Indeed, Schudson ends his essay with the worry that partisan divides will do just that by enfeebling the media, medicine, and other institutions. So, on one hand, it seems startling and counterproductive to see partisan divides with respect to trust in institutions. How can an institution get its work

done when half the population distrusts it? On the other hand, polarization suggests that the institution itself might need to rethink how it does its work.

More generally, rethinking the operation of an institution might be necessary whenever major groups in society distrust it. Nowhere is this clearer than in the deep distrust felt for the police by African Americans, and the persistently large gap between Whites and African Americans in trust in the police. As Meares and also Wu and coauthors point out, perhaps the problem is the wrong model of policing and the wrong standard for legitimating the police. “If the primary reason for public confidence in police was their effectiveness at crime-fighting,” Meares explains, “we would expect [given decreases in crime in the past thirty years] confidence to rise during that time rather than to remain flat. Moreover, we would expect that the group who received the most benefits of crime-fighting, Black adults, would register increasing ratings of confidence even accounting for low base rates.” The problem, our authors argue, is designing policing only with regulatory and pragmatic legitimacy in mind, while neglecting cultural and normative legitimacy. Effective policing requires attention to justice and fairness. Consequently, polarization of trust is a problem that requires a better understanding of how to legitimate an institution.

**W**hat can be done to restore trust? These essays propose several general strategies for ameliorating distrust. Jasanoff suggests that experts and institutions must get beyond trying to justify science, medicine, or policing based upon regulatory authority. They must get better at cultivating civic epistemologies – ways of justifying advice – that “give voice to diverse standpoints, aggregate disparate opinions to produce a measure of objectivity, and find persuasive ways to bridge the gaps between available and ideal states of knowledge.” Right now, one critical arena for improvement is criminal justice policy. Meares makes several suggestions for restoring trust in the police: better training in procedural justice; establishment of civilian boards with authority not only to review police actions but also to make policy; and the elimination of the legacy of institutional racism that underlies ill-defined vagrancy and loitering laws.

Levi as well as Oreskes and Conway propose that we need a “progovernment” narrative that convincingly explains how governments can solve problems and improve citizens’ lives – a point that is implicit in Stewart’s argument. Republican distrust of election administration demonstrates how hard that will be. That our election system, by and large, performs well and is worthy of trust is not sufficient to produce trust in those who see government as the problem and who listen to leaders who harp on that theme. Criticism of government has become a cultural meme that does not require evidence. Getting beyond the neoliberal perspective that minimizes government and enshrines market solutions requires inventing new and more acceptable ways to think about the social welfare state model. It

also requires ensuring that government can actually solve problems by modernizing and improving its performance. That is a formidable agenda.

Meares, Wu and coauthors, and others emphasize the importance of a social justice perspective in public administration to engender trust among marginalized groups. Modern public administration is already pursuing a more inclusive and justice-oriented path, but such efforts are in their infancy. On his first day in office, President Biden signed Executive Order 13985, “Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government,” which, with the Office of Management and Budget’s report on assessing equity, marked it as one of the federal government’s performance goals.<sup>21</sup>

There are also more specific suggestions. Blendon and Benson make recommendations for the field of public health. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became apparent that the public knew very little about what public health officials do, and the media coverage of their actions did not match that of doctors and nurses in hospitals. As with all governmental activity, there needs to be more visibility for what government does and how it solves problems, but short of creating a hit television show with a public health officer as its protagonist, it is not clear how to do this. Blendon and Benson also suggest that there should be more separation of public health from partisan politics, but this must be done carefully. In many cases during the pandemic, public health officials could invoke sweeping emergency powers without political consultation, a strategy that, based upon Jasanoff’s analysis and recent work on failures of governance during the pandemic, may not succeed.<sup>22</sup> Ensuring that those who speak on behalf of science represent both parties might be useful, but it would require the development of new networks linking scientists with public health. Hatton and coauthors add another useful idea: because local governments are more trusted than the states or national government, public health outreach should involve local elected and appointed officials.

Certainly, the internet has exacerbated the problem of trust by creating so many diverse sources of information without mechanisms for assessing their accuracy or dependability. Rainie proposes a series of steps for creating trust in the internet. These include giving people more control of their data, changing “social media algorithms to downplay anger and divisive discourse,” finding ways to promote “accuracy, diverse perspectives, and pathways to agreement,” embracing more transparency by formal news operations and social media, reviving journalism – especially local papers – and creating new programs for digital and civic literacy. Finding a way to cope with the internet is another major project for our time.

**C**an we restore trust? The agenda presented in this volume is daunting: develop new civic epistemologies, rethink how institutions (such as police) operate, reframe the role of government, improve the performance of government, and clean up the internet. As Rainie reminds us in his essay, our

times present challenges akin to previous revolutionary moments, such as the invention of the printing press, the French Revolution, or the industrial revolution, when old authorities were overthrown and new paradigms emerged. We must re-establish authority by finding new ways to legitimate institutions. We have a lot of inventing, rethinking, and redoing ahead of us.

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- <sup>5</sup> Karen S. Cook, Russell Hardin, and Margaret Levi argue, in *Cooperation Without Trust?* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005), that large institutions cannot be trusted, or, to be more specific, that trust only makes sense as a “relational” ideal in which the relation is with another person. According to their “encapsulated” notion of trust, trust requires knowing another person well enough to believe that that person has encapsulated one’s interests, which Cook, Hardin, and Levi argue is not possible with institutions. In contrast, Lynne Zucker, in “Production of Trust: Institutional Sources of Economic Structure, 1840–1920,” *Research in Organizational Behavior* 8 (1986): 53–111, uses “trust” to mean institutional trust as well as personal trust. Susan Shapiro also includes institutions in her understanding of trust and argues that there are trust-like methods of control of institutions—what she calls “impersonal trust.” See Susan Shapiro, “The Social Control of Impersonal Trust,” *American Journal of Sociology* 93 (3) (1987): 623–658.
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- <sup>9</sup> We use the terms “trust” and “confidence” interchangeably. On the relationship between trust and legitimacy, see Jonathan Jackson and Jacinta M. Gau, “Carving Up Concepts? Differentiating Between Trust and Legitimacy in Public Attitudes Towards Legal Authority,” in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Trust*, ed. Ellie Shockley, Tess M. S. Neal, Lisa M. PytlikZillig, and Brian H. Bornstein (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 49–69.



- <sup>10</sup> Sheila Jasanoff, “Civic Epistemologies,” <https://www.sheilajasanoff.org/research/civic-epistemologies/>. See also Sheila Jasanoff, *Science and Public Reason* (London and New York: Routledge/Taylor and Francis, 2012); and Sheila Jasanoff, *Designs on Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015). The development of “social” epistemologies traces back to Alvin Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Also see Alvin Goldman and Cailin O’Connor, “Social Epistemology,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, February 6, 2001, rev. August 28, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology-social/>; and Alessandra Tanesini, “Social Epistemology,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online*, 2017, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/social-epistemology/v-2>.
- <sup>11</sup> The questions in these surveys ask about “confidence” in institutions. Consistent with endnote 9, we treat confidence as a measure of trust in our discussion. These surveys cover most major nonpolitical institutions. Among the few that are missing are the arts, food systems, tech companies, public utilities, philanthropy, nonprofits, and agriculture. By “political” institutions we mean those that make or adjudicate laws and that have elected members (presidency and Congress) or many presidentially nominated and congressionally confirmed members (Supreme Court and executive branch). By “nonpolitical” we mean institutions that are private sector (profit-making such as business or nonprofit such as religion) or government bureaucracies that do not make or adjudicate laws and that strive to be nonpolitical (such as the military, public schools, or the police), even though they might have some elected officials (public school boards) or political appointees (military and police leaders) running them.
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- <sup>20</sup> McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, *Polarized America*.
- <sup>21</sup> See “Advancing an Equitable Government,” Performance.gov, <https://www.performance.gov/equity/>; and Office of Management and Budget, *Study to Identify Methods to Assess Equity: Report to the President* (Washington, D.C.: Executive Office of the President, 2021), [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/OMB-Report-on-EO13985-Implementation\\_508-Compliant-Secure-v1.1.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/OMB-Report-on-EO13985-Implementation_508-Compliant-Secure-v1.1.pdf).
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# The Discontents of Truth & Trust in 21st Century America

*Sheila Jasanoff*

*Credible fact-making for policy demands the same legitimating moves as are required for credible politics. Experts, like politicians, must represent the world in ways that respect diverse standpoints, aggregate disparate opinions to produce a semblance of objectivity, and find persuasive ways to bridge gaps between available and ideal states of knowledge. Every society, moreover, commands its own culturally recognized approaches to producing and testing public knowledge, and expert practices must conform to these to be broadly accepted. Insisting on the superior authority of science without attending to the politics of reason and persuasion will not restore trust in either knowledge or power. Instead, trust can be regained with more inclusive processes for framing policy questions, greater attentiveness to dissenting voices and minority views, and more humility in admitting where science falls short and policy decisions must rest on prudence and concern for the vulnerable.*

The present has a way of engulfing all other time. For most of us, today's problems feel bigger, sharper, and more in need of correction than earlier ones. This overvaluing of the near past is so pervasive that cognitive psychologists have a name for our tendency to rely on recent memory in deciding for the future: the "availability heuristic."<sup>1</sup> Loss of trust in expertise is one such problem that has acquired unique urgency in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Judged by the proliferation of media reports, books, articles, and research projects on the topic, trust suddenly emerged as a salient problem for the Western world in the early 2020s. But though it appeared to some as a new social malaise, it was anything but that.<sup>2</sup> Looking behind the attention-grabbing headlines, it is clear that this crisis of legitimacy took root long before the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak of 2019. It had germinated for decades in a miasma of rising skepticism toward expert recommendations: in regulatory agencies, in courts, in advisory committees, in large corporations, and in international organizations. Seen in hindsight, the election of Donald J. Trump to the U.S. presidency in 2016 was not so much a cause as a symptom of the growing discontent with expert authority. If "democracy dies in darkness,"<sup>3</sup> then trust would seem to have died in the glare of transparency, its end hastened by the advent of the internet and social media. How can we begin to re-

pair the frayed nexus of truth and trust in the light of this long and complex history and in today's ruthlessly unforgiving information environment? And how does the theorizing of knowledge-power relations in modernity help us in this project?

In 1770, shortly before the American Revolution, Edmund Burke wrote an essay on the loss of trust between the sovereign and the populace in words that still resonate strongly. His litany of "present discontents" reads like an eerie forecast of our own time: a government "at once dreaded and contemned," rank, office, and title having "lost their reverence," inaction a "subject of ridicule," and hardly anything that "is sound and entire" but that "disconnection and confusion" prevail abroad and at home.<sup>4</sup> When trust collapses, Burke observed, very little can be done to summon people back to the same table, real or figurative: "When men imagine that their food is only a cover for poison, and when they neither love nor trust the hand that serves it, it is not the name of the roast beef of Old England that will persuade them to sit down to the table that is spread for them." His tract was widely interpreted as a call for a better organized form of politics. Burke asked his readers to rise above factionalism and embrace the formation of political parties within which people would subordinate individual self-interest to a shared commitment to the good of the nation. "Party," he wrote, "is a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed." Only by principled and virtuous association would people acquire the strength and stamina to achieve higher political goals. Trust, in short, was a matter of getting the politics of association right, to better align what people should aspire to achieve in public life with what could be practically accomplished.

The task of restoring legitimacy to experts and governing institutions looks equally desperate in twenty-first-century America, where the COVID-19 pandemic has raised the stakes yet higher for both experts and governments.<sup>5</sup> In fights over mask and vaccine mandates, disaffected citizens furiously questioned, and often flouted, public health requirements that government officials justified on claims of sound science. In April 2022, a federal judge in Florida unilaterally overturned the government's mandate to wear masks in airports and on public transportation, to the consternation of public health authorities.<sup>6</sup> The causal relationship between these acts of opposition and rising COVID case counts and deaths became another topic of contestation. Activists and resisters upended normal rules of civility in shops and restaurants, school board meetings, legislative assemblies, and airplanes in full flight. With trust in authority at historic lows, America confronted a moment of disrepair and reckoning similar to Burke's, and hence also a moment for rethinking what it might take to reconnect people to their ruling institutions so that policy-makers' claims, reasoning, and compulsions might again be seen as legitimate. Unlike in Burke's day, parties are not the answer: the two leading parties are embroiled in hostile moves likened to tribal warfare. From each po-

sition, the other's facts and reasons are tagged as suspect and dangerous. On the most urgent social issues of the present – from fair elections and racial justice to climate change and public health – there seems to be no shared base of trusted expertise or common knowledge on which the government might build policy compromise, let alone consensus. Authoritarianism looms as the feared backlash.<sup>7</sup>

When such radical “disconnection and confusion” prevail, there is no choice for democracy but to go back to basics. Possibly the most foundational of modernity's assumptions is that there are universally valid facts, many revealed by science, on which everyone must agree, and these provide the necessary grounding for values to negotiate from. Hannah Arendt, writing in 1967 on the tensions between truth and politics, accepted that politics encompasses the art of persuasive lying, but she insisted that factual truth puts a backstop on what politics can change at will, even when politicians think they can get away with mass deception.<sup>8</sup> When distrust is endemic as now, however, facticity itself must be put under the lens. Where and how is public knowledge produced and what is the appropriate role for science in informing politics? Can science legitimate policies of high economic, social, and political consequence while remaining, in terms constantly invoked by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), “policy-relevant but not policy-prescriptive”?<sup>9</sup> How can any expert body accomplish that delicate balancing of relevance and non-prescription without losing the public's confidence?

Several decades of scholarship in science and technology studies (STS) offer an indispensable starting point for addressing these questions, and they starkly underline the futility of trying to maintain sharp boundaries between the work of science and the work of politics. STS research has transformed our understanding of the nature of facts, knowledge, and expertise by examining in depth how scientists build new knowledge domains, innovate methods, deal with uncertainty, and come to agree on phenomena that are eventually treated as facts. Science, seen through the STS lens, is never a pure encounter between the powerful, discerning mind of the truth-telling natural philosopher and an unchangeable, preordained, external nature. Rather, it is always a collectively constructed representation of reality, a product of group effort, undertaken by communities of shared knowledge and belief, embedded within institutions and cultures that have their own social, political, and economic dynamics.<sup>10</sup> That multilayered social framework shapes how scientists look at the world, what they choose to investigate, and how they interpret what they have seen within their own select communities.

Translating the results of science's painstaking discovery process into political or policy domains, subject to their own rules of the game, exposes scientific consensus to alien forms of skepticism and added demands for legitimation.<sup>11</sup> Outsiders to science's normal processes of consensus-building may reject the insider agreements on varied grounds, such as perceived corruption, opposing religious

and cultural beliefs, or experiential knowledge that runs counter to what scientists take for granted. The factors that contribute to disconnects between experts and lay citizens need to be disentangled if trusting relations are to be rebuilt. Expert-lay relationships, moreover, are mediated by institutions that themselves must strike an uneasy balance between scientific claims and political expediency. In the public domain, expert knowledge is called upon to perform three tasks that cannot be contained within the practices that philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn famously described as “normal science”<sup>12</sup>: *representation* of phenomena deemed relevant for policy (what is the nature of the problem we are seeing?); *aggregation* of knowledge from diverse sources and viewpoints (how do we reconcile different interpretations of what we see?); and *bridging* to fill gaps between what is known and what is needed for problem-solving (how do we extrapolate from available data, or decide when we know enough?). Through techniques of *representation*, science often shows us new things to care about (such as the ozone hole, climate change, fetal abnormality, rising income inequality). Through *aggregation* of disparate viewpoints, science seeks to tell a coherent – and, for policy purposes, actionable – story about complex, contested phenomena (such as a maximum mean temperature rise to maintain a stable climate or an interest rate hike to stop inflation). And through *bridging* mechanisms such as statistical analysis, models, and algorithms, science enables predictions from imperfect knowledge (like which prisoner is likely to revert to criminal behavior upon release, how much food will be needed to feed a growing world population, how far must greenhouse gas emissions be cut to prevent a climate catastrophe, or how likely is it that an asymptomatic, COVID-positive individual will infect a contact group?).

Importantly, just as the political tasks of representation, aggregation, and compromise are accountable to preexisting norms and rules, so too are the basic practices of public knowledge-making accountable to local cultures of sense-making, or “civic epistemologies.”<sup>13</sup> The three sets of practices that are essential for making public facts – representation, aggregation, and bridging – are neither universal nor grounded in an invariant “scientific method.” Normally backgrounded in the theater of politics, these culturally authorized procedures for producing public knowledge must be understood and respected in efforts to rebuild trust in the wake of crises such as the pandemic. Civic epistemologies are part of the machinery whereby contemporary polities integrate knowledge with values, and they constrain the range of approaches to getting publics to accept and agree on facts. In the United States, for example, such background norms include a preference for experts qualified by certified disciplinary credentials and for open, adversarial contests among stakeholders, even if such contestation makes closure difficult. Closed-door negotiations among experts representing diverse economic and political positions have found less favor in the American context than in many European countries, though those approaches are more likely to lead to consensus on factual claims.<sup>14</sup>

Burke's solution to his era's political discontents famously was a defense of more energetic collective action. He proclaimed that "no men could act with effect who did not act in concert; that no men could act in concert who did not act with confidence; that no men could act with confidence who were not bound together by common opinions, common affections, and common interests." Parties, for Burke, would represent the collective, aggregate their core values, and bridge differences among members even if individuals disagreed on some of their less central values.

In modern times, science has stepped in to provide an added foundation of commonality that many see as essential for societies to act in concert and with effect. To the list of opinions, affections, and interests, all of which can be factionalized, science has added the superior force of common knowledge, which, by definition, sits above mere interests. Good scientific knowledge is viewed throughout the world as indispensable to the running of modern societies. It gives politicians and policy-makers authority to identify, frame, and prioritize problems, assess the likelihood of possible outcomes, evaluate their consequences, and design workable responses. But although democracy theorists from Arendt to contemporary political epistemologists such as Hélène Landemore agree on a polity's need for shared truths to serve these purposes, where to look for common factual understandings in pluralistic societies and how best to arrive at them are by no means settled.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the risks of political fracture and fractiousness, even on questions of scientific fact, have grown more intense in our era of instant electronic communications and opinion-shaping digital technologies than in the older, slower days of newsprint, telephones, and television.<sup>16</sup>

Democracy theorists have tended to divide on what we may call the "knowledge question" and its implications for legitimacy and trust: Is shared knowledge indispensable for good democracy? If so, then how should one treat factual disagreement in communities of free-thinking and necessarily heterogeneous opinion holders? John Rawls, one of the most influential political theorists of the twentieth century, advocated a position of "epistemic abstinence," associated with the argument that insisting on any singular truth as a precondition for good politics would simply result in coercion of the less powerful by those with more power.<sup>17</sup> In a series of rebuttals, other political theorists have insisted that abstaining from truth claims is not only *not* a necessary condition for political consensus, but that a positive commitment to correct epistemic positions is essential for functioning democracies. Landemore, in particular, holds that for a democracy to be successful, it must subscribe to what she calls a "procedure-independent" standard of validity or correctness: in other words, democratic processes cannot insist on neutrality with respect to where the truth lies.<sup>18</sup> Getting the right answers, in accordance with standards that are not themselves embedded in politics, is part and parcel of good government, along with securing the fundamental values of equality, fairness, and justice.

It is one thing to subscribe to an ideal of independent standards of correctness, however, and quite another to work out where such standards can be found. STS research has repeatedly demonstrated that what we accept as fact for policy purposes is not a preexisting condition of the world, discoverable through policy-neutral processes, but rather the endpoint of socially sanctioned methods of observation, argument, negotiation, and persuasion.<sup>19</sup> The production of credible facts thus depends on prior agreement about the right ways to go about finding facts. Without such settled agreements, controversies about the validity of salient claims and findings are prone to persist or continually resurface. Moreover, in the age of social media, the lines between claim, finding, fact, information, knowledge, and evidence are easily blurred. Scientists themselves have contributed to confusion by abandoning the slow and costly processes of peer review and fact-checking to disseminate attention-grabbing claims – what political scientist Yaron Ezrahi evocatively called “out-formations” – rapidly into the consumer marketplace in place of better validated information.<sup>20</sup> Such behavior is all the more common in times of crisis, when reputation, intellectual property rights, and financial support may hinge on claiming priority for one’s own work above that of competitors and rivals.

In keeping with traditional political theory, however, conventional explanations for the loss of trust in institutions providing critically needed, policy-relevant knowledge tend to fall back on blaming the recipients and not the generators of knowledge. The realist conception of science dominates the public discourse, most especially in the United States, reinforcing the notion that facts have validity independent of human process, will, or intention. Possibly the most common move is to pin the cause of distrust on the public’s misunderstanding of science, which itself is explained in varied ways.<sup>21</sup> On one common view, it is simply a matter of ignorance. There is a built-in asymmetry between experts, who arrive at the truth by virtue of their specialist knowledge, skills, and experience, and non-expert publics who are too ill-informed, technically deficient, or interest- and instinct-driven to accept the expert pronouncements as true. The legitimacy of expert consensus is not put in question. It is the deniers who are seen to have turned away from expert judgment because they are “antiscience” or have bought into the radically relativist “post-truth” position that there is no truth apart from politics: it is power all the way down.<sup>22</sup> In the United States, the divisive years of the Trump presidency added weight to this diagnosis through repeated attacks on science advice from the highest places in politics – so much so that many left-leaning scientists and commentators greeted President Joseph Biden’s narrow win in 2020 as a victory for science in a country widely seen as almost evenly split between pro- and antiscience factions.<sup>23</sup>

A second, partly related view is to blame popular misunderstanding on conscious corrupters of the truth who appropriate and subvert the processes of sci-



ence in order to manufacture doubt where none should exist, sow confusion where clarity should prevail, and sap people's will to act by diluting the power of the expert consensus. Here again the public is cast in a passive and unknowing role in accordance with what STS scholars call the "deficit model." Culprits in these corruption stories include powerful private groups, most prominently the fossil fuel, chemical, and tobacco industries, and scientists who sell their services to such lobbies for money and fame.<sup>24</sup> From the standpoint of the media, the pandemic spawned a new rogues' gallery of scientists who touted quack remedies or cures lacking adequate scientific validation, such as the drugs ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine. But the line between rogue and responsible was never so easy to draw. Prominent among the dissidents endorsing hydroxychloroquine, for example, was France's Didier Raoult, a charismatic, politically well-connected, and highly credentialed member of France's COVID-19 committee from Marseille. Raoult's work had long been regarded with suspicion by colleagues in the French scientific establishment, for whom he was an outlier.<sup>25</sup> In a time of great public anxiety and demand for quick solutions, however, a figure like Raoult, who offered certainty and was not manifestly unqualified, carried heightened authority. He won powerful support in France and elsewhere, although critics turned on him for deluding people who seemingly did not have the knowledge or capacity to disentangle good science from bad.

While the deficit model rightly points to gaps in expertise between specialists and publics, and hence is reassuring to mainstream science, it leaves unanswered highly pertinent questions about the politics of trust. Why, though indicators demonstrate consistently high public confidence in science and medicine, do some claims dismissed by mainstream science nonetheless gain ground in public opinion? What accounts for particular focal points of distrust, and why do obvious (even ridiculous) falsehoods find readier, more fertile ground in some societies than others? The STS framework of co-production helps make sense of these puzzles. This theoretical posture derives from demonstrated intimate connections between how we see the world (epistemic truth) and how we value the world and wish to live in it (normative truth or justice).<sup>26</sup> Whereas much of administrative and legal practice is geared toward separating the former from the latter, the framework of co-production posits that *in practice* the building of natural ontologies and representations, usually seen as the preserve of science, proceeds hand in hand with the work of developing discourses, identities, and institutions in any society. Indeed, an expert institution has authority as such – that is, it enjoys institutionalized credibility – precisely because it can authorize both knowledge and norms in order to persuade its audiences what are the right beliefs and why those beliefs are the ones to live by. It is not that expert institutions find and purvey truths from some "outside" that exists independent of society; it is that institutions such as courts and expert regulatory agencies are accepted as le-

gitimate largely because of their capacity to diagnose what matters to people and deliver credible knowledge on those issues.<sup>27</sup>

Co-production is a pervasive feature of modernity simply because the lives we live could not be led without the infrastructure of reliable expert knowledge. Finding examples of co-production is therefore more a matter of how one chooses to look at the role of knowledge in decision-making than what specific problems one chooses to look at. Almost any technical certainty we live by can be revisited and re-narrated in the idiom of co-production. It is, however, easiest to demonstrate this process at work when significantly new ways of knowing the world gain a hold on public consciousness and move societies to collective action. These might include the germ theory of disease, the discovery of the ozone hole, the attribution of some cancers to chemicals, the reality of anthropogenic climate change, or the identification of inequality as a social problem.<sup>28</sup> In each of these instances, as in countless less transformative or consequential moments of altered understanding, the change in public awareness followed no simple, linear path from scientific discovery to concerted action. Rather, what historians, political scientists, sociologists, and STS scholars, among others, have repeatedly documented is an intertwined, often long-drawn evolution of new instruments and ways of seeing (such as microscopes, atmospheric chemistry, toxicology tests, climate models, statistics); professionals with acknowledged skills and training (such as doctors, earth scientists, modelers, economists); groups willing to be seen as affected (such as asymptomatic disease carriers, bearers of genetic risk, economically disadvantaged groups); and institutions capable of making and certifying knowledge claims even under conditions of uncertainty (such as university departments, professional societies, expert committees, and regulatory agencies).

What emerges forcefully from these convergent lines of research on knowledge production is that – especially in contested political domains – the legitimacy of scientific facts and representations cannot be disentangled from the ways in which powerful actors account for their claims of expertise to varied audiences. In this sense, public knowledge and public authority are interdependent and co-produced. Put differently, standards of epistemic correctness do not stand outside of politics but are configured through the same processes of social authorization as political legitimacy. It follows that any attempt to build trust solely on the basis of the claimed robustness of science, without addressing the associated politics, is likely to founder under stress.

**T**he framework of co-production has rendered obsolete the model of science policy captured in the well-known phrase “speaking truth to power.” That description of the idealized relationship between science and politics firmly located truth-making on one side of a normative wall and political action on the other. Neither side, this formulation implies, should be allowed to in-

terfere with or contaminate the other: scientists and technical experts should find and speak the truth, wherever it may lead; and power should enact society's purposes, with deference to the truths spoken by science, but not constrained to act in specific ways based solely on what the science says. It is a foundational finding of STS that such a bright line between truth and power does not exist in practice – not until it has been put in place as a result of negotiation or the exercise of power.<sup>29</sup> Politics and power, with small *p*'s, enter into the practices of public knowledge-making in innumerable ways, from close-in choices of instrumentation, methods, and disciplinary criteria of soundness by scientists to larger public determinations about the sources and objectives of research funding, the framing of questions that need to be answered, and decisions about when to declare that knowledge is sufficiently robust for application. The uses may range widely, from administering a vaccine to launching a rocket to offering an algorithmic substitute for counting a population, and much else besides. In each instance, the deployment of knowledge or technology is a social choice, shot through with collective values and preferences.

For practical purposes, of course, as members of modern societies, we mostly accept expert claims and technological artifacts unquestioningly and at face value in our daily lives – for example, airplane timetables, food labels, drug doses, or standardized test results – simply as the price of leading our lives without constant uncertainty. But it remains the case that each of the countless points of epistemic stability, or stubbornness, that we rely on daily comes with its own history of struggle and compromise. And when any one of them becomes controversial, such as through allegations of racial bias in the case of standardized tests, that prehistory can be excavated and reopened for contestation.

This state of affairs, in which a largely invisible world of expert knowledge and skills undergirds the safety, security, and quality of our lives, has led to what we might see as a tacit constitutional settlement: no representation (of conditions in the world) without representation (of the voices of those affected). Indeed, one great movement of democracy through the long twentieth century has been toward publics in all societies demanding more transparency, accountability, and say in the ways that experts determine, and rulers deploy, facts of relevance to all our lives. These moves take many different, culturally grounded forms. Some countries have turned to the law through measures such as the 1946 U.S. Administrative Procedure Act guaranteeing hearings before regulatory action, France's Charter for the Environment cementing citizens' right to participate in decision-making, and the South African Supreme Court's decision upholding the public's constitutional right to participate in law-making on issues of life.<sup>30</sup> In other contexts, citizens have taken to the streets in droves to signal dissatisfaction with official policies on technological issues, such as Germany's massive nuclear protests in the 1970s or the 2008 beef protests in South Korea challenging the

government's decision to import U.S. beef despite public concerns over mad cow disease. What all these moves have in common is a deepening unease with rule by experts and a worry that government reliance on technical expertise often masks the promotion of particular sectarian, class, or economic interests at the expense of the broader public good. The breakdown of trust in experts thus can be traced to a deeper sense of being excluded from the processes by which powerful expert knowledge is made.

**D**emands for representation raise a corollary problem that Rawls and other political philosophers have wrestled with: what to do about the dilemma of epistemic pluralism, or the fact that in modern societies, people may see things differently based on their particular interests and standpoints. Since the Progressive Era, a pragmatic answer has been to look to expert institutions to aggregate epistemic differences and develop consensus on complex policy problems requiring diverse technical inputs.<sup>31</sup> The IPCC is one such body with enormous clout at the international level, a cowinner with former U.S. Vice President Al Gore of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for alerting the world to the perils of climate change. The COVID-19 pandemic thrust any number of other national and global expert bodies into the limelight, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States to the World Health Organization (WHO). One might have expected bodies such as these to consolidate trust during the pandemic, but despite their long-established claims to expert authority, neither the CDC nor the WHO proved equal to the task. Under pressure to justify extensive and unpalatable restrictions on personal liberty in the name of public health, neither organization found its expert reputation to be a sufficient shield. Both fell victim to charges that they were captive to special interests whose political impulses had colored the parent body's reading of the evidence.

Faced with such challenges, expert groups often adopt the discourse of factual truth almost as a conditioned reflex. They claim to be "following the science," as if their own practices of representation, aggregation, and bridging had nothing to do with the knowledge they relied upon. The discourse of truth seeks to abandon the messy battleground of epistemic pluralism by escaping to a position above the fray, seemingly untouched and untouchable by political winds. In complex modern societies, some epistemic moves that serve this purpose have come to be accepted as necessary if an expert body's judgment is to be trusted. Chief among these is the claim of objectivity, the posture that allows knowledge-makers to speak as if from a viewpoint untainted by cognitive bias, subjectivity, or special interest.

Objectivity, however, is not procedure-independent in the sense desired by political theory. It is not an invariant standard but a historically and culturally grounded achievement.<sup>32</sup> Objectivity is constructed in accordance with locally specific criteria of virtue and validity that experts must respect if they are to as-

sert their credibility and legitimacy. Three standpoints are widely seen as guarantors of objectivity, although each is achieved through its particular epistemic practices and forms of accountability: the view from *nowhere* (sanctioned by the methods of empirical science and quantitative analysis); the view from *everywhere* (sanctioned by inclusive representation and fair deliberation); and the view from *somewhere* (sanctioned by individual witnessing and moral authenticity).<sup>33</sup> These standpoints are often brought together within decision-making institutions because each has its frailties and thus, on its own, is vulnerable to challenge and critique. Performed together, they are thought to ensure a kind of overlapping consensus that offers a closer approximation to truth and reality.

A formal courtroom proceeding, for instance, unites the view from somewhere and the view from nowhere. Opposing parties make their case, unabashedly representing their interpretation of the evidence with all the persuasive tools at their disposal. Markers of authenticity, such as expressions of sincerity or remorse, carry weight in such representations, which is why defense lawyers generally try to put their clients on the stand. While legal ethics forbids outright lying by lawyers and witnesses, the spin placed on the facts is allowed to be as partisan as good advocacy can make it, and there is no obligation to represent the situation from any viewpoint other than the litigants' own. It falls to the judge or jury to derive from the opposing arguments a conclusion that does not bear the positional stamp of the parties, but distills from clashing testimonies "from somewhere" a detached and impersonal verdict "from nowhere." The scientific process of peer review followed by editorial judgment offers a similarly hybrid approach: the editor's task is to synthesize from multiple reviews, each possibly reflecting the reviewer's personal biases, a composite recommendation that pushes a publication closer to impartial truth.

By contrast, fact-finding within a typical expert advisory committee aims to produce a synthetic view from everywhere that does not foreground personal opinion or special interests. Here, the presumption is that holism is the best approach to fact-making, and a committee comes closest to reality by combining all relevant perspectives into an inclusive whole. While the size and composition of expert bodies may vary, based on the scope and significance of the issues at stake, the notion that they should incorporate political as well as epistemic diversity is widely held. Committees entrusted with public fact-making often represent multiple disciplines, as well as a cross-section of stakeholder perspectives. Though each participant may bring a view from somewhere, colored by the specifics of that position, the presumption is that, by integrating knowledge from every significant standpoint, the collective body arrives at a representation that can be accepted as unbiased, and hence objective, by all. To strengthen the appearance of consensus, some bodies take pains to avoid dissenting opinions, though others see dissents as contributing to the committee's credibility.

Some approaches to aggregating diverse epistemic positions avoid mediating bodies such as courts or committees and seek instead to take the measure of public opinion directly through mechanisms such as deliberative polling or referenda. Associated particularly with the work of political scientist James S. Fishkin, deliberative polling attempts to combine the virtues of crowd-sourcing information and opinion formation through deliberation in small groups.<sup>34</sup> Any effort to model so large and amorphous a collective as a public can be critiqued for errors of sampling and faulty representation, and Fishkin's approach has drawn its share of such commentary. From an STS perspective, however, the more serious limitation is that instrumental elicitations of public opinion as inputs to policy may reinforce the biases that led to particular, possibly un- or antidemocratic formulations of public problems. For example, in a far-reaching study of deliberative mechanisms designed to set limits on embryo research, STS scholar J. Benjamin Hurlbut showed that most methods of aggregating citizens' views on the subject narrowed the scope of deliberation while technology itself was enlarging the goals and purposes of intervening in human reproduction.<sup>35</sup> Such mismatches between what is of concern to citizens and what actually gets discussed in formal deliberative proceedings can contribute to the gulf between experts and publics and to the undermining of trust.

In practice, collective knowledge-making in any society draws on long-accepted traditions of representation, aggregation, and bridging gaps between what is and what needs to be known. Expert processes do not freely adopt styles of how to argue and how to build agreement. They are regulated by law or embedded in political tradition. Modes of demonstrating objectivity are similarly conditioned by prior social commitments, including rules governing expert professions or derived from administrative law. For example, the view from nowhere has earned special purchase in American politics through entrenched and interlocking practices of public claims-testing that differ considerably from those in other nations with comparably active democracies and powerful scientific communities.<sup>36</sup> These cross-cultural differences play a substantial part in framing how the problem of trust manifests itself within a given society.

**T**he intertwined production of public facts and public norms means that expert bodies cannot achieve buy-in unless their epistemic practices are accepted as valid by the societies in which they operate. These practices vary widely across political systems, even though in principle all such bodies are committed to the same standards of objectivity, "sound science," and "evidence-based" judgment. Just as cultures are defined by recognized and recurrent practices of meaning-making around fundamental social relations – such as kinship, marriage, worship, property rights, death and dying – so political cultures gravitate toward the institutionalized patterns of public fact-making, demonstration,

and reasoning that I have termed civic epistemologies. National political cultures differ, for instance, in the methods they use to construct objectivity in public decisions: through delegation to trusted individuals such as experienced civil servants, through consensus-building within multipartite representative bodies, or through adversarial processes designed to sift good from bad arguments and appeal to impartial knowledge. Institutions that conform to their culture's dominant civic epistemologies are able to maintain public trust because experts and lay publics agree on the right way to develop facts and arguments; by the same token, institutions sacrifice trust and credibility if they operate without awareness of, or against the grain of, their culture's preferred ways of knowing.

Sometime in April 2020, a new icon of trust emerged on the American scene: Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and chief medical advisor to the president. Born on Christmas Eve in 1940, Fauci was an unlikely folk hero. Yet the slogan "In Fauci We Trust" sprouted on innumerable yard signs and pop culture merchandise like mugs and T-shirts. Dubbed the "nation's top infectious disease expert," Fauci conducted countless press interviews while also appearing frequently at President Trump's side in his daily briefings on the pandemic. Fauci's absences drew panicky comments, and his "two-second grimace and a face-palm"<sup>37</sup> on a day when the president joked about the "deep state department" turned him into an internet sensation. As one expert on popular culture observed, "he seems to be talking sense and science."<sup>38</sup> It is tempting to read the Fauci phenomenon as an example of America buying into the view from somewhere, specifically the position of personal credibility occupied by the honest and experienced Dr. Fauci. More plausibly, however, Fauci came to personify the caretaking ethos of the physician who has sworn an oath to put the patient's health foremost, in a moment when no one else in the federal administration seemed to offer coherence, competence, or caring. So seen, Fauci became the voice of transcendent epistemic authority because his mission was that of the nation's healer, an embodiment of the view from everywhere. Instructively, the CDC's efforts to restore trust through abstract appeals to science (the view from nowhere) in the first year of the Biden administration proved less persuasive than Fauci's pronouncements at the pandemic's height.

The peculiarity of the U.S. debate over the trustworthiness of pandemic science emerges most clearly by contrasting it with parallel developments in other Western democracies.<sup>39</sup> Strident objections to vaccine and mask mandates surfaced elsewhere too, for example, in Germany, France, and Canada, but these mapped onto political dissatisfaction with the country's ruling party. Thus, in France, protests against the required use of the *passe sanitaire* (later *passe vaccinal*) to gain entry into specified public spaces reflected much of the same discontent with the policies of Emmanuel Macron that had also fueled the "yellow vest" protests of 2019.<sup>40</sup> At stake in the European debates were explicit constitutional ques-

tions, such as the extent of the state's emergency powers and the proportionality of the state's mandates in relation to the solidity of the available evidence. Neither the dissidents nor the press cast the conflict as one over scientific validity, whereas American media continued to frame comparable U.S. conflicts as stand-offs between the authorizing forces of science and politics. As late as February 2022, two years into the pandemic, an editorial in *The Washington Post* declared, "Science, not politics, should dictate school mask mandates."<sup>41</sup>

Debates in Britain focused even less centrally on science or on epidemiological evidence. In sharp contrast to the U.S. case, the most politically visible controversies of the pandemic era had to do with rule-following by scientists, political officials, and the prime minister himself. The epidemiologist Neil Ferguson, the prime minister's chief strategy adviser Dominic Cummings, and eventually Boris Johnson all paid hefty political prices when each appeared to set himself above the constricting rules that applied to the rest of the British public. Boozy Downing Street parties, some attended by Johnson, called forth police investigations and sanctions, while images of these seemingly illicit gatherings circulated in social media alongside the poignant, dignified image of the Queen observing public health guidelines by mourning alone the death of her husband of seventy-three years. The British public by and large went along with the rules, taking special pride in winning the race to approve the first COVID-19 vaccine. Mask mandates were accepted as matters of public health prudence, and few recorded incidents emerged of conflict over people's acceptance or rejection of masking rules.

The point here is subtle, but profoundly important for the topic of trust in science and expertise. Only in the United States was science repeatedly represented, and called upon, as a direct authorizer of restrictions on public conduct. In other countries, from authoritarian China to democratic Western Europe and countries of the Global South, such as Brazil and India, conflict centered on the role of specific mediating bodies – elected or unelected officials, political parties, expert committees – responsible for translating knowledge to action. The institutional authority of science itself in the public eye proved most fragile in the country, the United States, whose dominant civic epistemology relies most heavily on maintaining a strict separation between facts and values. Put differently, trust eroded most where the alleged objectivity of science was called to substitute for a more open politics of representation, aggregation, and bridging.

Conventional wisdom in America calls for restoring trust in governing institutions by doubling down on technocracy's most sacred legitimating devices: scientific integrity, separating science from politics, and teaching science to publics constantly seen as being in a deficit of knowledge and understanding. This is consistent with the commitment to the distinction between epistemic truth and populist politics that has been a defining feature of this nation's



civic epistemology, as propagated by its intellectual and professional elites and by many democracy theorists. An approach grounded in STS suggests that this way of thinking will not get to the heart of weakened trust in our era of fractured facts and polarized parties. If there is something still to be taken away from Burke's prescription for how to restore trust in a time of profound discontent, it is that the answer lies in doing politics better – only, in modern times, that prescription has to extend beyond making stronger political collectives to improving the production of knowledge for politics. Parties alone cannot be the answer when the parties are separated by their understanding of the rightful connections between power and expertise. At the same time, mechanisms geared toward improving science communication or sampling public opinion on already defined policy issues are also likely to fall short by ignoring the intertwining of epistemic and political values.

Credible fact-making for policy purposes demands the same broad moves as are required for credible politics. Experts must represent things in the world in ways that give voice to diverse standpoints, aggregate disparate opinions to produce a measure of objectivity, and find persuasive ways to bridge the gaps between available and ideal states of knowledge. Expert practices in any society, moreover, must conform to its own recognized approaches to producing and testing public knowledge. Simply insisting on the authority of science without attending to the politics of reason and persuasion has proved not to restore trust in either knowledge or power. In a polarized political system like that of the United States, where each side doubts the other's epistemic integrity, there is no panacea that will magically restore trust. Modest beginnings can be made, however, with more inclusive processes for framing policy questions, greater attentiveness to dissenting voices and minority views, and humility in admitting where regulatory restrictions are based more on prudence and concern for others than on "sound science." Ultimately, the solution to a world whose "solemn plausibilities . . . have lost their reverence and effect" is not to walk away from the politics of truth, but to understand, improve, and knowingly embrace it.

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ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Availability: A Heuristic for Judging Frequency and Probability," *Cognitive Psychology* 5 (2) (1973): 207–232.
- <sup>2</sup> Sheila Jasanoff and Hilton R. Simmet, "No Funeral Bells: Public Reason in a 'Post-Truth' Age," *Social Studies of Science* 47 (5) (2017): 751–770.
- <sup>3</sup> "Democracy dies in darkness" is the motto of *The Washington Post*.
- <sup>4</sup> Edmund Burke, *Thoughts on the Present Discontents and Speeches*, ed. Henry Morley (Salt Lake City: Project Gutenberg eBook, 2007 [1770]), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2173/2173-h/2173-h.htm>.
- <sup>5</sup> I am focusing on the United States in this essay, although loss of trust in government and expertise is a more pervasive phenomenon, heightened by the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in democratic societies. The 2022 trucker rebellions that spread from Canada to countries such as Australia, France, and New Zealand are just one example of an international rebellion against what I have elsewhere called "public health sovereignty." Nonetheless, the almost fifty-fifty cleavage of the polity into opposing camps across a range of issues demanding expert judgment was unique to the United States before and during the pandemic era.
- <sup>6</sup> Charlie Savage and Heather Murphy, "Federal Judge Strikes Down Mask Mandate for Planes and Public Transit," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2022.
- <sup>7</sup> Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2018).
- <sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," *The New Yorker*, February 25, 1967. Arendt offered as an example of an incontrovertible fact that Germany invaded Belgium in 1914 and not the other way around. The Russia-Ukraine war of 2022 renders that reading problematic in ways that others have noted but are beyond the scope of this essay.
- <sup>9</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "IPCC Factsheet: What Is the IPCC?" [https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2021/07/AR6\\_FS\\_What\\_is\\_IPCC.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2021/07/AR6_FS_What_is_IPCC.pdf).
- <sup>10</sup> Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, trans. Thaddeus J. Trenn (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1979 [1935]).
- <sup>11</sup> Sheila Jasanoff, *The Fifth Branch: Science Advisers as Policymakers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).
- <sup>12</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1st ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
- <sup>13</sup> Sheila Jasanoff, *Designs on Nature: Science and Democracy in Europe and the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- <sup>14</sup> These are, of course, broad generalizations, but they are backed up by many case studies and longue durée observations. See, for example, *ibid.*, comparing biotechnology regulation in Europe and the United States. One may also cite in this context relatively high degrees of American skepticism toward the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and, more recently, even the COVID-19 policy recommendations of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Both the IPCC and the CDC operate mostly in the expert committee mode.
- <sup>15</sup> Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013); and Hélène Landemore, "Beyond

- the Fact of Disagreement? The Epistemic Turn in Deliberative Democracy,” *Social Epistemology* 31 (3) (2017): 277–295.
- <sup>16</sup> Zeynep Tufekci, “How Social Media Took Us from Tahrir Square to Donald Trump,” *MIT Technology Review*, August 14, 2018, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2018/08/14/240325/how-social-media-took-us-from-tahrir-square-to-donald-trump/>.
- <sup>17</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, exp. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); but see also Joseph Raz, “Facing Diversity: The Case of Epistemic Abstinence,” in *Ethics in the Public Domain: Essays in the Morality of Law and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- <sup>18</sup> Landemore, “Beyond the Fact of Disagreement,” 280–285.
- <sup>19</sup> Classic STS works that make this fundamental point include David Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); Bruno Latour, *Science in Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); Donald MacKenzie, *Inventing Accuracy: A Historical Sociology of Nuclear Missile Guidance* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990); Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985); and Brian Wynne, *Rationality and Ritual: Participation and Exclusion in Nuclear Decision-Making*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge Earthscan, 2011 [1982]). See also Jasanoff, *The Fifth Branch*.
- <sup>20</sup> Yaron Ezrahi, “Science and the Political Imagination in Contemporary Democracies,” in *States of Knowledge: The Co-production of Science and the Social Order*, ed. Sheila Jasanoff (London: Routledge, 2004), 254–273.
- <sup>21</sup> Alan Irwin and Brian Wynne, eds., *Misunderstood Misunderstandings: Social Identities and Public Uptake of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- <sup>22</sup> Paul R. Gross and Normal Levitt, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).
- <sup>23</sup> Stephen Hilgartner, Sheila Jasanoff, and J. Benjamin Hurlbut, “Was ‘Science’ on the Ballot?” *Science* 371 (6532) (2021): 893–894.
- <sup>24</sup> David Michaels, *Doubt is Their Product: How Industry’s Assault on Science Threatens Your Health* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010).
- <sup>25</sup> Robert Zaretsky, “The Trumpian French Doctor Behind the Chloroquine Hype,” *Slate*, March 30, 2020, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/03/didier-raoult-hydroxy-chloroquine-plaquenil.html>.
- <sup>26</sup> Jasanoff, ed., *States of Knowledge*.
- <sup>27</sup> David Demortain, *The Science of Bureaucracy: Risk Decision-Making and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2020); and Daniel Carpenter, *Reputation and Power: Organizational Image and Pharmaceutical Regulation at the FDA* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).
- <sup>28</sup> Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*. See also Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962, 1987); Richard E. Benedick, *Ozone Diplomacy: New Directions in Safeguarding the Planet*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Ronald Brickman, Sheila Jasanoff, and Thomas Ilgen, *Controlling Chemicals: The Politics of Regulation in Europe and the United States* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985); Paul N. Edwards, *A Vast Machine*:

*Computer Models, Climate Data, and the Politics of Global Warming* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010); and Thomas Piketty, *A Brief History of Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2022).

- <sup>29</sup> See references in endnote 19 above.
- <sup>30</sup> *Doctors for Life International v. Speaker of the National Assembly*, 2006 (6) SA 416 (CC) (South Africa).
- <sup>31</sup> Stephen Skowronek, Stephen M. Engel, and Bruce Ackerman, eds., *The Progressives' Century: Political Reform, Constitutional Government, and the Modern American State* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016). For a useful listing of mechanisms of knowledge aggregation, see Stephen Turner, "Political Epistemology, Experts and the Aggregation of Knowledge," *Spontaneous Generations* 1 (1) (2007): 36–46.
- <sup>32</sup> Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (Brooklyn and Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books and MIT Press, 2007).
- <sup>33</sup> The idea of the "view from nowhere" is often attributed to Thomas Nagel's book of the same name. See Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). In STS usage, however, this is not an idealist position of objectivity but rather the sought-after endpoint of social practices that aim to shear away perspectival bias so that only detached truth is left standing in the end.
- <sup>34</sup> James S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- <sup>35</sup> J. Benjamin Hurlbut, *Experiments in Democracy: Human Embryo Research and the Politics of Bioethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
- <sup>36</sup> Jasanoff, *Designs on Nature*.
- <sup>37</sup> Christian Paz, "Anthony Fauci's Gen Z Cred," *The Atlantic*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/04/how-anthony-fauci-made-himself-meme/610330/>.
- <sup>38</sup> Daxia Rojas, "America's Love Affair With an Elderly Epidemiologist," *The Jakarta Post*, April 19, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2020/04/19/americas-love-affair-with-an-elderly-epidemiologist.html>.
- <sup>39</sup> These comparative observations are drawn from an ongoing and still incomplete study of responses to COVID-19 in sixteen countries that I am co-leading with Stephen Hilgartner of Cornell University under grants from the National Science Foundation and Schmidt Futures. For an interim report from January 2021, see Sheila Jasanoff, Stephen Hilgartner, J. Benjamin Hurlbut, et al., *Comparative Covid Response: Crisis, Knowledge, Politics – Interim Report* (Cambridge, Mass., and Ithaca, N.Y.: Harvard Kennedy School and Cornell University, 2021), <https://compcore.cornell.edu/publications/>.
- <sup>40</sup> Introduced by law on May 31, 2021, and later replaced by the *passé vaccinal*, the app provided proof of vaccination and was required for entry into such spaces as museums, restaurants, and certain forms of public transport.
- <sup>41</sup> The Editorial Board, "Science, Not Politics, Should Dictate School Mask Mandates," *The Washington Post*, February 12, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/02/12/science-not-politics-should-dictate-school-mask-mandates/>.

# Fifty Years of Declining Confidence & Increasing Polarization in Trust in American Institutions

*Henry E. Brady & Thomas B. Kent*

*Except for the military and science, confidence in most American political and non-political institutions has fallen precipitously over the past fifty years. Declines in trust are partly the result of dissatisfaction with governmental and institutional accountability and concomitant skepticism about the competency and responsiveness of institutions. Declines are also the result of a polarization in trust in institutions, as Republicans trust business, the police, religion, and the military much more than Democrats, whose confidence in these institutions, except the military, has fallen. In turn, Democrats trust labor, the press, science, higher education, and public schools much more than Republicans, whose confidence in these institutions has fallen. Declines and polarization in confidence may be traceable to political polarization stemming from increasing income inequality and segregation in America. With polarization and decreasing trust in institutions, it becomes more difficult to fight epidemics, maintain faith in policing, and deal with problems such as climate change.*

Everyday life depends upon confidence in institutions. We trust the military and police to protect us, businesses to deliver safe products at reasonable prices, educational institutions to instruct our children, the media to transmit truthful and useful information, doctors and lawyers to cure and defend us, and government to act in our best interest. But confidence in these institutions has declined and become politically polarized in the past fifty years. How and why has this happened? What does it mean for America when trust declines and some people trust institutions more than others, especially when the split in trust is across party lines?

Every year or two since the early 1970s, the Gallup Poll, NORC's General Social Survey (GSS), and the Harris Poll have asked a series of questions about the public's confidence in the "people in charge of running institutions" or in these "institutions" themselves. Each survey typically asks about fifteen or so institutions, although not all the same ones. Over the entire period we have continuous data on four political institutions and sixteen nonpolitical ones.<sup>1</sup>

The four political institutions are the presidency, the executive branch, Congress, and the Supreme Court of the United States.<sup>2</sup> Trust in these governing institutions has declined dramatically in the past fifty years (see Figure 1). On a scale with answers of:

- (3) “a great deal of confidence,”
- (2) “quite a lot of confidence,”
- (1) “some confidence,”
- (0) “hardly any confidence at all,”

confidence in the presidency has gone from usually nearer “quite a lot” in the 1970s and 1980s (except for just after the Watergate scandal around 1972 to 1974) to just “some” in the last decade.<sup>3</sup> Between the period of 1972 to 1979 and the period of 2010 to 2021, confidence in Congress declined by 45 percent. Confidence in the presidency and in the executive branch declined by about 20 percent, and confidence in the Supreme Court declined by 12 percent.<sup>4</sup> These changes mirror the drop in trust in “government” of about 40 percent found over the same period on another set of surveys, the American National Election Studies.<sup>5</sup>

The sixteen nonpolitical institutions cover all major segments of society.<sup>6</sup> Four are associated with the economy: business, banks, Wall Street, and organized labor (see Figure 2). Seven are related to knowledge and information production: the press, TV news, television, public schools, education, higher education, and science (see Figure 3). Three enforce norms and standards: the police, the military, and religion. Two deliver professional services: medicine and law (see Figure 4 for these last five).<sup>7</sup> Historically, these have all been considered neutral, nonpolitical institutions for the provision of goods and services.

The decline in confidence in these nonpolitical institutions is less well known than the drop in trust in government. In Figures 2–4, confidence falls relatively steadily for almost all institutions, with some ups and downs superimposed. If we compare average confidence in each of these nonpolitical institutions from 1972 to 1979 with average confidence from 2010 to 2021, confidence has declined in fourteen of the institutions, stayed the same for one (science), and increased only for the military. Most of these declines occurred relatively steadily over time, with the largest ones – comparable to the drops for Congress and government as a whole – occurring for Wall Street, TV news, banks, and the press. More moderate declines – comparable to those for the presidency and executive branch – occurred for public schools, medicine, television, business, and religion. Smaller reductions – roughly comparable to those for the Supreme Court – occurred for law, education, and the police. Still smaller decreases occurred for higher education and labor. Figure 5 summarizes these changes in the Gallup-GSS-Harris data, with the four political institutions in the darker bars and the sixteen nonpolitical institutions in the lighter bars.

Figure 1  
Confidence in Four Political Institutions from 1972 to 2021

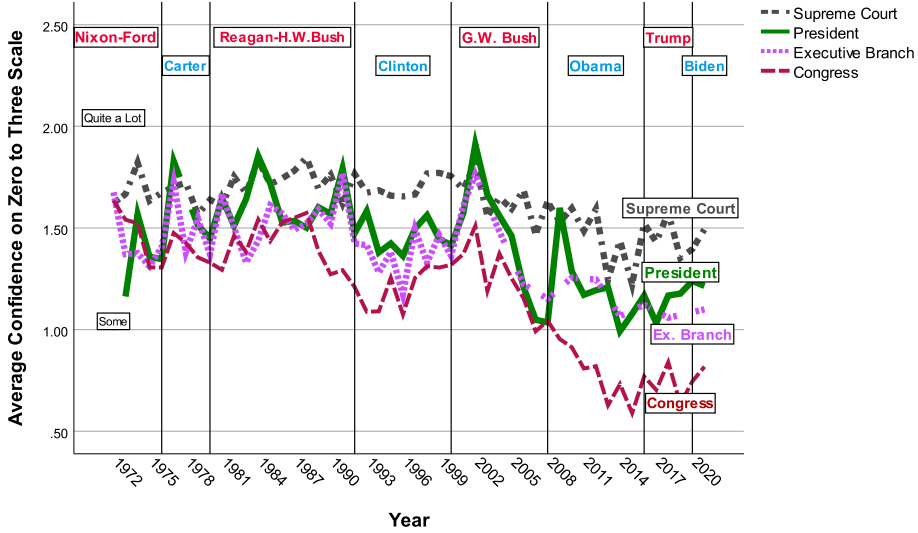
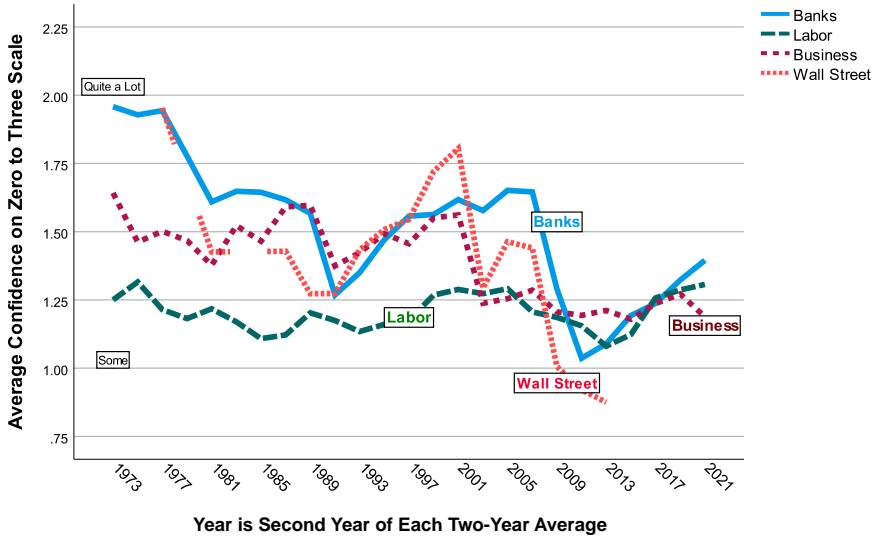


Figure 2  
Confidence in Four Nonpolitical Institutions Related to the Economy from 1972 to 2021



Source (Figures 1 and 2): Authors' data and calculations from pooled Gallup Polls, Harris Polls, and General Social Surveys.

Figure 3

Confidence in Seven Nonpolitical Institutions Related to Knowledge and Information Production from 1972 to 2021

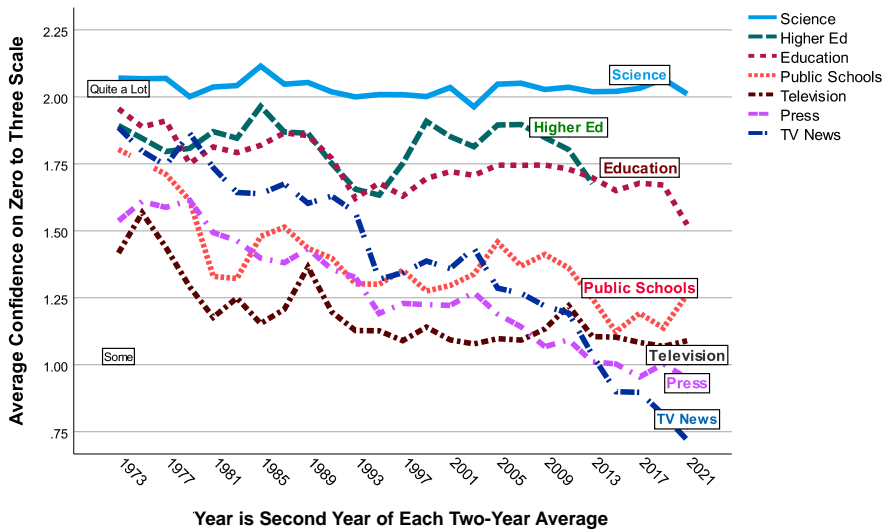
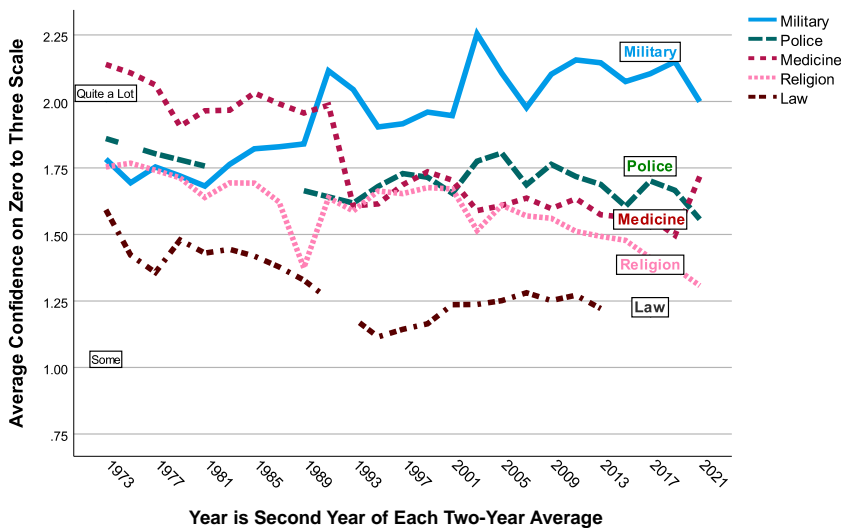


Figure 4

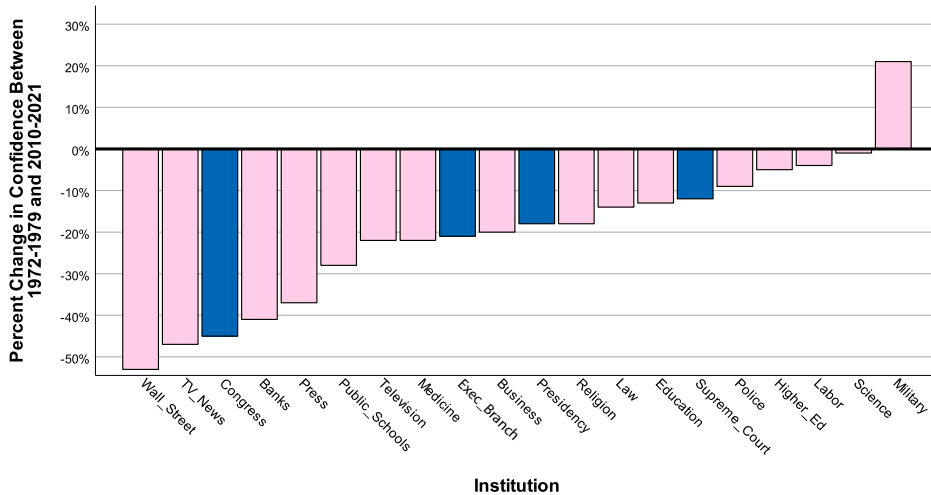
Confidence in Three Nonpolitical Institutions Related to Norm Enforcement and Two Providing Professional Services from 1972 to 2021



Source (Figures 3 and 4): Authors' data and calculations from pooled Gallup Polls, Harris Polls, and General Social Surveys.



Figure 5  
Changes in Confidence in Political and Nonpolitical Institutions  
between 1972–1979 and 2010–2021



Source: Authors' data and calculations from pooled Gallup Polls, Harris Polls, and General Social Surveys.

These declines have been significant, and nonpolitical institutions have gone from being trusted quite a lot to being trusted only somewhat. The American people expressed “quite a lot” of confidence in 1972–1979 in thirteen of the sixteen nonpolitical institutions, and they expressed merely “some” confidence in only three of them (labor, law, and television) back then. By 2010–2021, only six institutions – education, higher education, medicine, the military, science, and police – still enjoyed “quite a lot” of confidence, and ten institutions warranted just “some” confidence. Recent data suggest that Americans probably have only “some” confidence in higher education as well because the time-series for higher education from the Harris Poll used in Figures 3 and 5 ends at 2012, and data from the Pew Research Center show that trust in higher education has fallen significantly since 2012.<sup>8</sup> So Americans have gone from believing that thirteen of sixteen nonpolitical institutions deserved quite a lot of confidence to believing that only five of sixteen merit quite a lot of confidence, and that eleven deserve just some confidence.

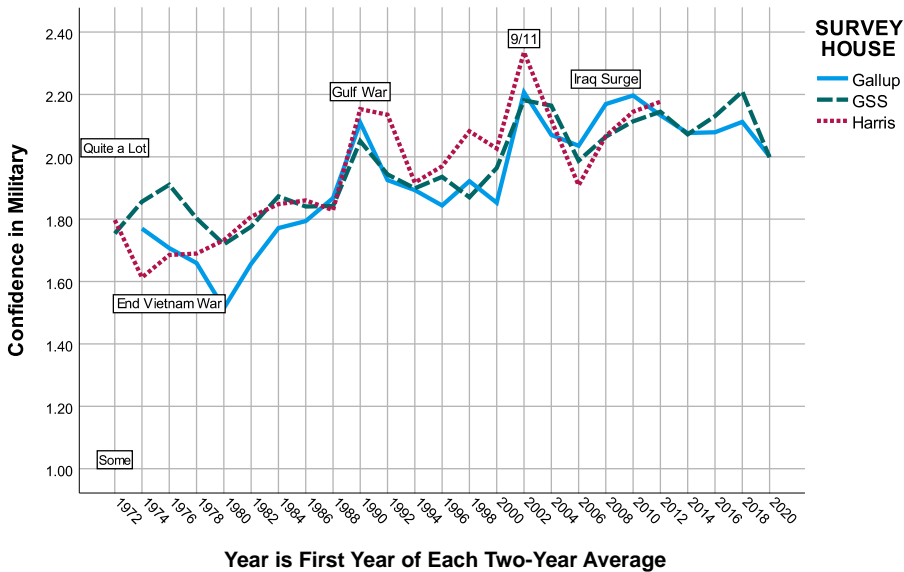
Confidence in science is about the same in the 2010–2021 period as it was in the 1972–1979 period, and confidence in the military has increased by about 21 percent, according to the Gallup-GSS-Harris data. Confidence in labor has only

gone down by 4 percent, but labor was the least trusted institution (political or nonpolitical) in the 1972–1979 period with only “some” confidence expressed in it, so it did not have much room to fall. Its decline by 4 percent is significant given these circumstances. Medicine and science were the number one and number two most trusted of all institutions in 1972–1979 with “quite a lot” of confidence expressed in them, so the drop in confidence in medicine (becoming the fifth-most trusted institution) is not surprising, but the stability of confidence in science is surprising. As we shall see, this steadiness masks some interesting partisan dynamics. The increase in confidence in the military is real, but feeling thermometers from the American National Election Studies that ask about “warmth toward an institution” starting in 1964 suggest that confidence in the military declined through the rest of the 1960s as a result of the Vietnam War and that some of the gain from the 1970s is a return to 1964 levels of confidence, although the rest of the gain reaches still higher levels of confidence than even the early 1960s.

**H**ow do we know that confidence questions are capturing something real? The evidence is clearest for the military: confidence in the military closely tracks the ups and downs of national security events. Figure 6 plots confidence in the military from 1972 onward for three different survey houses: Gallup, GSS, and Harris. The similarities in the ups and downs across the three survey organizations indicate that they are measuring comparable attitudes, and the pattern over time signals that confidence in the military responds to actual events. The low values for confidence on the left correspond to the end of the Vietnam War period when confidence in the military was low. The success of the 1990–1991 Gulf War led to increased confidence in the military. The peak right after September 11, 2001, suggests a rally-around-the-flag effect. High casualties, insurgency, and civil war in Iraq then led to declines in confidence in the military, while the January 2007 “surge” quickly inspired more confidence in the military, as American casualties fell and ethnosectarian violence in Iraq decreased.<sup>9</sup> Despite these effects, it is surprising that the military retained the confidence of Americans through the failed war in Afghanistan, finally ended by Joseph Biden in the summer of 2021, although the most recent survey evidence suggests a decline in confidence as indicated by the drop in the 2020–2021 average for confidence in the military in Figure 6.

Just as confidence in the military is affected by national security events, confidence in Wall Street is affected by the major ups and downs of the stock market, such as the peaks from the dot-com bubble of 2000 and the housing mortgage securities–fueled 2007 run-up, and subsequent downturns in the recession of 2001 and the Great Recession of 2008–2009. Confidence in banks was greatly affected by the savings and loans failures of 1988 to 1992 and the bank failures of the Great Recession of 2008–2009. There are local high points in confidence in 1988

Figure 6  
Confidence in the Military from 1972 to 2021



Source: Authors' data and calculations from pooled Gallup Polls, Harris Polls, and General Social Surveys.

and 2006 followed by local valleys in 1991 and 2009–2011, with half-point or more drops on the zero-to-three scale.<sup>10</sup> There is also a local peak in confidence in banks in 1977 followed by a precipitous drop until 1981 that cannot be explained by bank failures. Instead, mortgage rates began to increase from about 8 percent in 1977, where they had been for a while, to the peak of the last fifty years of over 16 percent in 1981, as the Federal Reserve tightened the money supply to fight inflation. It is very likely that this drop in confidence reflects concerns about high mortgage rates charged by banks during this period.

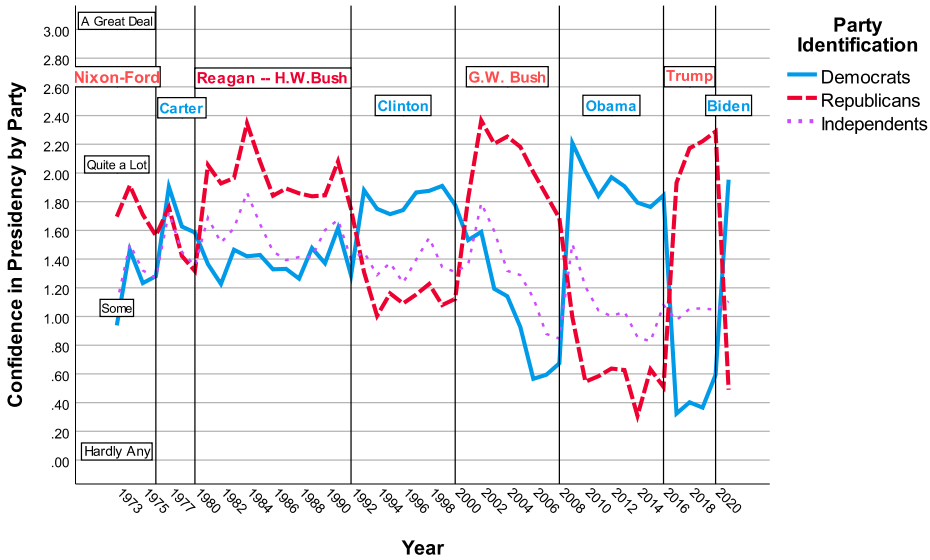
Although confidence in other institutions is not so clearly affected by episodic major events (see the relatively smooth declines in Figures 2–4 for most institutions), other factors, including the accumulations of events and experiences, have substantial impacts on trust. Those who attend religious services nearly every week or more have “quite a lot” of confidence in religion whereas those who never attend trust religion only “some.” African Americans are about 25 percent less confident in the police than White Americans, presumably because of their ongoing negative experiences with the police. Members of union households are 25 percent

more confident in labor. Those in the highest quintile of education are 20 percent more trusting of science than those in the lowest quintile. Those in the highest income quintile have 15 percent more confidence in business and Wall Street than those in the lowest income quintile. Young people are about 10 percent more likely to have confidence in higher education than older people. In all these cases, individual life experiences, indexed by socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, affect confidence in these institutions. In addition, the GDP growth rate is positively associated with about 30 percent of the variance over time in confidence in Wall Street, 11 percent in business confidence, and 11 percent in confidence in banks, but it is not, just as we would expect, associated with confidence in any other nonpolitical institution. The unemployment rate is negatively associated with about 24 percent of the variance in trust in labor, but there is no significant correlation of confidence in labor with growth rate.<sup>11</sup> These relationships provide evidence that confidence is measuring something meaningful to people.

**I**n addition to significant declines in confidence, there have been substantial increases in partisan polarization in confidence in which the partisans of one party have more confidence in an institution than the partisans of the other party, merely because of perceptions about which party controls the institution. Among the four political institutions, polarization depends upon which party has control of the institution at a given moment. This moment is easiest to define for the presidency and the executive branch, for which periodic elections determine their partisanship. Figure 7 displays trust in the president by partisan group from 1973 to the present.<sup>12</sup> There are several interesting features. First, the most trusting are always the partisans of the president's party. When there is a Republican president, then Republicans are the most confident in the president, and when there is a Democratic president, then Democrats are most confident. And the confidence of the partisans of the incumbent president's party depends most of all on their partisanship: it remains more or less constant over time at "quite a lot," with some variation, such as the peak confidence in 2001 for Republicans and even for Democrats – for a president of the other party – due to Americans rallying around the flag after 9/11. Second, the lowest level of trust is for the out-party partisans, those of the opposite party from the president, and it has fallen dramatically over time from midway between "some" and "quite a lot" to closer to "hardly any at all." Republicans did not have even some confidence in Obama and Democrats had hardly any confidence in Trump. Third, trust among independents has gone down over time. This decline in confidence among out-party partisans and independents has caused trust in the presidency to decline overall.

Confidence in the executive branch behaves similarly. The stories for Congress and the Supreme Court are more complicated given the difficulties of identifying their partisanship, but they reveal some of the same forces at work.

Figure 7  
Trust in the Presidency by Party from 1973 to 2021



Source : Authors’ data and calculations from pooled Gallup Polls, Harris Polls, and General Social Surveys.

Among nonpolitical institutions, only business and labor showed significant polarization in the 1970s, with Republicans trusting business about 21 percent more than Democrats and Democrats trusting labor about 28 percent more than Republicans.<sup>13</sup> By the 2010s, assessments of every institution except banks were more polarized than in the 1970s. These changes in polarization are summarized in Figure 8 for the 1972–1979 period and in Figure 9 for the 2010–2021 period. The graphs plot the average level of confidence in sixteen institutions during the time period for Democrats against the average level of confidence for Republicans.

For the 1972–1979 period depicted in Figure 8, some institutions are trusted more than others, appearing farther to the right and toward the top of the graph. The diagonal “neutral” solid line indicates where the institutions would be located if Democrats and Republicans had the same average confidence in them. To get a sense of how much difference there is in confidence between the parties, we add two other dashed lines: one 0.25 units above the neutral line and another 0.25 units below that line. We chose this number (somewhat arbitrarily) because it is about the same as the decline in confidence in the presidency from the 1970s to the

Figure 8  
Polarization in Confidence in Institutions in 1972 – 1979

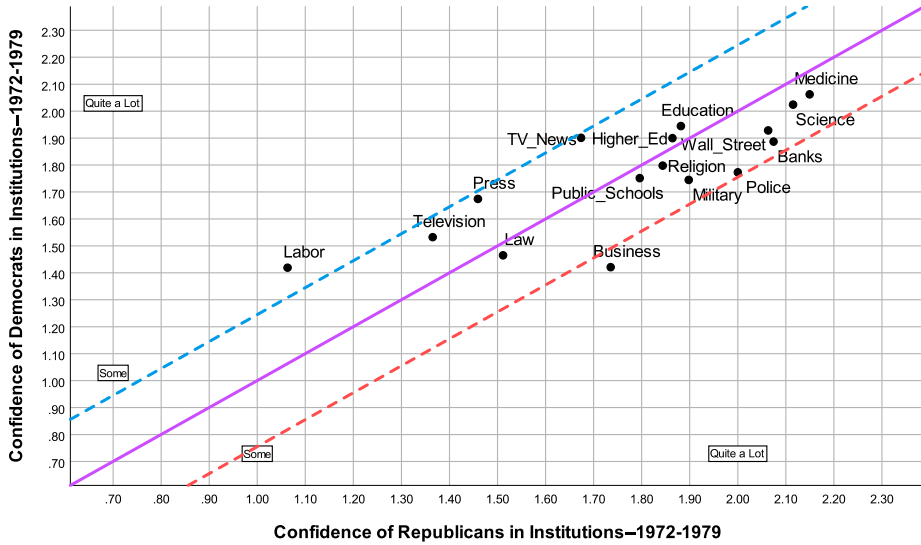
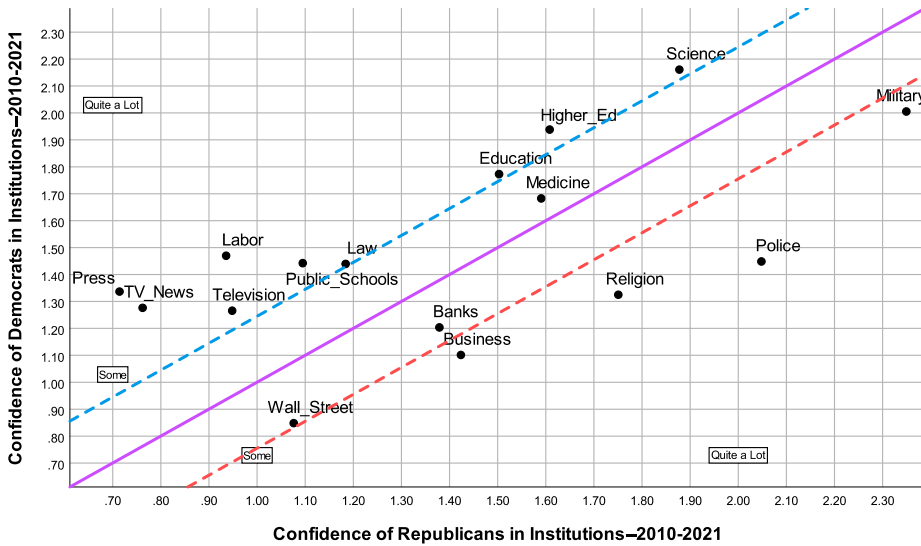


Figure 9  
Polarization in Confidence in Institutions in 2010 – 2021



Source (Figures 8 and 9): Authors' data and calculations from pooled Gallup Polls, Harris Polls, and General Social Surveys.

present, somewhat less than half the decline in confidence in the U.S. Congress, and one-twelfth of the entire zero-to-three confidence scale.

As indicated above, only business and labor fall significantly from the diagonal line of neutrality in the 1972–1979 period. Republicans trusted business much more than Democrats and Democrats trusted labor much more than Republicans. In addition, several other institutions are on or near one of the dashed lines: TV news and the press were slightly more trusted by Democrats than by Republicans. On the other side, the police and banks were slightly more trusted by Republicans than by Democrats. While there was some polarization, what is most remarkable about this picture is that there was very little partisanship with regard to trust in most major institutions.

For the 2010–2021 period depicted in Figure 9 using the same scale, many institutions have moved to the bottom-left of the graph, indicating a loss of confidence, and almost all of them have moved outward from the solid line and beyond the dashed lines, indicating polarization. In the current period, there is now polarization in trust across almost all institutions that is comparable to or more than the polarization in partisan trust of business and labor in the 1970s. Democrats trust the knowledge- and information-producing institutions and organized labor more than Republicans: 54 percent more for TV news, 46 percent more for the press, 44 percent more for labor, 37 percent more for television, 28 percent more for public schools, 19 percent more for higher education, 16 percent more for education, and 14 percent more for science.<sup>14</sup> Republicans trust the norm-enforcing institutions and business more than Democrats: 38 percent more for police, 30 percent more for religion, 27 percent more for business, 25 percent more for Wall Street, and 13 percent more for the military. Only banks and medicine are clearly within the dashed lines. A comparison of Figures 8 and 9 also reveals that law, public schools, science, and medicine have moved from being more trusted by Republicans than Democrats in the earlier period to being now more trusted by Democrats than Republicans. Finally, an analysis that compares the 2010–2015 period to the 2016–2021 period reveals that polarization is continuing with more polarization in confidence for twelve of the fifteen nonpolitical institutions for which we have data, especially for the police, the press, higher education, television, science, and TV news, whose differences in partisan evaluations of confidence nearly or more than doubled over that short period of time.<sup>15</sup>

**F**or twelve of the thirteen nonpolitical institutions (excepting banks) in which trust has fallen, the decline in overall confidence is partly explained by this polarization, with confidence among partisans of the currently less-trusting political party dropping especially precipitously, while the confidence of the other, more trusting, political party either declining only a bit or even increasing somewhat.

For the two cases in which confidence has changed slightly or not at all, labor and science, there are two different stories. After a dip in confidence through the Reagan years (perhaps precipitated by President Reagan's antilabor policies, including his breaking of the Air Traffic Controllers' Strike of 1981), the confidence of Democrats and independents in labor has increased somewhat over the past thirty-five years while Republicans' confidence has stayed the same, except for a drop and then rebound during the Obama years. Republicans were more favorable toward science until the mid-2000s, when a switch occurred and Democrats became much more favorable than Republicans.

For banks, partisan differences have remained about the same, and the major cause of the overall decline in confidence appears to be, as noted earlier, episodes of bank failures, whose effects on confidence then persist. And for the one case in which trust has increased – the military – the biggest factor has been the substantial increase in confidence among the partisans of the more trusting party, in this case, the Republicans, although trust in the military among Democrats has gone up as well.

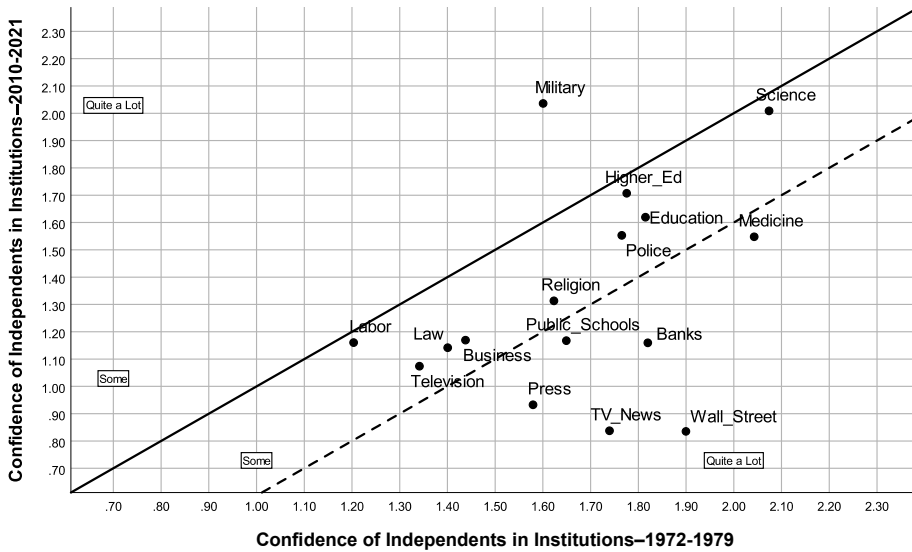
Confidence among political independents is always either lower than that of both Democrats and Republicans or between the levels of those partisans, and trust has changed among independents in almost the same way as in the entire population (see Figure 10). This graph plots independents' confidence in each nonpolitical institution in 2010–2021 against their confidence in 1972–1979. For institutions above the solid diagonal line, trust has increased over time; for those below, it has decreased. Trust in the military increased among independents between 1972–1979 and 2010–2021, but declined for every other institution, with especially large drops for Wall Street, TV news, banks, the press, public schools, and medicine. These institutions are all below the dashed line in Figure 10 with changes of 0.40 or more. These six nonpolitical institutions also had the largest overall declines in Figure 5.

These data reveal distinct and complementary patterns of change for nonpolitical institutions. In some cases, changing confidence in a particular institution can be linked to a large-scale event with society-wide consequences; for example, across individuals and groups, a war can affect confidence in the military (see Figure 6), or a financial crisis can diminish confidence in banks and Wall Street. In other cases, individual life experiences might have implications for confidence in a particular institution: for example, being the victim of police harassment or the victim of a crime might influence trust in the police. We have already cited evidence for these kinds of events and life experiences affecting confidence for various nonpolitical institutions.

In a quite different pattern, a set of general nonpartisan forces – affecting independents especially strongly – produces an overall decline in trust in almost all nonpolitical institutions (see Figure 10). Although different groups, including different party groups, vary in their initial levels of confidence in various nonpolit-



Figure 10  
Changes in Confidence for Independents from 1972–1979 to 2010–2021



Source: Authors' data and calculations from pooled Gallup Polls, Harris Polls, and General Social Surveys.

ical institutions, such forces operate more or less uniformly across groups to diminish confidence in all institutions, including political ones.

In still another distinct pattern, there is a partisan interaction. Some factors lead to a decline in trust among members of one party or the other, depending upon the type of institution, resulting in polarization in confidence (see Figures 8 and 9). The effects are related to the kind of institution, with trust falling for the knowledge- and information-producing institutions for Republicans and for the norm-enforcing institutions for Democrats.

The forces at work probably interact in complicated ways. To identify what is going on, we must consider the events and life experiences that affect trust, and the multiple forces that have led to a secular decline in trust and those that have led to partisan polarization in trust.

Getting at these explanatory factors requires understanding what institutions need to do to elicit trust. Being viewed as legitimate both by their stakeholders and by the public at large provides the foundation for trust. Legitimacy underlies confidence. As noted in the introduction to this issue of

*Dædalus*, legitimacy can come from four basic sources, and different institutions rely on different mixes of sources of legitimation.<sup>16</sup> Legitimacy can stem from the political system sharing its *regulatory authority* with an institution – such as the military, police, or a corporation – based upon government’s power of coercion to defend the nation, keep the peace, and enforce contracts. As long as the institution conforms to the rules established by the government, it draws legitimacy from its relationship to the government in the form of laws or charters. Legitimacy may also come from adherence to *culturally approved and accepted meanings and logics*, as with the practice of medicine, religion, education, and science that are shaped by what is culturally appropriate for each institution. It may reside in *moral and normative beliefs* about how those in institutions behave, as with professional codes of ethics for law, medicine, higher education, and journalism. Finally, it may come from *pragmatic authority based on efficiency and high performance*, as with corporations, science, or banks.

To be successful, an institution must be seen as legitimate in at least one and often in all four ways. If an institution is legitimate, then it is usually seen as trustworthy as well. It will be trusted by individuals, and people will accept the institution’s advice, services, and decisions. They will have confidence in it.

The four sources of legitimacy are places to look to understand the various patterns in the decline and polarization of trust. It is obvious that events and experiences can affect legitimacy and confidence: legitimacy declines when institutions defy regulatory authority, fail to adhere to culturally approved logics, violate moral and normative beliefs, or simply do not perform. For example, bank failures indicate insufficient performance and an inability to meet regulatory requirements. Corruption in institutions such as religious organizations violates moral and normative beliefs and reduces people’s confidence in those institutions. Rising tuition for higher education suggests a lack of performance and erodes confidence. Legitimacy and confidence are enhanced when events and experiences conform with and reinforce regulatory, cultural, normative, or pragmatic legitimacy. Science gains legitimacy when it uses culturally accepted logics, such as peer review; business corporations gain legitimacy when economic growth is high. People are more confident in labor when unemployment is low. Identifying these events and experiences for each institution can help to explain movements in confidence, but they do not seem to be enough to explain the secular decline in trust and the increasing polarization of trust.

What broad nonpartisan forces could lead to an overall loss of confidence and how could partisan forces lead to polarization in confidence in institutions? These forces might be related to one another, but it is useful to start by looking for nonpartisan forces that undermine legitimacy and hence social cohesion, the sense of trust among people and between people and institutions.<sup>17</sup> Other essays in this volume suggest that we live in a skeptical age replete with journalists and pun-

dits constantly questioning authority and brimming with more and more college-educated people trained to doubt and to question authority. Rising skepticism might account for the general trend toward declining confidence in institutions, but we are far from knowing whether this explains the large declines in trust, especially since it suggests that people were overly credulous of institutions in the past.

Declining confidence in institutions is also associated with a diminution in political efficacy, an increase in political alienation, and declining trust in other people when asked: “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in life?” Social trust gauged by this question has decreased over the past fifty years, and it is generally correlated with confidence in institutions.<sup>18</sup> Taken together, these results reveal additional symptoms of the overall syndrome of splintering social cohesion, but they do not explain its roots unless we can explain falling efficacy, increasing alienation, and diminished social trust.

The overall erosion of trust across multiple institutions suggests that we should look more widely for major social trends that might undermine trust among all groups and increase alienation. Two possible causes that might affect the social fabric are fifty years of mounting inequality and increasing diversity in the United States through immigration and differential birth rates.<sup>19</sup>

Economic inequality has increased in the United States over the past fifty years, with the top 1 percent’s wealth going from 25 percent to almost 40 percent of all wealth and their income jumping from 10 percent to 20 percent of all earnings. This widening inequality followed an earlier period of growing income for everyone:

From 1946 to 1980, growth [in income] was evenly distributed with all income groups growing at the average 2 percent annual rate (except the top 1 percent which grew slower). From 1980 to 2018, growth has been unevenly distributed with low growth for bottom income groups, mediocre growth for the middle class, and explosive growth at the top.<sup>20</sup>

Diversity increased dramatically from 1970 as the United States shifted from being over 83 percent non-Hispanic White, with only 11 percent African American, 5 percent Hispanic, and less than 1 percent Asian American, to being 58 percent non-Hispanic White, with 19 percent Hispanic, 12 percent African American, 6 percent Asian American, and 5 percent other in 2020.<sup>21</sup>

There is no research on how either of these trends affects confidence in institutions, but the increase in economic inequality in America has been implicated in the decline of social trust between people, which, in turn, is related to other forms of trust.<sup>22</sup> There has also been a great deal of research on how increases in ethnic diversity where people live, coupled with inequality and segregation of neighborhoods, reduce social trust, notably in the United States.<sup>23</sup> Ethnic, economic, and

residential divides produce a sense of anomie and isolation that decreases social cohesion and social trust. Perhaps the same forces are undermining confidence in almost all political and nonpolitical institutions. The nonpartisan nature of these forces is suggested by the fact that while social trust has declined over the past fifty years for all groups, it has declined faster for political independents, who do not have the baggage of partisan affiliation, than for partisans.<sup>24</sup>

**P**artisan polarization in trust must have additional causes that have politicized formerly nonpolitical institutions. Polarization in presidential confidence is based upon the long history of partisan battles between Democrats and Republicans and the identification of presidents with political parties. Polarization in confidence for business and labor already existed in the 1970s when the New Deal economic cleavage still dominated American politics, and it was based upon a long history of conflict between business and labor in America culminating in the National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act) of 1935 and the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947. In addition, business had a long-standing identification with the Republican Party that was cemented with the elections in 1920, 1924, and 1928 of three probusiness Republican presidents. Labor became strongly associated with the Democratic Party because of the National Labor Relations Act and the New Deal.

The lack of confidence shown by Democrats in business or by Republicans in labor was at least partly rooted in the calculation that business was not trustworthy for Democrats and labor was not trustworthy for Republicans because of the different bases of legitimation for labor and business. That suggests that we should look for ways since the 1970s that the nonbusiness nonpolitical institutions have appeared to be less trustworthy for partisans of one side or another because they did not meet that partisan group's standards for regulatory, cultural, normative, or pragmatic legitimacy.

The growth of partisan polarization in trust in nonbusiness nonpolitical institutions tracks the partisan emergence since the 1970s of hot-button social and cultural issues – including, for example, civil rights, abortion, immigration, prayer in school, gay rights, and gun rights – that had long been divisive yet not aligned with partisanship.<sup>25</sup> It is tempting to believe that the emergence of this new cultural and social dimension of politics underlies this new form of polarization in institutions.<sup>26</sup>

Before exploring this possibility, we should ask whether these nonpolitical institutions have actually become associated with particular sides of political debates. In a national survey that we completed in September 2019, a representative group of Americans was asked about their perceptions of the partisan and ideological complexion of a subset of institutions. We found that highly religious people, police, bankers, and military generals are seen as typically conservatives and Republicans, and college professors, journalists, labor union members, public

school teachers, and scientists are seen as liberals and Democrats. Only doctors and lawyers were seen, on average, as neither Republicans nor Democrats. Most institutions appear to be politicized.

Unfortunately, these questions have not been asked in the past, so it is hard to know whether these perceptions are new or long-standing. Based upon scattered results from similar survey questions in the past, however, we believe that they are new. In addition, Kent has found evidence that at least some of the perceptions may be right. Since 1980, some professions and semiprofessions have become more partisan in their political contributions in just the ways found on the 2019 survey.<sup>27</sup>

That still leaves open the question about whether these identifications explain the polarization in trust. Perhaps people make these identifications, but they do not affect their confidence judgments. Perhaps other factors related to legitimacy, such as the importance, cost, or competence of an institution, matter more to or are assessed differently by Republicans and Democrats, and these differences account for polarization of trust. Democrats and Republicans may just have different opinions about the legitimacy of these institutions. To test this possibility, we also asked our national sample whether various institutions do important work that matters, whether they cost too much, and whether they do good work that is competent.

Americans differ in their beliefs about whether institutions do important work. Republicans believe that the police, the military, and religion do important work, but Democrats are less sure. Democrats believe that labor, the press, and higher education do important work, but Republicans are less sure. We found that Republicans think that labor, the press, science, and higher education cost too much and Democrats are less inclined to believe that. Democrats think that the military, the police, and religion cost too much and Republicans do not. Republicans think that the military, the police, and religion do good, competent work, but Democrats are less sure. Democrats think that labor, the press, science, and higher education do good work and Republicans are less convinced. Despite these significant partisan differences regarding the importance, cost, and competency of these institutions, one of the biggest predictors of a respondent's confidence in an institution is their perception of its partisan makeup.

Our survey results show that nonpolitical institutions have become identified with the parties and that these identifications are associated with the polarization of confidence, but they do not provide any insight into the exact way that previously nonpolitical institutions became politicized. The rise of a social/cultural dimension of American politics in addition to the preexisting New Deal economic cleavage suggest how polarization could have gone beyond business and labor to other institutions by implicating many of these institutions in fundamental political debates, often exacerbated by concerns about increasing inequality and di-

versity. Issues such as abortion, prayer in school, gay marriage, racial equality, gun rights, and language and immigration policy often involve the knowledge- and information-producing institutions (the press, TV news, science, higher education, public schools, and education) and the norm-enforcing institutions (the police, religion, and the military) on different sides of debates about these issues. Recently, with the politicization of COVID policy, they have involved medicine as well.

The story for each institution is probably somewhat different: for religion it is the rise of the Christian right, for public schools the role of teachers' unions, for police the politics of criminal justice, for higher education the role of liberal professors, for the press its role in Watergate, and so forth. Part of the story may be that people have selected into these institutions based upon values and perspectives that put them on one side or the other of the cultural divide. The rise of talk radio, then cable television, and more recently the internet and the twenty-four-hour news cycle have amplified these political identifications and debates. The threat to a political candidate of being outflanked in a primary on the left for Democrats and on the right for Republicans further reinforces ideological polarization. The result is that ideological debate has gone beyond the business-labor divide of the New Deal to almost all American institutions.

Putting the factors together that appear to have affected trust in institutions – events and experiences specific to institutions, nonpartisan factors affecting all institutions, and partisan factors affecting institutions according to their presumed partisanship – we can speculate about the sources of declines in trust. About one-third of the overall decline in trust might be due to specific events and experiences with institutions. Another one-third might come from nonpartisan factors such as increasing inequality and diversity, leading to anomie that undermines trust in nearly all institutions among all groups. These nonpartisan factors have probably been exacerbated by an increasingly skeptical and cacophonous media environment. And a final one-third might come from partisan factors related to the emergence of cultural, social, and identity issues in American politics that have implicated nonpolitical institutions. Of course, the mix of these factors will differ for each institution, and the nonpartisan and partisan factors do not seem to apply at all for the military and not much for labor or science (until perhaps recently), but they all seem to be parts of the larger story. Because it is likely that they have interacted in complicated ways to reinforce one another, untangling them will require more research and much ingenuity.

**D**oes all of this matter? In our 2019 survey, we asked respondents how they would feel about someone close to them (kin or friends) choosing a career in or marrying someone involved with various institutions. We found that Republicans do not want their kin or friends to have close connections with those in journalism or higher education. Democrats do not want their kin or friends to

have close connections with those in the police, the military, or religious institutions. And these effects are sizeable. Republicans, for example, are more worried about their kin or friends becoming involved with a journalist than with a gay person or an atheist.<sup>28</sup> These results suggest that the impact of institutional distrust runs deep.

Movements to defund the police, to end mask mandates, to refuse vaccination, and to overturn the 2020 election have revealed the costs of institutional distrust. Arguably, the future of democracy depends upon confidence in our institutions and the ability to bridge partisan divides. The picture painted in this essay is troubling. Confidence in institutions is declining and polarization is increasing. We do not really know enough about why this is so, and we know even less about how to fix it. To take just one example, we need to know a great deal more about when declines in confidence lead to insurrection. Those participating in and sympathetic to the January 6, 2021, insurrection have voiced their lack of trust in election systems, the federal government and its bureaucracy, the Congress of the United States, and many other institutions. How can we restore their trust?

One of the obstacles to success is that many of these controversial matters arising in the past fifty years are rooted in identities related to such characteristics as religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and sexual orientation.<sup>29</sup> When it comes to disagreements over economic interests, it is often possible to split the difference through bargaining over money. That is very much the story of the 1940s to 1960s in America as business and labor bargained over economic matters, made even easier by the fact that economic growth meant that the results did not have to be zero-sum since both parties could benefit. It is also possible to find compromises on cultural and social issues. *Roe v. Wade* did this by splitting pregnancy into three trimesters, with different rules for each; past gun control legislation found compromise by focusing on outlawing only assault weapons; and immigration policy accepted facts-on-the-ground in the Simpson-Mazzoli Act of 1986, which provided legalization for undocumented immigrants who had been in America for five years or more. Such compromises now seem less attainable because powerful interest groups on the left and right are especially entrenched in their positions, often because of moral concerns, deep-seated fears about compromises as “slippery slopes,” and perhaps the “zero-sum” nature of many of these issues. Consequently, it seems to be more difficult to forge compromise by meeting in the middle when it comes to conflicts over social and cultural issues, accounting for the political battles that now beset us.

The resulting oscillations and variations in laws regarding fundamental rights such as voting, immigration, and abortion are mind-boggling. In states controlled by Democrats, voting rights and voting accessibility are expanded, while in states controlled by Republicans, they are reduced and circumscribed. During the Obama administration, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program pro-

tected immigrants who came to the United States when they were children from deportation. During the Trump administration, DACA was terminated and new applicants were rejected. In the Biden administration, DACA was restored. For almost fifty years the Supreme Court ruled that the right to abortion is fundamental, making abortion widely available and legally permissible through at least the first two trimesters of pregnancy, and even under some conditions in the third. Now abortion is banned in many states, and pregnant women face constraints that they have not experienced for fifty years. These scenarios have repeated in many other policy areas: gun laws, the environment, criminal justice, education, and even public health. There does not appear to be any middle ground. Instead, presidential administrations, sessions of the Supreme Court, and state governments are going in opposite, usually extreme directions depending upon their partisanship. Social-cultural politics lead to conflicting sets of norms and mores, as well as different cultural logics and meanings that stymie trust across partisan boundaries. It is hard to bridge these divides, especially when almost every ostensibly authoritative institution is identified with one side or the other on most issues.

In 1919, in the aftermath of World War I and the 1918–1919 flu pandemic, the poet William Butler Yeats used imagery of the apocalypse to describe a topsy-turvy world.<sup>30</sup> Today, with declining and polarized trust, the sinews of society seem stretched to the point of snapping. Perhaps it is not overwrought to invoke Yeats:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Henry E. Brady**, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2003, is the Class of 1941 Monroe Deutsch Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley. He served as Dean of the Goldman School of Public Policy from 2009–2021. He is the author of *Letting the People Decide: Dynamics of a Canadian Election* (with Richard Johnston, André Blais, and Jean Crête, 1992), *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (with Sidney Verba and Kay Lehman Schlozman, 1995), and, most recently, *Unequal and Unrepresented: Political Inequality and the New Gilded Age* (with Kay Lehman Schlozman and Sidney Verba, 2018).

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ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The data set we have constructed is described in Henry E. Brady and Thomas B. Kent, “Increasing Partisan Polarization since 1970 in Trust for American Non-Political Institutions,” paper presented at the September 2020 meetings of the American Political Science Association, September 8–13, 2020. The data set includes 128 surveys (43 Gallup, 31 GSS, and 54 Harris) and 165,478 respondents, with at least one survey every year from 1972 to 2021.
- <sup>2</sup> By “political” institutions we mean those that make or adjudicate laws and that have elected members (presidency and Congress) or many presidentially nominated and congressionally confirmed members (Supreme Court and executive branch).
- <sup>3</sup> The mid-point on the scale between (2) “quite a lot” and (1) “some” is 1.5. We interpreted values between 1.5 and 2.5 as indicating “quite a lot” of confidence and those between 0.5 and 1.5 as indicating just “some” confidence.
- <sup>4</sup> GSS and Harris use a three-point scale (a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all) and Gallup uses a four-point scale (a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little). To make the responses comparable, we use a scaling technique—described in Brady and Kent, “Increasing Partisan Polarization since 1970 in Trust for American Non-Political Institutions”—that goes from zero to three points. To get these percentages, we take the difference between average trust over all the surveys in the 2010–2021 period and average trust over all surveys in the 1972–1979 period and divide it by the average trust in the earlier period to get a fraction that can be converted to a percentage. Although these percentages are somewhat arbitrary, depending as they do upon the scoring of the four-point scale, they provide a useful comparison across institutions and some idea of the magnitude of the changes.
- <sup>5</sup> The Pew Research Center compiles data from numerous sources on trust in government using the single question: “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?” Pew Research Center, “Public Trust in Government: 1958–2022,” June 6, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/public-trust-in-government-1958-2022/>. From 1958–1964 to the present, trust in government has declined by an even larger 73 percent.
- <sup>6</sup> By “nonpolitical” we mean institutions that are private sector (profit-making such as business or nonprofit such as religion) or government bureaucracies that do not make or adjudicate laws and that strive to be nonpolitical, such as the military, public schools, or the police, even though they might have some elected officials (public school boards) or political appointees (military and police leaders) running them. Whatever the proper division between political and nonpolitical, it seems obvious that the U.S. Supreme Court is more politicized than the military, most public schools, or most police departments. Our surveys ask about the “executive branch of the federal government,” which is led by the president, contains many political appointees, and proposes laws, so we classify it as political. Confidence in the executive branch tracks that of confidence in the president, especially among partisan groups.
- <sup>7</sup> Most major nonpolitical institutions are covered. Among the few that are missing are the arts, food systems, tech companies, public utilities, philanthropy, nonprofits, and agriculture. There are occasional questions about them.

- <sup>8</sup> The time-series for higher education from Harris ends in 2012. Data from Pew show that confidence since then has declined. See Kim Parker, “The Growing Partisan Divide in Views of Higher Education,” Pew Research Center, August 19, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/08/19/the-growing-partisan-divide-in-views-of-higher-education-2/>. Using a 2019 survey fielded as part of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study that employs the same questions as the Harris surveys, we find that confidence in higher education has decreased by 29 percent.
- <sup>9</sup> When we are dealing with just a few peaks and valleys on a graph like this—and there are only a few events relevant to the institution that could explain them and their dates coincide with a particular peak or valley—it seems acceptable to make causal claims, especially if one has thought a bit about possible alternative explanations as we have.
- <sup>10</sup> These ups and down can be seen in Figure 2, but they are even more robustly evident when the data are plotted year by year instead of averaged over two years. Bank failures hit very high peaks in 1989 and 2010. See the chart on Banking Strategist, “Bank Failures over the Decades since 1980,” <https://www.bankingstrategist.com/history-of-us-bank-failures>.
- <sup>11</sup> These are the squares of correlations between the confidence measure and the economic measure.
- <sup>12</sup> A respondent’s party identification is their response to a question such as “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, independent, or what?” We classify those who are not Democrats or Republicans as independents.
- <sup>13</sup> These percentages (and the ones reported later in this section) are calculated as the difference between the average confidence of partisans of each party (Democrats and Republicans) during each time period divided by the mean value for all respondents.
- <sup>14</sup> If we use data from the 2019 Cooperative Congressional Election Study survey that we fielded, then higher education is now polarized by the same amount as TV news. Pew Research Center data produce a similar result.
- <sup>15</sup> This analysis adds the data we collected in 2019, and it shows that for the six listed institutions, partisan evaluations of confidence moved between another 0.30 to 0.50 units apart on our zero-to-three scale. Evaluations of law (which was not very polarized to begin with) and labor became somewhat less polarized by 0.15 and 0.25 units respectively, and business polarization remained the same. Confidence in both business and labor, however, remains highly polarized.
- <sup>16</sup> David L. Deephouse, Jonathan Bundy, Leigh Plunkett Tost, and Mark C. Suchman, “Organizational Legitimacy: Six Key Questions,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, ed. Royston Greenwood, Christine Oliver, Thomas B. Lawrence, and Renate E. Meyer, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 2017), 27–54.
- <sup>17</sup> Social cohesion is a broader concept that includes trust in other people and trust in institutions. “Social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations.” See Joseph Chan, Ho-Pong To, and Elaine Chan, “Reconsidering Social Cohesion: Developing a Definition and Analytical Framework for Empirical Research,” *Social Indicators Research* 75 (2006): 290. Chan and colleagues argue that social trust is a “horizontal” measure of social cohesion among other people, while confidence in institutions is a “vertical” measure of people’s trust in authority.

- <sup>18</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, “The State of Personal Trust,” July 22, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/the-state-of-personal-trust/>, “People’s views on personal trust are strongly associated with their views on issues related to institutional trust.” The General Social Survey has questions about both social trust and confidence in thirteen institutions (three political) and social trust, and our own analysis of these data shows that social trust is positively correlated with confidence for ten institutions, negatively correlated for two (organized labor and television), and not correlated for one (the military). Two of these last three are institutions for which confidence either declined only very slightly or for which it increased. In addition, just as confidence in most institutions has trended downward over the past fifty years, social trust has trended substantially downward as well. Although the correlations of institutional trust with social trust are relatively small at the individual level, they are substantial at the societal level across countries. See Kenneth Newton and Pippa Norris, “Confidence in Public Institutions: Faith, Culture, or Performance?” in *Disaffected Democracies: What’s Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* ed. Susan J. Pharr and Robert Putnam (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 52–73.
- <sup>19</sup> These have been proposed as the causes of polarization in the U.S. Congress. See Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).
- <sup>20</sup> Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, “The Rise of Income and Wealth Inequality in America: Evidence from Distributional Macroeconomic Accounts,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 34 (4) (2020): 3–26, Figures 1, 3, and 4. Also see Thomas Piketty, Emanuel Saez, and Gabriel Zucman, “Distributional National Accounts: Methods and Estimates for the United States,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 133 (2) (2018): 553–555, 573–589.
- <sup>21</sup> Pew Research Center, “Most Americans Say the Declining Share of White People in the U.S. Is neither Good nor Bad for Society,” August 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/23/most-americans-say-the-declining-share-of-white-people-in-the-u-s-is-neither-good-nor-bad-for-society/>. For the 1970 data, see Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, “Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990 for the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States,” Working Paper No. 56 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2002), Table 1, 15% Sample for 1970.
- <sup>22</sup> Eric Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Kenneth Newton, Dietlind Stolle, and Sonja Zmerli, “Social and Political Trust,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*, ed. Eric Uslaner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- <sup>23</sup> Tom Van Der Meer and Jochem Tolsma, “Ethnic Diversity and Its Effects on Social Cohesion,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 40 (2014): 459–478; Peter Thisted Dinesen and Kim Mannemar Sønderskov, “Ethnic Diversity and Social Trust: A Critical Review of the Literature and Suggestions for a Research Agenda,” in Uslaner, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*, 175–204; and Merlin Schaeffer, *Ethnic Diversity and Social Cohesion: Immigration, Ethnic Fractionalization and Potentials for Civic Action* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
- <sup>24</sup> Based upon our analysis of GSS data, social trust among independents fell from 1972–1979 to 2010–2021 by more than twice as much as among partisans: 17.8 percent for independents and 8.0 percent among partisans (5.1 percent for Democrats and 13.6 percent for Republicans). The percentage of people calling themselves independents also increased from 34.3 percent to 44.3 percent, with all of the decline in the Democratic percentage.

- <sup>25</sup> Edward Carmines and James Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989); Greg D. Adams, "Abortion: Evidence of an Issue Evolution," *American Journal of Political Science* 41 (3) (1997): 718–737; Morris P. Fiorina and Samuel J. Abrams, "Political Polarization in the American Public," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 563–588; Alan Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010); and Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020).
- <sup>26</sup> Henry E. Brady, "Trust the People: Political Party Coalitions and the 2000 Election," in *The Unfinished Election of 2000*, ed. Jack Rakove (New York: Basic Books, 2001); and Henry E. Brady, "APSA Presidential Address—The Art of Political Science: Spatial Diagrams as Iconic and Revelatory," *Perspectives on Politics* 9 (2) (2011): 311–331.
- <sup>27</sup> Thomas B. Kent, "Institutions and Constituents: Ideological Trends Over Time," paper prepared for the Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, Illinois, April 7–10, 2022.
- <sup>28</sup> This research extends the notion of "affective polarization" with respect to political party identification described in Shanto Iyengar, Yptach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (1) (2019): 129–146. We also find that our respondents who are partisans are less likely to want their kin or friends to have close connections with those of the other party. While the effect is strongest for Republicans, Democrats are about as unwilling to have their kin or friends have a close connection with a Republican as Republicans are unwilling to have their kin or friends have a close connection with a journalist, atheist, or gay person.
- <sup>29</sup> John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck, *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018).
- <sup>30</sup> William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).

# Trust in Medicine, the Health System & Public Health

*Robert J. Blendon & John M. Benson*

*This essay reviews more than forty years of public opinion polling to look at trust in medicine, the health system, and public health. We use polling data to explore the reasons for the decline and current level of public trust in leaders of medicine and public health, including underlying forces such as the decline in trust in other institutions. Except for the military, none of the efforts to improve public trust in various institutions have been very successful to date. Given the uncertainty about how to restore trust, this essay makes a number of recommendations that might improve public trust in medicine and public health in the future.*

A discussion of trust in medicine, the health system, and public health needs to recognize as context the exceptionally low trust the American public currently has in institutions, especially government.

As many scholars have noted, trust in the federal government has declined sharply over the past decades.<sup>1</sup> In 1958, nearly three-fourths (73 percent) of the public believed they could trust the federal government to do what is right just about always or most of the time. By 1980, trust had dropped to 25 percent, and although the level of trust has varied, at no time since 2006 has more than one-third of the public expressed trust in the federal government. Currently only one in five U.S. adults (20 percent) believe they can trust the government in Washington to do what is right just about always or most of the time.<sup>2</sup>

When President Johnson signed the Medicare and Medicaid Act of 1965, more than three-fourths (77 percent) of the U.S. public said they trusted the government to do what is right just about always or most of the time.<sup>3</sup> No doubt trust in the federal government contributes both to support of and opposition to government-led changes in the health care system.

The level of public trust in national governments worldwide appears to have affected public trust in public health recommendations during the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent study of data from 177 countries found that higher levels of trust in the national government have a large association with lower COVID-19 infec-

tion rates and, among middle-income and higher-income countries where vaccine availability was more widespread, also correlate with higher COVID-19 vaccination rates.<sup>4</sup>

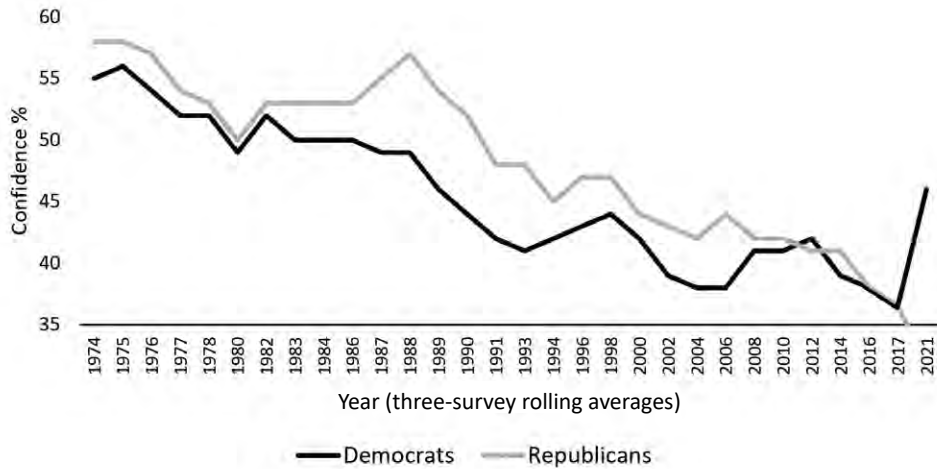
Confidence in a variety of other institutions in the United States has also declined during the past fifty years. For instance, Gallup has found that the share of the public expressing a great deal of confidence in public schools has fallen from 58 percent in 1973 to 32 percent in 2021; in banks, from 60 percent in 1979 to 33 percent in 2021; and in television news, from 46 percent in 1993 to 16 percent in 2021. Even confidence in organized religion has declined, from 65 percent having a great deal of confidence in 1973 to 37 percent in 2021.<sup>5</sup>

Given the overall downward trend in trust in institutions, it is not surprising that trust in medicine has also decreased. Although comparable data on trust in the medical system going back to the 1960s are not available, data on trust in the *leaders* of medicine have been collected since then. The Harris Poll shows that the share of the public expressing a great deal of confidence in “the people in charge of running” medicine had already fallen from 73 percent in 1966 to 57 percent in 1973, and eventually to 34 percent in 2012.<sup>6</sup> NORC’s General Social Survey also finds that the public’s trust in the leaders of medicine declined significantly since the 1970s. In 1974, a majority of the public (54 percent) expressed a great deal of confidence in “the people running” medicine. Confidence peaked at 61 percent in 1976. In contrast, fewer than four in ten adults (38 percent) in 2021 said they had a great deal of confidence. Throughout most of this forty-seven-year period, partisan differences were modest, except in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when a larger share of Republicans than Democrats expressed confidence. But in 2021, Democrats were more likely than Republicans (46 percent to 32 percent) to say they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the people running medicine, and the change was mainly among Democrats (Figure 1).<sup>7</sup>

The partisan difference in 2021 is likely related to the government’s response to COVID-19. Leaders of medicine supported recommendations made by public health officials for responding to the pandemic that included lockdowns, mandatory vaccination, and mask requirements. Democrats were more likely to favor these steps than Republicans, a large share of whom opposed such measures.<sup>8</sup> It is too early to tell whether the pattern of partisan difference on confidence in the leaders of medicine will persist.

Views of the medical system do not appear to be dramatically different from views of its leaders. From 1993 to 2019, Gallup asked about the nation’s medical system and, during that period, only 34 percent to 44 percent of the U.S. public expressed a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in it. Public confidence in the nation’s medical system increased during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, from 36 percent in 2019 to 51 percent in 2020, before declining to 44 percent in

Figure 1  
Public Confidence in the People Running Medicine, 1973–2021



Data are three-survey rolling averages, except for 2021. Source: NORC at the University of Chicago, General Social Survey, 1973–2021.

the summer of 2021.<sup>9</sup> By then there were significant partisan differences, with 50 percent of Democrats (including those who lean Democratic) and 36 percent of Republicans (including leaners) expressing confidence.<sup>10</sup>

When we look at the issue of public trust in medicine, it is important to separate trust in the medical profession from people’s trust in their own personal doctors. The results of a twenty-nine-country survey found something unique about the United States: it ranked near the bottom (tied for twenty-fourth) in the public’s trust in the medical profession but near the top (third) in patients’ satisfaction with their own medical care when they last visited a doctor. It appears that compared with the United States, the public elsewhere sees the leaders of medicine in their countries as being closer to their own views in the actions they take.<sup>11</sup>

The evidence clearly shows that the U.S. public’s trust in medicine is not related to individuals’ perception of the quality of care they receive. A recent poll found that more than eight in ten U.S. adults (82 percent) rated the quality of health care they receive as excellent or good, 16 percent as only fair or poor.<sup>12</sup> When it comes specifically to their own doctor, 76 percent of those who have a regular doctor rate the medical care they have received in the past twelve months from their regular doctor’s office or clinic as excellent or very good, 16 percent as good, and 7 percent as fair or poor.<sup>13</sup> What this result suggests is that, at least among those who have

a regular doctor and are able to receive medical care, there are other factors that drive public distrust of the leaders of medicine.

When asked in general terms how much they trust various private groups involved in health and health care, none of the groups are completely trusted by a majority of the public, but some are more trusted than not. When it comes to trusting the groups completely or somewhat, health care practitioners – nurses and doctors – come first, with 85 percent trusting nurses completely (32 percent) or somewhat (53 percent) and 84 percent trusting doctors completely (28 percent) or somewhat (56 percent). Trust drops for hospitals (14 percent trust completely, 58 percent somewhat), but still more people trust them than not. The tables are turned for pharmaceutical companies and health insurance companies. Only about one-third of the public trusts pharmaceutical companies (3 percent trust completely, 31 percent somewhat) or health insurance companies (4 percent trust completely, 29 percent somewhat).<sup>14</sup>

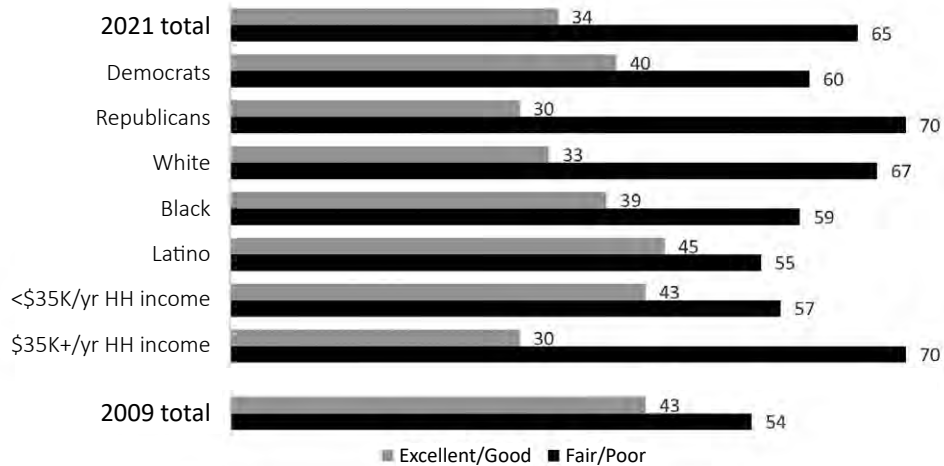
Among fifteen groups that were rated on their honesty and ethical standards, nurses (89 percent), doctors (77 percent), and pharmacists (71 percent) along with grade-school teachers (75 percent) are the top four groups in terms of being rated highly or very highly. By contrast, members of Congress rate at the bottom of the list, tied with car salespeople (8 percent each).<sup>15</sup>

**T**urning to the public health system, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which more than one million have died so far in the United States, only about one-third of adults (34 percent) gave positive (excellent or good) ratings to the nation's system for protecting the public from health threats and preventing illness, with nearly two-thirds (65 percent) rating the nation's public health system as fair or poor. Democrats (40 percent) were more likely than Republicans (30 percent) to rate the public health system positively, Latinos (45 percent) more likely than Whites (33 percent), and adults from households with incomes under \$35,000 per year (43 percent) more than those with incomes \$35,000 or over (30 percent). But no major demographic group gives the public health system a majority-positive rating. Of note, even in the absence of a pandemic in 2009, only 43 percent gave positive ratings to the nation's public health system (Figure 2).<sup>16</sup>

Polls show that the public does not express a high level of trust in government public health agencies or leaders when it comes to the broad question of making recommendations to improve health. Less than half of the public says they trust (a great deal or quite a lot) the recommendation of their state health department (41 percent), the surgeon general (40 percent), and the federal Department of Health and Human Services (33 percent). Once again, the public rates nurses (71 percent), health care workers they know (70 percent), and doctors (67 percent) at the top of the list.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 2  
The Public’s Rating of the U.S. Public Health System, 2009 and 2021



Respondents were asked to rate “the nation’s system for protecting the public from health threats” as excellent/good or fair/poor. The bars show the percent of positive or negative responses; “don’t know/refused” responses are not shown. Demographic groups are for 2021 only. The polls were conducted from February 11 to March 15, 2021, and from June 24 to 28, 2009. Source: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, *The Public’s Perspective on the United States Public Health System* (Princeton, N.J., and Boston: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2021), [https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/94/2021/05/RWJF-Harvard-Report\\_FINAL-051321.pdf](https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/94/2021/05/RWJF-Harvard-Report_FINAL-051321.pdf).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) are sister agencies that work to protect the public health but have different responsibilities. The CDC’s mission is to collaborate to create the expertise, information, and tools that people and communities need to protect health through health promotion; prevention of disease, injury, and disability; and preparedness for new health threats. The FDA is a regulatory agency whose mission is to protect the public health through the regulation of food, cosmetics, tobacco, and medical products, including drugs, biological products, and medical devices. This includes the principal responsibility for making fundamental decisions about approving new drugs and vaccines for use and monitoring for adverse effects resulting from them.<sup>18</sup>

An October 2021 poll found that the public did not trust medical advice from either the CDC or the FDA at a high level (“a lot”), but a significant share trusted medical advice from them at least somewhat. About half of the public (51 percent)

said they trusted medical advice from the CDC a lot (29 percent) or somewhat (22 percent). Similarly, half of the public (50 percent) trusted medical advice from the FDA a lot (21 percent) or somewhat (29 percent). Although the CDC and FDA play very different roles, the ratings of the two agencies were about the same. But once again, there were significant partisan differences. More than eight in ten Democrats trusted medical advice from the CDC (85 percent) and FDA (80 percent) a lot or somewhat, compared with only about three in ten Republicans (30 percent CDC, 31 percent FDA).<sup>19</sup> When it came specifically to confidence in sources of information about coronavirus vaccines, less than half of the public in September 2021 expressed a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the CDC (45 percent) and FDA (38 percent) as sources.<sup>20</sup> In January 2022, 44 percent of the public said they trusted what the CDC has said about the coronavirus, a marked decline since the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when in April 2020 more than two-thirds (69 percent) reported that they trusted what the CDC said about the virus.<sup>21</sup>

In a country in which about half of the public does not express trust in public health agencies, how does that distrust influence real-world health decisions? When those who said they would not or might not get a coronavirus vaccine were asked about their reasons, three of the top four reasons reflected a distrust in government or other institutions: the vaccine was too untested and they would wait to see what happens (58 percent), they do not trust government (37 percent), or they do not trust the scientists and companies that make the vaccine (28 percent). Only one of the top four reasons referenced individual medical conditions, as 37 percent of the people expressed worry about allergies or side effects.<sup>22</sup>

**W**hat are the reasons for public distrust in the leaders of medicine? Prior research suggests that the public judges the performance of an institution based on how it addresses the key issues that are most important to them. If leaders do not address the big issues, it will have a negative effect on public confidence.<sup>23</sup> Polls have shown over the past several years that when it comes to health care, apart from COVID-19, the most important issue to the public is the high cost of health care and prescription drugs for individuals.

When the public was asked in January 2020, shortly before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, how important each of twenty-two possible domestic priorities should be for President Trump and Congress during the rest of the year, the top two priorities were taking steps to lower the cost of health care (80 percent extremely or very important) and to lower prescription drug prices (75 percent). And there was both Democratic (89 percent and 85 percent, respectively) and Republican (76 percent and 69 percent, respectively) support for these priorities, with partisans of both parties ranking them higher than another shared priority, reducing the federal budget deficit (60 percent for Democrats and 65 percent for Republicans).<sup>24</sup> Increasing federal funding for K–12 public education and reduc-

ing hate crimes both received 63 percent support, but partisans differed dramatically in their support for them.

In December 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the public was asked which of twenty-three possible priorities for President-elect Biden and the new Congress they felt were extremely important. Overall, the public wanted to address the destructive effects of COVID-19: four of the top five priorities were related to coping with the impact of COVID-19 on people's lives and on the economy. But the second highest priority in the public's mind was the federal government taking action to lower prescription drug prices.<sup>25</sup>

In September 2021, at the time of congressional debate over the \$1 trillion infrastructure bill and the then-\$3.5 trillion social spending bill, the public was asked the importance of including each of twenty proposed items in these spending bills. The top priority was for the federal government to negotiate directly with pharmaceutical companies to lower the prices of prescription drugs for seniors on Medicare.<sup>26</sup>

Polls have shown that the public sees doctors and hospitals as major contributors to high health care costs, the public's biggest health care concern. In 2019, nearly three-fourths of the public believed that high prices charged by hospitals were a "major cause" of high health care costs, and about two-thirds thought that high prices charged by doctors and other health professionals were a "major cause."<sup>27</sup> Clearly, these groups are not seen as leaders in trying to resolve what the public sees as the biggest health care issue.

In addition, for Black Americans, racism in American life is a fundamental problem. Nearly three of every four Black Americans say that civil rights is a "very important" issue.<sup>28</sup> This concern includes discrimination in health care.<sup>29</sup> More than three-fourths of the public as a whole say it is very important that all Americans are treated equally in terms of the health care they receive (77 percent). Nearly nine in ten (88 percent) U.S. adults say it is very important that African Americans receive the same quality of health care as White Americans.<sup>30</sup>

**W**hat are the underlying reasons for public distrust of the public health system? There are several, but we will focus on two: overall distrust of the federal government and the absence of a high level of trust in medical scientists and in scientists more generally.

Although the public has considerable confidence in science as an institution, it has less confidence in individuals involved in scientific endeavors. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) express a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in science as an institution.<sup>31</sup> However, only about four in ten U.S. adults (39 percent) say they have a great deal of confidence in scientists to act in the best interests of the public, while 48 percent have a fair amount of confidence and 12 percent say they have not too much or no confidence at all. Similarly, only 43 percent report that they have a great deal of confidence in medical scientists to act in the best interests of

the public, while 46 percent have a fair amount of confidence and 11 percent say they have not too much or no confidence at all. Distrust is especially acute among Black respondents, of whom only 27 percent have a great deal of confidence in scientists and 35 percent in medical scientists. Indeed, only 53 percent of college graduates could muster a great deal of confidence in medical scientists and 50 percent in scientists. And here as in so many areas, the partisan divide is greater than 20 percentage points.<sup>32</sup>

Democrats are significantly more likely than Republicans to express a great deal of confidence in scientists in general (52 percent to 27 percent) and in medical scientists (53 percent to 31 percent) to act in the public's best interest. In addition, Black Americans are significantly less likely than both Whites and Latinos to have a great deal of confidence in scientists in general (Blacks 27 percent, Whites 41 percent, Latinos 39 percent) and in medical scientists (Blacks 35 percent, Whites 43 percent, Latinos 45 percent). College graduates are more likely than non-college graduates to express a great deal of confidence in both scientists in general (50 percent of college graduates, 34 percent of non-college graduates) and in medical scientists (53 percent versus 38 percent).<sup>33</sup>

A critical difference is that a majority of Republicans think many scientists have agendas beyond the pursuit of scientific facts. While 54 percent of U.S. adults believe that scientists make judgments solely based on the facts, 45 percent believe scientists' judgments are just as likely to be biased as other people's. Seventy-three percent of Democrats believe that scientists make judgments solely on the facts, while more than two-thirds of Republicans (68 percent) think that scientists' judgments are just as likely as other people's to be biased.<sup>34</sup>

Public confidence in colleges and universities, the home of many scientists, displays a similar partisan split. While more than half of Democrats (56 percent) say they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in colleges and universities, this view is shared by only one-third of Republicans.<sup>35</sup> This partisan split is part of a change that has taken place over the past several years. In 2017, two-thirds (67 percent) of Democrats (including those who lean Democratic) and more than half (53 percent) of Republicans (including leaners) believed that colleges and universities had a positive effect on the way things are going in the country. In 2019, the attitudes of Democrats/leaners had not changed (still 67 percent), while positive assessments among Republicans/leaners declined to 33 percent.<sup>36</sup> By 2021, about three-fourths of Democrats (76 percent) but only one-third of Republicans (34 percent) said that colleges and universities had a positive effect.<sup>37</sup>

Public distrust of government and medical experts was reflected in the early-2010s debate over the creation of a comparative effectiveness agency for health care in the United States. Despite the fact that such agencies exist in Canada and Great Britain, a majority (56 percent) of U.S. adults opposed having a government decision-making body that recommends whether government programs should

pay for prescription drugs or medical/surgical procedures if they think they cost too much. One in two Democrats supported such a decision-making body, as compared with only about one in four Republicans (27 percent).<sup>38</sup>

**T**he forces of distrust in the health field are exacerbated by the deep political polarization that has developed in the United States, particularly over the past two decades. Since the mid-1990s, those identifying with the two political parties have grown further apart in their overall policy preferences. In 2019, average Republicans differed from average Democrats by 39 percentage points in their views across thirty policy-related priorities, more than double the gap in 1994.<sup>39</sup> The differences between the parties encompass not only critical health policy and social issues – particularly abortion – but also issues relating to the preferred role for government in addressing critical national problems and even some of the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to political scientists Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, partisan polarization is now at its highest point in at least a century.<sup>40</sup>

A substantial body of research shows that votes on policy issues by individual members of Congress often do not correspond to overall public opinion. In recent years, votes by members more closely reflect the views of their party's identifiers than the voting public. Because those who identify with a party are most likely to have voted in a partisan primary election and are often more active in political affairs, their views have more influence on the voting behavior on members of Congress of the same party.<sup>41</sup> As a result, differences in attitudes between Democrats and Republicans in the general public and among voters are especially important politically. As adherents of the two parties have become more polarized in their views, so have votes in Congress. An important consequence is that legislation on health care, as on many other policy areas, differs significantly depending on which party is in power.

Political polarization is evident on several values and policies related to health care and public health. Overall, when it comes to the federal government's role in health care, about half of the public prefers that the federal government be less involved (30 percent) or about as involved as it is now (21 percent), while 46 percent believe it should be more involved. But more important is the sharp partisan split: only 17 percent of Republicans want the federal government to be more involved in health care, while 68 percent of Democrats do.<sup>42</sup> In addition, most Democrats (86 percent) favor substantially increasing federal spending on improving the nation's public health programs. This view is shared by only four in ten Republicans.<sup>43</sup> We have already seen that Democrats have a significantly higher level of confidence than Republicans in medical scientists and scientists in general to act in the best interest of the public, and are more likely to believe scientists make judgments based solely on facts.<sup>44</sup>

Although 82 percent of Democratic likely voters in the 2020 election believed that making sure all Americans have health care coverage is the responsibility of the federal government, that view was shared by only 39 percent of Republican voters.<sup>45</sup> More than nine in ten Democrats (93 percent) favor keeping the existing Affordable Care Act and passing additional legislation to improve how it works. Only three in ten Republicans (30 percent) have this view.<sup>46</sup>

Over the forty-year period of falling public trust in institutions, efforts to restore public trust have accomplished little. Political scientists Jack Citrin and Laura Stoker have lamented, in the more general context of trust in government, “recommendations about how to raise the level of political trust tend to have a forlorn quality.” They add that partisan polarization is “a formidable barrier to the rapid restoration of trust.”<sup>47</sup> Some scholars have suggested that with changes in the nation’s culture, the decline in trust might eventually reverse, but we have not seen any supporting evidence to date.<sup>48</sup>

The exception is the U.S. military. Since the mid-1970s, the military has been the only major institution to increase its confidence ratings.<sup>49</sup> What lessons can we learn from the increase in public trust in the military? The first, applicable directly to the military, is to avoid involvement in unpopular wars. But there are more. When those who expressed confidence in the military were asked by Gallup in an open-ended question why they had such confidence, four issues emerged: competence, the importance of the job they do, personal connections (for example, the respondent, a friend, or a family member served in the military), and positive attitudes about people who serve. In addition, 68 percent of the public felt that the phrase “personally courageous” described military leadership “very well.”<sup>50</sup> While these responses offer some hope for improvement in public trust in other institutions, the perceived importance of the military’s role and personal courage of military leaders make the example harder to emulate. It is too early to know if the gravity of COVID-19 will inspire similar public trust in leaders of medicine and public health.

How might the public’s trust in medicine be recovered? It is not what individual physicians are doing with patients that is driving distrust in the leaders of medicine. Prior research suggests that the public judges the performance of institutions based on how they address the key issues that are most important to them. Leaders of medicine need to be seen as addressing what the public believes are the biggest health care problems in the United States.

In particular, leaders of medicine and hospitals would have to take firm positions on the best way to solve the problems of high health care and drug costs. As noted earlier, the public sees doctors and hospitals as the leading causes of the problem of high health care costs. In this regard, it is important that physician

and hospital organizations' public positions do not look like they are economically self-serving. In addition, they need to focus on racial/ethnic equity. In taking policy positions, it is important that their stands be publicly visible, particularly in the media.

**H**ow might the public's trust in public health be recovered? In this environment of political polarization, restoring trust is a difficult goal. But there are six initiatives that deserve our focus.

First, key federal and state public health officials should be more visible to the public, with a focus on their backgrounds and commitment. Much of the public is unsure of what public health leaders and professionals do to help them and their families directly. Despite extraordinary efforts and sacrifices by public health officials during the COVID-19 pandemic, positive public perception of leaders of public health has not reached or increased at the rate of the military over recent decades. And unlike doctors and nurses, whose heroic acts during the pandemic have been covered widely by the media, almost no attention has been paid to the heroic deeds of public health officials who work for health departments administering vaccinations, COVID-19 tests, and contact tracing in often dangerous settings, or to leaders who face threats of violence simply for trying to serve the public.

Second, it is important that public health leaders not be seen as associated with one or the other political party. Public health agencies and advisory groups should be separated as much as possible from political decision-makers when making their public health recommendations.

Third, because of the political polarization by religion, race/ethnicity, and region, it is important to have scientific spokespeople who are clearly identified with each demographic group across the country.

Fourth, because a substantial share of the public does not have confidence in scientists' advice, it is necessary for public health leaders to explain more fully the nature of the scientific findings that lead to their policy recommendations. It is not enough to say, "Scientists believe this, so here is what you should do."

Fifth, state and local health departments should make efforts to offer information on health across the entire population, so a larger share of the public has experience with them before a health emergency occurs. Prior to COVID-19, surveys showed that few people had contact with state and local health agencies. Only 22 percent of the public said they had any contact with a local or county government health agency in the past twelve months. Even fewer (14 percent) had contact with a state government health agency.<sup>51</sup> The public has strong interest in consumer health information and advice about issues affecting the health of their families. Public health agencies should be seen as credible sources for such vital recommendations.<sup>52</sup>

Sixth, when the COVID-19 pandemic finally comes to an end (or settles on some steady state), it is important to have a bipartisan examination of what can be done to reduce the high level of politicization of the response to pandemics that may occur in the future.

If we cannot reduce the levels of distrust of leaders of medicine and public health, we are likely to see continuing conflicts between those leadership groups, the political parties, and the public on critical public health and medical science issues.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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# American Trust in Science & Institutions in the Time of COVID-19

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*The COVID-19 pandemic prompted many discussions about how people's trust in science shaped our ability to address the crisis. Early in the pandemic, our research team set out to understand how trust in science relates to support for public health guidelines, and to identify some trusted sources of science. In this essay, we share our findings and offer ideas about what might be done to strengthen the public's trust in science. Notably, our research shows a stark partisan divide: Republicans had lower support for public health guidelines, and their trust in science and institutions such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health eroded over time. Meanwhile, Democrats' trust in science has remained high throughout the pandemic. In the context of this divide, we explore how trust in various information sources, from governmental institutions to the media, relates to trust in science, and suggest that the best avenue for rebuilding trust might be through empowering local institutions and leaders to help manage future crises.*

Until 2020, the 1918 influenza pandemic had the ignoble badge of being the second deadliest pandemic in human history after the Bubonic Plague. With surprising speed, the “Spanish flu” spread to all corners of the globe, and by 1920, fifty million people had died in its wake. The scale and scope of this disaster made it a defining moment for the public health community, as researchers, advocates, and policy-makers scoured the pandemic for lessons to forestall future disasters. In a 2004 *New York Times* bestselling history of the 1918 pandemic, John M. Barry presciently wrote about the importance of trust in pandemic response. The key lesson learned from 1918, Barry writes, is that “Those in authority must retain the public’s trust. The way to do that is to distort nothing, to put the best face on nothing, to try to manipulate no one.” Without public trust, Barry argued, societal leaders would be unable to encourage the collective behaviors necessary to stop future pandemics.<sup>1</sup>

Public trust, however, is a complex phenomenon. First, it has many dimensions that can affect societal responses to a global pandemic. People’s trust in each

other, in medical professionals, in the health care community, and in public leaders helps shape how they experience, understand, and respond to a public health crisis. Second, all these aspects of public trust exist in a mutually dependent, dynamic relationship with public health leaders' responses to a pandemic. In other words, public trust is both cause and consequence of the choices that societal leaders make about the pandemic: what policies they implement, what guidelines they enact, what behaviors they recommend.

A key dimension of public trust during a pandemic is, of course, trust in science. During the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, whenever public health leaders have promulgated new guidelines or tried to make sense of the pandemic for the public, they have explicitly relied on information and guidance from scientists. On one hand, news about trust in science is good. Data from the General Social Survey show that scientists continue to be some of the most trusted figures in the United States, second only to members of the military.<sup>2</sup> Other data from Pew Research Center demonstrate an overall increase in confidence in scientists generally and medical scientists specifically during the early months of the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

But there is troubling news too. Although historical data reveal overall stability in the general public's levels of trust in science, the relationship between trust in science and partisan identity is shifting. In 1975, Gallup asked Americans about their confidence in science and found that 70 percent had either a great deal or a lot of confidence in science. Republicans reported slightly higher levels of confidence in science than Democrats: 72 percent to 67 percent, respectively. However, that relationship has since flipped. In 2021, Gallup found that overall confidence in science had declined slightly from 70 percent to 64 percent (note that other surveys, such as the General Social Survey, find greater stability). But there was a dramatic shift between political parties. Now, according to Gallup, 79 percent of Democrats report having confidence in science, while only 45 percent of Republicans say they have either "a lot" or "a great deal" of confidence in science.<sup>4</sup>

Anecdotal data indicate that a lack of trust led some people to be uninterested in or downright hostile to the scientific consensus regarding public health behaviors recommended to slow the spread of COVID-19.<sup>5</sup> For example, many Americans hesitated or refused to wear masks, despite recommendations from public health experts. These choices had real consequences. Early research showed that states with lower rates of mask wearing had higher rates of COVID-19.<sup>6</sup> Americans may trust science in the aggregate, but that does not mean that they will listen to scientists' recommendations when it comes to issues like pandemic response.<sup>7</sup>

Understanding the relationship between trust in science and the public's response to the pandemic requires better data that allow us to examine variation across people over time. Thus, early in the pandemic, we launched a

unique nationally representative panel survey, conducted in April 2020, July 2020, November 2020, and July/August 2021. By surveying the same group of people at these four points, we were able to observe the stability and change in their views and assess the factors that shape variation between and across groups. Throughout our analyses, we use two key measures: trust in science and support for evidence-based public health measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.<sup>8</sup>

Our survey allows us to explore three key questions. Does trust in science even matter, relative to the pandemic? What are the factors that shape people's likelihood of trusting science? What can we do about the persistent partisan gap in trust in science?

The exigencies of the coronavirus pandemic created one of the most uncertain historical moments the global community has faced. The world economy shut down, leaving people stranded in their homes, unmoored from the everyday workplaces, relationships, and patterns that shaped their lives. In this precarious moment, the scientific community confronted uncertainty by applying scientific tools to understand what was happening, and to determine what could be done to help the world return to normal. As the science developed, many governmental leaders around the world chose to issue public health guidelines based on recommendations from scientists.

In the United States, how would the general public's regard for the scientific community affect their willingness to adhere to these guidelines? We know that people who have lower trust in science are less likely to believe the perspectives held by scientific experts (for example, that climate change is caused by humans).<sup>9</sup> But do these patterns hold when people need to make personal decisions that affect their own health and safety?

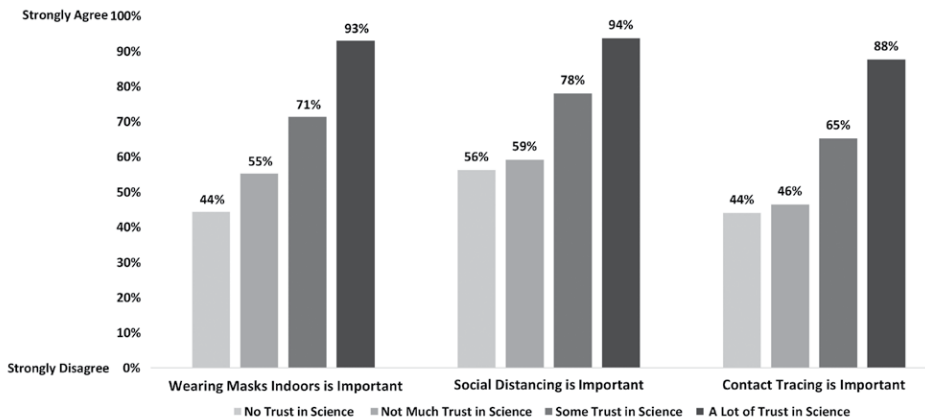
Throughout the pandemic, public health leaders have consistently recommended mask wearing, social distancing, and contact tracing for mitigating the spread of COVID-19, and in the aggregate, Americans have remained highly supportive of all three measures. For example, while overall public support for social distancing dipped from a high of 89 percent in April 2020 to 79 percent in July 2020, support for both social distancing and mask wearing remained above 75 percent throughout 2020 (and just below 75 percent for contact tracing) in our sample.

But people who did not trust science were much less likely to support any of these measures. In Figure 1, we present the average level of support for each of these public health measures, based on respondents' self-reported level of trust in science. The patterns are clear across all three measures: the more people trust science, the more likely they are to support public health guidelines.

Consider support for mask wearing. Overall, survey respondents reported generally high agreement that mask wearing was important.<sup>10</sup> But that support var-

Figure 1

Average Support for Public Health Measures by Trust in Science, Pooled Survey Data from 2020



We collected data about mask wearing and contact tracing in July and November 2020. Data about social distancing were collected in April 2020, July 2020, and November 2020. Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed that select public health measures were important for controlling the spread of COVID-19. Source: Authors' calculations from the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Civic Life and Public Health Survey, <https://snfagora.jhu.edu/project/the-johns-hopkins-covid-19-civic-life-and-public-health-survey>.

ied a great deal among people based on their level of trust in science. Among the subset of respondents who reported “a lot” of trust in science generally, average support for mask wearing was much greater than for those who indicated they did not trust science at all.<sup>11</sup> This divide across levels of trust in science emerged consistently across support levels for all three public health measures. Since a handful of people forgoing recommended safety measures can lead to significant spread of the disease, understanding the variation is important.

**W**e used three other models to estimate support for mask wearing, social distancing, and contact tracing as a function of trust in science. This time, we included demographic and attitudinal variables in the analysis: race and ethnicity, gender, age, education, household income, political party affiliation, ideology, time spent participating in community organizations, and valuing helping out in the community, plus the five-day statewide COVID-19 incidence rate at the time of survey completion.<sup>12</sup> With this last measure, we wanted to capture objective variation in how the prevalence of the disease in someone's community might affect their views.



We found that people's trust in science had an enduring impact on their support for public health guidelines. The magnitude of the effect of trust in science eclipsed every other variable (including political party identification). As one example, in our model examining support for mask wearing, support among individuals who had "a lot" of trust in science was 34 percentage points higher than support for mask wearing among individuals with "no" trust in science. Partisan identities had an important but smaller impact. Identifying as a strong Republican, for example, lowered people's support for mask wearing by 21 percentage points, relative to those identifying as strong Democrats. This finding was consistent across all models examining social distancing and contact tracing.

Trust in science was not, of course, the only factor predicting varying levels of support for public health measures. In general, we found that non-White respondents and older people were more supportive of these measures relative to both White non-Hispanic respondents and younger respondents.<sup>13</sup> Similar to partisanship, people's ideological views mattered as well. Americans who were more conservative were significantly less likely to support mask wearing, contact tracing, and social distancing compared with respondents identifying as more liberal.

Putting the pieces together, we found that trust in science is strongly associated with higher levels of support for public health responses to the pandemic, even when accounting for individual attitudes and characteristics that potentially shape support for these measures. Even though these public health recommendations presented a less invasive request than some other measures such as vaccinations, people who did not trust science were less likely to support them. Americans who are skeptical toward science are less likely to support even low-burden public health measures. This pattern raises the question of what attributes are associated with people's trust in science.

Certain kinds of people may be more likely than others to trust science. One person's level of trust in science may also change over time, such as when scientific consensus evolves quickly, as it did when scientists learned more about COVID's transmissibility during the early stages of the pandemic. We wanted to understand both phenomena. No matter how we examined the data, the strongest pattern that emerged was the persistent role of partisanship and ideology in shaping levels of trust. Though science is widely considered to be a politically neutral way of identifying truth and facts about the world, our data show that people's trust in science is highly conditioned by their own politics. Republicans and conservatives were consistently less likely than Democrats and liberals to trust science, and Republicans' trust in science eroded over the course of the study.

In general, Americans' aggregate levels of trust in science remained relatively stable during our study. Scientists worked rapidly and diligently from the onset of the pandemic to understand and ultimately develop defenses against COVID-19.

Although Americans experienced changing information and guidelines as scientific understandings evolved, most Americans retained stable views toward science (see Figure 2).<sup>14</sup>

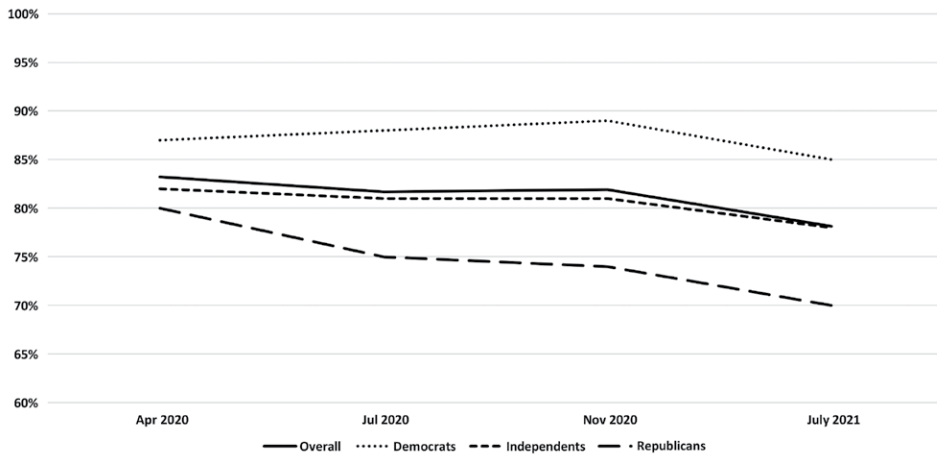
However, while average levels of trust in science were stable across the study, there were important partisan differences. Overall, 22 percent of the respondents reported decreases in trust and 10 percent of the sample reported increases. If we examine people's responses in each of the four waves of our study, we find that only 51 percent of respondents reported the exact same level of trust in all four waves. With respect to differences in party affiliation, we find that Republicans reported consistent declines in their trust in science during the pandemic, while Democrats and independents remained relatively stable. As Figure 2 shows, there was a clear pattern of declining trust among Republicans over time, culminating in a statistically significant decrease of 11 percentage points between April 2020 and July 2021. In other words, Republicans drove the overall decrease in trust during our study.

To dig deeper into the relationship between politics and trust in science, we wanted to compare the role of partisanship relative to other factors in explaining people's varying levels of trust in science.<sup>15</sup> We found that, on average, women expressed lower levels of trust in science, as did respondents identifying as either Hispanic, Black and non-Hispanic, or other and non-Hispanic, relative to White and non-Hispanic respondents. Individuals with college degrees reported greater trust in science than those without college degrees. Respondents in the highest income tercile (greater than \$85,000 per year) also reported greater trust in science compared with those in the lowest tercile (less than \$40,000).

The bulk of our investigation focused on the relationship between people's political views and their levels of trust in science. Partisanship refers to the political party with which people affiliate. Ideology refers to the liberalism or conservatism of their views. Today, people who are conservative also are more likely to identify as Republican, and people who are liberal are more likely to identify as Democrat (that pattern is very consistent in twenty-first-century America, but it has not always been the case; until the mid-twentieth century, for instance, a number of conservative Southerners identified as Democrats). We included both ideology and party identification as predictors of trust in science in our research and examined how these relationships changed over time.<sup>16</sup>

In general, we found that Republicans and conservatives were less likely to trust science, and that Republicans became less trusting of science over time.<sup>17</sup> When we examined how ideology and partisanship interacted with time, we found that partisanship was the only predictor that had a statistically significant interaction with time at each point of data collection. In particular, we found that levels of trust among respondents identifying as Republican decreased by our second wave of data collection (July 2020) compared with other respondents, and that this gap held through the remainder of the study.

Figure 2  
Average Trust in Science by Party Identification, April 2020 – July 2021



Respondents were asked prior to joining our panel survey for their party identification. We then treated this one-time party identification as constant throughout the panel survey. Source: Authors' calculations from the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Civic Life and Public Health Survey, <https://snfagora.jhu.edu/project/the-johns-hopkins-covid-19-civic-life-and-public-health-survey>.

Politics matters, at least when it comes to people's trust in science. Although we were unable to disentangle fully the relative roles of ideology and partisanship, we can see that these political identities shaped the ways in which Americans have responded to the pandemic, and, as we discussed in the previous section, the extent to which they have supported key public health recommendations. As suggested by recent studies, the partisan and ideological gap in trust in science is not new to the current public health crisis. The persistence of the gap in trust between political parties through 2020 and 2021, however, suggests that these gaps are relevant even when scientific recommendations can have material benefits for people, such as protecting them from disease.

**W**hither trust in science? Democrats and Republicans clearly differed in their levels of trust in science during the first eighteen months of the pandemic. So where do we go from here? Changing people's partisan identities is notoriously hard to do, but perhaps we can dig more deeply into the places where people get their information to see whether there are pandemic-related information sources that do not evoke strong partisan reactions.<sup>18</sup>

We examined how people's sources of information about the pandemic related to their levels of trust in science, and how those relationships changed during our study. We found that trust in institutions most enmeshed in the hurly-burly of national politics in America exhibited the biggest partisan gaps. Those institutions that remained above the fray of national politics – namely, local government officials and state and municipal health departments – were most likely to emerge as potentially stable sources of trust over time.

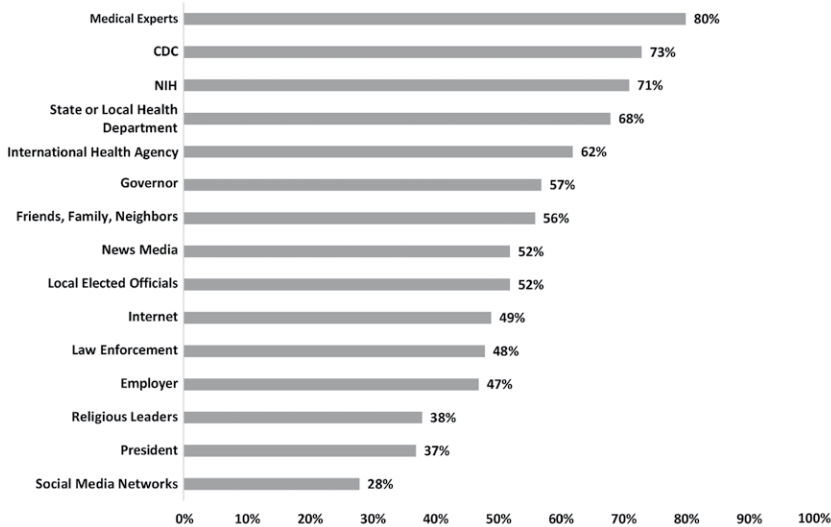
People turned to many different sources for information about the pandemic, from medical experts and public health agencies to elected officials, news media, and their personal social networks. When we examined Americans' trust in fifteen different sources for accurate information about the pandemic, we found that, overall, they reported the highest levels of trust in medical experts and public health agencies, including national institutions like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and international health agencies, as well as their respective state and municipal health departments. Trust in elected leaders, people's personal networks, and news media ranked below health agencies and medical experts (see Figure 3).

When we examined the association between trust in the fifteen sources of pandemic information in Figure 3 and trust in science generally, we found that thirteen of the fifteen information sources had a statistically significant association with trust in science.<sup>19</sup> Americans who placed higher trust in an institutional information source (such as the CDC, the NIH, and law enforcement) also had greater trust in science. Trust in social media and the president were the exceptions, though the latter is largely due to the change in administrations. Trust in the president predicted lower trust in science in 2020 and higher trust in 2021.

Trust also shifted over time. Across the four waves of our survey, we found that Republicans' trust in four information sources – medical experts, the CDC, the NIH, and international health agencies – declined precipitously as the pandemic wore on. In this sense, Republicans stand out relative to the general population, for whom overall trust in most information sources was relatively stable.<sup>20</sup> Figure 4 plots trust in medical experts, the CDC, the NIH, and international health agencies as information sources over time for Republicans and non-Republicans. Republicans were nearly as trusting of medical experts, the CDC, and the NIH as Democrats and independents at the onset of COVID-19, but as the pandemic progressed, they became increasingly distrustful of these institutions, especially between the November 2020 election and July 2021.

**O**f particular interest, we found that the strength of the association between trust in science and four information sources increased during the course of our study: local elected officials, state and local health departments, news media, and international health agencies. Trusting these information sources

Figure 3  
Average Pooled Trust in Pandemic Information Sources



We pooled self-reported trust in information sources across all four waves of data collection and then reported the average by information source. Respondents were originally asked to rate how much they trusted each source for pandemic information on a four-item Likert scale. We rescaled these responses 0–1, where 0 is “not at all” and 1 is “a lot.” Source: Authors’ calculations from the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Civic Life and Public Health Survey, <https://snfajora.jhu.edu/project/the-johns-hopkins-covid-19-civic-life-and-public-health-survey>.

es predicted even greater trust in science as the pandemic progressed. For example, if we imagine that people can trust science anywhere from 0 percent (no trust) to 100 percent (absolute trust), Americans who trusted local officials more reported more trust in science in April 2020. Specifically, Americans who reported high trust in local officials reported, on average, 87 percent trust in science compared with 78 percent among those with no trust in local officials. In July 2021, respondents with high trust in local officials reported, on average, 91 percent trust in science, compared with 71 percent among those with no trust in local officials.

Among these four information sources, local elected officials and state and local health departments stand out because overall support in them grew or remained stable over time, even when adjusting for partisanship. Trust in local officials grew over the course of our study – a relatively rare occurrence among the tested information sources. In the case of health departments, total trust was stable, and health departments consistently ranked as one of the most trusted sources of information about the pandemic. News media and international

health agencies, in contrast, either became somewhat less trusted as sources of pandemic information over time, or developed major partisan cleavages in trust (see Figure 4). Throughout the study, local officials and state and local health departments weathered the storm of dampened public trust (Figure 5).

Untangling the causal relationship between information sources, trust in science, and partisanship remains tricky. But these analyses suggest that trust in local elected officials and local and state health departments has remained less susceptible to politics than other information sources. Reliance on those information sources is associated with trust in science as well. Putting the pieces together suggests that fortifying local information sources may be one avenue to explore for strengthening trust in science.

**T**he role that science plays in any history of the global coronavirus pandemic will likely be two-sided. On one hand, the scientific community came together in an unprecedented way to develop public health guidelines and multiple vaccines to reduce COVID infection and mortality rates. On the other, even when the science was clear, the global community proved unable to convince everyone eligible to get the vaccine, or, in many countries, to persuade the public to adhere to the guidelines scientists recommended. In developing countries, inequitable systems of vaccine delivery served as the primary limitation. In the United States, however, one of the most important limitations has proved to be attitudinal. People who did not trust science concomitantly did not trust the solutions science developed, and many Americans continue to express skepticism and hostility toward the vaccines, even as the pandemic continues.

Perhaps even more alarming is the fact that our data showed that Republicans became even less trusting of science over the course of the pandemic. At first glance, that trust seemed to remain largely stable in the general population, but a closer look at the data reveals far more volatile partisan undercurrents. Republicans began the pandemic with levels of trust closer to that of Democrats and independents. But as the pandemic wore on, and especially following the inauguration of a Democratic president, Republicans' distrust separated them from Democrats and independents. This movement away from trusting in science appears to be part of a larger trend in recent years among Republicans and conservatives.<sup>21</sup> For the pandemic, the consequences of declining trust in science were clear. Republicans were consistently less supportive of public health measures that could protect them, their families, and their communities.

Divergent levels of trust in various information sources may help explain divisions in trust in science and support for public health measures. Trust in the CDC, the NIH, medical experts, and international health agencies as reliable sources declined among Republicans over time. Although disentangling the precise reasons for that decline requires more research, partisan attacks on scientific exper-

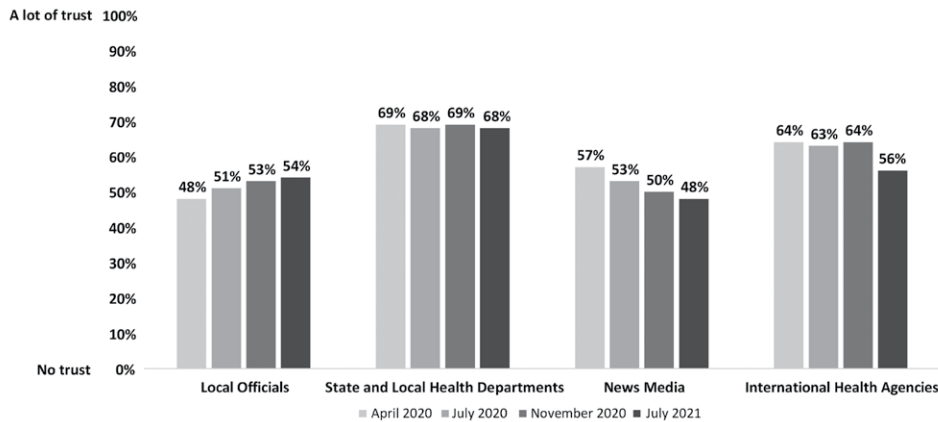
Figure 4  
Trust in Pandemic Information Sources, Republicans and Non-Republicans



We adjusted for race, ethnicity, age, educational attainment (college degree), gender, household income, party identification, ideology, five-day statewide COVID-19 incident rate, valuing helping in the community, and time spent participating in a community organization. Respondents were asked how much they trusted a given source for information related to the pandemic: 0 corresponds to “not at all,” while 1 corresponds to “a lot.” Source: Authors’ calculations from the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Civic Life and Public Health Survey, <https://snfagora.jhu.edu/project/the-johns-hopkins-covid-19-civic-life-and-public-health-survey>.

Figure 5

Adjusted Levels of Trust in Local Officials, State and Local Health Departments, News Media, and International Health Agencies



We adjusted for race, ethnicity, age, educational attainment (college degree), gender, party identification, household income, ideology, valuing helping in the community, time spent participating in a community organization, and five-day statewide COVID-19 incident rate. See endnote 19 for more details. Source: Authors' calculations from the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Civic Life and Public Health Survey, <https://snfagora.jhu.edu/project/the-johns-hopkins-covid-19-civic-life-and-public-health-survey>.

tise had clear consequences for trust in these institutions. The question we now must ask is whether lasting damage has been done to the field, and what the consequences will be if a significant and potentially growing share of the population views these institutions (and science more generally) with skepticism.

Americans' trust in local elected officials and state and municipal health departments stood out for their relative resilience to these political shifts, and also the fact that they became more associated with trust in science over time. This pattern suggests these messengers may be important for communicating scientific findings for the public. Once a Democratic administration took over the federal government, Republicans became more likely to distrust recommendations and information from federal scientific agencies. Yet local institutions retained public trust despite these partisan shifts. Perhaps federal agencies and institutions should enhance their partnerships with those organizations that continue to be trusted in their communities to reinforce or foster Americans' trust in science.

Many critics point to the content of science communication as a source of stumbling responses to the pandemic and crumbling trust in science, and often end with a call for greater accuracy and expediency, or the need for more nu-



anced and cautionary presentations of discoveries.<sup>22</sup> Our research underscores a long-standing finding from the study of political communication: the messenger matters. For instance, if local officials and organizations can remain above the fray of national politics, then perhaps we should also empower them to lead on scientific communications and recommendations in times of crisis. After all, Americans generally have greater trust in local government and institutions compared with their state and federal counterparts.<sup>23</sup>

Science will always remain critical to managing public health crises, and there is ample reason to think we will only be facing more crises in the future. To meet that challenge, science must be trusted as an impartial guide to the difficult choices societal leaders must make to manage crisis. When people perceive science to be partisan, science loses its ability to be that guide. Restoring trust in science remains an ongoing challenge. Just as John Barry presciently noted the importance of trust after the 1918 flu pandemic, perhaps the great lesson coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic is that trust in science matters more than ever.

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- <sup>6</sup> Charlie B. Fischer, Nedghie Adrien, Jeremiah J. Silguero, et al., “Mask Adherence and Rate of COVID-19 across the United States,” *PLOS ONE* 16 (4) (2021): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0249891>.
- <sup>7</sup> Alan I. Leshner, “Trust in Science is Not the Problem,” *Issues in Science and Technology* 37 (3) (2021): 16–18, <https://issues.org/trust-in-science-is-not-the-problem-engagement-leshner>.
- <sup>8</sup> Our Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Civic Life and Public Health Survey measured trust in science for each wave by asking respondents whether they trusted science “a lot,” “some,” “not much,” or “not at all.” We scaled these responses 0–1, with 0 representing “not at all” and 1 representing “a lot.” We also asked respondents to what extent they agreed that wearing masks indoors, social distancing, and contact tracing were important for slowing COVID-19 transmission. Responses were initially coded on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 was strongly agree and 5 was strongly disagree. We rescaled these responses 0–1, with 0 corresponding to strongly disagree and 1 corresponding to strongly agree.
- <sup>9</sup> Matthew Motta, “The Dynamics and Political Implications of Anti-Intellectualism in the United States,” *American Politics Research* 46 (3) (2018): 465–498, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02F1532673X17719507>.
- <sup>10</sup> On the 0–1 Likert scale, average support was 82 percent in July 2020 compared with 81 percent in November 2020.
- <sup>11</sup> Among respondents who reported “a lot” of trust in science, average support for mask wearing was 92 percent in July 2020 and 93 percent in November 2020. For those who indicated they did not trust science at all, average support for mask wearing was 54 percent in July 2020 and 38 percent in November 2020.
- <sup>12</sup> It is worth taking a moment to discuss the role of religion in our analyses. At first, we presumed people’s faith commitments would have a strong relationship to their support for public health guidelines. As such, we initially included two measures of religi-

osity in our analyses: religious attendance and identifying as a Protestant evangelical. Yet in this analysis, and all the other analyses in this essay, these explanatory variables did not demonstrate a statistically significant relationship with the outcomes. Because these variables were a source of significant missing data (25 percent of the sample), we ultimately chose to remove them from the models to be able to conduct analyses on our full sample. The results throughout the remainder of this essay reflect their exclusion from the models.

- <sup>13</sup> Participant ages ranged from eighteen to ninety-two. We included age as a continuous variable and found that support for public health measures was significantly higher as participant ages rose (0.03 per ten years across all three public health measures).
- <sup>14</sup> As Figure 2 shows, the average level of trust in science on a 0–1 scale was 83 percent in April 2020, 82 percent in July 2020, 82 percent in November 2020, and declined only slightly to 78 percent in July 2021.
- <sup>15</sup> These analyses are based on cross-sectional multivariate models of trust in science as a function of the same social and political characteristics that we used to explore support for the three public health measures.
- <sup>16</sup> We asked survey participants to describe their partisanship and ideology using seven-point Likert scales. For our partisanship measure, 1 corresponded with “strong Democrat” and 7 corresponded with “strong Republican.” For our ideology measure, 1 corresponded with “extremely liberal” and 7 corresponded with “extremely conservative.”
- <sup>17</sup> Our multivariate models (with interaction terms for party and ideology) showed that average levels of trust among those who had conservative ideologies or were strong Republicans were 76 percent and 72 percent, respectively, during the pandemic, compared with 88 percent and 90 percent among liberal respondents and strong Democrats, respectively.
- <sup>18</sup> Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler, *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002).
- <sup>19</sup> These analyses were based on separate multivariate models that treated trust in science as the outcome measure, included an interaction term between survey wave and trust in information sources, and controlled for the same factors that we used in our previous analyses examining trust in science.
- <sup>20</sup> By July 2021, however, overall trust declined slightly in many information sources, including the CDC and the NIH.
- <sup>21</sup> Naomi Oreskes and Eric M. Conway, “From Anti-Government to Anti-Science: Why Conservatives Have Turned Against Science,” *Daedalus* 151 (4) (Fall 2022).
- <sup>22</sup> Richard Saitz and Gary Schwitzer, “Communicating Science in the Time of a Pandemic,” *JAMA* 324 (5) (2020): 443–444, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2020.12535>; and Molly A. Sauer, Shaun Truelove, Amelia K. Gerste, and Rupali J. Limaye, “A Failure to Communicate? How Public Messaging Has Strained the COVID-19 Response in the United States,” *Health Security* 19 (1) (2021): 65–74, <https://doi.org/10.1089/hs.2020.0190>.
- <sup>23</sup> Tyler Schario and David Konisky, *Public Confidence in Government: Trust and Responsiveness* (Columbia: University of Missouri Institute of Public Policy, 2008); and Gallup, “Trust in Government,” last modified: September 17, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/5392/trust-government.aspx>.

# From Anti-Government to Anti-Science: Why Conservatives Have Turned Against Science

*Naomi Oreskes & Erik M. Conway*

*Empirical data do not support the conclusion of a crisis of public trust in science. They do support the conclusion of a crisis of conservative trust in science: polls show that American attitudes toward science are highly polarized along political lines. In this essay, we argue that conservative hostility toward science is rooted in conservative hostility toward government regulation of the marketplace, which has morphed in recent decades into conservative hostility to government, tout court. This distrust was cultivated by conservative business leaders for nearly a century, but took strong hold during the Reagan administration, largely in response to scientific evidence of environmental crises that invited governmental response. Thus, science – particularly environmental and public health science – became the target of conservative anti-regulatory attitudes. We argue that contemporary distrust of science is mostly collateral damage, a spillover from carefully orchestrated conservative distrust of government.*

In 2020, scientists performed an astonishing feat. In less than one year, they produced not one but several safe and effective vaccines against the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2. Yet, by the summer of 2021, barely half of all Americans had been fully vaccinated, even though free vaccines were widely available. By the autumn of 2021, ten thousand deaths following vaccination had been reported, and only six positively attributed to the vaccine, with more than four hundred and fifty million vaccine doses administered. This is a vaccine-death rate of 0.0000001 percent.<sup>1</sup> Yet public health officials still struggled to persuade the remaining Americans to get vaccinated.

Commentators have read this opposition as evidence of a crisis of public trust in science. Crisis-in-science narratives are widespread in both the scientific literature and in mass-media reporting, but the available evidence does not support the narrative.<sup>2</sup> The General Social Survey has long included a question about trust in the leaders of major institutions, and its polling shows that most Americans evince confidence in scientific institutions. In 2021, the largest share of re-

spondents answered that they had “a great deal of confidence,” rather than “only some” or “hardly any” confidence, in scientific institutions.<sup>3</sup> In fact, scientific and medical leaders are generally second only to military leaders in public estimation.<sup>4</sup> Moreover – and contrary to popular impression – overall trust in scientific leaders has not changed since the 1970s. A 2018 poll by Research!America found that more than 70 percent of Americans believe that government investments in science and technology pay off in the long run. A recent report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences that analyzed the Research!America poll, as well as other data, found that most Americans view scientific research as beneficial, support an active role for science and scientists in public life, trust scientists to tell the truth and report findings accurately, and believe that scientists should play a major role in shaping public policy with respect to health and the environment.<sup>5</sup>

These findings do not support the conclusion of a crisis of public trust in science. However, available data do support the conclusion of a crisis of *conservative* trust in science. Reaction to scientific findings is highly polarized, with Republican voters and self-identified conservatives far more likely than Democrats and self-identified liberals to reject consensus scientific findings, particularly in the areas of climate change and COVID-19 response. In 2020, 88 percent of Democrats agreed with scientific findings that climate change was a major threat to the well-being of the United States, but only 31 percent of Republicans thought so.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, 94 percent of Democrats believe that the documented increase in global temperature is due to human activities (again, consistent with the scientific consensus), but only 69 percent of Republicans do. When it comes to the question of whether the globe is warming at all, the proportion of Republicans accepting that conclusion has decreased since 2000, from about 75 percent to only about 55 percent, even as scientists have declared the fact of global warming to be “unequivocal.”<sup>7</sup> These patterns cannot be linked in any obvious way to who holds the presidency. Democratic acceptance of climate science and concern about climate change increased during both the Obama and Trump administrations, but Republican views were largely unchanged until 2019, when extreme weather events – including the largest fire in California history – may have shifted some people’s views.<sup>8</sup>

There is a similar pattern in reactions to COVID-19. Most Democrats support mask-wearing; most Republicans do not.<sup>9</sup> Almost all Democrats are or plan to be vaccinated; many Republicans are not vaccinated and do not plan to be. In counties that Joe Biden won in the 2020 presidential election, 52.8 percent of people were fully vaccinated by September 2021, but in counties that went to Donald Trump, the rate was 39.9 percent.<sup>10</sup> At that time, nearly half of all unvaccinated people identified as Republicans or Republican-leaning. Republican confidence in science dropped during the Trump administration: a 2021 Pew survey found a striking decline in Republican confidence that “science has largely had a positive

effect on society,” from 70 percent in January 2019 to 54 percent in March 2021, with no similar decline among Democrats.<sup>11</sup>

These patterns cannot be attributed to scientific illiteracy. Researchers have found that scientific literacy and educational attainment do not predict attitudes related to specific science controversies. In general, higher education correlates with positive perceptions of science, yet highly educated Republicans are *more* likely than less educated ones to reject climate science or think that scientists are exaggerating the threat.<sup>12</sup> People who reported in the spring of 2021 that they would “definitely not” get the COVID-19 vaccine – as compared with those planning to “wait and see” – were not so much uneducated as overwhelmingly Republican (67 percent versus 12 percent Democrat).<sup>13</sup> During the summer and autumn of 2021, this partisan gap grew, even as the scientific evidence of vaccine safety and efficacy also grew. These patterns of partisan polarization confirm an argument we have already made elsewhere: the sources of science rejection lay not in the science itself, but in prior political and ideological beliefs and commitments.

In our 2010 book *Merchants of Doubt*, we showed that climate-change denial was grounded in conservative hostility toward “Big Government,” in particular the idea that government regulation of the marketplace – whether in response to environmental issues, public health crises, or other social problems – was a step on a slippery slope toward socialism.<sup>14</sup> Also in 2010, Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap proposed that American conservatives tended to reject “impact” sciences – those concerned with identifying environmental and health damages – but not “production” sciences, those that support business and industry.<sup>15</sup> In other words, conservatives are not rejecting science *tout court*, but rejecting sciences that undergird or might be perceived to demonstrate the need for government action. The problem with the “impact” framing, however, is that any science can become an impact science if scientists discover something that points to the need for government regulation. The scientists who discovered the ozone hole and acid rain did not think of themselves as environmentalists, or even environmental scientists. But they discovered problems created by activities such as burning fossil fuels, driving cars, and using refrigerants that could only be fixed by measures to reduce or otherwise control those activities. The solutions involved national government regulations and international treaties. The “merchants of doubt” did not oppose these laws and treaties because they doubted the science; they doubted the science because they opposed these laws and treaties.

Citizens protesting COVID-19 mandates have not for the most part questioned the science but have carried placards equating mask mandates with government tyranny and denial of personal liberty.<sup>16</sup> When they have questioned the science, it has often been in the context of questioning the basis for government mandates that they oppose on other grounds.

All of these challenges lead to the question: Why do American conservatives distrust government? It is not obvious that conservatives, who historically have

valorized order, authority, and respect for tradition, should necessarily distrust government. Classical liberal economists – including Adam Smith – recognized that governments serve essential functions, such as building infrastructure from which everyone benefits, and regulating banks, which, if left to their own devices, could destroy an economy.<sup>17</sup> Conservatives have also historically recognized that taxation was required to enable governments to perform those functions. For most of the nineteenth century, business leaders in the United States supported public investment in infrastructure too. Infrastructure investment helped create the modern business corporation, as state and federal governments used corporations to carry out large infrastructure projects, such as the electrification of rural America, the interstate highway system, the aerospace industry, and later the space program.<sup>18</sup>

Admittedly, there is a long tradition in American culture of believing that the government that governs best governs least.<sup>19</sup> But broadly held cultural attitudes do not explain partisan divides. To explain that, we need to look more closely at a factor that has received insufficient attention: the prolonged attack on government by business leaders and political conservatives in the mid-late twentieth century, and the way in which anti-government attitudes spilled over into anti-science attitudes in the Ronald Reagan administration.

Our story begins in the early twentieth century, when a group of conservative business leaders and economists shifted economic and political thinking in a radical way. They argued that any government action in the marketplace – even if well-intentioned – compromised the freedom of individuals to do as they pleased, and therefore put us on the road to totalitarianism. Political and economic freedom were “indivisible,” they insisted, and so a compromise to the latter, even when it addressed an obvious ill like child labor, was a threat to the former. Their arguments gained some traction when Franklin Roosevelt dramatically expanded the scale and authority of the federal government through the New Deal. But they took serious hold during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, who famously insisted in his first inaugural address that “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.” Reagan initiated a pattern of Republican rejection of any science that pointed to the need for more government regulation rather than less. Today, hostility to the federal government is a touchstone for political conservatives, and contemporary conservative distrust of science is collateral damage, a spillover effect of distrust in government.

American citizens in the mid-twentieth century were largely suspicious of “Big Business,” saw the government as their ally, and believed that government should address the problems that unconstrained capitalism had created.<sup>20</sup> These included “social costs,” such as the deaths of workers in dangerous mines, mills, and factories, as well as market failures like bank runs and collapses. When thousands of

workers were killed every year in railroad accidents, boiler explosions, and mine collapses, the U.S government created Workers' Compensation and established standards for occupational safety.<sup>21</sup> When banks failed during the Great Depression, the government created the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) to protect people's savings. As massive pollution of the nation's waterways made the water undrinkable, and the air in Los Angeles grew so poisonous that people died from breathing it, the public demanded government standards for clean water and clean air. The Progressive Era, the New Deal, and 1960s environmentalism all reinforced the essential role of government in addressing problems created by economic and industrial activity.

But while politicians of both major parties were devising government remedies to the failures of the marketplace, a small coterie of businessmen and conservative intellectuals set to work to block those remedies. They did so in part by conventional means: lobbying Congress, making campaign contributions, running ad campaigns. But unifying these familiar activities was a bigger project to change the way Americans thought about "the marketplace" and the role of government in it. It was a project to build an American myth designed to undermine confidence in the very idea that government could remedy the failures of capitalism.

The myth had three parts. The first is that free enterprise is one of the foundations of American government, on par with representative democracy and the civic rights enshrined in the Bill of Rights. Government action in the marketplace, the myth insisted, threatens these foundations. The second is that any compromise to economic freedom risks political freedom. The third is the claim that government is not the solution to the country's problems; it is the cause of them. To generate prosperity, government has to get out of the way, "get off our backs," and let "the market do its magic."

Their efforts worked. By the end of the century, public opinion had flipped: many Americans now admired business leaders as "entrepreneurs" and "job creators," and believed that it made more sense to count on markets to solve problems than to engage government.<sup>22</sup> Many Americans saw government as dead weight, taxation as unfair or even a form of theft, and chuckled knowingly when Reagan insisted that the scariest nine words in the English language were, "I'm from the government and I'm here to help."<sup>23</sup>

The people involved in the project to change how Americans viewed government were diverse and dispersed, but they were also interconnected in important and sometimes startling ways. They included trade organizations and corporations; industrialists, writers, intellectuals, and economists; Protestant religious organizations beginning with Spiritual Mobilization in the late 1930s; and influential foundations and think tanks, like the Foundation for Economic Education, which drew personnel from the Chamber of Commerce and from Spiritual Mobilization.<sup>24</sup> There was not a conspiracy, but it was a network of people who knew



each other, supported each other intellectually and financially, and used this mutual support to expand their influence.

In this essay, we identify four instances when conservative businessmen and intellectuals purposefully advanced distrust in government to influence public opinion: a propaganda campaign launched in the 1920s by leaders in the electricity industry to fight government involvement in electricity markets, and continued in the 1930s and 1940s by the National Association of Manufacturers to fight the New Deal; the promotion by private philanthropists of pro-market, anti-government ideology at the University of Chicago; the transmogrification of Ronald Reagan from New Deal Democrat to anti-government Republican under the influence of General Electric executives, and the launch of his political career with the financial support of those executives; and, crucially, the Reagan presidency, during which science became collateral damage of this anti-government ideology.

**I**n the early twentieth century, electricity was mostly monopolized by the entrepreneurs whose for-profit business made the required machinery – famously, Thomas Edison and George Westinghouse – and the private utilities that exploited that machinery, including Edison Electric. Their companies and utilities were extraordinarily successful: Edison and Westinghouse became household names as electricity lit up cities and urban homes across the country.<sup>25</sup>

Rural customers wanted electricity as much as their urban counterparts – and many observers argued that they needed it more – but electrical utilities had neglected them. In Pennsylvania in the 1920s, only about 10 percent of rural residents had access to an electricity grid.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, country folks who were fortunate enough to have access paid much higher rates – often double their urban counterparts’ – leaving many farmers unable to afford electricity even when it was offered.<sup>27</sup>

Outside the United States, electricity was generally not viewed as a commodity like corn or pork bellies to be bought and sold at a profit, but as a public good like water or sewers that demanded government engagement to ensure equitable distribution. In Germany and France, electricity generation was developed as a public utility; in the United Kingdom, Parliament nationalized electricity generation.<sup>28</sup> The contrast in outcome was stark: by the 1920s, nearly 70 percent of Northern European farmers had electricity, but fewer than 10 percent of U.S. farmers did.<sup>29</sup>

Against this backdrop, reformers such as Pennsylvania Governor Gifford Pinchot argued the need for greater government involvement in electricity markets. In response, the National Electric Light Association (NELA) launched a massive propaganda campaign that included, among other things, the hiring of academics to rewrite textbooks and develop curricula to promote pro-market, anti-government perspectives in emerging business schools and economics programs across the country. They also recruited experts to write reports “proving” that private elec-

tricity was cheaper than public electricity, despite available facts that showed otherwise.

NELA also promoted the larger argument that private property was the foundation of the American life, so any attempt to interfere with the private electricity industry threatened to undermine that way of life. Opinions to the contrary (they claimed) were unsound, socialistic, and fundamentally un-American.

When the Federal Trade Commission later investigated NELA's activities, they concluded that "private utilities, led by [their] industry trade group, the National Electric Light Association" had "mounted a large and sophisticated propaganda campaign that placed particular emphasis on making the case for private ownership to the press and in schools and universities."<sup>30</sup> Historian David Nye concurs: "The thousands of pages of testimony revealed a systematic covert attempt to shape opinion in favor of private utilities, in which half-truths and at times outright lies presented municipal utilities in a consistently bad light" and private utilities in a good light.<sup>31</sup> Historian Ronald Kline calls the campaign "underhanded" and "unethical."<sup>32</sup>

The Federal Trade Commission found that the "character and objective of these activities was fully recognized by NELA and its sponsors as propaganda," and that, in their internal correspondence, they "boasted that the 'public pays' the expense."<sup>33</sup> Ernest Gruening, a journalist at the time who later served as the territorial governor of Alaska and then as U.S. Senator, noted that when the presiding judge in the hearings asked if NELA had neglected any form of publicity, its Director of Public Information replied: "Only one, and that is sky-writing."<sup>34</sup>

**I**n the 1930s, as the Great Depression unfolded and the failures of the marketplace seemed to demand government response, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) reprised the NELA effort with a multimillion-dollar propaganda campaign to convince the American people that – despite all the apparent evidence to the contrary – American business and industry were working just fine. They argued that the real causes of the Great Depression were the unreasonable demands made by unionized labor, coupled with excessive government interference in the affairs of business and federal taxation that starved industry of the monies it needed to expand productive capacity.

Using print media, radio, and film, NAM ran a propaganda campaign that lasted into the 1940s to influence what newspapers had to say about the economy and American life, what teachers taught in the classroom, and what the American people came to believe about the federal government. NAM's president cited the famed tobacco industry strategist Edward Bernays as the sort of authority whose help NAM should (and later would) seek.<sup>35</sup> NAM sent pamphlets, leaflets, comic strips, and push surveys to newspaper editors and radio stations across the country, as well as materials to member companies to help them persuade their work-

ers not to unionize. They published magazines and organized lecture series aimed at teachers, clergy, and youth. They produced and distributed free of charge radio programs, short films, feature films, and “documentaries.” Like NELA, NAM also attempted to influence and censor textbooks.

The budget for these efforts matched their ambitions.<sup>36</sup> In 1937 alone, NAM spent over \$793,000 (the equivalent of about \$14 million today) on “public information” designed to work as integration propaganda.<sup>37</sup> These expenditures constituted more than 55 percent of the organization’s total income and continued to rise in subsequent years.<sup>38</sup> In 1946, its public relations budget was \$3 million.<sup>39</sup>

NAM leaders had concluded that a strictly economic defense of business was insufficient to turn the American people against government and toward business. They needed to link their cause to something “all Americans held dear,” not free enterprise, but freedom itself: “Free enterprise [will not] be saved as the result of appeals in the name of free enterprise alone,” one NAM memo argued. “The public must be convinced that free enterprise is as much an indivisible part of our democracy and the source of as many blessings and benefits as are our other freedoms of speech, press, and religion.”<sup>40</sup> If they could “emphasize effectively the inseparability of ‘democracy’ and ‘free enterprise,’” enthusiasm and support for the former could carry the latter.<sup>41</sup>

This led to the insistence on the inseparability or indivisibility of democracy, political freedom, and free enterprise capitalism, what we have labeled the *indivisibility thesis*. “Representative political democracy, religious and social liberties and free enterprise are inseparable and with one lost, all are lost,” NAM declared in 1938.<sup>42</sup> Economic freedom was one of the three legs in a tripod of freedom that kept America standing.<sup>43</sup> The New Deal, with its alphabet-soup of regulatory agencies, was a threat to the fabric of American life. Today, rural electrification; tomorrow, goodbye to the Bill of Rights.<sup>44</sup>

NAM messages denied the federal government’s central role in the recovery from the Great Depression, attempting instead, in the words of historian Burton St. John III, to bind Americans “to the pre-Depression ideal of the supremacy of the markets.”<sup>45</sup> NAM would try to shift Americans’ view of government from a “friend” offering a “helping hand during the Depression” to something that stood in the way of prosperity.<sup>46</sup> Above all, NAM insisted, the people who should be trusted to guide the ship were the captains of American industry.<sup>47</sup> The villain in the American story was not Big Business but Big Government.<sup>48</sup>

As the economy began to recover from the Great Depression, the NAM message began to take hold. In 1941, a NAM survey found that 71 percent of respondents believed the disappearance of the free enterprise system would harm their personal liberty.<sup>49</sup> Later that year, NAM polling found a majority of Americans believing that industry – not government – could best protect against the threats posed by the conflicts overseas.<sup>50</sup>

Despite these exceptional efforts, and despite NAM's advancing steps toward their goal, some American businessmen thought NAM had not been aggressive enough in fighting government encroachment in the affairs of business. One was Harold Luhnow, a businessman from Missouri and head of the libertarian Volker Foundation. Another was Jasper Crane, a former DuPont executive. Crane felt that NAM focused too much on the details of commerce and not enough on the vision of the society they wanted to build and sustain. They were also too willing to compromise. The battle for a free society needed to be carried forward by "a cadre of intellectuals and businessmen that would be *absolutely committed to the market*."<sup>51</sup> Historian Kim Phillips-Fein quotes Crane: "I have been wondering whether we ought to attempt to mobilize a few men who are *absolutely sound in the faith and will not compromise*, who are earnest in thinking, talking and writing for freedom, and who are resolved to uphold it at any personal sacrifice."<sup>52</sup>

Crane and Luhnow decided to develop and fund a project to move the public conversation – and thereby American society – in the spirit of Karl Marx, but in the opposite direction. They despised Marx, but thought that he was correct about one thing: that the point of philosophy should not be to study the world, but to change it.<sup>53</sup> The successful outcome of their project would be an altered social contract, in a society that valorized and protected economic freedom above other considerations. But how would they do that? Marx had written a book that had changed the world; maybe they could find someone to do the same on their side. What they needed, then, was not just *a* book, but *the* book – "the New Testament of capitalism," the "bible" of free enterprise, written by a man who would take no intellectual prisoners.<sup>54</sup> Crane and Luhnow found him in the Austrian neoliberal economist Fredrich von Hayek.

Hayek's manifesto, *The Road to Serfdom*, had been published in 1944, and its argument was the indivisibility thesis: that any compromise to economic freedom threatened political freedom. For Hayek, there could be no such thing as democratic socialism or even social democracy, because the "unforeseen but inevitable consequences of socialist planning is to create a state of affairs in which if the policy is to be pursued, totalitarian forces will get the upper hand."<sup>55</sup> In 1945, Luhnow funded Hayek's American book tour, but wanted much more than just a book tour. He wanted social change. But he worried that Hayek's approach was too intellectual and too European. The best way to get the book that America needed, Luhnow and Crane concluded, was to finance a project at a reputable American institution where the arguments could be developed in an American register with an American audience in mind. Their chosen institution was the University of Chicago. The operation would be named the "Free Market Project."

Over the objections of the economics department, Luhnow provided the money for Hayek to be hired, and also funded the launch of the Free Market Project, bringing together several economists who shared their vision. One of these

like-minded economists was George Stigler, who would produce an edited version of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* that expunged nearly all of Smith's caveats, including his discussion of the need for bank regulation, for adequate wages for workers, and for taxation for public goods, like roads and bridges. Another was Aaron Director, who developed a project making the case against anti-trust enforcement.<sup>56</sup> A third was Milton Friedman.

Hayek never wrote the American *Road to Serfdom*, but Milton Friedman did. His best-selling book *Capitalism and Freedom* laid out the indivisibility thesis in language that any educated person could understand, and achieved Luhn's goal of accessibility and impact. First published in 1962, it would sell over half a million copies, see numerous editions, be translated into eighteen languages, and be adapted into a ten-part PBS television series, *Free to Choose*. The book appears on virtually every list of the top 100 or even the top 10 books by conservatives. It was named a top 100 book by *Time* magazine, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and others. Friedman would become not only the most influential economist of his generation, but one of the most influential public intellectuals. In 1966, he became a regular columnist at *Newsweek*, and went on to write hundreds of opinion pieces for mass media publications.<sup>57</sup> In the 1970s, he was a frequent speaker at the UK Institute of Economic Affairs, credited with shaping Margaret Thatcher's policies, which in turn influenced Ronald Reagan. Friedman became an advisor to both, as well as to Chilean economists associated with the dictator Augusto Pinochet.<sup>58</sup> President Reagan awarded Friedman both the National Medal of Science and the National Medal of Freedom.

Reagan raised Friedman's star, but the president had in fact developed his anti-government ideas long before he ever met Friedman. Most Americans know that Reagan was an actor before he became a politician, but they may not know that his flagging acting career was revived by the General Electric Corporation (GE), who gave him a job that was crucial both to his professional transformation from actor to politician and to his political transformation from New Deal Democrat to anti-government Republican.

**B**y the 1960s, corporate leaders, neoliberal economists, libertarian intellectuals, and market fundamentalists had for more than thirty years been selling a story in which businessmen were the heroes and government the villain. It was a story in which markets were efficient; individual enterprise was all that was needed to succeed; and racism, discrimination, corporate violence, monopolistic practices, and dangerous working conditions played only an incidental role. It was a story in which "economic freedom" meant the freedom of business owners to run their shops as they saw fit, even if that included anti-competitive practices or imposing environmental costs on surrounding communities. Above all, it was a story in which political and economic freedom were in-

divisible, so any government action in the marketplace – even if well-intentioned and seemingly warranted – would put us on the slippery slope to socialism, or worse. In effect, American manufacturers had manufactured a myth.

But despite the hard sell, for the most part, Americans weren't buying. FDR was the longest serving president in American history, elected and reelected four times, and in 1948, his vice president, Harry Truman, had won reelection in his own right. When Dwight Eisenhower was elected in 1952 – the first Republican president since Herbert Hoover – it was as a centrist seeking to avoid excessive power concentration in either state or private hands.<sup>59</sup> Eisenhower not only supported Social Security, but expanded it. With respect to the New Deal, he famously wrote that “should any political party attempt to abolish social security, unemployment insurance, and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, you would not hear of that party again. . . . There is a tiny splinter group, of course, that believes you can do these things,” but “their number is negligible and they are stupid.”<sup>60</sup> Barry Goldwater was one of that small number, and in 1964, he had suffered a crushing defeat.<sup>61</sup> Ordinary Americans – especially working- and middle-class Americans – saw the government as their ally because, for most of the twentieth century, it was.<sup>62</sup>

Twenty years later, however, the picture was different, and the person who did the most to change it was Ronald Reagan. The “Gipper” flipped the national narrative from one in which government existed to address the needs of the people to one in which government blocked people's aspirations. In the 1920s, Americans had hated Big Business. Reagan would persuade them to hate Big Government. Promising to “get the government off our backs,” Reagan encouraged Americans to see government as malevolent, not benevolent.<sup>63</sup> “The nine most terrifying words in the English language,” he snickered, “are *I'm from the government and I'm here to help.*”<sup>64</sup> The solution was to shrink government, cut it down to size, “starve the beast,” and let the market do its “magic.”<sup>65</sup>

Reagan would ask Americans to love the market and loathe the government, but – and perhaps this was the key to his success – he didn't frame it as a tale of loathing. He framed it as a love story: loving freedom, loving capitalism.<sup>66</sup> The late historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot suggested that Reagan's brilliance lay in his capacity “to inscribe his presidency into a prepackaged narrative about the United States.”<sup>67</sup> Trouillot was right: it had been packaged by NEA, NAM, and Milton Friedman, and Reagan learned it when he worked for GE.<sup>68</sup>

Reagan had joined General Electric in the 1950s to jump-start both the company's faltering efforts at television production and his own faltering acting career.<sup>69</sup> As the host of the popular weekly television program *GE Theatre*, Reagan created one of the most successful personas of the century: himself. It was not merely a matter of fashioning an image, but a radical reconstruction from New Deal Democrat and president of a major union (the Screen Actors Guild) to

anti-union, pro-management, right-wing Republican. Moreover, while the American people knew Reagan as the host of *GE Theatre*, that was only half of his job. The other half was as the public face of a massive PR program designed to convince GE's workers and citizens in their communities of the greatness of American capitalism and the threat represented by Big Government.

Reagan's mentor in this work was GE executive Lemuel Boulware, whose anti-union tactics were so extreme they earned a name: Boulwarism. (They also earned GE several indictments for federal labor law violations.) Boulware's politics became Reagan's politics, and GE's vision Reagan's vision.<sup>70</sup> Reagan's political fortunes were transformed as well, as he emerged from GE with powerful backers in corporate America who helped him launch his political career.

In later years, Reagan would assemble a forceful coalition of business leaders, social conservatives, evangelical Protestants, and disaffected blue-collar Democrats that would propel him to the presidency, but this was not the coalition that launched his political career. Reagan's 1960s "kitchen cabinet" was a handful of wealthy business executives assembled by a group of GE executives, including Boulware.<sup>71</sup> Reagan's victory in his bid to become governor of California was in many ways surprising: few people at that time had launched a successful career in politics by running first for an office as high as governor of one of America's largest states. But while Reagan may have been untested in public office, his message and delivery had been extensively tested in his years at GE, which had given him a public platform, a political ideology, and the opportunity to refine both the message and its delivery in the thousands of speeches that he had given across the country before he ever ran for office.

**A**s governor of California, Reagan was no liberal, but neither was he hostile to science. As president, however, he faced a conundrum: the emerging science of a set of issues – acid rain, the ozone hole, and man-made climate change – that suggested the need for firm and timely federal action to avoid serious, perhaps even catastrophic, damage. Reagan's answer was to question the science.

One clear example involves acid rain. In the months before Reagan took office, scientists had concluded that air pollution caused acid rain, and the Carter administration was moving toward a treaty with Canada that would severely limit air pollution from American power plants. But when Reagan took office, he reversed course, introducing the idea that the science was not sufficient to justify a strong regulatory response, much less a treaty. The administration did not merely cast doubt on the existing science, it also interfered in the scientific peer review process. In 1984, presidential science advisor George Keyworth intervened in the final stages of a scientific review, instructing the lead author to make changes that made the science seem less certain than the scientific panel had concluded it was; the administration then used this to justify inaction.<sup>72</sup> When it came to the ozone

hole, Reagan eventually signed the Montreal Protocol, the international treaty that controlled ozone-destroying chemicals, but not before some of his advisors and cabinet members disputed the science behind stratospheric ozone depletion; later, they would question the emerging evidence of global warming.

Reagan's successor, George H.W. Bush, tried to balance the demands of environmental protection and the marketplace. He championed the 1990 Clean Air Act amendments that instituted a market mechanism – emissions trading – to control the pollution that was causing acid rain. He also established the U.S. Global Climate Research program to improve scientific understanding of climate change, and agreed to a complete ban on the chemicals responsible for stratospheric ozone depletion. But Bush was a one-term president, in part because his moderate and fact-based positions were out of step with an emerging Republican ideology that took no prisoners when it came to climate change. Under Reagan, a precedent had been established: to question science that illuminated any problem that invited (or worse, seemed to demand) government action.

Conservative resistance to scientific findings emerged originally in environmental and public health domains, where markets had *created* the problems, like diseases caused by tobacco use, acid rain caused by electric power generation, or the ozone hole caused by chemicals used in refrigeration and propellants.<sup>73</sup> But it would be wrong to say that the trigger was “regulatory” science or impact science, because much of the relevant science emerged in the context of basic research, such as the work in forest ecology and soil science that established the problem of acid precipitation.<sup>74</sup> Some of it emerged in the context of applied science that conservatives supported, such as the work in the 1950s and 1960s on weather modification – much of it funded by the U.S. military – that contributed to predicting global warming. But in time, animus toward specific scientific findings spilled over into animus toward science, generally. One telling example involves the Big Bang theory, which Christian conservatives once welcomed, as it seemed (in contrast to steady state theories) to affirm that the universe had a beginning. But then Christian conservatives turned against the theory.<sup>75</sup> From the 1990s onwards, to be an American conservative increasingly meant being distrustful of science.

By the 2020s, Republican leaders were rejecting factual evidence on a host of problems that pointed to the need for the government to act in ways that could infringe upon business or personal liberty – from gun control and the opioid crisis to the safety of vaccination and efficacy of mask mandates. They were also attacking scientists – particularly those engaged in climate research – subjecting them to hostile congressional inquiries, Freedom of Information Act requests, and even subpoenas. Conservative activists used lawsuits to try to obtain scientists' correspondence, hoping to catch them in embarrassing statements.<sup>76</sup> Climate scientists were also subject to attacks in conservative media. The message was not that



particular policy approaches to climate change were undesirable, but that climate scientists were untrustworthy.<sup>77</sup>

What began as an ideological argument had become a cultural pathology. A commitment to “limited government” caused conservative leaders not merely to drag their feet on responses to climate change, health care, opioid addiction, and other problems that the private sector has been unable to solve – and that are too big for individuals or even the states to fix on their own – it also led them to attack scientific findings related to these issues, and the scientists responsible for those findings. And, when COVID-19 hit in 2019, it caused conservative leaders to encourage their constituents to distrust science and defy scientists’ guidance, even when their lives were at stake.

**I**n April 2020, Dr. Anthony Fauci called for a nationwide stay-at-home order to slow the spread of COVID-19. “I don’t understand why that’s not happening,” said the country’s leading expert on infectious disease, although he did acknowledge “the Trump administration’s hesitancy to encroach upon local authorities.”<sup>78</sup> Many Americans shared the doctor’s confusion. Why wouldn’t President Trump use his authority to issue a national stay-at-home order? Or use his influence to persuade governors to do so? Above all, why did the president downplay the threat and refuse to act on the advice of his experts while there was still a chance of containing the virus and saving hundreds of thousands of American lives?<sup>79</sup>

To many people, the president’s actions were inexplicable. To us, they seemed all too familiar. Trump’s response was, in fact, almost inevitable given three things we know about his administration and the policies it represented: a habit of hostility toward science and other forms of expertise, a worldview that prioritizes the economy above all else, and the adherence to the ideology of “limited government” that has made conservatives belligerent toward the federal government even when they are running it. The president’s response to COVID-19 was consistent with the worldview that American business conservatives began to develop a century ago and that, with persistent repetition, took root in conservative circles. Three years ago, few observers would have viewed virology or immunology as impact sciences, yet both have come under attack during the COVID-19 pandemic for the evidence they have offered on the benefits of social distancing, masking, and vaccination mandates.

**D**istrust is a complex social and psychological problem, and is unlikely to be explained by any single factor. But the distinctly partisan pattern of American distrust in science suggests that its origins are likely to lie more in political beliefs and commitments than in anything that scientists themselves have done or failed to do. To be sure, poor communication by scientists does not help their cause, but – absent other factors – missteps by scientists would likely generate skepticism across the political spectrum rather than in one part of it.

Evidence compiled by sociologist Gordon Gauchat in 2012 confirms that conservative trust in science has dropped dramatically since the 1980s, as our argument suggests it should have. In 1974, there was no statistically significant difference between liberals and conservatives in their level of trust in science. In the 2000s, the gap between liberal and conservative trust in science had reached 14.1 percentage points, according to General Social Survey data captured in Figure 1. (Moderates began with the lowest levels, ending the period with levels comparable to conservatives, a finding for which we have no ready explanation.) By the 2010s, conservatives' trust in science had steadily declined, while liberals' trust remained roughly constant. The most recent data, for 2021, suggest a further dramatic increase in the partisan divide, with the gap widening to 33.6 percentage points. The data collection methodology changed in this plague year, and it represents one year, not a decadal average, so the result is not directly comparable to the older data. But the 2021 result is similar to the dramatic drop in the Republican belief that science was generally good for society, which Pew Research Center found in their polls the same year.<sup>80</sup>

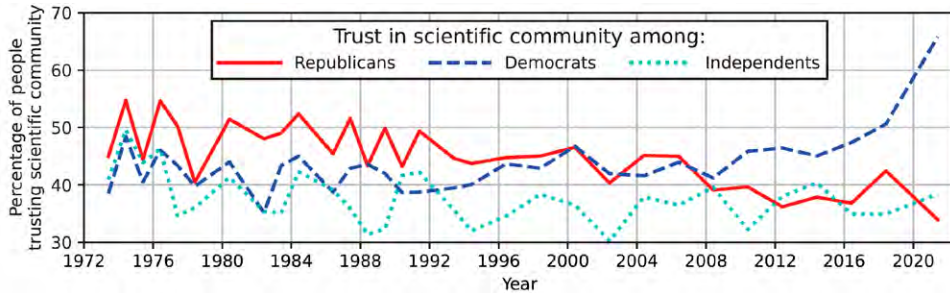
This pattern, Gauchat notes, is long-term rather than abrupt, and cannot be pinned on who held the White House at any interval during this period. It is also distinctive in comparison to trust in other secular institutions. He finds that “the politicization patterns observed for science are unique and do not reflect a parallel decline across institutions.”<sup>81</sup>

Gauchat calls this divergence of trust in science “a breakdown of this postwar consensus [about science] along sociopolitical lines.”<sup>82</sup> He interprets this breakdown in ideological terms: conservatives turned against science while liberals did not. Gauchat concludes that the source of this divergence is “empirically underdetermined,” but that “conservatives' distrust is [likely] attributable to the . . . increased connection between scientific knowledge and regulatory regimes in the United States, the latter of which conservatives generally oppose.”<sup>83</sup> A 2021 study by sociologist John J. Lee expanding on Gauchat's work examines the matter in terms of party affiliation, finding that Republican trust in science has decreased, and Democratic trust has increased. Lee attributes this to elite messaging such as the anti-government propaganda campaign we have summarized here.<sup>84</sup>

The General Social Survey asks respondents about their level of confidence in major American institutions, including science. Examining the survey data, we see that there is both a major ideological shift and a partisan change of attitudes toward science since the 1970s, and that the substantive changes have mostly occurred since the 1990s. In the 1970s, there was little difference in the response between liberals and conservatives: on average, 45 percent of all respondents had a great deal of confidence in science; the figure for liberals was 47 percent and for conservatives it was 45 percent. To the extent that there was a partisan divide at that time, Republicans expressed *more* confidence in the scientific communi-

Figure 1

Level of Confidence in Science by Political Party, 1974–2021



Source: The General Social Survey, the latest conducted from December 1, 2020–May 3, 2021. Auditors asked, “I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?” Figure by Alexander Kaurov.

ty than Democrats did. This began to change, however, in the 1990s. In 1995, 48 percent of liberal respondents expressed a great deal of confidence in science versus only 40 percent of conservatives. Figure 1 shows that this ideological shift was followed by a partisan shift: between 2000 and 2008, Republicans became less likely to trust science than Democrats. Figure 1 also shows that the shift in Republicans’ attitudes away from trusting science precedes a shift toward trusting science among Democrats. The decreasing Republican confidence in the scientific community begins in the 1990s, but increasing Democratic confidence does not get underway until the 2010s, with a dramatic increase after the election of Donald Trump. This suggests that Democrats reacted to President Trump’s anti-science positions by further embracing science.

Sociologists Timothy L. O’Brien and Shiri Noy argue that the partisan divide over science can be traced to the partisan divide in religious identity that has grown in parallel.<sup>85</sup> As the Republican Party has become identified with conservative religiosity – in particular, evangelical Protestantism – religious and political skepticism of science have become mutually constitutive and self-reinforcing. Meanwhile, individuals who are comfortable with secularism, and thus secular science, concentrate in the Democratic Party.<sup>86</sup> The process of party-sorting along religious lines has helped turned an ideological divide over science into a partisan one.

We agree but underscore that the alignment of conservative Protestant religious identity with free-market political ideology is no coincidence. The business leaders and intellectuals we have discussed here worked *to create* this align-

ment. From the 1940s to the 1990s, they worked to embed free-market economic thought into the curricula of Protestant seminaries, and placed it in the hands of individual ministers and lay readers, so that *market* fundamentalism became part of the identity of American *religious* fundamentalism. The rise of market fundamentalism in America is directly tied to the rise of conservative religion to political power in the late twentieth century, and vice versa.<sup>87</sup> The timing of the observed changes in public opinion are consistent with this interpretation.

**B**ecause regulatory regimes are located in secular government – and, in the United States, typically in the federal government – conservatives encouraged by dominant ideologies of the past half-century express broad animus toward “the government,” and not just toward specific regulatory regimes or policy instruments. Yet this does not necessarily imply animus toward science. After all, it is logically possible to accept scientific claims – for example, about the threat of climate change or the efficacy of masking – and still believe that the government should not do anything about it. And it is logically possible to accept the reality of problems identified by scientists, and accept market-based mechanisms to address them, as President George H.W. Bush did with acid rain. Thus, conservative distrust of science requires additional explanation, and we find that explanation in the efforts of American business leaders to turn Americans against government regulations, efforts that met success in the Reagan administration and have informed conservative thinking since. In short, contemporary conservative distrust of science is not really about science. It is collateral damage, a spillover effect of distrust in government. Therefore, to rebuild trust in science, we cannot simply defend science as an enterprise or demonstrate the integrity of scientists. We must address – and counter – prevailing conservative narratives of a government that smothers prosperity and threatens the liberties of its people, when it is in fact working to sustain and equitably distribute prosperity and protect its people from grave threats like climate change.

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#### AUTHORS' NOTE

This essay is derived from the authors' forthcoming book, *The Big Myth: How American Business Taught Us to Loathe the Government and Love the Free Market* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023).

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- <sup>13</sup> Grace Sparks, Ashley Kirzinger, and Mollyann Brodie, “KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor: Profile of the Unvaccinated,” KFF, June 11, 2021, <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/poll-finding/kff-covid-19-vaccine-monitor-profile-of-the-unvaccinated>.
- <sup>14</sup> Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010).
- <sup>15</sup> Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap, “Anti-Reflexivity: The American Conservative Movement’s Success in Undermining Climate Science and Policy,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 27 (2–3) (2010): 100–133, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409356001>; and Aaron M. McCright, Katherine Dentzman, Meghan Charters, and Thomas Dietz, “The Influence of Political Ideology on Trust in Science,” *Environmental Research Letters* 8 (4) (2013), <http://doi:10.1088/1748-9326/8/4/044029>. We have also written on this; see Erik M. Conway and Naomi Oreskes, “Why Conservatives Turned Against Science,” *The Chronicle Review*, November 5, 2012, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/why-conservatives-turned-against-science>.
- <sup>16</sup> The states leading the protests against federal mandates all have Republican governors; see Tom Hals, “Republican Governors Lead Attack on Biden Vaccine Mandate,” Reuters, November 5, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/republican-governors-lead-attack-biden-vaccine-mandate-2021-11-05>; and Associated Press, “GOP State Officials Push Back

- on Employer Mandate,” *U.S. News and World Report*, November 4, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/business/articles/2021-11-04/gop-pushback-on-employer-vaccine-mandate-underway-in-states>.
- <sup>17</sup> For Smith’s discussion on the risks of inadequate bank regulation, see Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, facsimile edition (New York: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1966), 229–234. For recent failures of banking regulation, see Anat Admati and Martin Hellwig, *The Bankers’ New Clothes: What’s Wrong with Banking and What to Do about It* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).
- <sup>18</sup> For example, Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011); William G. Roy, *Socializing Capital: The Rise of the Large Industrial Corporation in America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Gary Gerstle, *Liberty and Coercion: The Paradox of American Government* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017).
- <sup>19</sup> Eugene Volokh, “Who First Said, ‘The Best Government Is That Which Governs Least?’ Not Thoreau,” *The Volokh Conspiracy* (blog), *The Washington Post*, September 6, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2017/09/06/who-first-said-the-best-government-is-that-which-governs-least-not-thoreau>.
- <sup>20</sup> Opinion Research Corporation, “Survey: What the Factory Worker Thinks about Free Enterprise,” February 11, 1942, box 83, folder 3, National Association of Manufacturers Records, accession number 1411, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware.
- <sup>21</sup> According to one estimate, one in every thousand American workers in 1900 was killed on the job, the equivalent today of 1.5 million people every year. See John Fabian Witt, *The Accidental Republic: Crippled Workingmen, Destitute Widows, and the Remaking of American Law* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004), 3. See also Jeffrey Helgeson, “American Labor and Working-Class History, 1900–1945,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, last modified August 31, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.330>.
- <sup>22</sup> Erik Baker, “Family Business: The New Right at Work,” “Entrepreneurial: Management Expertise and the Reinvention of the American Work Ethic” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2022), chap. 5.
- <sup>23</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Inaugural Address,” Washington, D.C, January 20, 1981, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/reagan-quotes-speeches/inaugural-address-2>.
- <sup>24</sup> Spiritual Mobilization was a key link between religious organizations and secular businesses like NAM, and had an explicit purpose of reversing what its leaders perceived as a statist trend in American religion. It drew its support from business leaders, including J. Howard Pew, who later was the principal backer of both *Christianity Today* and the bygone *Christian Economics*, a journal intended to embed classical liberal economics in Christian theology. See Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *The Big Myth: How American Business Taught Us to Loathe Government and Love the Free Market* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023); Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); and James McKay, “Crusading for Capitalism: Christian Capitalists and the Ideological Roots of the Conservative Movement” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 2015), <https://depot.library.wisc.edu/repository/fedora/1711.dl:NCLQEOUED2EHK8K/datastreams/REF/content>. For evidence on how this has carried on into current evangelical rejection of science,

particularly climate science, see Robin Veldman, Andrew Szasz, and Randolph HaluzadeLay, “Climate Change and Religion—A Review of Existing Research,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 6 (3) (2012): 255–275, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v6i3.255>; and R. G. Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism: Why Evangelicals Oppose Action on Climate Change* (Oakland: The University of California Press, 2019).

- <sup>25</sup> David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992).
- <sup>26</sup> Sarah Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 26.
- <sup>27</sup> Nye, *Electrifying America*, 287.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid. On views of electricity in countries other than the United States at that time, see Harold Evans, “The World’s Experience with Rural Electrification,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 118 (1) (1925): 30–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000271622511800107>.
- <sup>29</sup> Evans, “The World’s Experience with Rural Electrification.”
- <sup>30</sup> William J. Hausman and John L. Neufeld, “How Politics, Economics, and Institutions Shaped Electric Utility Regulation in the United States: 1879–2009,” *Business History* 53 (5) (2011): 74; and Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 133.
- <sup>31</sup> Nye, *Electrifying America*, 340.
- <sup>32</sup> Kline, *Consumers*, 133 (“underhanded”) and 139 (“unethical”).
- <sup>33</sup> Ernest Gruening, *The Public Pays: A Study of Power Propaganda* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1931), xiii.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., 211. See also Judson King, *The Challenge of the Power Investigation to American Educators: Address to the American Political Science Association Convention* (Washington, D.C.: National Popular Government League, 1929).
- <sup>35</sup> Robert L. Lund, quoted in Richard S. Tedlow, “The National Association of Manufacturers and Public Relations During the New Deal,” *Business History Review* 50 (1) (1979): 31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3113573>. On NAM, see also Jennifer A. Delton, *The Industrialists: How the National Association of Manufacturers Shaped American Capitalism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2020). NAM called their activities “public relations” instead of propaganda, but we follow here the usage of the Hagley Library, where the NAM records are kept. According to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, propaganda is “information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view.” The NAM campaign was that. See Hagley Library, “The National Association of Manufacturers and Visual Propaganda,” September 22, 2014, <https://www.hagley.org/librarynews/research-national-association-manufacturers-and-visual-propaganda>.
- <sup>36</sup> Wendy L. Wall, *Inventing the “American Way”: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 49.



- <sup>37</sup> Burton St. John III, “A View That’s Fit to Print: The National Association of Manufacturers’ Free Enterprise Rhetoric as Integration Propaganda in *The New York Times*, 1937–1939,” *Journalism Studies* 11 (3) (2010): 380, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700903290585>.
- <sup>38</sup> Jennifer A. Delton, *The Industrialists: How the National Association of Manufacturers Shaped American Capitalism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2020), 108.
- <sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 34.
- <sup>40</sup> Telegram from F. D. Patterson to Aldrich, September 22, 1947, box 19, “American Heritage Foundation, September 1947” folder, Winthrop W. Aldrich collection, Baker Library, Harvard Business School, Boston, Massachusetts. Quoted in Wall, *Inventing the “American Way,”* 59.
- <sup>41</sup> “Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Trustees, October 8, 1947 at 2:30 p.m.” box 19, “American Heritage Foundation, Board of Trustees, 1947” folder, Winthrop W. Aldrich collection, Baker Library, Harvard Business School, Boston, Massachusetts. Quoted in Wall, *Inventing the “American Way,”* 59.
- <sup>42</sup> “Paint Men Warned of Trend to Control; Prentis, as NAM Spokesman, Fears Dictatorship,” *The New York Times*, October 29, 1938, quoted in Burton St. John III, “A View That’s Fit to Print,” 385.
- <sup>43</sup> National Association of Manufacturers, *Declaration of Principles Relating to the Conduct of American Industry Adopted in the Congress of American Industry*, December 8, 1939, box 2, “National Association of Manufacturers 1939–40” folder, J. Howard Pew Papers (accession number 1634), Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware.
- <sup>44</sup> As historian Wendy L. Wall notes in *Inventing the “American Way,”* this was not an easy argument for some businessmen to make, as many did not actually approve of majoritarian democracy. In 1933, NAM secretary Noel Sargent had suggested that people receiving public funds should not be permitted to vote, lest they coerce the majority into giving them still more undeserved support. See also the National Association of Manufacturers Records, 1885–2021 (accession number 1411), Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware.
- <sup>45</sup> St. John III, “A View That’s Fit to Print,” 378.
- <sup>46</sup> Opinion Research Corporation, “What the Factory Worker Thinks.”
- <sup>47</sup> American industrialists had long fought demands for government-led social welfare reform. Some of the more enlightened had enacted employer-provided benefits, while still insisting that the nation’s prosperity depended on the freedom of businessmen to run their business as they judged best. Jennifer Klein, *For All These Rights: Business, Labor, and the Shaping of America’s Public-Private Welfare State* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).
- <sup>48</sup> Opinion Research Corporation, “What the Factory Worker Thinks.” See also Lawrence B. Glickman, *Free Enterprise: An American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).
- <sup>49</sup> “NAM Finds 11 Fallacies,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 6, 1941. Quoted in Burton St. John III and Robert Arnett, “The National Association of Manufacturers’ Community Relations Short Film *Your Town*: Parable, Propaganda, and Big Individual-

- ism,” *Journal of Public Relations Research* 26 (2) (2014): 103–116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2013.795868>.
- <sup>50</sup> St. John III and Arnett, “The National Association of Manufacturers’ Community Relations Short Film *Your Town*,” 103–116.
- <sup>51</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen’s Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 29, italics added. See also George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 1996 [rev. ed.]), 11.
- <sup>52</sup> Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*, 29, italics added.
- <sup>53</sup> Gregory Teddy Eow, “Fighting a New Deal: Intellectual Origins of the Reagan Revolution, 1932–1952” (PhD diss., Rice University, 2007).
- <sup>54</sup> Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*, 30.
- <sup>55</sup> F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), 50.
- <sup>56</sup> Constructing an economic analogue to Darwin’s theory of natural selection, Director argued that monopolies should not be broken up, because they were often the appropriate outcome of competition. One of Director’s students was the jurist Robert Bork, who in the 1990s would successfully use these arguments against the U.S. Department of Justice’s anti-trust prosecutions, laying the groundwork for jurisprudential resistance to strict anti-trust enforcement that persists today. In June 2021, for example, a federal judge threw out a Department of Justice complaint against Facebook on grounds that echoed many of Bork’s arguments. Cecilia Kang, “Judge Throws Out 2 Antitrust Cases Against Facebook,” *The New York Times*, June 28, 2021, last modified October 4, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/28/technology/facebook-ftc-lawsuit.html>.
- <sup>57</sup> “Samuelson and Friedman to Write for Newsweek,” *The New York Times*, September 4, 1965. <https://www.nytimes.com/1966/09/04/archives/samuelson-and-friedman-to-write-for-newsweek.html>.
- <sup>58</sup> Friedman’s defenders question how connected Friedman was to the Chilean dictatorship. For example, Megan McArdle, “Milton Friedman and Chile,” *The Atlantic*, July 15, 2008, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2008/07/milton-friedman-and-chile/3841>. This misses the point that he was unquestionably sympathetic to the Pinochet regime, brushed aside criticisms of it, and argued that the economic policies it had adopted were good ones, in part because they would (allegedly) increase freedom. It also misses the point that, irrespective of how much time Friedman may have spent with Pinochet himself, economists influenced by the Chicago school played a major role in constructing the regime’s policies. For Friedman’s own rationale, see Milton Friedman, “Up for Debate: Reform Without Liberty: Chile’s Ambiguous Legacy,” interview, *Commanding Heights: Reform*, October 1, 2000, [https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights/shared/minitextlo/ufd\\_reformliberty\\_full.html](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights/shared/minitextlo/ufd_reformliberty_full.html). Moreover, we know that, contrary to some popular claims, Friedman’s influence was not merely indirect; he did in fact meet with and advise Pinochet. See Milton Friedman, “Letter to President Augusto Pinochet,” *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Milton-friedman-letter-to-president-augusto-pinochet-annotated> (accessed September 28, 2022).
- <sup>59</sup> Timothy Rives, “Eisenhower, the Frontier, and the New Deal: Ike Considers America’s Frontier Gone, Embraces, Adds to FDR’s Legacy,” *Prologue* (2015): 8–15, <https://www.archives.gov/files/publications/prologue/2015/fall/ike-frontier.pdf>.

- <sup>60</sup> Letter to Edgar Eisenhower, November 1954, *ibid.*, 14.
- <sup>61</sup> Naomi Oreskes and John Krige, *Science and Technology in the Global Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2014).
- <sup>62</sup> NAM officials often acknowledged this point; hence, they needed to change how Americans viewed “The Government.”
- <sup>63</sup> Hedrick Smith, “Reagan’s Effort to Change Course of Government,” *The New York Times*, October 23, 1984, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/10/23/us/reagan-s-effort-to-change-course-of-government.html>.
- <sup>64</sup> Ronald Reagan, “The President’s News Conference,” August 12, 1986, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/reagan-quotes-speeches/news-conference-1>.
- <sup>65</sup> Howard Gleckman notes that the focus on tax cuts was both to stimulate the economy through supply-side economics, but also to try to shrink the federal government by denying it money. He points out that the latter aspiration has failed, but the former of course failed, too. Howard Gleckman, “Starving the Beast? The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act Seem to Be Feeding It,” *Forbes*, February 6, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/beltway/2018/02/06/starving-the-beast-the-tax-cuts-and-jobs-act-seems-to-be-feeding-it>.
- <sup>66</sup> Mariana Mazzucato, *The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs. Private Sector Myths* (New York: Anthem Press, 2013).
- <sup>67</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 26, paraphrasing William F. Lewis, “Telling America’s Story: Narrative Form and the Reagan Presidency,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (3) (1987): 280–302.
- <sup>68</sup> Bruce L. R. Smith and James D. Carroll, “Reagan and the New Deal: Repeal or Replay?” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 14 (4) (2013), 765.
- <sup>69</sup> Tim Raphael, “The Body Electric: GE, TV, and the Reagan Brand,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 53 (2) (2009): 113–138, <https://doi.org/10.1162/dram.2009.53.2.113>; Thomas W. Evans, *The Education of Ronald Reagan: The General Electric Years and the Untold Story of His Conversion to Conservatism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). On Reagan’s faltering acting career before he went to GE, see Timothy Raphael, *The President Electric: Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 160.
- <sup>70</sup> Thomas W. Evans stresses that Reagan was never implicated in these prosecutions, but Reagan did work for GE during the period when the activities under investigation took place, and he was GE’s leading public spokesman promoting the company’s vision at the time. Evans, *The Education of Ronald Reagan*, 161–162. See also Myron W. Watkins, “Electrical Equipment Antitrust Cases—Their Implications for Government and for Business,” *University of Chicago Law Review* 29 (1) (1961): 97–110.
- <sup>71</sup> The two other key figures were Ralph Cordiner and J. J. Wuerthner. The latter would later direct Volunteers for Nixon-Agnew. Memorandum, “Wuerthner to Citizen’s Staff, RNC Staff, New York Staffs, Citizen’s Field Operation and GOP Leaders Re: Progress Report on Enlisting 5 Million Volunteers, with Attachments. 5 Pages,” September 25, 1968, box 36, folder 7, Richard Nixon Presidential Library White House Special Files Collection, Yorba Linda, California.
- <sup>72</sup> Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, 100.

- <sup>73</sup> Chris Mooney, *The Republican War on Science* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).
- <sup>74</sup> Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, especially discussion in chapter four.
- <sup>75</sup> See, for example, “Big Bang,” Answers in Genesis, <https://answersingenesis.org/big-bang>.
- <sup>76</sup> See, for example, the case against Michael Mann and the University of Virginia. Michael Halpern, “Breaking: Climate Change Scientist Michael Mann (and Scientific Inquiry) Win in Virginia FOIA Case,” The Equation: Union of Concerned Scientists, September 17, 2022, <https://blog.ucsusa.org/michael-halpern/breaking-climate-change-scientist-michael-mann-and-scientific-inquiry-win-in-virginia-foia-case>. Mann continues to be involved in a defamation suit against the pro-market, anti-regulatory Competitive Enterprise Institute. *Mann v. Competitive Enterprise Institute*, 2012 CA 008263 B (D.C. Super Ct. 2012), <http://climatecasechart.com/case/mann-v-competitive-enterprise-institute>.
- <sup>77</sup> Oliver Milman, “Climate Scientists Face Harassment, Threats and Fears of ‘McCarthyist Attacks,’” *The Guardian*, February 22, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/feb/22/climate-change-science-attacks-threats-trump>; “How the Fossil Fuel Industry Harassed Climate Scientist Michael Mann,” Union of Concerned Scientists, October 12, 2017, <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/how-fossil-fuel-industry-harassed-climate-scientist-michael-mann>; and Renee Cho, “Perspectives of Scientists Who Become Targets: Katharine Hayhoe,” Climate Science Legal Defense Fund: Columbia University, August 10, 2017, <https://www.csldf.org/2017/08/10/perspectives-scientists-become-targets-katharine-hayhoe>. See also Joby Warrick, “Congressional Skeptic on Global Warming Demands Records from U.S. Climate Scientists,” *The Washington Post*, October 23, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2015/10/23/congressional-skeptic-on-global-warming-demands-records-from-u-s-climate-scientists/>; Lauren Kurtz, “NOAA Refuses to Produce Internal Communications Subpoenaed by House Science Committee,” Climate Law Blog, Sabine Center for Climate Law, October 30, 2015, <http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/climatechange/2015/10/30/noaa-refuses-to-produce-internal-communications-to-house-science-committee/>; and Reiner Grundmann, “‘Climategate’ and The Scientific Ethos,” *Science, Technology & Human Values* 38 (1) (2013): 67–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02F0162243911432318>.
- <sup>78</sup> Quint Forgy, “Fauci Endorses National Stay-At-Home Order: ‘I Just Don’t Understand Why We’re Not Doing That,’” *Politico*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/03/fauci-endorses-national-stay-at-home-order-162794>.
- <sup>79</sup> Eli Stokols and Noah Bierman, “Trump Coronavirus Response Puts Administration Weaknesses under Harsh Spotlight,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-03-12/trump-coronavirus-response-spotlights-administration-weaknesses>.
- <sup>80</sup> Funk and Tyson, “Growing Share of Americans.”
- <sup>81</sup> Gordon Gauchat, “Politicization of Science in the Public Sphere: A Study of Public Trust in the United States, 1974 to 2010,” *American Sociological Review* 77 (2) (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412438225>, 182.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.
- <sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 184 (“empirically underdetermined”) and 171–172 (“conservatives’ distrust”).

- <sup>84</sup> John J. Lee, “Party Polarization and Trust in Science: What about Democrats?” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 7 (1–12) (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231211010101>.
- <sup>85</sup> Timothy L. O’Brien and Shiri Noy, “Political Identity and Confidence in Science and Religion in the United States,” *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review* 81 (4) (2020): 439–461, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/sraa024>.
- <sup>86</sup> A good summary of this alignment can be found in Robin Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism: Why Evangelical Christians Oppose Climate Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).
- <sup>87</sup> Oreskes and Conway, *The Big Myth*. See also Kruse, *One Nation Under God*.

# Networked Trust & the Future of Media

*Lee Rainie*

*Americans believe the civic information ecosystem is collapsing. Trust in journalism has declined in the past generation, and news media now draw polarized audiences. Public confidence in social media as a news and information source has never been strong, and people today say social media firms cannot be trusted to be objective or impartial information curators of political discourse or stewards of their users' personal data. This adds up to public despair about disinformation and misinformation that impinges on the way expert knowledge is evaluated and deeply affects public life. A reckoning for both the news media and social media is at hand: For journalists, the existential challenge centers on the viability of their underlying business model. For social media firms, "techlash" might force them to change their structures and practices. Under the circumstances, networked individuals will determine the contours of trust in media.*

**I**t was supposed to turn out so well. John Perry Barlow's 1996 "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" proclaimed:

We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth. We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity. . . . In our world, whatever the human mind may create can be reproduced and distributed infinitely at no cost. The global conveyance of thought no longer requires your factories to accomplish. . . . We will create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace. May it be more humane and fair than the world your governments have made before.<sup>1</sup>

A quarter-century hence, those dreams have foundered, and many believe the civic information ecosystem is collapsing. In truth, Barlow's vision was about half right. Just as his words implied, many of the tribunes of traditional civic information were upended by the internet. Essential news nodes, especially local newspapers, were pummeled by digital competition and distractions.<sup>2</sup> Daily newspaper circulation fell from a high of about sixty million in the 1980s to twenty-eight million in 2018, and the circulation of the nation's top twenty-five newspapers has fallen 20 percent during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Starting at the turn of the twenty-first century, the economics of newspapers changed dramatically as consumer be-

haviors shifted from print to online, as did the retail and classified advertising that was the major source of revenue for newspapers. Ad revenue for print newspapers declined from a high of \$49.4 billion in 2005 to \$18.3 billion in 2016. Between 2004 and 2019, almost 1,800 newspapers closed.<sup>4</sup> That made about two hundred counties in the country “news deserts” with no newspaper at all, and about half the country’s 3,143 counties had a single newspaper, often a small weekly that barely, if at all, covered local civic life like meetings of the local government, school board, or zoning board. The number of employed journalists dropped 26 percent between 2008 and 2020, a loss of about thirty thousand jobs.<sup>5</sup> This hollowing out of newsrooms is alarming and particularly important because newspaper coverage is often the essential nutrient feeding other parts of the news ecology.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the other half of Barlow’s prediction about the “civilization of the mind” has hardly been realized. Rather than becoming “more humane and fair,” cyberspaces have turned out to be republics of rage, rife with mis- and dis-information and dominated by info-warriors tearing into those who have competing ideas. As social media and other online forums came to prominence, many people began to think much worse of each other and the institutions designed to serve the collective good.<sup>7</sup> Gallup pollsters have documented how one of the institutions that suffered a great loss of confidence is journalism: The share of Americans who said they had a great deal or a lot of confidence in newspapers fell from 51 percent in 1979 to 20 percent in 2021. It was much the same for television news, dropping from 46 percent in 1993 to 16 percent in 2021.<sup>8</sup> A related problem is that the news audience has polarized in ways that make it difficult for the public to assess one central cluster of organizations and norms in the news world that embodies the field as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

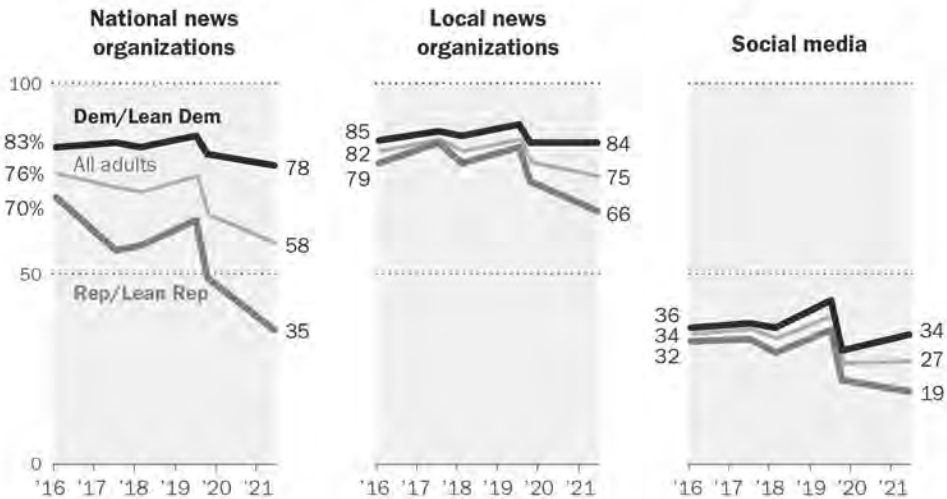
Meanwhile, the main digital spaces that have arisen alongside traditional journalism have hardly been the kind of inspirational substitutes Barlow imagined. In particular, public trust in social media as a news and information source has never been strong. In 2020, only 4 percent of Americans trusted the information in social media “a lot” and another 22 percent trusted the sites “some,” figures that have worsened a bit since 2016.<sup>10</sup> Even as people find pockets of the social mediasphere they trust, they are generally not confident in the overall performance of the firms that run these platforms. Some 73 percent of U.S. adults say social media firms cannot be trusted to be objective or impartial information curators of political discourse.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, public distress at the “surveillance capitalism” practiced by social media platforms and other giant tech firms has created a striking kind of anomie: Majorities of Americans are concerned, confused, and feeling out of control about how they are tracked, ranked, and rated by corporations and governments.<sup>12</sup> They feel powerless to take back control of their personal information and fundamental identities.

This sense of loss of personal agency ties to people’s judgments about public life. Many believe that social media has worsened the information environment

Figure 1  
Wider Partisan Gaps Emerge in Trust of National and Local News Organizations, Social Media, 2016 – 2021

% of U.S. adults who say they have a lot or some trust in the information that comes from ...



In 2016, trust of information from social media was only asked of and based on internet-using U.S. adults. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted from June 14 to June 27, 2021, published in Jeffrey Gottfried and Jacob Liedke, “Partisan Divides in Media Trust Widen, Driven by a Decline among Republicans,” Pew Research Center, August 30, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/30/partisan-divides-in-media-trust-widen-driven-by-a-decline-among-republicans/>.

and overall cultural climate: 64 percent of American adults say social media has a mostly negative effect on the way things are going in the country.<sup>13</sup> They are unhappy about the impact of disinformation and misinformation, fearful about the proliferation of conspiracy theories, and anguished about the toll of information wars.<sup>14</sup> They believe trust in government and interpersonal trust suffer in this environment.<sup>15</sup> Alarming, 73 percent of Americans now believe that political partisans do not operate in a shared reality, and a similar proportion of adults believe the party partisans do not occupy a shared moral universe.<sup>16</sup> The endpoint of this catalog of woe is that citizens’ gloom extends into the coming decades: they foresee further decline in the United States’ role in the world, along with growing inequality, polarization, and strife.<sup>17</sup>



Beneath this overall troubling story, though, a more mixed and somewhat hopeful story about public trust in news media is evident. Trust in media and information sources is not entirely vanishing. Rather, it is becoming distributed, networked, and dynamic.<sup>18</sup> Trust appears to be less a kind of property that people attribute to individuals, organizations, or systems and more a kind of conditional and context-specific social transaction that is applied in particular circumstances and for particular purposes to particular subparts of systems. In the industrial era of big, analog media in radio, TV, and newspapers, trust was easy to see as a thumbs up/thumbs down verdict on whole segments of the media industry. In the digital era, trust is better understood as fractal and contingent.

For instance, there is evidence that the broad distrusting judgments people apply to major institutions and groups do not represent their full answer about their trust in the individual components of those groups. The same people who say they do not have confidence in the news media in general can also cite news operations they trust, which is often tied to the partisan composition of news organizations' audiences. Republicans and conservatives particularly gravitate to Fox News, while Democrats and liberals say they trust multiple sources such as CNN, *The New York Times*, PBS, NPR, and NBC News.<sup>19</sup> Partisans' distrust decisions closely mirror their trust judgments: they distrust the news sources that are more trusted by those in the opposite party.

A similar polarized sorting process occurs when people are asked about trust in key institutions. In the past generation, Democrats have increasingly come to trust journalism, higher education, and science more than Republicans. At the same time, Republicans have come to trust the military, religion, and the police more than Democrats.<sup>20</sup> Only a few institutions, such as medicine and perhaps television (but not TV news) and the law, remain relatively apolitical, and partisans share an equal disdain for elected officials.<sup>21</sup>

When it comes to individual parts of government, Americans also have diverse and discriminating views that do not match their scorn toward the "federal government" as a whole. For example, a survey by Pew Research Center in 2020 seeking public opinion about ten different federal agencies in the final year of the Donald Trump presidency showed that all but one of those agencies enjoyed strong public support, the exception being U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, on which there was a split public verdict (45 percent unfavorable versus 46 percent favorable).<sup>22</sup> Among the agencies viewed in a positive light, the support ranged from 91 percent for the Postal Service to 60 percent for the Justice Department. About two-thirds viewed Veterans Affairs and the IRS favorably (both 65 percent). Slightly more held favorable views of the Federal Reserve (69 percent) and the Department of Homeland Security (71 percent).

As the COVID-19 pandemic enveloped the world, an analogous process of evaluation and trust allocation by Americans applied to different parts of the public

Figure 2

Ideology Adds Another Layer to Party-Line Divides of the Most Trusted and Distrusted News Sources

*% who trust each source for political and election news (first five shown)*

Democrat/Lean Dem				Republican/Lean Rep			
LIBERAL		MODERATE/ CONSERVATIVE		MODERATE/ LIBERAL		CONSERVATIVE	
CNN	70%	CNN	65%	Fox News	51%	Fox News	75%
New York Times	66	ABC News	63	ABC News	47	Hannity (radio)	43
PBS	66	NBC News	61	CBS News	42	Limbaugh (radio)	38
NPR	63	CBS News	60	NBC News	41	ABC News	24
NBC News	61	PBS	48	CNN	36	CBS News	23

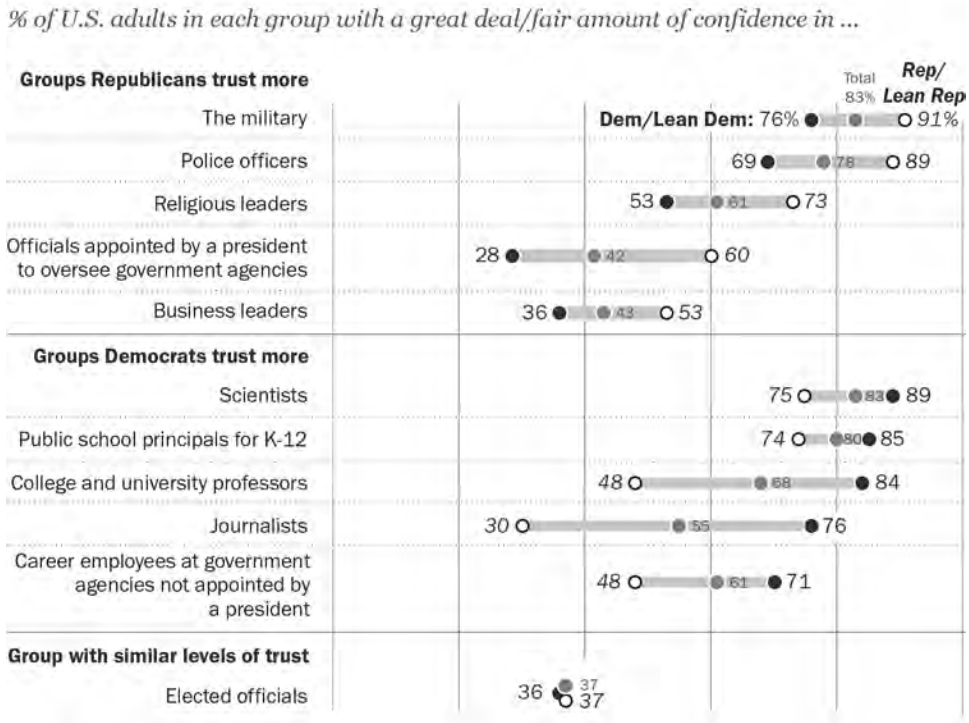
*% who distrust each source for political and election news (first five shown)*

Democrat/Lean Dem				Republican/Lean Rep			
LIBERAL		MODERATE/ CONSERVATIVE		MODERATE/ LIBERAL		CONSERVATIVE	
Fox News	77%	Fox News	48%	CNN	43%	CNN	67%
Limbaugh (radio)	55	Limbaugh (radio)	34	MSNBC	32	MSNBC	57
Breitbart	53	Hannity (radio)	28	HuffPost	30	New York Times	50
Hannity (radio)	50	Breitbart	22	BuzzFeed	29	NBC News	50
NY Post	27	BuzzFeed	20	Fox News	29	CBS News	48

Order of outlets does not necessarily indicate statistically significant differences. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted from October 29 to November 11, 2019, published in Mark Jurkowitz, Amy Mitchell, Elisa Shearer, and Mason Walker, “U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided,” Pew Research Center, January 24, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/01/24/u-s-media-polarization-and-the-2020-election-a-nation-divided/>.

health system. The vast majority said their local hospitals were doing an excellent or good job responding to the coronavirus outbreak. Smaller, but significant majorities said the same about public health officials, such as those at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Local officials received the next most favorable public reaction. State and federal elected officials fared the worst.<sup>23</sup> Of course, this follows the long-standing finding on the “trust gap” showing that those who have dim views of systems – such as Congress, the school system, or the health care system – are also usually quite happy with their community’s member of Con-

**Figure 3**  
**Sizable Partisan Divisions in Public Confidence in Leaders and Institutions**



Respondents who gave other answers or no answer are not shown. Source: Survey conducted from November 27 to December 10, 2018, published in Lee Rainie, Scott Keeter, and Andrew Perrin, “Trust and Distrust in America,” Pew Research Center, July 22, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/how-americans-see-problems-of-trust/>.

gress, their local teachers, and their own doctors.<sup>24</sup> Studies of trust in news media show a similar trust tilt toward local fare, rather than regional, national, or international media.<sup>25</sup>

**I**n these circumstances, trust in media and information is best viewed as a continuum with multiple levels, rather than a binary of trust or distrust. The continuum became multidimensional once people’s social networks and social media became embedded in their media spaces. This adds another set of factors for news consumers to consider as they decide where to invest their attention and make calculations about what information to trust. Social media users are quite

clear about their unhappiness with the overall quality of information and tone of discourse on social media. But they have not fled from the spaces – indeed, the share of those who use such spaces has grown – because they find clear social and civic value in the things they see and the ways that can participate on these platforms.<sup>26</sup> For example, 45 percent of U.S. adults say social media platforms are very or somewhat important to them personally in finding other people who share their views about key issues; 44 percent say the platforms are important for getting them involved with political and social issues; and 40 percent say they are important in giving them a venue to express their political opinions. Black adults and Hispanic adults are especially likely to say each of those things. Young adults aged eighteen to twenty-nine are also more likely than older Americans to say those traits of social media are important to them.<sup>27</sup>

The new character of information in digital social spaces makes these disparate and paradoxical views possible. Studies by media theorist danah boyd and Pew Research Center show there are eight aspects of digital information linked via the internet that have created a different kind of mediascape and, therefore, a different kind of milieu in which to consider trust. In other words, there are eight ways in which digital media are qualitatively or quantitatively different from previous kinds of analog media.<sup>28</sup>

First, the shift of media from atoms to bits has allowed *digital media to become pervasive*. All forms of media – text, audio, pictorial, video – now are conveyed in a digital format, making it possible for digital devices to be displays and amplifiers of information. Many analog media devices from radios to TVs to telephones to record players have been reimaged to embrace the multiplexity of digital formats. Moreover, smartphones themselves, which are owned by 85 percent of American adults, have become all-purpose media devices.<sup>29</sup> It is difficult to escape media now, especially for the 31 percent of Americans who say they are online “almost constantly.”<sup>30</sup>

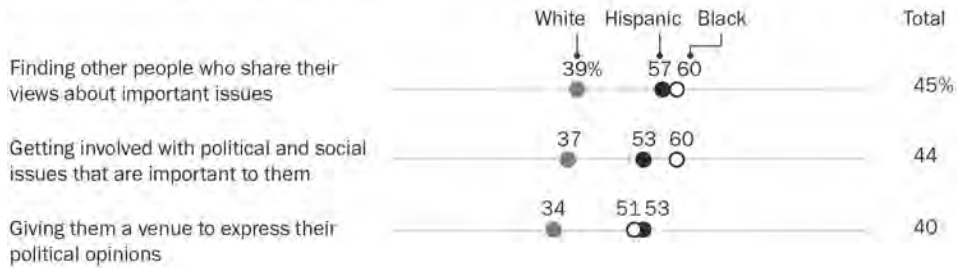
Second, *digital media are portable*. The rise of mobile connectivity has allowed media to move around with humans and decouples media experiences from the place-based media gadgetry that delivered news in the analog era. It also means that people think of their smartphones as a body appendage, an adjunct of their brain or, indeed, another limb.<sup>31</sup> This allows media to be consumed on-the-fly as people are moving around the world.

Third, *digital media and communication are persistent and visible*. Online expressions, boyd notes, are automatically recorded and archived. What one says sticks around, unlike the more evanescent communication and information sharing that takes place in nondigital environments.<sup>32</sup> Even ephemera often remain on the record, publicly visible for wide audiences. That reality overturns the common experience of the analog era when it took considerable effort and expense to publish media and gain an audience for it. This condition of persistence and visibility also

Figure 4

Black and Hispanic Social Media Users More Likely than White Users to Say Social Media Is Important to Them for Engaging in Certain Political Activities

% of social media users who say that social media is **very or somewhat important** to them personally when it comes to ...



White and Black adults include those who report only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. Those who did not give an answer or who gave other responses are not shown. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted from June 16 to June 22, 2020, published in Brooke Auxier, “Activism on Social Media Varies by Race and Ethnicity, Age, Political Party,” Pew Research Center, July 13, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/13/activism-on-social-media-varies-by-race-and-ethnicity-age-political-party/>.

puts on display the wide range of human activities – including civically related activities and opinions – that in yesteryear were largely invisible.

Fourth, *digital media are personal and customizable*. Essential parts of people’s digital information flows are personally curated and shaped by algorithmic curation systems. Both the technological and social filters that people use to customize the information flows into their lives are often necessitated by the volume and variety of information coursing around them. They filter email traffic. They make friending and unfriending decisions based on the relevance and appeal of the media and messaging others create. They subscribe to various types of content, crafting “playlists” of music, news, social encounters, and a host of other kinds of media content. Moreover, many function within algorithm-mediated environments in which media recommendations are offered (“here are other books that people who purchased this book purchased”), and profiles of them are created based on their purchases, clicks, shares, comments, or likes to craft the flow of new content in their “feeds.” This inevitably leads to situations in which people who share the same physical worlds – neighborhoods, apartment complexes, work cubicles – do not share the same information and media spheres.

Fifth, *digital media are participatory*: they allow everyday users to be content creators and activists in realms that matter to them. Arguably, the greatest impact of the rise of digital, connected media is that it has enabled many users to become media-makers themselves as they use low-cost tools to tell their stories and display their experiences to the world. Through social media, there are powerful new ways for citizens to draw an audience to their ideas and creations. This social production has disrupted every form of civic activity, knowledge-generating endeavor, and creative pursuit from scholarly work to music and film-making to software development.<sup>33</sup> In turn, the democratization of media production has challenged the structures of expertise, media gatekeeping, and legal regulation of media that dominated the industrial era of media. Of course, it has also given purveyors of misinformation, fraud, and menace new tools to torment and trick others.

Sixth, *digital media are replicable*. Digital bits are easy to duplicate. “Copies are inherent to these systems,” boyd notes.

In a world of bits, there is no way to differentiate the original bit from its duplicate. And, because bits can be easily modified, content can be transformed in ways that make it hard to tell which is the source and which is the alteration. The replicable nature of content . . . means that what is replicated may be altered in ways that people do not easily realize.<sup>34</sup>

Mash-ups and outright theft of digital content are commonplace in the digital era. People’s private one-to-one messages can be cut and pasted and thrust into the digital public square. An emerging concern is the rise of manipulated copies or creations of falsified information – deepfakes and cheapfakes – that give a mistaken appearance of real human activity.

Seventh, *digital media are spreadable and scalable*. A great deal of digital media creation, particularly in social media, is done for the purpose of sharing content and allowing it to be shared by others. Many websites and apps have one-click buttons for sharing that vastly expand the universe of potential consumers of information. Virality is an essential engagement metric for digital media and the advertisements it attracts. Of course, the same spreading process that enables meaningful and joyful content to find an audience is used by trolls and other malefactors to attack or shame content creators.

Eighth, *digital media are searchable*. The explosion of digital media would be largely unnavigable without powerful search tools that allow users to find the content they want – and remember it when they have forgotten it. Search enables long-ago episodes to be unearthed. Search permits people to outsource their memories to digital storage, retrievable almost instantaneously in a few commands. It also means that creators and users of digital content leave a record – a searchable, findable record that others can examine and exploit and perhaps even invade.

Taken as a whole, digital information reconfigures the media terrain and scrambles the way people think about and meet their information needs. The digital media ecosystem captures and exploits vastly more visible evidence about people's political and social engagement, their social networks, the subjects around which they cluster, their institutional affiliations, their allegiances, alliances, affirmations, enemies, arguments, and do-it-yourself initiatives. Further, this ecosystem allows tech firms to inject all this insight into the social media threads of others. This creates new context for people's considerations about what and whom to trust.

**T**hese sweeping developments in information structure have changed the character of media spaces, changed the way citizens use them, changed the nature and forms of civic participation, and changed the way people make judgments about trust and distrust in information and those who share it. It is a mediasphere in which every assertion can be liked, shared, commented upon, up-voted or down-voted, linked to, scraped for a database, de-contextualized as a singular tidbit or factoid, and re-contextualized by links to other assertions. Perhaps most consequentially, the "digital exhaust" that people create adds to the growing pile of data from all sources, thus forcing people to rely on new tools, organizations, and learning arrangements to help them navigate the digital mediasphere.

Moreover, these changes in the makeup and role of information have arisen at the same time that key social structures like families, groups, communities, organizations, and national relationships are also in transition. To the degree that every decision a person makes about who or what to trust is a social calculation, there is deep intersection between changes in information and changes in social arrangements. Especially in the age of social media, the members of users' personal and professional networks are key conduits to civic information and serve as key commentators on that information. In effect, citizens' efforts at assessing whether content can be trusted are now networking activities performed by networked individuals. Networked individuals live in a "social operating system" that could be called networked individualism.<sup>35</sup> In that system, people function more as connected individuals and less as embedded group members.

Networked individuals are also more in charge of the process of acquiring and evaluating information than their forebearers. When Pew Research Center asked Americans where they turn for information and advice when they have major decisions to make, they gave a very networked individual kind of answer: 81 percent said they relied a lot on their own research; 43 percent said they relied a lot on family and friends; and 31 percent said they relied a lot on professional experts.<sup>36</sup> Other evidence suggests that networked individuals meet their civic, social, emotional, and economic needs by tapping into loosely knit networks of diverse as-

sociates rather than relying on tight connections to a relatively small number of core associates. When they have problems to solve, decisions to make, or questions that need answers, people usually turn to the relevant parts of their network for assistance. They do not have one surefire anchor community to help them with all the issues that arise in their lives. Instead, they rely on many specialized relationships – and on information they find online – to meet their needs.

The most successful networked individuals have diverse networks – and diverse media needs – that require allocations of trust that are targeted and transactional. They have partial membership in multiple networks and rely less on permanent memberships in settled groups. Social media plays a special role for networked individuals because it is a creative and participatory medium. Network connections can ripen in important ways as social media offers so many options for interaction and information sharing. In addition, social media allows people to tell their stories, draw an audience, and gain assistance when they are in need.

All told, the social realities of networked individuals and their information needs create a new setting for considering what civic news and information to trust. Can trust in media be restored? A major reason to hope so is that humans have gone through challenges like this after information revolutions in the past and found ways to mitigate the harmful impacts created by disorienting upsurges in information and data. Yes, the rise of the printing press gave new life to those who practiced and promoted folklore, quackery, witchcraft, and alchemy by allowing them to propagate their crackpot theories cheaply and widely. But it also created the conditions that eventually gave rise to the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution. Historian Elizabeth Eisenstein has argued that large-scale changes in the creation, collection, and preservation of data and then the standardization and dissemination of information “brought about the most radical transformation in the condition of intellectual life in the history of Western civilization. . . . Its effects were sooner or later felt in every department of human life.”<sup>37</sup> Analysis by Jennifer Kavanagh and her team at RAND documents a similar dynamic in American journalism of “truth decay” abuse followed by reform that revives trust in media and government in several eras: The yellow journalism of the late nineteenth century begat the practices and norms of objectivity and muckraking in the ensuing generation. The “jazz journalism” and tabloid sensibilities of the 1920s begat the increasing effort by the government to gather and share statistics and was countered by the rise of scientific public opinion polling. The lying and dissembling of government officials during the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal begat aggressive investigative reporting and government transparency reforms like open-meeting laws and campaign disclosure laws.

There are similar efforts now under consideration to ameliorate the worst impacts of the explosion of digital media. In a series of nonscientific canvassings in



recent years seeking the insights of experts who build technology and scholars who study communications, Pew Research Center has cataloged a variety of initiatives aimed at reestablishing trust in media and comity in public life. They include twenty-first-century updates of time-tested strategies for trust-building: more institutional transparency; rules that limit abuse of power by those with the upper hand; more oversight of the distrusted and mechanisms to hold them accountable; construction of public alternatives to privately run organizations; and more education to allow the disadvantaged to gain agency. Some of the key ideas include:<sup>38</sup>

*Give people control of their data and more power in their interactions with major tech platforms.* Advocates argue for a legally enforceable “internet bill of rights” giving users sovereignty over their data and online identities.<sup>39</sup> The core planks would grant users access to and knowledge of all collection and uses of personal data by companies; opt-in consent to the collection of personal data by any party and to the sharing of personal data with a third party; secure personal data and timely notification when a security breach or unauthorized access of personal data is discovered; and interoperability of data so that users could move all personal data from one network to another. Proponents believe this is the surest antidote to surveillance capitalism and all the public confusions and dismay that surround it.

*Change social media algorithms to downplay anger and divisive discourse and upvote accuracy, diverse perspectives, and pathways to agreement.* Social media algorithms are optimized for capturing users’ attention and measure that through metrics of engagement with content. This leads to promotion of misinformation, hate speech, and angry and divisive content, which invariably generate the most shares, comments, and likes.<sup>40</sup> Of course, algorithms can be programmed to optimize for other things and reformers list a variety of examples: diversity of opinion; points of view different from users’ known interests; discourse that signals openness to constructive conversation and dialed-down anger. Users can also be offered “middleware” options allowing them to adjust algorithm parameters to experience the quality and tone of commentary that appeals to them.<sup>41</sup> Artificial intelligence learning systems can be designed to encourage the promotion of accurate and thoughtful content, and to shun or downplay misinformation from known sources of troublesome material.

*Embrace transparency in both formal news operations and social media.* The Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy outlined the ways in which greater transparency can be embraced by news organizations:

News leaders across competitive boundaries [can] work together to develop and adopt common standards and best practices that promote transparency. These include: labeling news, opinion and fact-based commentary; best practices on corrections, fact-checking, anonymous sources and tracking disinformation; and avoiding advertising formats that blur the line between content and commerce.<sup>42</sup>

On the technology side, transparency initiatives could cover several aspects of the work of the major platforms, starting with algorithmic forensics that would expose and reorient the hidden systems that are optimized for profit maximization. Another step toward transparency would be to press for algorithmic explainability. Judith Donath, of Harvard's Berkman-Klein Center for Internet and Society, puts it this way:

The [algorithmic] process should not be a black box into which we feed data and out comes an answer, but a transparent process designed not just to produce a result, but to explain how it came up with that result. The systems should be able to produce clear, legible text and graphics that help the users – readers, editors, doctors, patients, loan applicants, voters, etc. – understand how the decision was made. The systems should be interactive, so that people can examine how changing data, assumptions, rules would change outcomes. The algorithm should not be the new authority; the goal should be to help people question authority.<sup>43</sup>

A connected issue involves diversifying the pool of those who design algorithms and using data sets to train machine-learning systems that reflect diverse populations.<sup>44</sup> Nearly all the scores of ethics frameworks that have been proposed for AI initiatives call for increased diversity among the code writers and more substantial analysis of potential disparate impacts of algorithmic applications as they are making predictions. As algorithms and artificial intelligence spread, an increasingly common reform proposal is for the federal government to create an “FDA for algorithms,” applying the same regulatory framework for the approval of algorithms that is now required for drug approval.<sup>45</sup>

*Revive journalism and create public spaces like public broadcasting spaces in TV and radio.* Good journalism is the beating heart of civic life. Many advocates believe the best way to restore trust in civic life is to beat back the efforts of malevolent info-warriors by pumping much more accurate information into the media ecosystem. Advocates acknowledge the problem with online news is structural: there are too few gatekeepers, and the ad-based business model does not sustain quality journalism. So proponents focus on nonprofit and even subsidized systems of journalism. The Knight Trust Commission was particularly encouraging of nonprofit models such as community news organizations, public benefit corporations, and news organizations funded by venture philanthropy, a kind of grant-making that is specifically designed to address market failures. Some reformers specifically call for the creation of a “PBS for the internet” that would intentionally operate on different news standards with a different sense of the broad audience to be served. Of course, there are also ways that networked individuals and groups can band together to create news operations that cover relatively wide-ranging subjects like the investigative work of ProPublica, the Texas Tribune, and the Intercept, or that cover niche subjects in blogs and newsletters.

*Create new educational programs for digital and civic literacy.* Historically, education programs have been the places where cultures invest in long-term improvements in civic life, and the bedrock of education efforts has always been literacy. Many have called for adding dedicated courses on “cyberliteracy” to the formal education.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps one-third of American adults do not have basic “digital readiness” and an even larger share reports they struggle to find the information they want online.<sup>47</sup> Of course, this ties strongly to the struggles people have with civic literacy.

Just as some of the biggest problems of the Industrial Age eventually were mitigated by civic and social innovation such as labor organizations and labor laws, product safety rules, health and environmental regulations, and community-based social associations, many futurists expect the same kind of response to the problems that have spawned techlash. Beyond the general ideas listed above, futurists predict such information-era innovations as citizen engagement in participatory rule-making and budgeting, particularly at the local level; crowd-sourced and crowd-funded collective civic actions, especially in cases of natural disasters; smart agents that extend people’s civic activities; hybrid and self-directed learning that mixes in-person and digital programming; citizen-science and do-it-yourself local problem-solving; and peer-to-peer health care that complements institutional health care.

It is not entirely clear if any of those kinds of efforts will rebuild public trust in democracy, democratic institutions, or news media. What they do illustrate is how the traits and appeal of digital media to networked individuals might be recast to meet their needs. Digital media, notably social media, puts new tools in their hands to find, share, and create information. This is a social and information environment well understood by nineteenth-century German sociologist Georg Simmel, who initially formulated the ideas that now underlie social network analysis. Looking at the industrialization and urbanization reshaping his culture, Simmel argued that social life – especially in cities – was a fluid form of networks in which people make ongoing calculations about obligations and benefits.<sup>48</sup> He wrote: “The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life.” In the march from primitive life to village life to industrial, bureaucratic, urbanized life, he argued that “the same fundamental motive was at work, namely the resistance of the individual to being levelled, swallowed up in the social-technological mechanism.”<sup>49</sup> Simmel recognized that the move from villages to cities meant that people were no longer totally enmeshed in one all-encompassing community. Instead, they could maneuver more freely through their partial social attachment in a variety of social circles. He understood that this existence is both anxiety-producing and liberating, and that the nature of this networked world increases the stakes as people make trust decisions.<sup>50</sup>

Americans have their own ideas about how to restore trust in each other, if not trust in media. First, they see community activity as restorative. Some believe their neighborhoods and local civic groups such as churches, libraries, and schools are key places where interpersonal trust can be rebuilt as people work side by side on local projects.<sup>51</sup> A sizeable share of Americans also says the news and information ecosystem could be changed in several ways to serve the common good. They urge their fellow citizens to have a more balanced news diet that focuses less on insult-ridden talk shows. They want fewer sensationalist stories about conflict and more on the ways people cooperate, persevere, and achieve.

A majority also see the need for major reform in democratic processes.<sup>52</sup> Asked to name the biggest problem with government today, many cite Congress, politics, or a sense of corruption or undue outside influence, and they back changes to mute the effects of money and special interests.<sup>53</sup> Of course, once specific ideas to restructure the government are on the table, people's partisan preferences kick in. But their clear emotional yearning is for a better-performing, less money-saturated, and more accountable government.

Many recognize that the climb back to a better-functioning, more trusting society will be a long one. It would start with changes in the media ecosystem and with acts of kindness and cooperation among individuals. In short, Americans seem to know that the path to rebuilding begins with them and the information they produce and consume.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Lee Rainie** is Director of Internet and Technology Research at Pew Research Center. He is the author of *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (with Barry Wellman, 2012) and several books about the future of the internet that are drawn from the Center's research. Under his leadership, the Center has issued more than eight hundred reports based on its surveys that examine people's online activities and the internet's role in their lives.

## ENDNOTES

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# What Does “Trust in the Media” Mean?

*Michael Schudson*

*Is public trust in the news media in decline? So polls seem to indicate. But the decline goes back to the early 1970s, and it may be that “trust” in the media at that point was too high for the good of a journalism trying to serve democracy. And “the media” is a very recent (1970s) notion popularized by some because it sounded more abstract and distant than a familiar term like “the press.” It may even be that people answering a pollster are not trying to report accurately their level of trust but are acting politically to align themselves with their favored party’s perceived critique of the media. This essay tries to reach a deeper understanding of what gives rise to faith or skepticism in various cultural authorities, including journalism.*

**I**n F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1920 novel *This Side of Paradise*, the main character, Amory, harangues his friend and fellow Princeton graduate Tom, a writer for a public affairs weekly:

“People try so hard to believe in leaders now, pitifully hard. But we no sooner get a popular reformer or politician or soldier or writer or philosopher . . . than the cross-currents of criticism wash him away. . . . People get sick of hearing the same name over and over.”

“Then you blame it on the press?”

“Absolutely. Look at you, you’re on *The New Democracy*, considered the most brilliant weekly in the country. . . . What’s your business? Why, to be as clever, as interesting and as brilliantly cynical as possible about every man, doctrine, book or policy that is assigned you to deal with.”<sup>1</sup>

People have “blamed it on the press” for a long time. They have felt grave doubts about the press long before social media, at times when politics was polarized and times when it was not, and even before the broad disillusionment with established institutional authority that blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s, when young people were urged not to trust anybody “over thirty.” This is worth keeping in mind as I, in a skeptical mood myself, try to think through contemporary anxiety about declining trust, particularly declining trust in what we have come to call – in recent decades – “the media.”

As measured trust in most American institutions has sharply declined over the last fifty years, leading news institutions have undergone a dramatic transforma-

tion, the reverberations of which have yet to be fully acknowledged, even by journalists themselves. Dissatisfaction with journalism grew in the 1960s. What journalists upheld as “objectivity” came to be criticized as what would later be called “he said, she said” journalism, “false balance” journalism, or “bothsidesism” in sharp, even derisive, and ultimately potent critiques. As multiple scholars have documented, news since the 1960s has become deeper, more analytical or contextual, less fully focused on what happened in the past twenty-four hours, more investigative, and more likely to take “holding government accountable” or “speaking truth to power” as an essential goal. In a sense, journalists not only continued to be fact-centered but also guided by a more explicit avowal of the public service function of upholding democracy itself.

One could go further to say that journalism in the past fifty years did not *continue* to seek evidence to back up assertions in news stories but *began* to seek evidence, and to show it, for the first time. Twenty-three years ago, when journalist and media critic Carl Sessions Stepp compared ten metropolitan daily newspapers from 1962 to 1963 with the same papers from 1998 to 1999, he found the 1963 papers “naively trusting of government, shamelessly boosterish, unembarrassedly hokey and obliging,” and was himself particularly surprised to find stories “often not attributed at all, simply passing along an unquestioned, quasi-official sense of things.”<sup>2</sup> In the “bothsidesism” style of news that dominated newspapers in 1963, quoting one party to a dispute or an electoral contest and then quoting the other was the whole of the reporter’s obligation. Going behind or beyond the statements of the quoted persons, invariably elite figures, was not required. It was particularly in the work of investigative reporters in the late 1960s and the 1970s that journalists became detectives seeking documentable evidence to paint a picture of the current events they were covering. Later, as digital tools for reporters emerged, the capacity to document and to investigate became greater than ever, and a reporter did not require the extravagant resources of a *New York Times* newsroom to be able to write authoritative stories.

I will elaborate on the importance of this 1960s/1970s transformation in what follows, not to deny the importance of the more recent digital transformation, but to put into perspective that latter change from a top-down “media-to-the-masses” communication model to a “networked public sphere” with more horizontal lines of communication, more individual and self-appointed sources of news, genuine or fake, and more unedited news content abounding from all corners. Journalism has changed substantially at least twice in fifty years, and the technological change of the early 2000s should not eclipse the political and cultural change of the 1970s in comprehending journalism today. (Arguably, there was a third, largely independent political change: the repeal of the “fairness doctrine” by the Federal Communication Commission in 1987, the action that opened the way to right-wing talk radio, notably Rush Limbaugh’s syndicated show, and

later, in cable television, to Fox News.) Facebook became publicly accessible in 2006; Twitter was born the same year; YouTube in 2005. Declining trust in major institutions, as measured by surveys, was already apparent three decades earlier – not only before Facebook was launched but before Mark Zuckerberg was born.

At stake here is what it means to ask people how much they “trust” or “have confidence in” “the media.” What do we learn from opinion polls about what respondents mean? In what follows, I raise some doubts about whether current anxiety concerning the apparently growing distrust of the media today is really merited.

**D**id people ever trust the media? People often recall – or think they recall – that longtime CBS News television anchor Walter Cronkite was in his day “the most trusted man in America.” If you Google that phrase (as I did on October 11, 2021, and again on January 16, 2022) you immediately come up with Walter Cronkite. Why? Because a public opinion poll in 1972 asked respondents which of the leading political figures of the day they trusted most. Cronkite’s name was thrown in as a kind of standard of comparison: how do any and all of the politicians compare to some well-known and well-regarded nonpolitical figure? Seventy-three percent of those polled placed Cronkite as the person on the list they most trusted, ahead of a general construct – “average senator” (67 percent) – and well ahead of the then most trusted politician, Senator Edmund Muskie (61 percent). Chances are that any other leading news person or probably many a movie star or athlete would have come out as well or better than Cronkite. A 1974 poll found Cronkite less popular than rival TV news stars John Chancellor, Harry Reasoner, and Howard K. Smith.<sup>3</sup> Cronkite was “most trusted” simply because he was not a politician, and we remember him as such simply because the pollsters chose him as their standard.

Somehow, people have wanted to believe that somewhere, just before all the ruckus began over civil rights and Vietnam and women’s roles and status, at some time just before yesterday, the media had been a pillar of central, neutral, moderate, unquestioning Americanism, and Walter Cronkite was as good a symbol of that era as anyone.

But that is an illusion. Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson ran in 1952 against what he called the “one-party press,” a Republican press, that is. And if you looked at the corporate ownership of the country’s newspapers, their antagonism toward Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, and their overwhelming editorial-page support for Republican candidates, certainly he was right. If you go back very much further than the 1940s, you reach a moment when “trust in the media” would have been an incomprehensible phrase. News outlets were understood to be advocates for one party or the other, not neutral truth-tellers.

“Reader, do you trust the newspaper you read?”

“Well, sure, I’m comfortable with it. It’s my paper.”

“Do you trust the other guy’s paper?”

“Of course not, why would I?”

In common parlance, there was no “news media.” There was no “mainstream media.” There was “the press,” a term that, Richard Nixon decided in his presidential years, was too cozy and familiar. Journalists, in his estimation, were united against him, and he was not entirely wrong. Journalists went gaga over Jack Kennedy, bowled over in the 1960 campaign and the early days of the Kennedy administration by his charm and good-looking family.

After Nixon became president, he still felt aggrieved by journalists and worked strategically to muddy their reputation. To refer to journalists as “the press” ceded them an emotional upper hand, an aura of rectitude armed with First Amendment privilege. Nixon urged his staff to use the term “the media” rather than “the press.” William Safire, the public relations professional who became a Nixon speechwriter, recalls in his memoir: “The press became ‘the media’ because the word had a manipulative, Madison Avenue, all-encompassing connotation, and the press hated it.” Nixon judged journalists to be his dedicated opponents, and Safire reports that Nixon declared that “the press is the enemy” at least a dozen times in his presence.<sup>4</sup>

There was a moment, beginning in the late 1950s, when watching the television networks’ evening news shows became a settled ritual in many of America’s living rooms, with their cautious, measured, oh-so-sober, and soporific tone. This may have been the beginning of something called “the media.” Until then, Americans would have been hard put to identify a thing that today people comfortably recognize as “the mainstream media.” (According to Google Ngram, the term begins its rise to prominence at the very end of the 1970s and then shot rapidly upward.)<sup>5</sup>

The full entrance of “the media” into the American vocabulary arrived at about the same moment that distrust in the media intensified, but in a one-sided fashion. Barry Goldwater and his supporters, in his 1964 campaign for the presidency, were convinced that the media, and notably the three major television news networks, were deeply biased against him.<sup>6</sup> “The media” as a monolith was something of a novelty for Americans and one that, early on, Republicans found more threatening than did Democrats.

**T**he decline of measured trust in the media parallels the decline of trust in other leading institutions and can be traced back to the 1970s. Low trust in the media is not distinctively an internet problem, a Facebook problem, a Twitter problem, or a generalized social media problem, even if the new media ex-

acerbate it. Yes, social media offer a microphone to individuals who want to promote any old picture of reality that suits either their politics or their crackpot senses of humor or both. And yes, people learn about news in increasingly networked ways. Still, many continue to get news directly from television even as television continues for the most part to take its cues from those print-and-online organizations once known as newspapers. And many others, to be sure, access news online and may not know if their news comes originally from newspapers or television or online-only news operations or friends and family who post on social media, or the cloaked persons or bots who serve as agents of dedicated disinformation campaigns. This may well contribute to distrust of any and all assertions coming from unknown entities beyond one’s immediate social circles.

The transformative role of new information technology for newspapers is undeniable. Digital technology essentially destroyed their longstanding advertising-based business model, forcing a devastating loss of newsroom jobs, shuttering some newspapers and hollowing out many others, not to mention making national and international news outlets readily available to anyone with a laptop or mobile phone, thereby further reducing people’s dependence on local, metropolitan, or regional daily papers. But declining trust in the media predates the internet by several decades.

What has been lost in the simplified print-to-broadcast-to-digital technology-fixated tale of journalism’s history is how dramatically journalism changed in the decades just prior to the internet. The most significant change in American journalism between the 1950s and the rise of the internet and, after 2000, social media is the well-documented emergence of a more aggressive, more independent, more evidence-based, and more interpretive journalism. Besides the work of Carl Sessions Stepp, already mentioned, are other corroborating longitudinal studies. Political scientist Thomas Patterson has shown that leading news outlets grew more and more negative in covering both Republican and Democratic presidential candidates between the 1960s and 1990s.<sup>7</sup> A variety of studies of negativity in the news in European Union countries shows comparable trends in European journalism at the same time.<sup>8</sup> Sociolinguists Steven Clayman and John Heritage and their colleagues have closely examined the questions journalists have asked in presidential press conferences from 1953 to 2000. They found that the questions grew more assertive, even adversarial, over time, and in no year after 1968 did the level of assertiveness ever drop as low as the tallies reached from 1953 to 1967.<sup>9</sup>

Journalism scholar Katherine Fink and I added to this literature with our own study.<sup>10</sup> In what we call “contextual reporting,” the journalist’s work is less to record the views of key actors in political events and more to analyze and explain them. More than other concurrent changes, this one altered the front page in a way that put a premium on the story or stories *behind* the story. The move from writing down what political leaders said to contextualizing what they said and

did, and why, offered a new model of journalism. We looked at a sample of front pages in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Milwaukee Journal* for 1955, 1967, 1979, 1991, and 2003. The new model seeped into the work of journalism with surprisingly little fanfare. Journalists continued to defend their work as “objective” or “balanced” while, in practice, transforming what they meant by such terms. Fink and I found that in 1955, in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Milwaukee Journal*, 85 percent of front-page stories were conventional who-what-when-where stories, 9 percent contextual, and 6 percent “other.” Focus on that first figure and track it through succeeding years: in 1955, 85 percent of all front-page stories were conventional who-what-when-where stories; in 1967, 79 percent; in 1979, 60 percent; in 1991, 51 percent; and by 2003, 47 percent. In 2003, then, about half of front-page stories were forms of contextual reporting. Contextual journalism emerged as a powerful and prevalent companion to conventional reporting. The news media became an institution to reckon with as never before, and not because news organizations had political agendas of their own, although sometimes they did, but because they had attained a preeminent role in civil society as a monitor of government.

This does not mean that all was well with American journalism by the 1990s, but it does mean that the news media have not fallen from the great days of magazine muckrakers in the first decade of the twentieth century, like Ida Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens, or the days of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. Casual or simply nostalgic analysts have fallen for the temptation of a “declinist” portrait of historical trends. But the Ida Tarbell days of muckraking lasted just a few years and never extended very far beyond a handful of middle-class national magazines; “muckraking,” as Teddy Roosevelt derisively labeled it at the time, had little influence on the daily press. And when Woodward and Bernstein more than half a century later broke open the Watergate story, it took months for any other news organization to assign reporters to the story. Investigative reporting à la Woodward and Bernstein certainly grew beyond *The Washington Post*, but it has never been a quantitatively significant part of any news organization’s budget or time on the air or space on the page, at least not until the establishment of ProPublica (founded in 2007) and other substantial online news organizations that devote themselves primarily to investigative reporting.

What did change, and changed in a major way, was a move from who-what-when-where reporting to analytical “how” and “why” reporting, often focusing on a broader time frame than the past twenty-four hours, giving a context for the story at hand.

People of an ardently conservative persuasion judge the media to be very liberal; people of powerfully liberal convictions find the media to be pawns in the hands of conservatives. This is a familiar enough phenomenon to have acquired a name in academia: the “hostile media effect.”<sup>11</sup> The common response of journal-

ists has been that “we must be doing our job right if we have offended people both left and right.” But the news media will always offend partisans of the far left and the far right; partisan judgments of media bias are consistently unreliable. The lesson, for my purposes here, is that perfectly sane and intelligent, but politically hypersensitive, people may arrive at wildly off-base conclusions about the media. People think they know the media; what they do not know is how their preconceptions shape what they know.

Our age, like so many others, is an age of both credulity and skepticism, but what may be distinctive about our time is that the skepticism is approved, encouraged, and taught. Complaints about the snarkiness of reporters and columnists did not begin with social media, as the opening quotation from Fitzgerald in 1920 indicates. The capacity of journalism to demean and destroy is not a new discovery. But there is something different now: the institutionalization of skepticism as a value. To be accepted as a grown-up, there is now a cultural pressure to be, like the Princeton graduates of Fitzgerald’s novel a century ago, knowing, critical, and skeptical, if not cynical.

What is “trust”? And what is “the media” or “the news” or “journalism” that people are trusting or distrusting? What do respondents in surveys think the question is that they are supposed to be answering?

The question of declining trust in the news media is vexed not only because survey respondents may not understand what “trust” means, but also because “the media” is not a readily comprehensible entity. What further complicates the analysis of declining trust is the underlying premise that the high level of trust in the early 1960s we have descended from was a good thing. But trust in institutions is salutary for democracy only to a point. The decline in trust in most institutions that public polling has documented since the 1960s was a decline from what was arguably much too unquestioning a level of trust. This is clearly true with the federal government, the media, banking, corporate America, organized labor, and organized religion. Trust must be distinguished from complacency, the kind of complacency that accepted President Eisenhower’s lies about the U-2 spy plane, President Kennedy’s lies about the “missile gap,” President Johnson’s lies about the war in Vietnam, and President Nixon’s lies about Watergate. It required the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s to shake that overgenerous level of deference to American political institutions and reduce it to a level of “civic skepticism” more fitting for a democratic society.<sup>12</sup>

Some common phrases like “blaming the messenger” or “killing the messenger” go back at least to ancient Greece, when Sophocles in *Antigone* notes, “no one loves the messenger who brings bad news.” As news grew more negative and more critical, people had more reason to find journalism distasteful. What people do not like about the media is its implicit or explicit criticism of their heroes or their



home teams. In a two-party system like that of the United States, the president is either Republican or Democrat, and confidence in the president or the presidency is typically significantly higher among Republicans when there is a Republican president and higher among Democrats when there is a Democratic president. So we might amend “nobody loves the bringer of bad tidings” to add “no one loves to hear *good* news of the opposing party.” To the extent that the news flatters an opponent or criticizes a fellow partisan, trust measured by surveys will decline in ways that have little (or even nothing) to do with some deeper or abiding level of trust in the institution, only with portraits of the incumbent leaders of the institution.

Today, the news media can be understood as one of a set of knowledge-producing institutions in a “knowledge society.” When sociologist Daniel Bell popularized the term “post-industrial society” in the early 1970s to define our times, he wrote that he just as well could have named it the “knowledge society,” the “information society,” or the “professional society.”<sup>13</sup> In any event, the university, as the location for the formation of professionals in science and engineering and for the advancement of research generally, became, in Bell’s view, the central institution of the postindustrial world after World War II. And while academics, if they think about these matters at all, have largely abandoned the effort to locate a central guiding value for higher education – at least since University of California President Clark Kerr in 1963 dubbed universities “multiversities” – higher education has implicitly adopted organized skepticism as a supreme principle.<sup>14</sup> This is a dogma of humility, the conviction that what we know and what we profess, whether in physics or sociology or literary studies, will be challenged and will be reconstituted in a different shape, and that this is how human knowledge advances toward a new temporary consolidation (and another and another thereafter). At the San Francisco Women’s March early in 2017, a child held up a sign that read: “What do we want? Evidence-based science. When do we want it? After peer review.” If the university has a creed, that is it.

Since 1945, more and more journalists came to their work with a college education. Of journalists fifty-five years or older in 1971, 55 percent did not have college degrees; of those fifty-five and older in 2002, only 22 percent were not college graduates. Of journalists aged twenty-five to thirty-four in 2002, only 7 percent were not college graduates.<sup>15</sup> Their readers were more likely to have college degrees, too. Between 1940 and 1970, the percentage of the adult population with college degrees grew from about 3 percent to 20 percent. In 2018, it was 35 percent.

Equally important, college students came to receive a more critical education. Academic culture itself, like journalism, adopted more “adversarial” habits in the 1960s, not politically adversarial but intellectually adversarial. Faculty came to expect students to learn to “read against the text” in courses in the humanities, not simply to learn to revere accepted canons of high culture. And in the sciences and

social sciences, students were increasingly encouraged to imagine themselves as fledgling scientists, moving on to a next level of insight by criticizing the assumptions, methods, or reasoning of the exemplars whose work they were assigned to read. Students heard the message that the morally right way to go through life was with an “open mind,” eager for new evidence and not permanently attached to yesterday’s convictions.<sup>16</sup>

This may seem far afield from journalism, but as journalism became a more sophisticated, more interpretive, and less rote and ritualistic practice, it began to be recognized as a cousin of the knowledge professions spawned in the universities.

The change in journalism’s role was the joint product of several closely connected developments: government, especially the federal government, grew larger and more engaged in people’s everyday lives; the culture of journalism changed and journalists asserted themselves more aggressively; and many governmental institutions became less secretive and more attuned to the news media, eager for media attention and approval. As the federal government expanded its reach (in civil rights, economic regulation, environmental responsibility, and social welfare programs like food stamps and medical insurance for the poor and the elderly), as the women’s movement proclaimed that “the personal is political,” and as stylistic innovation in journalism proved a force of its own, the very idea of “covering politics” changed.<sup>17</sup> American political journalism changed profoundly from “inside Washington” politics toward a widening of focus to economic, social, and cultural life and toward a deepening of investigation and analysis. No example is more powerful than the #MeToo movement that sparked revelations of sexual harassment and sexual abuse around the world, propelled by investigative journalists at *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* magazine.

News coverage became more probing, more analytical, and more transgressive of conventional lines between public and private. In response, powerful institutions adapted to a world in which journalists had a more formidable presence. New legislation made governing more public, such as through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in 1966, which established a formal procedure for citizens to request the release of information held by government agencies and enabled citizens to sue an agency if it failed to release the information in accord with the law.

The FOIA (whose passage was strongly supported by the press) was just the beginning. The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 brought more “sunlight” to Congress. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 required federal agencies to provide and publicly release “environmental impact statements,” making possible lawsuits to prevent or modify anticipated government actions affecting the environment. The campaign finance laws of 1971 and 1973 required public disclosure of campaign contributions. These, as well as the Inspector General Act of 1978 and other legislation, were transparency-oriented milestones. Politicians and government officers could now more often be held accountable.<sup>18</sup>

All of this helped support a journalism hitched to a more interpretive ideal of objectivity than the simple routines of “quote one side, quote the other” that guided 1950s reporting.<sup>19</sup> Journalism changed, and changed for the better. No one now defends what one veteran reporter called the “rather sleepy” journalism of the 1950s.<sup>20</sup> The journalism that succeeded it was more intellectually ambitious. It was more “featurized” journalism with front-page stories of an interpretive cast. Consistent with this trend, the Pulitzer Prizes added an award for “explanatory reporting” in 1985; by the 1990s, it attracted so many entries that an administrator of the prizes said things were getting “out of hand.”<sup>21</sup>

European journalism moved simultaneously in the same direction, even without the Vietnam War and Watergate. This is recounted in a careful study of Swedish public broadcasting from 1925 to 2005, as well as in studies of German campaign coverage from 1949 to 2005, and accounts of changes toward more critical and more journalist-centered reporting in the Netherlands in the 1990s and in France from the 1960s to 1990s.<sup>22</sup> A comparative study of newspapers in the United States, Britain, Germany, Switzerland, France, and Italy in 1960–1961 and 2006–2007 shows a decrease in “news items” (that is, “he said, she said” conventional news reports) in five of the six countries (not France) and an increase in “information mixed with interpretation” in all six countries.<sup>23</sup> Whatever explanation one arrives at for these changes, it has to account for changes that affected European as well as American journalism, public broadcasting as well as commercial news output, broadcast news as well as print, and all this taking root before the internet.

**I**n the long stretch of history from the democracy of ancient Athens to the twenty-first century, popular government has shifted from what political theorist John Keane has called “assembly” government (picture ancient Athens) to “representative” government (the basic form of democratic governance as it arose in the eighteenth century) to “monitory” democracy.<sup>24</sup> In the United States, “assembly government” was largely limited to local government in New England; the town meeting model never became the template for U.S. state or federal government. In the federal government, representation was the primary governmental form from the country’s beginning in 1789 to 1945.

But post 1945, as Keane tells the story, there has been a politicization of everyday life, a sprawl of rights-consciousness, and a new availability of low-cost civic engagement, from 5K runs for breast cancer research and benefit concerts to blogging and hashtag-spawned social movements. In this era, representative institutions constituted through elections remain central, but they are supplemented in ways notable enough to qualify as a new species of democracy. Various terms for this new model of democracy have been offered – from “audience democracy” to “between-election democracy” to “counter-democracy” – but Keane’s “monitory democracy” may be the most fitting.<sup>25</sup> Monitory democracy calls attention to

how civil society holds government accountable, not only at the voting booth on election day but in 24/7 surveillance of governmental activity, or what Keane has called “the continuous public chastening of those who exercise power.”<sup>26</sup>

The contrast to representative democracy lies particularly in the term “continuous.” The character of democracy shifted from one in which citizens normally acted on disapproval of government only by voting to “throw the bums out” on election day to one in which thousands of civil society organizations kept government under surveillance, hundreds of them as nonprofits seeking what they judge to be the public good. There were social movements in the nineteenth century, but the proliferation in the twentieth century of nongovernmental organizations combined with the availability of information from the (often reluctant) government, the spread of public skepticism as a value, and the amplification of all this by the rapid dissemination of information online provides the infrastructure for “continuous public chastening.” In monitory democracy, journalism has adopted self-consciously and assertively the role of holding government accountable to its constitutional duties and to a broad obligation to serve the public. “Accountability” as a general term for holding government accountable to the public, or to national laws and traditions, has come into general usage only in the past generation, growing rapidly from the 1990s on.<sup>27</sup> “Accountability journalism” or “accountability reporting” are, likewise, terms of relatively recent invention. Leonard Downie Jr., *The Washington Post*’s executive editor from 1991 to 2008, was one of the first to make regular use of the term “accountability journalism.”<sup>28</sup>

If Keane is right, democracy has morphed from representative to monitory since 1945 and more intensively so since the early 1970s. If Bell is right, society has become less social-elite-centered and more university-centered and science-centered since 1945. And if I am right, journalism has changed dramatically in the period from 1965 to 1980 or 1990, never abandoning the ideal of “objectivity” but in practice demanding a more interpretive and less rigid version of it. There is now less need to trust journalists, in a sense, because they identify their sources more often than they did in the 1950s and 1960s. But there is more reason to question them because their ambition is to explain events, not just to record them.

That is all part of the context for today’s general cultural disquiet, but it fails to recognize a decided resistance to this “knowledge society” world with its attachment to peer review, its commitment to humility, and its expectation that the content of truth will change over time. This resistance has grown dramatically, and on January 6, 2021, unnervingly. One of its nontrivial outcomes is that Republicans are far more likely than Democrats to distrust the media, seeing journalism – correctly – as part of the knowledge society. Republican leaders are also more likely than their Democratic counterparts to reject commonplaces of medical science, notably the efficacy of vaccinations in diminishing the incident and intensity of illnesses, including COVID-19. There is a growing gap between Republicans and

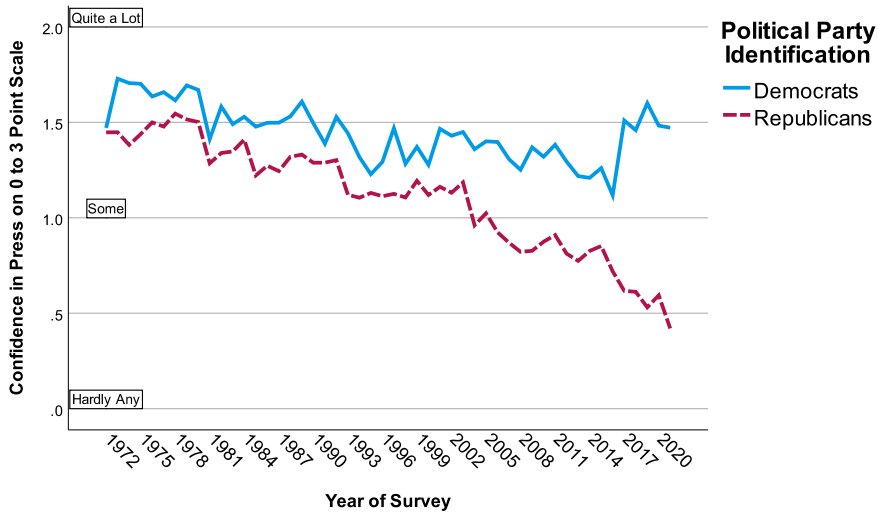
Democrats in trusting the media, and while Democrats since 2000 have shown steady or growing trust in the media, Republicans' confidence in the media has continued a downward plunge (see Figure 1).

Is this true for college-educated Republicans, exposed directly to higher education's evidence-centered ethos? Very much so. Their trust in the media declined at about the same rate as the decline among Republicans with only a high school education. What to make of this? One can say, easily enough, that this is a vivid reminder that political opinions are – as they have long been – more about identity than about information. The whole notion of “the informed citizen” was at most a minor theme for America's founding fathers whose experience of elections was one in which voters were expected to judge candidates' character and community standing. Aspirants for office offered the voters their good name, not advocacy of a party or a policy. The ideal of the informed citizen arose in the Progressive Era (1890–1920) as part of a reform movement that made its mark on journalists and intellectuals and various segments of liberalism including, perhaps, high school history teachers and writers of election day editorials, but it did not lead masses of people to deviate from the ethnic, class, and religious foundations of their political selves.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, the difference between Republicans and Democrats in the surveys may be accentuated by a gap between what pollsters think they are finding and what respondents think they are doing. When the polling experts probe for what factual political knowledge people have, the respondents may be answering as “cheerleaders” for their favorite party or candidate. Pollsters think they are learning about partisan differences in perception of reality, but poll respondents may turn out to be taking “low-cost opportunities to express . . . partisan affinities.”<sup>30</sup>

The divide between Republicans and Democrats in their level of trust in various institutions, including the media, is implicitly reinforced by political scientist Katherine Cramer's remarkable in-depth interviews with rural Wisconsin citizens in her 2016 *The Politics of Resentment*. What, she set out to discover, led so many Wisconsin voters to deeply resent the state's leading cities (Milwaukee and Madison); its state employees in general; the people who “shower before work, not afterwards,” as one of her interviewees put it; the pensions and health insurance that state employment provided; and pretty much everything about the University of Wisconsin–Madison, except its football team? Why were rural voters so attached to what Cramer calls “rural consciousness” in the early 2010s and so supportive of then-governor Scott Walker and his campaign to deprive state employees of their collective bargaining rights? Interestingly, the news media play no role in Cramer's study. The rural newspapers were conventionally respectful of incumbent politicians (the Madison and Milwaukee papers were tougher). The political views of the people Cramer talked to came from their communities, not distant media. Her closing chapter is titled “We Teach These Things to Each Other.”

Figure 1  
Trust in Media by Party Identification, 1972–2020



Source: Henry Brady–Thomas Kent database of confidence questions from Gallup Polls, General Social Survey, and Harris Polls. See Henry E. Brady & Thomas B. Kent, “Fifty Years of Declining Confidence & Increasing Polarization in Trust in American Institutions,” *Dædalus* 151 (4) (Fall 2022): 43–66.

Obviously, I share no nostalgia for 1950s journalism. In the representation of people of color and women in the newsroom and in the news, yes, the mainstream media of the 1950s and early 1960s was clearly deficient, and largely blind to its own limitations, like most other institutions of the day. Even as news organizations came to recognize the exclusion of women and people of color in both their newsrooms and their news content and pledged to rectify their practices in and after the 1970s, their performance lagged well behind their stated goals.

As for the representation of political conservatives, it depends on what one means by “political conservatives.” If it means “leaders of the Republican Party,” no, the mainstream media through the years have consistently represented Republicans and Democrats with roughly the same level of deference or skepticism. True, over time, the news media grew more critical of Republican presidential candidates, but they also grew more critical of Democratic presidential candidates.<sup>31</sup> They grew more critical, period. But as the Republican Party moved further to the right, from the “Tea Party” on through Donald Trump, the task of the

news media has become more complex and more contentious. “He said, she said” is all very well under normal circumstances, but at some point, a party can stake a position so far outside customary democratic values that a journalism committed to democracy has to cry: “Out of bounds!”

The United States seems to have reached that point. A Trump-minded Republican Party that holds to a lie that the 2020 presidential election was fraudulent (although, curiously, the Republicans for House and Senate who were newly elected or returned to office in the same election with the same ballots have no quarrels with the legitimacy of *their* own victories) has in effect proclaimed open opposition to democracy itself.

There is no U.S. precedent for this. It puts the news media in an unenviable position. How does a conscientious journalist seek to be fair-minded between two parties when one of them seeks to trash democracy itself? Do sharply antidemocratic positions deserve an “on the one hand” treatment when the majority of elected leaders of the Republican Party excuse, condone, or applaud armed insurrection against duly elected government? That is the dilemma for the conscientious journalist today.

**A** closing word about the digital era in journalism: We certainly know the digital space is full of screaming and dreaming on both the far right and the far left. And we know it provides information and entertainment, connection and companionship to many millions, a link for friends and family living far from one another, new access to vital, life-saving information for people who, for instance, suffer from rare diseases. It has opened windows and broadened horizons and, in journalism, increased research capabilities and enabled cooperation among journalists across national borders for unprecedented investigative work.

I would not wish away online communication. Utopian dreams for the internet have been scaled back, even as nightmares of interminable communicative disaster linger. In politics, online communication is laced with venom, dangerous fantasy, intentional misinformation, and verbal violence particularly toward women and people of color. Is this any worse than what once was written on the walls of public bathrooms? Yes, it is, in its targeting of specific, named individuals, in its violations of privacy, in its easy accessibility to the untutored and unstable, and in its terroristic impulse and death threats.<sup>32</sup>

In the wake of the digital revolution, when social media make rumor, gossip, fake news, parody, and other quasinews genres just as easy to access as content produced by professional journalism (or so it seems), journalists have to wonder whether their function in society has fundamentally shifted. My sense of the research is that portraits of a move from gatekeeper professionals communicating vertically to the public toward horizontal communication among members of the

public communicating to one another exaggerate how much of a monopoly “gate-keeper” journalism had on the public mind in the past. They also fail to acknowledge that today most people who go online for news still get their news directly or indirectly from mainstream media. While much research is underway, still more research is needed! A satisfying synthesis has so far proved elusive.<sup>33</sup>

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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What Does “Trust in the Media” Mean?

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# Trust & Models of Policing

Tracey L. Meares

*The notion of trust has become central to the discussion of policing and its transformation over the last decade. Scholars, policy-makers, and the agents who purport to carry out public safety projects on behalf of the public now commonly point to trust as one of the central goals of the relationship between policing agencies and members of the public they serve, in contrast to the more common and familiar notion of crime reduction. This essay highlights three common mechanisms agencies and the individuals they comprise use to attempt to improve the public's trust in police: changing policy, training of police, and citizen oversight boards. Focusing on the conceptual framework that the social psychology of procedural justice offers, the essay then turns to a less common target for change: the very laws police enforce. Changing the police will require not only transforming how its members carry out the job but also the laws they are sworn to uphold.*

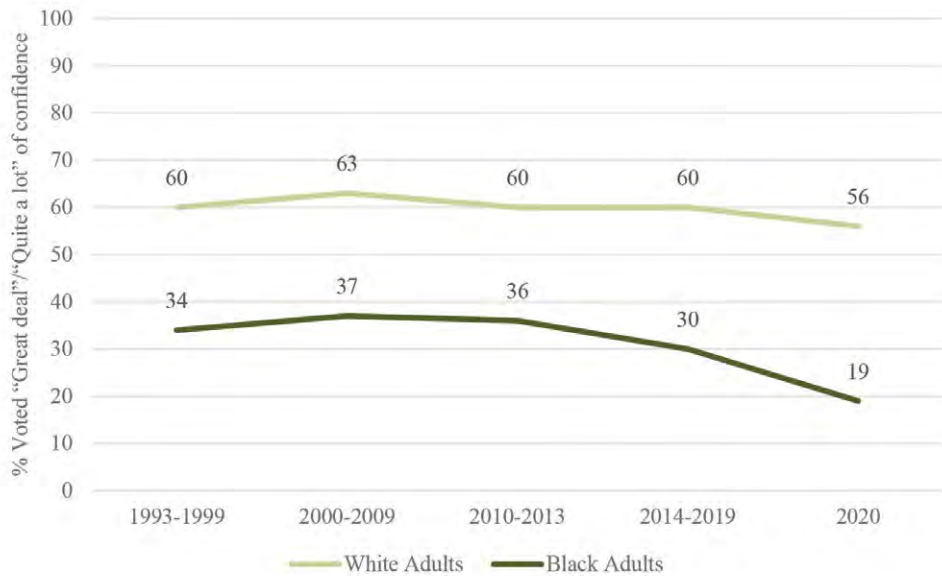
Over the last decade and certainly since 2015, it has become common for scholars, policy-makers, and those in public media outlets to highlight the importance of the public's perception of police as a legitimate authority. The *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing* contains, perhaps, one of the most prominent statements of this idea.<sup>1</sup> President Barack Obama convened the Task Force in 2014 after Michael Brown was killed by police officers in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner was killed by police officers in New York City. The foundation of the Task Force's fifty-nine recommendations for research, policy, and action is the report's first pillar, "Building Trust and Legitimacy." This initial step builds on extensive research of the concept of empirically assessed legitimacy and its close connection to the social psychology of trust and procedural justice. Beginning with psychologist Tom Tyler's seminal work on procedural justice, there is now an extensive literature demonstrating that when police focus on process, or how they treat members of the public, as opposed to outcomes, such as lowering crime rates no matter the approach, people are more likely to perceive them as legitimate and trustworthy.<sup>2</sup> But *legitimacy* and *trust* as measured in these studies are not one and the same; rather, perceptions of trustworthiness are important precursors to the public's conclusions regarding legitimacy. A growing literature also demonstrates that procedural justice, or process-based fairness, is associated with greater trust in police, as well as increased per-

ceptions of legitimacy.<sup>3</sup> The recent turn to improving trust relationships has not meant that former goals such as crime reduction are no longer important. Instead, the research demonstrates that agencies can continue to pursue such goals while also treating members of the communities they serve with dignity and respect. With this in mind, we explore recent efforts to address the pervasive lack of public trust across institutions of criminal legal processing and, in particular, distrust of the police.

**A**lthough the analysis here does not conceptualize trust as mere “confidence” in the relevant public actor, Gallup polling concerning confidence in police is a useful starting point. Gallup has tracked public confidence in a random sample of adults in a range of institutions, including police, for just over a quarter of a century.<sup>4</sup> An examination of these data reveals two striking facts. First, there is a large and distinct gap between levels of confidence in police among white adults as contrasted with Black adults (Figure 1). Among white adults, levels of confidence have hovered right around 60 percent since 1993. With respect to Black adults, confidence rates are approximately half that level, or 30 percent, during the same time period, with the lowest rate of 19 percent posted in 2020. Second, among all adults, these levels have remained largely flat over time (Figure 2).<sup>5</sup> Even among Black adults, the confidence rate in police for 2021 was 27 percent.<sup>6</sup> The fact that confidence rates have remained largely flat over time, even accounting for the very large gap between white and Black adults, is notable and relevant to the analytical approach of this essay.

In recent decades, police have committed themselves to crime reduction and styled themselves as “warriors” against crime. This orientation fueled a raft of proactive policing strategies, including the notorious “stop, question, and frisk” approach that was constitutionally challenged in 2013 in *Floyd v. City of New York*.<sup>7</sup> During the period that police actively employed these strategies between 1990 and 2016, violent crime declined dramatically, leading scholars to hypothesize about the relative importance of police activity as a contributing factor.<sup>8</sup> The group of people most likely to be victims of homicides, young Black men, experienced many fewer homicides during this period of decline. Sociologist Patrick Sharkey expressed this demographic change in the following way, “The impact of the decline in homicide on the life expectancy of Black men [as a group] is roughly equivalent to the impact of eliminating obesity altogether.”<sup>9</sup> To the extent that police can claim even some credit for this decline – and some believe that they can claim a great deal of credit – the Gallup polls described above are puzzling and call into question the relationship between public confidence and crime-fighting. If the primary reason for public confidence in police was their effectiveness at crime-fighting, we would expect confidence to rise during that time rather than to remain flat. Moreover, we would expect that the group who received the

Figure 1  
Confidence in Police by Racial Group



Source: Jeffrey M. Jones, “Black, White Adults’ Confidence Diverges Most on Police,” Gallup, August 12, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/317114/black-white-adults-confidence-diverges-police.aspx>.

most benefits of crime-fighting, Black adults, would register increasing ratings of confidence, even accounting for low base rates. But that is not what we see, which suggests that members of the public care about other factors beyond police effectiveness at reducing violence when coming to conclusions about confidence and trust. Tyler’s process-based approach provides a way to account for what we see in the Gallup data.

In their pathbreaking book *The Social Psychology of Procedural Justice*, psychologists Tom Tyler and Allan Lind develop what they call the “group value theory” of procedural justice, which explains that people understand the ways legal authorities treat them as information about how those authorities view them, as opposed to information about outcome control, which was the prevailing view before Tyler and Lind developed their theory.<sup>10</sup> People tend to place much more weight on how authorities exercise power than the ends for which that power is exercised. Across institutional contexts (courts, businesses, schools), researchers have demonstrated consistent findings: public conclusions regarding legitimacy are tied more closely to judgments about the *fairness of actions* than to evaluations

Figure 2  
Americans' Confidence in Police



Source: Jeffrey M. Jones, “Black, White Adults’ Confidence Diverges Most on Police,” Gallup, August 12, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/317114/black-white-adults-confidence-diverges-police.aspx>.

of the *fairness of outcomes* or the effectiveness of actors in achieving outcomes. In other words, the relationship between the public and how authorities make decisions is inherently relational instead of instrumental.

Procedural justice turns out to be key in members of the public’s determinations of whether they consider legal authorities to have behaved fairly. Their perceptions of procedural justice depend on four factors.<sup>11</sup> The first factor centers participation, particularly “voice.” People report higher levels of satisfaction in encounters with authorities when they have an opportunity to explain their situation and perspective. This is true even when people are aware that their participation will not impact the outcome; they nonetheless want to be listened to and taken seriously. Fairness of decision-making by authorities – that is, aspects of fair process – is the second factor. People focus on indications of a decision-maker’s neutrality, objectivity, factuality, consistency, and transparency. In the specific context of policing, it matters whether legal authorities, in their interactions with the public, take the time to explain what they are doing and why. The third factor is related to the first: people care a great deal about how they are treated by legal

authorities, such as police officers. Specifically, people desire to be treated with dignity, respect for their rights, and politeness. Being listened to and taken seriously is obviously related to this factor. Fourth and finally, in their interactions with authorities, people want to believe that authorities are acting out of a sense of benevolence toward them. That is, people attempt to discern *why* authorities are acting the way they are by assessing *how* they are acting. They want to trust that the motivations of the authorities are sincere and well-intentioned. Basically, members of the public want to believe that the authority they are dealing with believes that they count and cares about them. In relationships with law enforcement, the public makes this assessment by evaluating how police officers treat them.

Research connecting these ideas to policing has demonstrated great benefits for the police agencies that employ them. For example, when people perceive that legal authorities are treating them fairly, they say they are more likely to comply, cooperate, and engage with the law and authorities' directives.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, when policing agencies emphasize process-based approaches, they need not choose between crime reduction and promoting trust.

**T**he public conversation around policing has begun to center trust as opposed to merely police effectiveness at reducing crime. Again, a statement from President Obama's Task Force is instructive: "Crime reduction is not self-justifying."<sup>13</sup> To that end, in the last several years, police departments have promoted and implemented numerous strategies ranging from changes in policy to active bystander training for officers, to greater civilian involvement in setting policy, goals, and projects for their agencies.

Changing policy is a major starting point for many policing agencies attempting to establish trust through the behavior of officers in their interactions with civilians. For example, recent consent decrees adopted by the United States Department of Justice and the State of Illinois have prioritized requirements that agencies adopt formal policies promoting "Fair and Impartial Policing," key aspects of which highlight the importance of procedural justice as described above.<sup>14</sup> These policies are critical precursors to officer training; instructors will say that they "train to policy." While new policies concerning fair and impartial policing are predicates for training, it is important to note that they also serve as a basis for discipline in situations in which officers fail to comport their behavior in accordance with such policies upon completion of training.<sup>15</sup>

Changes in policy that emphasize fairness can help enhance trust between officers and members of the public by not only signaling to officers the importance of fair and impartial behavior as a key part of their mission but also by clarifying important legal constraints on everyday policing activity such as stops, arrests, and searches, which in too many places are governed by vague constitutional stan-

dards that are not constrained by department policy. As social psychologist Jack Glaser and public policy scholar Amanda Charbonneau have recently explained, vague constitutional standards combined with unspecific policy provide a foundation for broad police discretion to engage in behaviors subject to bias.<sup>16</sup> They emphasize the role that uncertainty plays in exacerbating individual biases and therefore the negative consequences of that bias, explaining that narrowing the scope of police behaviors can reduce rates of racial disparity that police action can produce. They argue that policy change is a step in this process.

It is difficult to assess the extent to which these policy changes are successful independent of evaluations of subsequent training. Since policy change is a bedrock component of the Department of Justice's "pattern or practice" program, one might look to assessment of the impact of consent decrees for some sense of the success rates of policy change. In his recent review of two decades' worth of federal consent decrees, historian and criminologist Samuel Walker notes that it is fair to conclude that decrees yield positive results, especially with respect to use of force and discrimination claims.<sup>17</sup> In support of his conclusion, Walker provides evidence of public polling among different racial groups in Los Angeles rating the LAPD much more highly after a consent decree. Since racially disparate treatment undermines trust, we can safely argue that changes in policy that limit ordinary policing in terms of prevalence and depth, along with increases in yield for searches, should be associated with increases in trust and confidence.<sup>18</sup>

**T**he most important aspect of promoting trust-based approaches is the training of agency personnel. I use importance in two senses here. First, training is the most common approach to establish the importance of trust among agency personnel. Second, agency leaders see training as the most likely mechanism to lead to behavioral change in a world where changing agency personnel is difficult to implement due to union rules and regulations, and where legal liability, whether criminal or civil, is rare. Overall, both systematic reviews of procedural justice theory and meta-analyses of the existing evidence find positive associations between the procedural justice or injustice people experience when dealing with the police and their perceptions of the police, their support for cooperative behaviors, and whether they say they trust the police.<sup>19</sup> Individuals who perceive interactions with the police as more procedural have more positive perceptions of legitimacy, as well as increased satisfaction with police services, disposition in interactions, and trust and confidence in the police. In their review of the research examining police-led intervention programs that aim to strengthen police legitimacy, criminologist Lorraine Mazerolle and colleagues found that interventions improve perceptions of procedural justice, as well as satisfaction with, confidence in, and compliance and cooperation with the police.<sup>20</sup> Given that the goal of this essay is to explore potential mechanisms for enhancing public



trust in police, the focus here will be on trainings as interventions that could exploit the theoretical framing laid out above.

There is academic literature covering rigorously studied effects of procedural justice training on officer and civilian attitudes, officer behaviors, and administrative policing outcomes. Evaluations of procedural justice trainings include studies of script-based trainings, whereby police are taught to use brief, procedurally just scripts (that is, texts) in traffic stops or other similar settings in which interactions are short and relatively homogeneous. Other studies have evaluated trainings that focus more broadly on the development of procedurally just policing practices through the use of lectures, discussions, and exercises that offer participants the opportunity to practice and refine these skills. Some research demonstrates that procedural justice training can positively influence officers' attitudes about the importance of procedural justice in their work – a critical first step in the process of motivating officers to value enhancing trust over their efforts to reduce crime at all costs.<sup>21</sup> As an example, political scientist Wesley Skogan and colleagues evaluated the short- and long-term effects of a police training program in the Chicago Police Department that aimed “to present procedural justice principles to officers as tactics that would encourage the public to recognize the police as a legitimate source of authority, resulting in improved officer safety, more compliance with their instructions, and greater cooperation from the public.”<sup>22</sup> Short-run survey-based comparisons for approximately 2,700 officers suggested that training had a positive and statistically significant effect on officers' perceptions of the importance of various procedurally just behaviors (neutrality, respect, trust, and voice). A longer-term survey (with a 28 percent response rate) suggested that these attitudinal changes persisted. Similarly encouraging findings are reported on a suite of trainings coordinated in six cities across the country by the National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice. The evaluation found statistically significant improvements in officers' self-reported attitudes toward procedural justice.<sup>23</sup>

Additional studies have found that civilians' views of police are more positive after interactions with officers trained in procedural justice principles. For example, the Queensland Community Engagement Trial (QCET) in Australia is the first randomized field trial to test the effect of procedural justice training on citizen views of the police. In their field study, Lorraine Mazerolle and colleagues have explored how brief, positive, and procedurally just police-citizen interactions influence people's legitimacy-related perceptions of the police, as well as their satisfaction and willingness to cooperate with the police.<sup>24</sup> They found that respectful treatment positively influenced specific and general views of the police. A subsequent analysis of QCET found that Australian drivers exposed to the experimental group of officers in the trial had higher trust and confidence in police than those

exposed to the control group, though no significant differences were found for obligation to obey police or willingness to cooperate with law enforcement.<sup>25</sup>

Another set of studies reveals the impacts of procedural justice training on administratively measured outcomes of police-citizen interactions. Criminologist Emily Owens and colleagues evaluated a procedural justice intervention in which supervisors were instructed to treat officers in a patient, respectful, and procedurally just manner. The intervention appeared to impact officers' encounters with citizens, as reflected by decreased arrest rates. The treatment group was less likely to resort to arrests in the week following their meeting (by 25 percent, relative to a pre-intervention incident-level arrest rate of 6 percent). Looking six weeks before and after their meeting, this result diminished, but officers who completed the training still demonstrated a 12 percent reduction in arrests.<sup>26</sup>

Further, sociologist George Wood and colleagues evaluated the implementation over four years of a one-day procedural justice training in Chicago, which emphasized policing strategies that create appropriate voice, neutrality, respect, and trustworthiness in community interactions.<sup>27</sup> Nearly 8,500 officers participated in the training program. Taking advantage of the phased rollout across the department, the researchers evaluated whether the training had effects on cluster-level outcomes, including complaint records relating to officer conduct, civil litigation settlement payouts, and officer use of force. Significant treatment options were identified for each of these outcomes and, over two years, treatment reduced complaints filed against officers by 10 percent and use-of-force reports by 6 percent (corresponding to 11.6 fewer complaints and 7.5 fewer use-of-force reports per one hundred trained officers).

**I**n addition to procedural justice, we can examine another popular recommendation that aims to address trust-related problems between civilians and policing organizations: the process of civilian review. A common prompt for such a recommendation has been an incident of violence between a police officer and a member of the public, and the public perception that the officer in question has not been held accountable for their actions. In response, members of the public sometimes point to civilian review of official disciplinary channels as a remedy. Indeed, more than two hundred of these boards have proliferated across the country in the last decade.<sup>28</sup>

In reality, civilian review boards rarely achieve the ends that such public calls seek. In many cases when an organization's leader seeks to separate an officer on the basis of violating conduct, civilian review boards will overturn the executive's decision. It is rare for a civilian board, even when empowered to do so, to impose more stringent punishment than organizational leaders will. But civilian review boards' focus on punishment instead of policy, and individual instances of misconduct instead of widespread organizational and policy change, is backward-

looking rather than forward-looking. It is exceedingly difficult to change behavior in an organization by addressing individual instances of misconduct in contrast to imposing regulations that seek to change behavior in a forward-looking way by imposing high standards, which, of course, is highly relevant to policy change. A recent article published by the Council of Criminal Justice illustrates the ways in which even the civilians who push for these institutional mechanisms are increasingly disillusioned by them. Their survey of oversight agencies demonstrates a large majority (78 percent) reporting that police executives listen carefully to their recommendations; however, less than half (46 percent) of the respondents believe that police executives frequently implement the recommendations.<sup>29</sup>

A different approach is to promote policy-making through these boards. In contrast to the backward-looking and more individual-centered proposals that civilian review boards regularly undertake, what legal scholars Barry Friedman and Julian Clark call “community advisory boards” provide more front-end accountability by being more broadly engaged with a town’s policing agency, building trust relationships between the agency and citizens and collaborating with the agency to help solve problems.<sup>30</sup> Most of these boards are volunteer-oriented and advisory only. It is rare for these boards to proactively create or pass binding policies and directives that police departments they engage must follow. Even when these boards do have that power, it appears such powers are rarely used.<sup>31</sup>

One of the most well-known boards that possesses binding authority on an agency is the Board of Police Commissioners in Los Angeles, California. Another board was recently inaugurated in Chicago, the country’s third-largest city.<sup>32</sup> And smaller cities also have begun to establish forward-looking policy-making boards. In November 2020, Portlanders (Oregon) overwhelmingly voted to pass the Police Oversight Board Charter Amendment, establishing a new police oversight board with the power to recommend new police policies and directives for the City Council – not the police bureau – to approve. This new board also restricts membership to individuals who lack either employment or familial ties to law enforcement. Despite its two-year existence, Portland’s board has yet to make any significant policy recommendations.

So far, the strategies I have outlined that address trust in policing have focused on how the policing service carries out tasks long associated with a primary goal of the agency, law enforcement, and shaping and structuring those tasks in ways that enhance public legitimacy according to the ideas of social psychology described above. The reality, however, is that normative conceptions of legitimacy that we might seek to measure through positive empirical methods are challenged by the role that settlement and chattel enslavement – and their ideological counterpart, race – have played in the construction of the very laws that the policing service has historically enforced and still does. Thus, an important

consideration for improving trust between police and members of the public is reform or elimination of the laws police officers are sworn to uphold.

While the passage of the Reconstruction Amendments at the end of the Civil War and the subsequently passed civil rights laws of the 1960s could be said to have removed white supremacy from the literal text of the criminal law, the structure and attendant culture of racial caste that three hundred and fifty years of law had already built remained embedded in legislation and law enforcement. For example, in the antebellum period, when the state was involved in punishment of an enslaved person – or more commonly, reserving “justice” for the enslaved as a task to be meted out privately – the law made formal distinctions in punishment for the same conduct as between enslaved Black people and whites.<sup>33</sup> Imprisonment was reserved for white people, as the punishment of liberty deprivation required a person be free and recognized as a citizen of the state. These formal distinctions were removed from state criminal law after the Civil War when Confederate leaders rewrote their state constitutions. Nonetheless, even after the removal of formal distinctions by race in the criminal code, distinctions by race still were encoded in the law *sub rosa* and also through the law’s operation.

As is well-known today, the practice of convict leasing functionally re-created slavery in many parts of the South for decades after Reconstruction through enforcement of criminal law, as the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution permits involuntary servitude for convicted criminal offenders.<sup>34</sup> Less well-known is the role that state constitutions played in formally legitimizing discrimination that the U.S. Constitution did not prohibit. This provision of South Carolina’s 1895 Constitution is illustrative:

The Penitentiary and the convicts thereto sentenced *shall forever be under the supervision and control of officers employed by the State*; and in case any convicts are hired or farmed out, as may be provided by law, their maintenance, support, medical attendance, and discipline shall be under the direction of officers detailed for those duties by the authorities of the Penitentiary.<sup>35</sup>

Just as corrections officers and facilities were given broad discretion over those imprisoned, so, too, were police officers given discretion to enforce the law in ways that typically yielded broad inequities by race. Well into the 1960s, police officers used both “field interrogations” and vaguely worded loitering and vagrancy statutes to both harass and intimidate people of color and other groups the officers deemed marginal.<sup>36</sup> Even after the Supreme Court invalidated loitering and vagrancy laws as inconsistent with federal due process guarantees in 1972, while also placing constitutional limits on the ability of police to utilize field interrogation at will in the famous 1968 case *Terry v. Ohio*, the turn toward policing for crime reduction put pressure on law enforcement agencies to engage in proactive policing strategies that relied, at least in part, on tactics such as stop and frisk.

Stops and frisks are consistent with the Constitution so long as a police officer has a reasonable belief that the person they are about to detain is about to engage or has engaged in a crime, and every state and locality in this country has managed to criminalize all manner of low-level behaviors – with specificity.

Thus, although the operation of criminal legal processing is formally democratic, it operates in conjunction with antidemocratic structures and culture. Low-level criminal laws might appear on their face to be devoted to public safety in service of a goal that majorities support through processes typically considered democratic. But these laws in operation and through their very DNA perpetuate and support structures of inequality. Consider that while laws prohibiting loitering and vagrancy have long been identified as suspect in the context of advancing the democratic project, contemporary ordinances designed with specificity – prohibitions on selling loose cigarettes on a street corner, or limits on grass lawns exceeding certain lengths – have not typically been considered to fall into this suspect category because their specificity has traditionally been thought to resist the expansion of police discretion that was the clear concern of those who sought to abolish the vagrancy and loitering laws of old.<sup>37</sup> The proliferation of even specific prohibitions vastly expands the power of enforcers to enforce laws, and this is an overlooked reality. The old concern about the potential for a police officer to create law and then enforce it is not the problem.<sup>38</sup> Rather, the rule of law becomes a mockery of itself when the enforcer has a smorgasbord of petty laws to choose from to validate a forcible arrest. Eric Garner lost his life for selling loose cigarettes on a street corner. As my colleague Stephen Carter puts it, “Every new law requires enforcement; every act of enforcement requires the possibility of violence.”<sup>39</sup>

But Carter is only half right. He is correct that laws require enforcement, but it does not follow that every act of enforcement requires the possibility of violence. That would only be true if one believed that compliance requires the threat of violence, which in turn is true only if one believes, as the theory of deterrence specifies, that people comply with the law because they fear the consequences of failing to do so. Tyler’s foundational and long-standing work points in a different direction: one that places emphasis on trust and legitimacy in securing compliance, cooperation, and engagement with legal authorities.<sup>40</sup>

Recent reform efforts support Tyler’s view emphasizing the importance of trust in securing compliance as well as disabling the threat of violence as central to law enforcement. That is, many agencies now embrace strategies that enhance trust as a better, more efficient, and less expensive way to achieve crime reduction and law compliance. To that end, the Baltimore Police Department is now largely prohibited from using forcible arrest to enforce a number of low-level crimes.<sup>41</sup> In Berkeley, California, police are now limited in their power to enforce ordinary traffic violations, the consensus being that police intervention should be reserved

for dangerous drivers.<sup>42</sup> In Virginia, the General Assembly banned police from pulling people over for exclusively minor traffic violations.<sup>43</sup> While legalization of possession of marijuana is now the majority position among the fifty states, Oregon is the first state to decriminalize possession of small amounts of drugs such as heroin and methamphetamine. Shifting attention to legislative efforts that restrain the initial grant of power police have over citizens is probably the most important effort we can undertake to enhance trust in government and therefore the state. Best of all: these efforts will not detract from, but very likely enhance, the goal of having safer and healthier communities.

**B**uilding trust between legal authorities and members of the public is a cornerstone of strategies that promote safe communities, but trust does more than just satisfy these instrumental goals. Police officers are state authorities who play a critical role in helping people decipher their environment and where they fit in society. Criminologist Ian Loader and sociologist Aogán Mulcahy put it this way:

[Police are] an interpretive lens through which people make sense of, and give order to, their world . . . a vehicle that enables individuals and groups to make sense of their past, form judgements on the present, and project various imagined futures. As an institution intimately concerned with the viability of the state . . . policing remains closely tied to the maintenance of ontological security, the production of subjectivities, and the articulation of collective identities.<sup>44</sup>

To ensure equality among all members of society, we need a better understanding of how and when critical state actors and members of the public create and maintain trust relationships. Elsewhere, historian Benjamin Justice and I have argued that the project of criminal justice – a normative project, not a descriptive one – must be concerned with the civic educational implications of the law and how it is enforced, as opposed to mere compliance. Given the role of police encounters in shaping individuals' perceptions of civic identity, it is time for us to contemplate just how police educate citizens and the potential for that education to foster trust.<sup>45</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

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# Race & Political Trust: Justice as a Unifying Influence on Political Trust

*Cary Wu, Rima Wilkes & David C. Wilson*

*Americans' trust in government is lower than ever. However, while all groups have seen a decline in trust since the 1960s, the gap in trust between racial and ethnic minorities and Whites in this period has varied not only in size but also in direction. At times, racial and ethnic minorities have actually had higher rates of trust than Whites, contradicting the broad assumptions in research about race and political trust. Explanations of the causes of trust in government that emphasize institutional experience and early socialization would not predict this outcome. We propose that an underutilized component in the study of race and political trust is perceived justice. On one hand, racial and ethnic minorities' sensitivity to institutional injustice often leads to lower rates of trust. On the other hand, when racial and ethnic minorities perceive there are greater opportunities for racial progress, which signal that widespread harm can be repaired, their political trust tends to increase, sometimes to levels that exceed those for Whites. The interplay between political realities that shape perceived justice as well as political hope for racial progress likely creates the variable longitudinal patterns of racial and ethnic differences in trust.*

Few would debate the importance of public trust in government for a well-functioning democracy. The social contract establishing the terms by which individuals agree to be governed requires that the government and its leaders work on their behalf, and do so without taking advantage of citizens, residents, and visitors by way of corruption, waste, deceit, or mistreatment. Since most people hold government and its related institutions responsible for their safety and social and economic well-being, confidence in political institutions, actors, and practices should be both high and stable for a well-functioning democracy.<sup>1</sup>

Sadly, Americans' trust in government is lower than ever. The decline in political trust has spanned more than fifty years and caused widespread concern.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a distrusting public endangers democratic stability. When individuals have little trust in government, they are less likely to follow social and political rules, and more likely to engage in confrontational or even violent political actions.<sup>3</sup>

The attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, is a case in point. Low trust in government has also led to low compliance with public health measures and is the main contributing factor to the skyrocketing numbers of positive cases and deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

Still, while all groups have seen a decline in trust since the 1960s, the gap in trust between racial and ethnic minorities and Whites has varied not only in size but also in direction.<sup>5</sup> Given the history of discrimination against communities of color in the United States, it may come as a surprise that racial-ethnic minorities are sometimes more trusting of the government than White Americans. To understand this phenomenon, we provide a brief review of what we know about race and political trust – recognizing that minority groups have different experiences in America – and explore the gaps in what we do not know or should know more about.

It is puzzling that racial and ethnic minority groups do not always trust the government less than Whites. Explanations for public trust in government that emphasize either institutional performance or cultural experiences would not predict this variance. In the former instance, racial and ethnic minorities' trust is thought to reflect their lower political status and experiences of institutional mistreatment. In the latter view, racial and ethnic minorities' trust reflects civic values and behaviors, as well as group identity. Both theories would predict that trust in government should be lower for racial minorities than for Whites. Alternatively, we propose that perceptions of justice underlie varied levels of political trust and distrust among racial and ethnic minorities, but also have the power to explain racial gaps in political trust. That is, stronger beliefs about justice (for example, ratings on how fairly or unfairly government operates) could mediate, at least partially, the relationship between racial and ethnic status and political trust.

Specifically, political trust calculations at least involve an experiential component resulting from public action, and a moral component appraising the quality and results of that action.<sup>6</sup> High trust accompanies a general expectation that a person or institution “can be relied upon to do what they say” and therefore do “what is right.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in measuring political trust, the American National Election Studies (ANES) asks respondents, “How often can you trust the federal government in Washington to *do what is right*?”<sup>8</sup> People tend to view authorities more positively when they perceive them as trying to do what is best, and as acting with benevolence and care.<sup>9</sup> It is true that people expect government to function well and do so with a degree of economic proficiency. This aligns well with the experiential components of trust. However, the moral component that underlies “what is right” means that political institutions should abide by the agreed-upon rules, and when individuals perceive that political institutions are not meeting this principle, they will likely conclude that the government is not *deserving* of their trust. Societies use laws to provide order and structure, safety and security, and cultural direction and faith, but laws cannot accomplish any of these unless they attend to justice. History shows

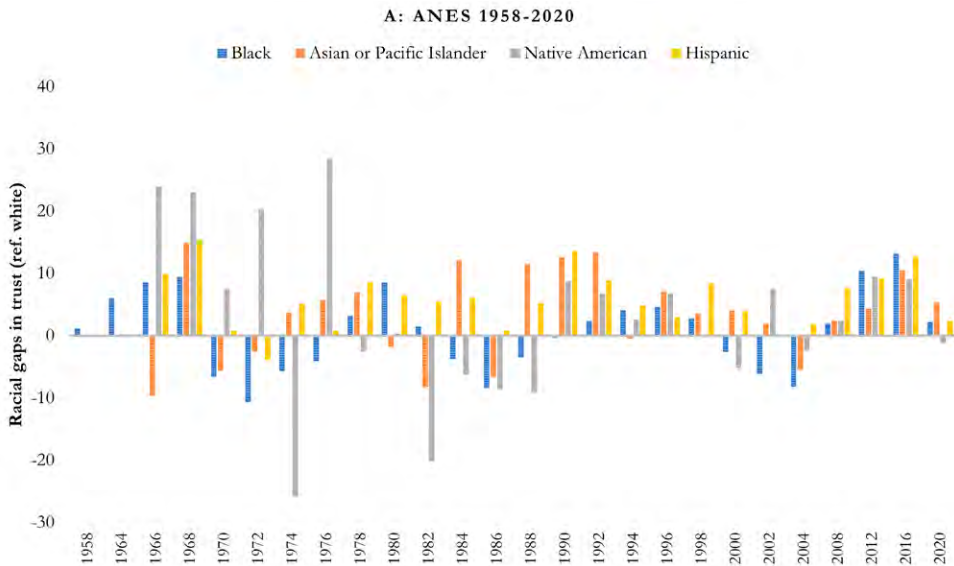
that people will reject and rebel against their governments when laws are unjust. This perhaps explains contemporary protests proclaiming passionately that Black Lives Matter, or that there was unpunished election fraud in 2020. In short, people expect an efficient and effective government, but also one that is just.<sup>10</sup>

A just government is particularly relevant to racial and ethnic minorities because they witness and perceive the justice and injustice meted out by political institutions differently than Whites.<sup>11</sup> On one hand, racial and ethnic minorities have good reasons to be skeptical about the extent of a just government. Relative to Whites, ethnic and racial minorities have poorer health and limited access to health care, lower wealth, more hostile interactions with law enforcement, and less descriptive political representation – representation that mirrors the politically relevant traits of its constituency – at the state and federal levels.<sup>12</sup> While progress over time exists, these lingering disparities can lead racial and ethnic minorities to wonder, “Who is looking out for us?” This would normally signal an intractable problem for political trust among communities of color. On the other hand, when racial and ethnic minorities perceive there are greater opportunities for their progress, which signal that harms can be repaired, their political trust tends to increase, sometimes to levels exceeding those for Whites.<sup>13</sup> The key to this line of thinking is starting from the expectation of a just civic experience through individual values, rather than theorizing that institutional trust is solely a reaction to government performance.

Diverse racial and ethnic minorities cannot be simply reduced to one minority group. Perceptions of injustice and racially progressive politics that may ignite hope are often group-specific.<sup>14</sup> For example, there are good reasons to expect that Black Americans should be especially and acutely sensitive to issues of justice, given the historic injustice of chattel slavery, as well as long-standing racial bias that permeated institutional practices and federal policy (for example, the Tuskegee Syphilis experiment).<sup>15</sup>

**T**he ANES began measuring trust in government in 1958. The same basic questions have been asked for over several decades: *Do you trust in the federal government to do what is right? Is the government pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or is it run for the benefit of all the people? Do people in government waste a lot of the money that we pay in taxes? Are a lot of the people running the government crooked?* Using the ANES’s trust in government index based on responses to these questions, Figure 1 provides a visualization of trust differences over time for four racial groups – Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, and Native American – as relative to Whites.<sup>16</sup> The figure shows that the gap in trust between racial and ethnic minorities and Whites has varied over time, not only in size but also in direction. For example, a pattern emerges wherein Black and White Americans switch positions repeatedly. The pattern for Native Americans is extremely

Figure 1  
Racial Gaps in Political Trust, American National Election Studies (ANES), 1958–2020

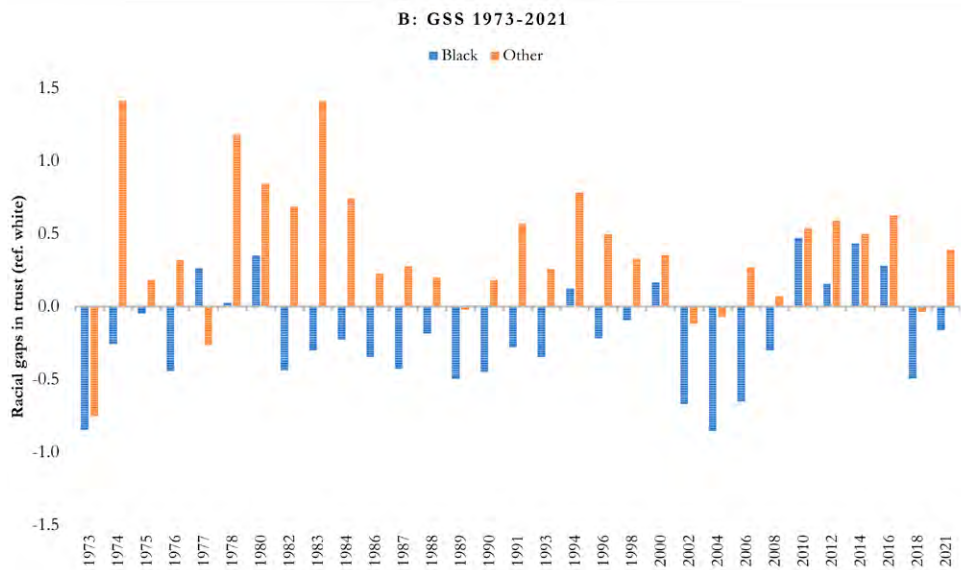


The deviations of the bars from the mid-point of zero indicate higher and lower levels of trust relative to White respondents. Results are from the authors' analyses of data from the ANES (1958–2020). Asian or Pacific Islander, Native American, and Hispanic respondents were not included in studies conducted before 1966. The index ranges from 0 to 100. Higher scores indicate higher levels of trust.

variable, likely reflecting the volatility of a small sample size. Latino and Asian Americans often demonstrate the highest trust levels across all the groups.

The U.S. General Social Survey (GSS) has asked about confidence in political institutions since 1973.<sup>17</sup> Their question reads: *I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?* The item list includes the executive branch of the federal government, the Supreme Court, Congress, and the military. Using an index created from these questions, Figure 2 visualizes the racial differences in political trust across self-identified race categories over time, including Black, Other (neither White nor Black), and White (reference group). Regardless of how political trust is measured, trust is not always lower among racial and ethnic minorities compared with the White majority group.

Figure 2  
Racial Gaps in Political Trust, General Social Survey (GSS), 1973–2021



Authors’ analyses of data from the General Social Survey (1973–2021). Political trust is measured using the combined score of the confidence in four political institutions: the executive branch of the federal government, the Supreme Court, Congress, and the military. The score ranges from 0 to 8 with higher scores indicating higher levels of trust.

We also find a similarly varied pattern when reviewing the literature on race and trust in government in the United States. Table 1 provides a curation of the existing studies that examine the differences in political trust across racial groups. Some publications show that Blacks are equally or more trusting than Whites, others find that Blacks are less trusting than Whites, and yet others note inconsistent racial gaps over time.<sup>18</sup> Studies also find that Latinos tend to be more trusting of government than other racial/ethnic groups, including White Americans.<sup>19</sup> Among those studies that include Asian and Native Americans, both groups show comparable levels of trust to White Americans, but higher than Black Americans.<sup>20</sup>

How do we make sense of these variable patterns? Scholars have largely explained the race and political trust association through two general theories of political trust: one tied to institutional behavior (that is, performance and representation), and another tied to cultural experiences (that is, political socialization).<sup>21</sup> The dominant institutional theory highlights the role of government performance

**Table 1**  
**Studies on Race and Political Trust in the United States**

Author(s)	Year	Data	Race/ Ethnicity	Political Trust	Trust Gap (relative to White group)
Aberbach and Walker	1970	1965 Detroit Survey	Black, White	ANES trust in local and federal government	Blacks less trusting
Miller	1974	Center for Political Studies, 1964–1970	Black, White	ANES items	Varied: Blacks more trusting, 1964– 1966; less trusting, 1968–1970
Abney and Hutch- eson	1981	City of Atlanta surveys, 1970–1976	Black, White	ANES trust in city government	Context: Election of a Black mayor appears to increase Black Atlantans' trust
Howell and Fagan	1988	1984 New Orleans Survey	Black, White	ANES trust in government in city hall	Blacks more trusting
Bobo and Gilliam	1990	1987 GSS	Black, White	Confidence in government	Blacks less trusting
Emig et al.	1996	1994 Mobile, Alabama Survey	Black, White	ANES trust in local government	Blacks more trusting
Miller and Hoffmann	1998	1987 GSS	Black, White	ANES trust in the federal government	Blacks less trusting
Michelson	2001	1999 survey of Latino population in Chicago and 1998 ANES	Latino, Black, White; immigrant and native-born	ANES items	Latinos more trust- ing than Blacks and Whites; immigrants more trusting
Michelson	2003	Latino National Political Survey, 1989–1990	Latino, immigrant, and native-born	ANES trust in government	Latino immigrants more trusting, but their trust declines with the length of stay



Table 1, continued

Author(s)	Year	Data	Race/ Ethnicity	Political Trust	Trust Gap (relative to White group)
Rahn and Rudolph	2005	2000 Social Capital Benchmark Survey	Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, Native American	ANES trust in local government	Blacks and Native Americans less trusting; Asians and Latinos show no differences
Avery	2006	2000 National Annenberg Election Survey	Black, White	ANES trust in federal government	Blacks less trusting, but small racial differences
Wenzel	2006	2002 Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas Survey and ANES	Latino, Black, White	ANES items: trust in local and federal government	Latinos more trusting
MacDonald and Stokes	2006	2001 Social Capital Benchmark Survey	Black, White	Trust in local police	Blacks less trusting
Grabb et al.	2009	1999–2002 World Values Surveys	Non-White, White	Confidence in specific institutions (the police, the civil service, the federal government, and political parties)	Non-Whites more trusting
Avery	2009	1996 National Black Election Study; 2007 Race and Trust Survey	Black, White	ANES items	Blacks less trusting
Perrin and Smolek	2009	2001–2002 National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health	Black, Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, White	Trust in the federal government, my state government, and my local government	Blacks less trusting, Native Americans no difference, and Asians more trusting

*Table 1, continued*

Author(s)	Year	Data	Race/ Ethnicity	Political Trust	Trust Gap (relative to White group)
Abrajano and Alvarez	2010	ANES, 1964–2002	Black, Latino, White	ANES items	Latinos more trust- ing than other groups
Wilkes	2015	ANES, 1958–2012	Black, White	ANES items	Varied over time
Reinhardt	2015	2006 internet survey	Black, non-Black	Trust in local, state, and federal government	Blacks less trusting
Michelson	2016	2005–2006 Latino National Election Study, Latino Immigrant National Election Study, and ANES	Latino, White	ANES items	Latinos more trust- ing than Whites; becoming more trusting
Koch	2019	2004 and 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey	Asian, Hispanic, African, Native, White	ANES items	Native Americans and Asians show no differences; Hispanics and African Americans less trusting
Cao and Wu	2019	Meta review of 35 empirical studies	Black, White	Trust in the police	Blacks less trusting, but the gap is small
Heideman	2020	2007 and 2011 Urban Mayoral Elections Study	Black, Hispanic, White	ANES trust in city government	Blacks less trusting; Hispanic or Latino residents show no differences
Rosenthal	2020	2016 ANES	Black, White	ANES items	Blacks more trusting
Bech	2021	2016–2017 survey experiments	Latino, White	Trust in political leaders and institutions	Context: political rhetoric influences political trust among Latino Americans and White Ameri- cans differently

Source: Information compiled by the authors.<sup>22</sup>

in generating trust. This theory predicts that group membership should have little impact on trust in government – as long as citizens, regardless of race, experience the same political performance and the same quality of political leaders and political institutions.

For the institutional model, significant racial-ethnic differences in political trust can only be explained by assuming different groups have different experiences.<sup>23</sup> Individuals place greater trust in the government and political institutions when they perceive that institutions and leaders of government are meeting their needs.<sup>24</sup> Individuals show lower levels of political trust when they perceive their own interests are not being served.<sup>25</sup> Their evaluations make appraisals of trust more personal and likely reflect how individuals perceive the government as politically responsive rather than objectively well-performing.<sup>26</sup> Thus, racial differences in institutional trust are attributed to the extent to which government serves racial groups or their political interests.

Two institutional models follow this line of thinking. First, the political reality model posits that racial minorities' lower status in the power structure affects their trust in the government. Negative experiences due to systemic oppression create a political reality of social exclusion and discrimination in which governments treat racial and ethnic minorities less favorably and with less devotion to their interests compared with their White counterparts.<sup>27</sup> These experiences create a culture of doubt and cynicism about government agents' ability, much less their desire, to respond to the problems that racial and ethnic minorities face. Second, the political empowerment thesis links minority trust in government to political representation. Empirical studies show that greater descriptive representation for racial and ethnic minorities leads to increased legitimacy for governmental institutions among racial minorities.<sup>28</sup> Lower rates of descriptive representation for racial minorities cues the likelihood that racial discrimination influences the representative selection process, leading to a lessened ability to influence one's political reality, let alone believe that political power is truly feasible. Less descriptive representation also fuels the perception that the political system is less responsive and less accessible to the members of minority groups.

In contrast to the institutional theory, the cultural theory views political trust as originating from outside the political sphere. Conceptualized as part of political culture, trust in government is rooted in the shared values and cultural norms of one's communities and how these communities are received by society more generally.<sup>29</sup> Individuals learn their views on government early on from their family, friends, neighbors, and local institutions. For example, racial and ethnic minorities' perceptions about the prevalence of systemic racism, historical discriminatory practices carried out by the U.S. government, and denial of equal access to resources, power, and protection under the law all signal the extent to which

they should trust or distrust their governments, and how they should engage in civic life.<sup>30</sup>

The institutional theory views government behavior and performance as essential to understanding racial and ethnic differences in political trust, whereas the cultural theory highlights the important role of social and political positions and historical contexts of various groups. Integrating both theories suggests that trust in government is not just about the group experience of government behavior and performance, but it is also about how the group experience is being influenced by the social and political positions and historical contexts of different groups.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, people learn different ideas about the government and political authorities – including what they should expect, and how they should evaluate them – from their varying social and political positions and historical contexts.

Hence, understanding racial and ethnic differences in trust requires considering how different groups experience various government performances. For example, African Americans experience higher levels of police-stops and incarceration, and this pattern is contextualized against the history of a society that has used police to control, segregate, and denigrate Black people. Because of this history, African Americans do not see stop-and-frisk practices or mass incarceration as indications of government performing well, although many Whites do. In what follows, we suggest how perceptions of justice can offer a ripe area of further theoretical development to explain why racial-ethnic communities will sometimes express higher trust in government than Whites.

Up to this point, researchers have often excluded justice orientations when studying institutional trust among racial and ethnic minorities. The literature tying justice and institutional trust has focused mainly on procedural justice: the adherence to principles of fair procedure in the areas of policing, law enforcement, and the courts.<sup>32</sup> This work hypothesizes that when the government treats people with respect and gives them a fair hearing, individuals will accept the outcomes of political decision-making. The consensus from this line of research is that citizens' experiences of respectful treatment at the hands of the political authorities affect their perceptions of legal legitimacy, trust, and behavior regulation.<sup>33</sup> We propose that more work needs to be done on justice perceptions and institutional trust, both in terms of theorizing and expanding beyond procedural matters.

Political philosopher John Rawls identifies justice as “the first virtue of social institutions,” remarking, “in a just society the liberties of equal citizenship are taken as settled.”<sup>34</sup> Justice offers a distinct scholarly lens for political behavior, but also serves as a motivation for judging what factors deserve attention in scholarship.<sup>35</sup> We define justice as a real or perceived state in which the burdens and benefits of society are decided upon (processed), handed out (distributed), commu-

nicated (interacted), and corrected (restored/repared) according to agreed upon principles. Table 2 outlines these four primary forms of justice in political decision-making, along with the principles that underlie their character, and provides examples of violations that should produce stronger feelings of injustice.

Justice activates concerns about the violation of principles such as equity, equality, need, transparency, respect, neutrality, and accountability. If we define politics as “who gets what” or as the “authoritative allocation of values,” then it becomes clear that justice is fundamental to the embrace of governance and trust in that governance, especially when groups feel they are being shortchanged, without repair, on unequal amounts of resources, and through unfair procedures and negative interactions.<sup>36</sup> Principles of justice – also called norms of justice or justice criteria – come in the form of values, those subjective psychological standards that individuals use to guide their thinking about right and wrong, and ultimately whether we deserve what we get. Motivated by a need for consistency in reasoning, people tend to evaluate government actions as consonant or dissonant with their values. As scholars evaluate existing theories of institutional trust, especially among racial and ethnic minorities, they should examine the extent to which they align with principles or violations of the principles of justice. For example, if one values fairness and objectivity, one will likely evaluate government with those principles in mind.

We propose that a just government is one that adheres to the principles of the local, federal, and state laws it creates, administers, and evaluates. And the laws must reflect basic principles of justice, such as equality. We adopt this conceptualization knowing that adherence can have subjective meaning. Nonetheless, when government is perceived to act in accordance with principles of justice (for example, equitably, consistently, respectfully, and responsibly), trust should increase, and vice versa. Indeed, previous research suggests that perceived institutional injustice matters even more than actual experience of injustice in shaping people’s political trust.<sup>37</sup>

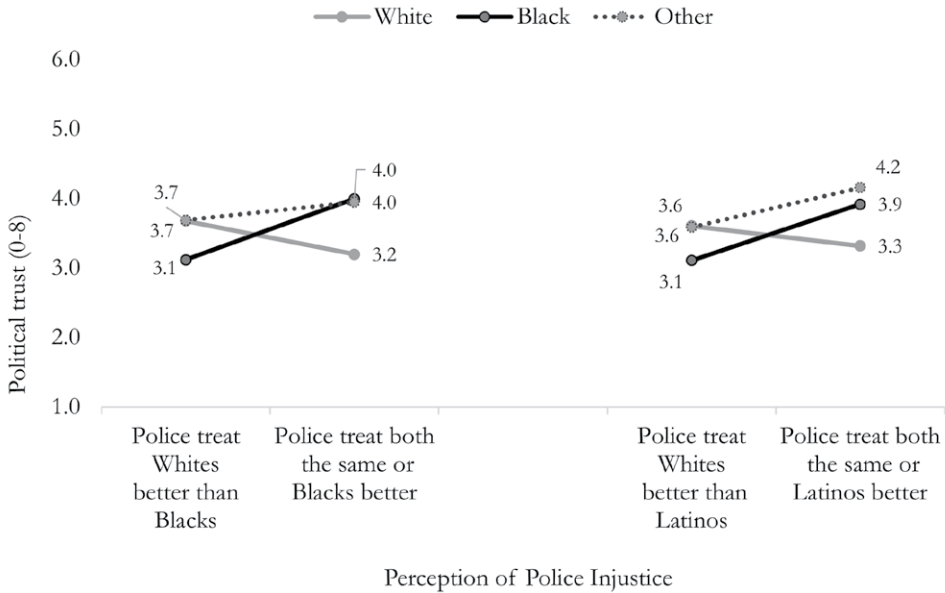
To provide empirical support of our claims, we consider how perception of unfair treatment by police may be associated with the levels of political trust across Black, White, and Other groups using the GSS 2018–2021 data. The GSS data include questions about police and law enforcement, asking respondents, “In general, do the police treat Whites better than Blacks (or Latinos), treat them both the same, or treat Blacks (or Latinos) better than Whites?” Figure 3 shows that trust is lower among Blacks and members of other race groups when they perceive “Police treat Whites much better than Blacks (or Latinos).” We see an opposite pattern for Whites: their trust is higher when they perceive that “Police treat Whites better than Blacks (or Latinos).” The finding is consistent with previous research that shows that trust in police is most strongly affected by people’s perceptions of whether the police follow fair procedures when exercising their authority.<sup>38</sup> Differ-

Table 2  
Principles of Justice and Examples of Violations

Types of Justice	Named Principles	Violations
<p><i>Distributive Justice</i></p> <p>The fair distribution of the conditions (burdens and benefits) of goods among diverse populations, which affects individual, group, or societal well-being. Distributive justice is about the receipt or non-receipt of outcomes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▸ Equity (Merit)</li> <li>▸ Equality</li> <li>▸ Need</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▸ Unfair standards</li> <li>▸ Discrimination</li> <li>▸ Doubt/Prejudice</li> </ul>
<p><i>Procedural (Informational) Justice</i></p> <p>The quality of decision-making procedures or policies used to allocate outcomes. Procedural justice concerns how decisions are made about the distribution of outcomes. Procedural justice tends to be more about the appraisal of policy rather than personal interactions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▸ Consistency</li> <li>▸ Neutrality (Bias suppression)</li> <li>▸ Voice (Representation)</li> <li>▸ Ethics</li> <li>▸ Decision control</li> <li>▸ Correctability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▸ Changing the rules</li> <li>▸ Favoritism</li> <li>▸ Exclusion</li> <li>▸ Cheating</li> <li>▸ No opportunity</li> <li>▸ No return policy</li> </ul>
<p><i>Interactional (Interpersonal) Justice</i></p> <p>The fairness and quality of interpersonal treatment (as opposed to policy) received when procedures are implemented, or outcomes are determined. Interactional justice is about the experiences, relationships, and social practices between individuals and groups.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▸ Truthfulness (Sincerity)</li> <li>▸ Respect</li> <li>▸ Justification</li> <li>▸ Courtesy</li> <li>▸ Appropriateness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▸ Deceit</li> <li>▸ Yelling/Name-calling</li> <li>▸ No explanations</li> <li>▸ Being ignored/dismissed</li> <li>▸ Being vulgar</li> </ul>
<p><i>Restorative Justice</i></p> <p>Repairing the harm caused by a crime while holding the offender responsible for their actions, by providing an opportunity for the parties directly affected by the crime—victim(s), offender, and community—to identify and address their needs in the aftermath of a crime, and seek a resolution that affords healing, reparation, and reintegration, and prevents future harm. Restorative justice is about acknowledging harm, and the authenticity of efforts to repair damages.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▸ Repair/Apology</li> <li>▸ Responsibility</li> <li>▸ Humility</li> <li>▸ Dialog</li> <li>▸ Acceptance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▸ Festering resentment</li> <li>▸ Blame</li> <li>▸ Arrogance</li> <li>▸ Not addressing the issues</li> <li>▸ Denial</li> </ul>

Source : Information compiled by the authors. For more background on these concepts, see Jason A. Colquitt and Jessica B. Rodell, “Measuring Justice and Fairness,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Justice in the Workplace*, ed. Russell S. Cropanzano and Maureen L. Ambrose (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 187–202.

Figure 3  
Political Trust and Perception of Police Injustice



Political trust (see solid black and dotted lines) is higher for Black and Other (non-Black and non-White) Americans when they perceive police treat Blacks (see left comparison) or Latinos (see right one) the same or better than Whites, but political trust is lower for Whites (see gray lines) in those cases. Political trust is measured using the combined score of the confidence in four political institutions: the executive branch of the federal government, the Supreme Court, Congress, and the military. The score ranges from 0 to 8 with higher scores indicating higher levels of trust. Source: Data from the 2021 General Social Survey.

ential perceptions of injustice across racial groups therefore help explain racial and ethnic differences in trust.

Public policy and other government decisions produce *change*, and individuals evaluate these changes through the extent to which they are deserved or not. Most people want to see politics produce fair and deserved outcomes, just procedures, equal treatment, and limits on excess and inappropriate punishments. Yet they also expect that some are more deserving of government policy outcomes than others. In this way, justice reflects a social determination as much as a moral one, because the quality of how one is treated by government may be indicative of one’s standing and status as a member (or non-member) of a trusted group. Essentially, there is a principled relationship between one’s political identity (for example, race or party), the identity of government leadership (for example, party or ideology),

and policy outcomes (for example, tax breaks and free social services). In situations in which political authorities and individuals share a salient identity, their in-group relationship should lead them to feel that government agencies are more deserving of their trust than not, and vice versa for out-groups.<sup>39</sup> Thus, just governments are those deserving of trust, and identity influences these boundary judgments.<sup>40</sup>

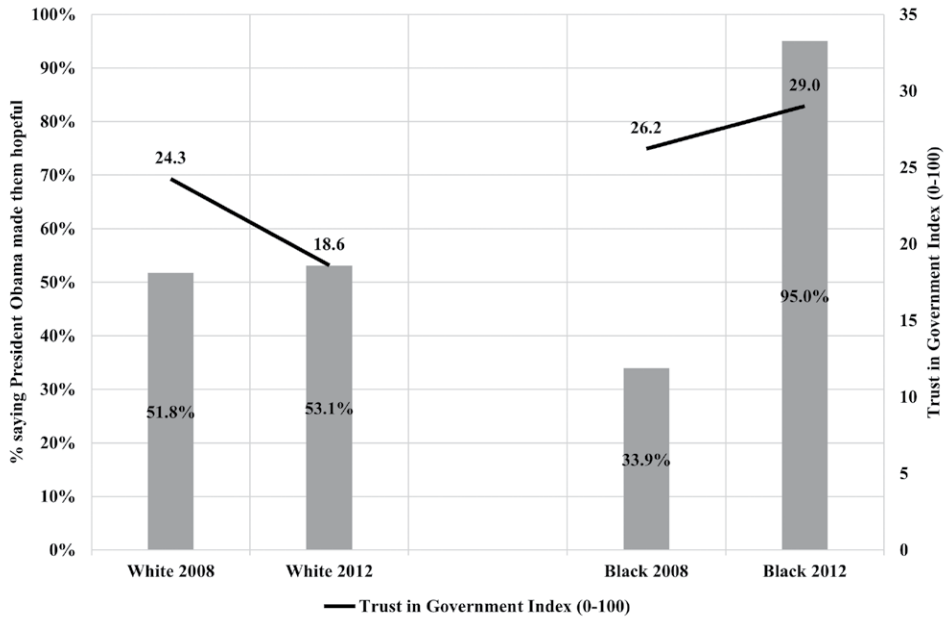
For racial and ethnic minorities, justice principles provide guidance on how to judge the quality of the resources one receives (distributive justice), how one is treated in terms of clear procedures (informational justice) and relationships (interactional justice), and how and whether errors in process or distribution are repaired through restitution (restorative justice). As we have argued, the negative experiences thought to explain lower rates of institutional trust among racial ethnic minorities stem from their clear sense that these institutions do not (or have not) “establish(ed) justice” – let alone “secure(d) the blessings of liberty” – as promised in the preamble to the U.S. Constitution.<sup>41</sup> Yet there is some evidence that positive political changes through policies (that is, effectiveness) and elections (that is, representation) can raise democratic spirits and political trust among racial and ethnic minorities.

Recent research suggests that political hope can prime greater collective efficacy and mobilize political participation, and the effect is stronger among racial minorities than among Whites.<sup>42</sup> Changes that engender political hope for racial justice can promote political trust among racial minorities. For example, there was a significant increase nationally in political trust among Blacks between 1964 and 1966. During those years, trust in government was higher among Blacks than among Whites. Many agree that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 led to high hope among Black Americans that a real change in racial integration, along with a reduction in discrimination, would be forthcoming.<sup>43</sup> Locally, during the 1970–1976 period, there was an increase in trust in city government among Black residents even though there was a distinct decline in trust in government among Blacks nationally during the same period. For example, the presence of a Black mayor in Atlanta may have had some positive impact upon political trust among Atlanta’s Black population.<sup>44</sup> Greater descriptive representation for minority groups can generate political hope for racial justice, which, in turn, can promote greater political trust among racial and ethnic minorities. This highlights the importance of justice as evidence of legitimacy. Indeed, past studies examining African Americans show that the size and even the direction of the gap in political trust between Black and White Americans varied with the federal government’s efforts to ensure racial equality.<sup>45</sup>

We tested this theory of hope, justice, and trust using national survey data. Data from the 2008 ANES show that the election of Barack Obama as the first Black president of the United States led to high hopes among Black Americans, and could be the reason why trust in government among Blacks increased significantly since 2008 (see Figure 4).



Figure 4  
The Election of Barack Obama Affects Political Hope and Trust in Government, 2008–2012

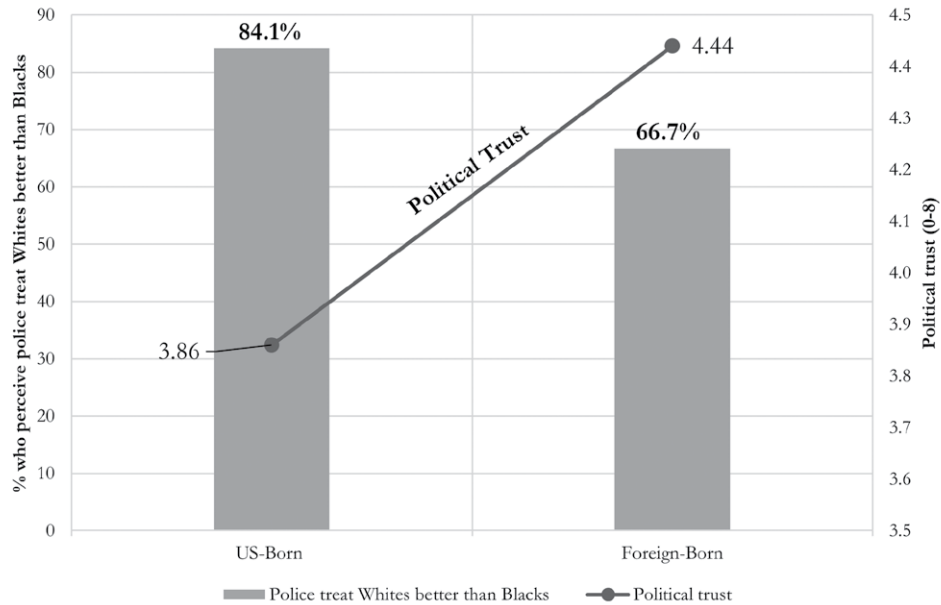


For White Americans (see left pair of bars), Obama’s election did not affect political hope, but led to a decrease in political trust. For Black Americans (see right pair of bars), Obama’s election increased both political hope and trust in government (see solid black line). Political hope is measured using the question, “Has President Obama made you hopeful?” Response categories include 0=“No, haven’t felt” and 1=“Yes, have felt.” Political trust is measured using the ANES trust in government index. Source: The American National Election Studies, 2008–2012.

Political hope for racial justice is also the main factor underpinning how race and partisanship interact to shape the racial and ethnic differences in trust. Consequently, the election of Democratic presidents often leads to an increase in both political hope and trust in government among racial and ethnic minorities, especially African Americans.<sup>46</sup> Studies document that racial minorities, especially African and Hispanic Americans, tend to have more trust in government than White Americans when the Democratic Party holds presidential power, including the current Biden administration, as well as during the Obama and Clinton administrations. Conversely, during Republican presidencies – including Reagan, George W. Bush, and Trump – trust in government tends to be higher among Whites than among racial minorities, especially African Americans.<sup>47</sup> It is true that African Americans are more likely to be Democrats, but the Democratic Party has

Figure 5

Perception of Unfair Treatment by the Police and Trust in Government among U.S.-Born and Foreign-Born Black Americans



Perception of unfair treatment by the police is based on the question of whether respondents think police treat Whites better than Blacks. U.S.-born Black Americans (on left) are more likely to believe that “police treat Whites better than Blacks” (see bars) and less likely to trust government (see line) than foreign-born Black Americans (on right). Political trust is measured using the combined score of the confidence in four political institutions: the executive branch of the federal government, the Supreme Court, Congress, and the military. The score ranges from 0 to 8 with higher scores indicating higher levels of trust. Source: Data from the 2021 General Social Survey.

become the institutional champion of racial justice, promoting and funding policy interventions in addressing racial inequalities and protecting civil rights since the 1960s, whereas the Republican Party has often been more racially intolerant.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, the fact that immigrants often show higher trust in government than the native-born is also an effect of political hope. Scholars have argued that foreign-born Latinos have more trust because they hold more optimistic and positive views of government. As immigrants, not only do they perceive the American political system as better, compared with the political system in their country of origin, but they also have high hopes for freedom, democracy, and transparency, and all the ideas that are associated with the “American dream.”<sup>49</sup> This pattern also holds for Black Americans. Previous research shows that foreign-born Black Americans

tend to have lower perceptions of institutional injustice than U.S.-born Black Americans.<sup>50</sup> Our analysis of the data from the 2021 GSS yields similar results. Figure 5 shows that Black Americans born in the United States tend to perceive higher levels of unfair police treatment and to have lower levels of political trust than Black Americans who were born outside the country.

**P**olitical trust is essential to a well-functioning democracy. Individuals need to believe that the government and its representatives are acting on their behalf and at their behest. This belief requires trust: trust that there will be no waste, trust that there will be no mistreatment, trust that everyone is being treated equally and fairly. Therefore, assuming that the government is functioning as it should, trust is needed for regime stability. The recent rise of Black Lives Matter, the protests at Standing Rock, and the movement to abolish Immigration and Customs Enforcement all suggest that many Americans do not trust the government. These events suggest that racial discrimination continues to be salient in the lives of many Americans. These movements are not targeting other Americans. They are targeting institutions they perceive to be acting unfairly.

This essay proposes that a key ingredient for explaining political trust, both within and across racial and ethnic minority status, is the notion of perceived justice. Because there is nothing about skin color and physical appearance *per se* that should affect trust, the presence of a relationship between race and political trust indicates that the political system is perceived to be less responsive, less accessible, and less reliable to do “what is right” for people from communities of color than for White people. As scholars evaluate existing theories of political trust, especially among racial and ethnic minorities, they should examine the extent to which they align with principles or violations of the principles of justice. Dominant explanations of institutional trust among racial and ethnic minorities like political realities and low rates of descriptive representation could reflect perceived violations of distributive justice principles. Thus far, however, little attention has been paid to the role of perceptions and evaluations of distributive and procedural justice in shaping racial differences in trust. Political science scholars Jack Citrin and Laura Stoker identify one potential reason few surveys provide direct measures of perceptions of injustice as well as political trust: “since scholars have not [yet] introduced perceptions of process into the major national surveys, we know less about the topic than we should.”<sup>51</sup> We propose that more work needs to be done on justice perceptions and institutional trust, both in terms of theorizing and expanding beyond procedural matters.

Perhaps the positive story is that racial minorities still hold the belief that a just future is politically achievable. When there is hope, there is trust. The hope among communities of color for racial justice is so powerful that it can inspire actions that counterbalance the negative effects of the political reality of racial injustice.

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# Religion, Democracy & the Task of Restoring Trust

*Robert Wuthnow*

*There is a palpable sense of betrayal when religious leaders participate in moral malfeasance: when they engage in illicit sexual affairs, commit or condone child abuse, or deal in fraudulent financial transactions. Betrayals like these prompt doubts that religious leaders can be trusted and pose questions about the organizations they represent. But what can be learned from these episodes? I discuss the dramatic erosion of confidence in religious organizations that has taken place in recent years, framing it in terms of arguments about moral decline and institutional changes in religion. I show how betrayals of trust become symbolic representations of larger societal problems that are deemed to necessitate remediation. How the betrayals are interpreted becomes the basis for several mechanisms through which attempts are made to restore trust: confessions, investigations, and litigation. Their limitations notwithstanding, they cast light on the major challenges we face as a nation in seeking to restore trust in our basic institutions and our faith in American democracy.*

**A**t the start of the twenty-first century, few American churches were as powerful or as well respected as Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago. Its twenty-five thousand members, who worshipped at eight sprawling locations, were part of a televised global association that linked congregations across the nation and internationally. Thousands of pastors visited the church in person and online each year to learn the secrets of dynamic congregational growth from Willow Creek's founder and senior pastor, Reverend Bill Hybels. But on August 8, 2018, Willow Creek's entire board of elders resigned, and said they did so because they had failed to heed accusations of sexual harassment against Hybels that they now believed were credible. "We viewed the allegations through a lens of trust [in Hybels]," one of the leaders explained, "and this clouded our judgment." Said another, "Trust has been broken by leadership and it doesn't return quickly."<sup>1</sup>

The breach of trust at Willow Creek was one of many such scandals among religious leaders in recent decades. In 1987, Pat Robertson protégé Reverend Jim Bakker, whose leadership, with his wife Tammy Faye, of the conservative Christian television program *The PTL Club* had earned a national audience, resigned following the disclosure of his involvement in illicit sexual encounters. One year later,

TV evangelist Jimmy Swaggart confessed to hiring and having relations with a sex worker, gave up his ministry temporarily, and then resumed preaching only to be accused of picking up a sex worker again in 1991. In 1999, Ellen F. Cooke, treasurer of the national Episcopal Church, was sentenced to five years in prison for embezzling \$1.5 million from the church and evading \$300,000 in income taxes. In 2002, *The Boston Globe* published the first of a series of articles detailing widespread sexual abuse by Boston-area Roman Catholic clergy, whose abuses were enabled for decades by Catholic bishops who repeatedly reassigned these priests to new parishes.

Concurrent with the Willow Creek investigation, in 2018, a grand jury found that Roman Catholic leaders in Pennsylvania had covered up the sexual abuse of more than one thousand children over seven decades. A few months later, an investigation of sexual abuse within the Southern Baptist Convention found that nearly four hundred clergy and lay leaders were alleged to have engaged in sexual misconduct. The following year, Jerry Falwell Jr., whose father led the Moral Majority in the 1980s, resigned as president of Liberty University after photos and stories surfaced about his (and his wife's) extramarital sexual relations and financial dealings.

Scandals involving religious leaders and their organizations are troubling beyond their immediate contexts and the persons most directly affected by them. Religious leaders are the experts, the trained specialists, the role models within their respected institutions and communities who may on occasion fall short of moral virtue, but are supposed to be fundamentally honest, trustworthy, and given to common decency. Scandals raise doubts about other religious leaders' sincerity and evoke broader questions about the ethical standards religious organizations purport to uphold. Trust broken is not quickly restored. Nor is mistrust easily contained. Confidence in religious institutions suffers when scandals occur too often, too publicly. Evidence suggests that confidence in religious institutions has fallen dramatically in recent decades. Gallup polling, for instance, recorded a decline in those who had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the church or organized religion from 68 percent among those polled in 1975 to only 36 percent in 2019.<sup>2</sup>

Not only has confidence in religion declined, but affiliation has also plummeted: the latest polls suggest that nearly 30 percent of Americans no longer identify with any religious tradition.<sup>3</sup> A shift of this kind poses serious questions. Among these are whether the United States, which has long been the outlier among advanced industrial democracies in its residents' religious commitment and practices, is drifting toward a fuller embrace of secularity and, if so, whether that has implications for American democracy.

Indeed, there is widespread concern that religion's decline – and the decline of trust in religion – does not bode well for American democracy. Many of our deepest values – especially the importance we attach to human dignity and freedom – are grounded in religion. Thus, we need to understand why trust in religion is declining, what religious leaders are doing to restore trust, what can be learned from

the outcomes of these methods, and whether the strength of America's historic religious diversity is being weakened by secularity and polarization.

Trust is commonly conceived of as an attitude, a generalized belief, an implicit agreement, or an unspoken norm that bonds people together and facilitates the civic cooperation so sorely needed in a democratic society.<sup>4</sup> But to understand trust we must also consider the events that sometimes weaken it – betrayals, for example – and how these events take on meaning as symbols of social disorder. In this symbolic role, betrayals of trust are events that evoke public deliberations about how they should be interpreted and what should be done to prevent them from happening again. The deliberations in turn influence the measures that are taken to restore the trust that has been broken. Many betrayals are private, affecting only a small circle of confidants, victims, and acquaintances; others have far-reaching effects. The Watergate scandal, for example, led to a significant decline in confidence not only toward the Nixon administration but also toward the U.S. Congress, Supreme Court, the military, higher education, the press, major companies, and organized religion.<sup>5</sup>

Betrayals of trust in religious organizations are probably no more frequent than in other settings, but these betrayals are particularly problematic because of the norms religious organizations seek to reinforce. These norms vary among religious traditions but generally include an ethic of mutual concern, such as is expressed in the Golden Rule or the injunction to show love toward one's neighbor; prescriptions favoring such virtues as truthfulness and sincerity; proscriptions against such ethical violations as theft and adultery; and conceptions of these ethical standards as being divinely ordained and universally applicable. Additionally, religious organizations provide both resources through which these ethical conceptions are taught and rituals that serve as occasions for bonding and commemoration. Moreover, the constitutional protection of religious liberty sometimes reduces the legal scrutiny and regulatory supervision of religious institutions and thus puts the onus on these institutions' leaders to earn the public's trust and police themselves. Exposure to ethical instruction and ritual observance of course does not guarantee conformity, nor does it imply that trust cannot be cultivated by individuals and organizations in the absence of religious convictions. However, the prominence of norms that are meant to facilitate trust within religious communities does imply that betrayals of trust are likely to necessitate repair work for religious organizations. In short, it is not only the frequency or severity of betrayals that matters but also how and how effectively religious organizations attempt to recover from these events.

In his examination of 1990s responses to sex scandals in politics and the entertainment industry, sociologist Joshua Gamson argues that the responses typically feature "institutional morality tales," narratives that deflect attention

from individuals' indiscretions and focus instead on institutional pathologies. "These institutional frames," Gamson writes, suggest that "*personal* behavior at first presented as 'shocking' . . . may be quite typical of those in the institutional *role*, that the individual *nonconformity* to sexual norms may actually reveal a sort of *conformity* to institutional norms."<sup>6</sup> Especially when multiple scandals occur, the impetus is to generalize, positing reasons to worry that institutions are not as good as they used to be in recruiting the right kind of leaders, training them, upholding norms of integrity, monitoring leaders' actions, and punishing misdeeds: in short, feeding the erosion of trust in institutions. This impetus is driven partly by journalists' interest in making the story about something larger than any one incident, such as about the public's gullibility, the corrupting influence of capitalism, the superficiality of contemporary culture, insufficient attention to the problems of male dominance, and hypocrisy among proponents of traditional values.

Perhaps the tendency Gamson observes is present in religion as well. A scandal in religion occasions a cautionary tale not only about an individual but also about religious institutions. Willow Creek's response to the accusations against Hybels – after the board of elders resigned for failing to investigate the charges and oversee Hybels – was to determine what the church could do better to prevent similar incidents from happening again. Evangelical publications and websites in turn questioned whether evangelicalism as a national phenomenon had become complacent or insufficiently attentive to fleshly temptations. But the cautionary tale is not only about religion, but also cultural malaise. Religion is beleaguered and less influential, the narrative suggests, because of the broader culture's increasing secularity. The year following the investigation of alleged widespread sexual misconduct by Southern Baptists, in a thoughtful essay titled "Why I Am a Baptist," R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, traces the history of Baptists' preaching, doctrines, evangelism, growth, notions of citizenship, emphasis on separation of church and state, past instances of persecution for their beliefs, and decades-long confrontations with the corrosive effects of modernity. "An increasingly aggressive secularism, joined by forces aligned with moral progressivism," he warns, "renders all traditional theistic beliefs subversive and retrograde. The entire inheritance of Christianity and Christendom is dismissed as inimical to the project of secular liberation."<sup>7</sup>

**T**he story of a church beset by "aggressive secularism" can be an appealing narrative with which to explain the dramatic drop in public confidence in religion. In this account, declining trust is the evidence that secularity is winning. The facts that nearly one in three adults is religiously unaffiliated and nearly half rarely or ever attend religious services – captured in polling report headlines such as "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace" – offer further evidence for this view of secularity's ascendancy.<sup>8</sup> But secularity is not the

only possible explanation. The recent decrease in religious participation is concentrated among young adults and has been attributed to the economic difficulties young adults experience: student loans, uncertainties about careers, the necessity of changing jobs and retraining for different occupations, corporations' increasing reliance on temporary labor, and uncertainties about health insurance, often coupled with credit card debt and geographic mobility – all of which are associated with delayed marriage and childrearing. The life courses of young adults thus deviate markedly from the settled family and neighborhood lifestyles around which many congregations have been built.<sup>9</sup> Were these factors not enough to explain young adults' disaffiliation from religion, researchers have also documented alienation induced by religious leaders who align themselves with political candidates and policies, especially on the right.<sup>10</sup> This evidence on the face of it therefore suggests that religious leaders seeking to curb what they regard as secularity by engaging in partisan politics may be harming rather than strengthening their own institutions.

The alignment of religious leaders with partisan politics is reason to be interested in another aspect of the relationship of religion and trust: the politicization of trust, or as columnist E. J. Dionne Jr. has termed it, “the weaponization of mistrust.”<sup>11</sup> The question of trust with respect to religion is not confined to whether the public does or does not have confidence in religious institutions. The more pressing question is whether religion, especially when it is politically weaponized, encourages or discourages trust in other institutions: science, medicine, higher education, government, the media? The history of religion in this regard is quite mixed, as debates about the teaching of evolution, faith healing and scientific medicine, and antivaccination crusades have shown. Much depends on which kind of religion, which issues, and which context. In the current “post-truth” context, in which any statement can be called “fake news” – or denied having been uttered at all – distrust has become a political weapon wielded for partisan purposes, including by religious leaders.<sup>12</sup>

The idea that religion is beleaguered by aggressive secularism poses two important questions: Who perceives religion to be besieged this way? And who do they perceive the purveyors of secularism to be? Both questions are about trust, asking, in other words: Who among religious leaders are least trusting of the secular society? And which institutions do they distrust the most?

In a study published in 1998, sociologist of religion Christian Smith suggested an answer to the first question, writing that White evangelical Protestants cultivated an image of themselves as an embattled subculture.<sup>13</sup> More recently, sociologists Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry have identified what they describe as Christian nationalism among a similar population of White evangelical Protestants.<sup>14</sup> Although neither study is specifically concerned with trust, both imply that White evangelical Protestants are at least one prominent group within

American religion that is distrustful of the wider society – an implication, incidentally, that corresponds with studies showing that social capital among White evangelical Protestants tends toward in-group bonding rather than bridging with outsiders. Other groups, including Jews, Roman Catholics, Christian Scientists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Muslims have been literally and figuratively embattled within the larger society as well, but White evangelical Protestants have been of particular interest in recent decades because of their apparent influence in electoral politics. Their sense of embattlement has perhaps increased as well, at least if diminishing membership matters. According to one estimate, the White evangelical Protestant population declined from 21 percent of the American population as recently as 2008 to only 15 percent in 2019.<sup>15</sup>

The second question, of whom they distrust, is best answered with reference to the traditions of White evangelical Protestantism. These include an emphasis on the spiritual lives of individual persons and an ambivalent stance toward secular authority. The emphasis on individual spirituality is traceable to the Protestant Reformation in teachings about personal salvation and in practices oriented toward moral discipline such as temperance, sobriety, and marital fidelity. Ambivalence toward secular authority is expressed in the New Testament injunction of obedience to government, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to qualified obedience when government is perceived as acting in violation of a higher divine authority. Taken together, moral discipline and qualified obedience to governmental authority provide a basis for White evangelical Protestants to be distrustful of institutions such as the media and entertainment industry insofar as they are perceived to promote moral relativism and to be distrustful of government when government is perceived to act in ways contrary to evangelicals’ understanding of God. Distrust of government, though, is subject to partisan interpretation such that in recent decades White evangelical Protestants have been less trusting of Democrats than of Republicans, whom they perceive as allies on issues of religious freedom, opposition to abortion and homosexuality, and, as far as White Christian nationalism is concerned, opposition to racial and ethnic diversity and immigration.

Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have illustrated religious leaders’ beliefs about who and who not to trust. As the Trump administration questioned scientists and health experts’ advice and issued misleading statements about the scope and risks of the pandemic, White evangelical Protestants aligned themselves with the president, with only 31 percent disapproving of Trump’s handling of the pandemic, compared with 65 percent of the general public who disapproved.<sup>16</sup> One of the first U.S. religious leaders to die from COVID-19, an evangelical pastor in Virginia, for example, reportedly distrusted the media’s warnings about the seriousness of the virus and the importance of social distancing, believing instead Trump’s portrayal of a liberal media hyping the story. The man’s daughter re-

called, “I was frustrated with the way that the media was very agenda driven – and it’s on both sides. I feel like the coronavirus issue turned into something that was ‘party against party’ instead of one nation under God.”<sup>17</sup> Most religious leaders, especially mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy who were subject to denominational authorities, and thus did not typically have individual control of their messaging to their congregation, heeded health officials’ warnings. However, defiance of social distancing and mask wearing increased as the pandemic continued, with religious leaders especially of large predominantly White non-denominational evangelical congregations challenging the authority of governors to impose regulations and, in some cases, questioning health officials’ credibility.

White evangelical Protestants’ sense of themselves as an embattled minority illustrates another important dynamic in understanding the relationship of religion and trust: “Organized religion” is not one thing, as survey questions sometimes imply. Rather, organized religion in the United States is highly diverse, varying in tradition, theology, national origin, region, ethnicity, and race, which means that religious groups hold varying levels of trust or distrust toward institutions and one another. These variations may not be expressed specifically in the language of trust, but are evident in the frequent conflicts that have characterized religious groups throughout the nation’s history, including tensions between Christians and Jews, Protestants and Catholics, and among Protestant denominations and sects. The recent decline in confidence toward organized religion, therefore, is likely in part to reflect distrust of religious groups toward one another, such as White evangelical Protestants who distrust liberal Protestants, and vice versa.

**N**arratives about what has gone wrong when trust is betrayed tend to expand in multiple directions that reflect religious communities’ varied concerns. These stories can also suggest what should be done to restore the trust that has been transgressed. If we take as examples the Swaggart scandal, the Willow Creek sexual harassment allegations, and the Catholic sex abuse cases, we see three of the most common means by which attempts are made to restore trust. Swaggart tearfully confessed to his congregation and television audience that he had sinned and asked God’s forgiveness. Willow Creek launched an independent advisory committee investigation that emphasized personal discipline, accountability, and administrative oversight. The Catholic sex abuse scandals extended over such long periods, included so many victims, and involved such a lack of transparency on the part of church officials that many of the cases resulted not only in laicization of clergy and the resignations of bishops, but in litigation and criminal prosecution.

In none of these three cases was the means employed entirely effective. Following his confession and a subsequent incident of sexual misconduct, Swaggart’s ministerial license was revoked by the Assemblies of God denomination he was af-



filiated with, after which he continued to preach independently to a large audience of radio listeners and television viewers. They were apparently eager to believe that Swaggart was repentant, and that God was working to bring other sinners to repentance through him. Willow Creek's investigative committee, which commenced its work after Hybels took early retirement, concluded that the church's leadership needed to be more careful in handling sexual harassment cases, including instituting written guidelines and a third-party off-site hotline for reporting misconduct, but the flaws of these recommendations were exposed by another such case only a few months later. The report left it to the church's leadership to devise its own plan of action. The Catholic sex scandals resulted in monetary settlements with some of the victims, but the fact that abuse had been concealed so often without penalty or transparency left doubts as to how thoroughly the problem was being addressed; in surveys, many Catholic parishioners have said they remain distrustful of clergy and have reduced their attendance at services and financial support of the church.<sup>18</sup> Unsurprisingly, confession, investigation, and litigation in these cases were limited by the extent to which they carried enforceable obligations. They were also limited by the declining credibility of these very mechanisms resulting from cynical abuses of how they were meant to function: by insincere confessions staged for media consumption, from investigative committees producing toothless reports that languish in bureaucratic darkness, and by litigation that drags on for years before inconsequential penalties are levied. The efforts to address these particular scandals were subject to all these limitations.

Their relative ineffectiveness, however, did not mean these efforts were without positive consequences. The scandals became institutional morality tales that publicized the incidents, defined them as transgressive of institutional norms, and demonstrated that the institutions' leaders felt an obligation to do something about them. The Swaggart case was a cautionary lesson about accepting public confessions at face value and about the importance of truthfulness and accountability. Willow Creek's investigation similarly cautioned against putting too much trust in and giving too much unchecked power to charismatic leaders, while also serving as a lesson to other evangelical churches about the need to adopt clearer policies about gender equality and sexual harassment. The Catholic abuse cases, among other things, prompted wide-ranging discussions of pedophilia and new demands for clergy reform. Collectively the responses resemble what anthropologist Mary Douglas described in the 1960s as rituals of rejuvenation: they contribute to the renewal of the moral order by dramatizing concerns about purity and danger.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, rejuvenation involves concrete steps that extend beyond the immediate discussion prompted by a particular scandal. Institutions are, among other things, arrangements of formal and informal norms that govern how people act and expect others to act in given situations. Restoring trust in an institution therefore requires clarifying and reinforcing these norms. Swaggart may have

continued preaching, but not under Assemblies of God auspices, which demonstrates the Assemblies' rejection of his behavior. Willow Creek learned that it, like any large organization claiming to be trustworthy, needed to have formalized rules about handling allegations of sexual harassment. Catholic leaders, with varying amounts of credibility, sought to demonstrate that they were capable of exposing sex offenders and cooperating with the law in punishing them.

What religious leaders have done to restore trust, then, is not so different from how other institutions, including our political system, attempt to restore trust. Evoking confessions of wrongdoing can seem impossible in the political arena, but public pressure to depose untrustworthy leaders is an elemental part of the electoral process. So are investigations and litigation, as those surrounding the January 6, 2021, insurrection illustrate. Although these processes are often lengthy and bitterly contested, they are the means through which we attempt to call attention to mistrust. And as the examples in religion illustrate, these mechanisms facilitate valuable discussions of crucial social norms, even when trust itself is difficult to restore.

**T**he potential gains through confessions, investigations, and litigation notwithstanding, the decline of trust in religious institutions, coupled with dissension about who and who not to trust, is detrimental in the near term to the collective good. Democracy benefits when citizens trust one another and the institutions that make up civil society, when trust is sufficient to facilitate reaching out to strangers as well as acquaintances, joining voluntary associations, taking part in political activities, and working together for the common good. Trust that is grounded in religious convictions has long been a source of common values and a basis on which to build consensus. Even as religion sometimes inflames passions and promotes incommensurate ideas, Americans have historically conceived of it as a kind of civil institution that promotes agreement more than disagreement. It is understandable therefore to wish that more Americans held something like a common faith – even if faith were only belief in faith itself – and considered it deplorable when religious communities target each other, rather than work together to promote peace and harmony.

However, the dissension so obviously present among religious leaders today points to a feature of American religion that in the past – under the right conditions – has served democracy well. Dissension among religious groups provides checks and balances in the same way that divergent views between political parties and special interest groups do. America's "variety of sects," as James Madison termed them, motivated the separation of church and state. And the contending factions that have vied with one another have also limited the tendencies of any particular group to become a religious establishment.<sup>20</sup> Along these lines, legal scholar Kent Greenawalt, writing about religion and the politics of liberal democracy, suggests that trust is possible not in spite of religious diversity but because

of it. “If one believes that comprehensive views themselves are so diverse that one has little fear if decisions are reached by individual citizens and legislators in accord with comprehensive views,” he writes, “one might not worry much about their employment.” The reason, among others, is that despite impassioned and uncompromising religious advocacy, the reality of diversity can alter the standards of judgment on which political decisions are made and promote healthy skepticism toward political claims.<sup>21</sup>

Greenawalt is mindful of the fact that American religion – like American democracy – is pluralistic. In religion, as in politics, we are a diverse society. We agree on basic principles, such as the rule of law and the peaceful transition of power, but we disagree deeply about many other things. Political parties, special interest groups, racial and ethnic groups, and religious groups all contend with one another for power, rarely engaging in direct deliberations or coming to a consensus that resolves their disagreements, but bringing diverse ideas, arguments, and proposals to bear on policy decisions. Unlike in relatively homogeneous societies where common cultural traditions provide a basis for deliberative democracy to be practiced, the diversity of a society like the United States demands greater respect for differences and heightened expectations about the persistence of fundamental disagreements. The contention is messy and indeterminate, yet is the means through which a pluralistic democracy adapts to challenging circumstances.<sup>22</sup>

From this perspective, democracy can withstand, perhaps even be strengthened by, the kinds of contention evident among religious groups today. Faith communities are organized along racial and ethnic as well as theological lines, often serving as the local centers in which constituents support one another, learn about issues of common importance, and facilitate their coreligionists’ access to information about leisure activities, schools, health care, social services, and opportunities for volunteering. The fact that faith communities disagree with one another adds incentive for them to advocate for their distinctive beliefs and, in many instances, results in mutual criticism and calling foul on adversaries’ tactics.<sup>23</sup> Of course, the winner-take-all approach that seems to have characterized White evangelical Protestants’ alignment with Republicans in recent years is regarded by many as a threat to the civil liberties democracy is meant to preserve. Yet the 15 percent of the electorate composed of White evangelical Protestants is countered by numerous religious and secular groups who hold differing views. The extent of this diversity suggests, as long-time observer of American religion Kenneth L. Woodward has argued, that White evangelical Protestants can hardly be credited with – or blamed for – electoral outcomes that in reality are the result of complex aggregations of constituencies and political strategies.<sup>24</sup> The diversity of American religion is also a significant factor in the debates – divisive as they have been – about the standards by which citizenship should be determined, elec-

tions should be held, and presidents should be judged. Long-standing advocacy groups such as the ACLU and NAACP have been joined in recent years by groups such as the Clergy Emergency League, the (revived) Poor People's Campaign, the Interfaith Center for Public Policy, Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, Vote Common Ground, and Black Lives Matter as well as by local and regional clergy councils and lay organizations that advocate for immigrant rights, affordable housing, and universal health insurance.

Pluralism means that advocacy groups in religion, just as in politics, will take different sides on issues and will directly challenge their adversaries' arguments. Pluralism is also operative when advocacy groups mobilize constituencies with divergent interests, as illustrated by some faith-based groups orienting their efforts toward immigrant rights while others focus on homelessness, racial reconciliation, or police reform. Apart from advocacy, pluralism is the condition that encourages institutions to work to restore trust. Leaders of religious organizations are motivated to restore trust because, in the absence of it, constituents will vote with their feet, taking advantage of a vastly diverse American religious landscape and choosing to worship elsewhere, or not worship at all. Attendees at Willow Creek can decamp to a different church if they no longer trust Willow Creek's leadership, and college students can opt to study somewhere other than Liberty University if its board of trustees does not restore the institution's trustworthiness. An amendment to the concept of pluralism, then, is that religious organizations do not have to attack one another as long as pluralism provides the opportunities for constituents to register their dissent by moving their loyalties to other organizations.

But without a basic level of trust among the parties involved, pluralism falters. Profound disagreements must include at least minimal agreement about the norms of involvement. Disputants must treat one another only as adversaries rather than as enemies, and disagreements must be negotiated within the law through legislation, the courts, and peaceful confrontations. There must be a basic threshold of trust that those with whom one disagrees will play by the rules of basic civility, adhering to norms of honesty and respect for well-established norms of human rights and freedoms. Despite serious disagreements, America's various faith communities have in the past generally exhibited adherence to these norms, even to the point of arguing less exclusively about divinely revealed truth than in terms of procedures and practicalities. In surveys, White evangelical, White mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish respondents rate each of the other groups warmly, if not quite as positively as they do their own, the exceptions being colder feelings toward Muslims and atheists.<sup>25</sup> More to the point, religious groups with widely divergent views about religious freedom, abortion, homosexuality, conscientious objection, welfare, immigration, and capital punishment – including advocacy groups that have formed to press for particular issues – have, with only a few exceptions, worked to achieve their goals through lobbying, voting, and the courts.

The decline of trust in religious institutions has to be considered in terms other than the numbers documented in polls. Declining trust is an opening for religious and secular groups alike to fight for their convictions and, in so doing, clarify the operative social norms as well as the beliefs for which they stand. The fighting itself can be a good thing, bringing to the table alternative values and elevating the importance of clarifying those values. But it is the terms under which the fighting takes place that matters. The disputes must be conducted in good faith, expressing what people sincerely believe to be true and understanding that to disagree requires respect for those with whom one disagrees. The danger to religion, as well as to democracy, lies in cynical distortions of sincere convictions. Democracy is truly endangered when leaders refuse to believe that those with whom they disagree are worthy of the elemental trust that all deserve.

The task of restoring trust in basic institutions and of rejuvenating faith in American democracy is, at this moment in our nation's history, a high priority. Any hope that the United States can find common ground in the beliefs and practices that once inspired religion as a source of consensus is ill founded. The more likely scenario is that religious groups in alliance with or in opposition to one another, as well as in conjunction with secular groups, will either keep fighting for what they think is uniquely true or retreat into a privatized faith that encourages individuals to seek spiritual gratification in their own ways. Neither of these possibilities is very encouraging for the health of democracy. Especially when religious groups willingly dispute the basic facts of scientific medicine, endorse the false claims of political strategists, and deride people whose religious convictions differ from theirs – when religious groups fail to treat one another according to basic principles of trust and toleration – then religion functions more to facilitate authoritarianism than to support democracy.

For religious leaders to restore the public's and, indeed, their own members' trust in the religious institutions that have served America so well in the past, they certainly do not have to all agree on the important moral and social issues of the day. But they must be attentive to the basic principles within their own traditions of how to live amicably and respectfully among those with whom they disagree. Perhaps religious leaders can once again appreciate that their own traditions are strengthened by America's pluralism. And perhaps that realization can be a source of inspiration for upholding the underlying principles of law, trust, and common respect on which democracy is based.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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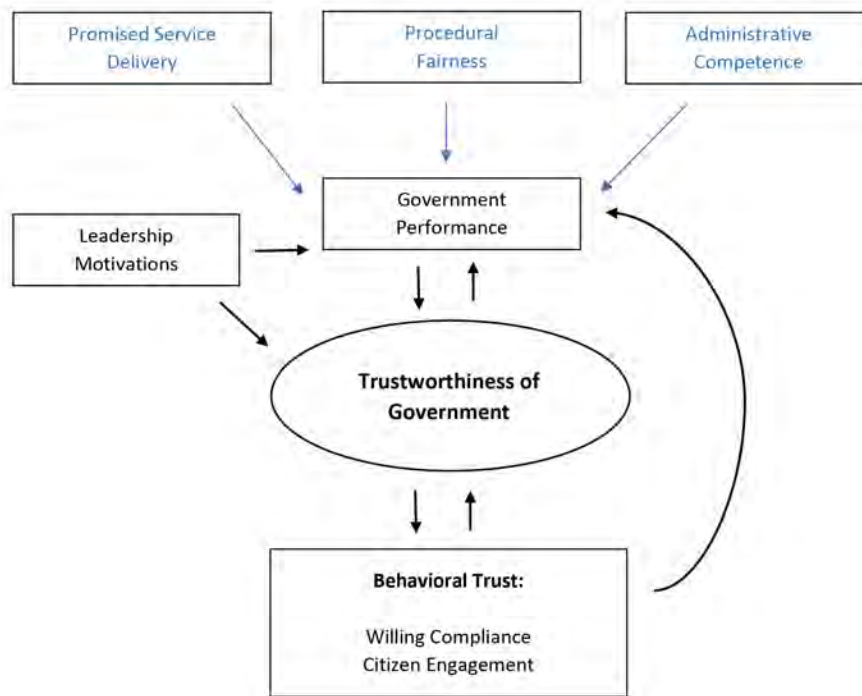
# Trustworthy Government: The Obligations of Government & the Responsibilities of the Governed

*Margaret Levi*

*Establishing trustworthy government is a major problem for contemporary democracies. Without public confidence, government faces considerable noncompliance with its policies, as has been the case with the reaction of some subpopulations to COVID safety requirements. The pressures on government today are numerous. The challenges are complex and the polity diverse. Creating confidence and thus willing compliance requires a demonstrated government competence. It also requires political leadership committed to the collective good and to forging a common identity among multiple subgroups while recognizing their distinctive differences and needs. Citizens are also crucial actors. It is incumbent upon a democratic citizenry that it recognizes its responsibilities to and interdependence with others in the polity as members of an expanded community of fate.*

In well-functioning democracies, a virtuous circle arises.<sup>1</sup> The government is trustworthy, and the citizens recognize it as such and respond with compliance and willing cooperation with its policies and practices.<sup>2</sup> Being a trustworthy government depends on the credibility of the government's commitment to the flourishing of its people. Establishing credibility requires that government uphold its side of its implicit contract with citizens and subjects, that is: the provision of goods and services, fair processes in policy-determination and implementation (given the norms of place and time), and a demonstrable administrative capacity, including the ability to identify and punish free-riders, those who defraud or abuse a government program. Service delivery, procedural fairness, and administrative capabilities are attributes of government performance, but the motivations and ideologies of elected politicians can also affect perceptions, positively or negatively. When citizens perceive government as serving their interests, they consider government trustworthy. As seen in Figure 1, a trustworthy government provokes greater willingness to comply with its demands and a more engaged public, which enables government to provide more of what citizens need, which further enhances both its performance and its trustworthiness.

*Figure 1*  
Virtuous Circle of Government



Earlier versions of the virtuous circle appeared in Margaret Levi, Audrey Sacks, and Tom R. Tyler, "Conceptualizing Legitimacy, Measuring Legitimizing Beliefs," *American Behavioral Scientist* 53 (3) (2009): 354–375; and Margaret Levi and Audrey Sacks, "Legitimizing Beliefs: Concepts and Measures," *Regulation & Governance* 3 (4) (2009): 311–333.

As the following examples illustrate, the legitimacy of government further enhances (or undermines) willing compliance. But legitimacy rests on more than effective governance; it demands popularly acceptable justifications for who holds the reins of power, who the leadership is, and the policies they promote.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as is patently obvious these days, different subgroups of the population can have widely different assessments of the legitimacy of government itself and its actions.

But there is another piece of trustworthy government that requires reemphasis: being trustworthy requires that officials craft policies that reflect the values and interests of their diverse and pluralistic populations. Democratic governments can and should enhance social solidarity among groups within the polity, even those distrustful of each other. Indeed, democracies may further enhance the perception of their trustworthiness by assisting citizens to become aware of their

common project with each other and with the government to ensure the flourishing of its peoples and, better yet, of all peoples and the planet. The obligations between citizens and government are reciprocal, indeed, multilateral.

Some clarifications and addendums are necessary before proceeding. A minor point is the use of the term *government*. Some, including myself at times, use the term *state* to connote the complex of institutions and processes noted here, and reserve *government* for the politicians currently in charge. I follow this common practice in U.S. and comparative political science and the common usage by much of the media and public.

More important, the trustworthiness of government is seldom, if ever, complete. Some agents and agencies of government might meet the standards (or be perceived as meeting the standards) more than others. The World Justice Project Rule of Law Index, for example, reveals how the legal and judicial institutions of states vary, even among those with similar income and regime characteristics. The Scandinavian countries, for example, rank high on almost every dimension, while the United States ranks high on some indicators, but ranks low, relative to its peers, for criminal justice.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this continuum can be discontinuous. Governments, including democratic governments, can fall into a vicious cycle in which they are both untrustworthy and mistrusted. This cycle can but does not necessarily lead to reconstitution of the government.

Finally, even when a democratic government is relatively trustworthy, there can and should be healthy skepticism about its practices, processes, and policies.<sup>5</sup> The *sine qua non* of a thriving democracy is public questioning, media scrutiny, and protest that hold government accountable or push it to extend what are understood to be its obligations to the people. One responsibility of citizenship in a democracy is to try to make government more responsive to the needs of the populace and better able to meet them.

Let me make this point even crisper. The first task of a trustworthy government is enacting, devising, and implementing policies. The second and equally important task is engagement, creating processes for acquiring informed input from the citizenry and enabling them to participate in solving societal problems.<sup>6</sup> The goal is the flourishing of the people and the planet in terms of well-being but also opportunity and dignity.

In what follows, I expand on my approach to conceptualizing and assessing trustworthy government, then address where democracies seem to be now, and conclude with some thoughts about how to make governments both more democratic and more trustworthy, and in the process, how they might generate an empathetic citizenry that can work together to solve societal problems.

I have long had a problem with research that assesses citizen perceptions of how trustworthy a government is by considering only surveys. Though one of the issues in the early surveys has been mostly corrected over time, it still persists:

generic questions about trust in government may be about the politicians in office rather than about the government in general. Equally as important, “trust” in government, indeed trust in general, is an attitude or belief that can produce inadequate assessment of the other party in the trust relationship and may lead to being conned or worse.<sup>7</sup> Although trust can be an important component of social and even economic interactions, we do not want to rely on trust when dealing with government. Rather, we should be relying on institutional arrangements that ensure government agents act in the interests of the polity and the claimants they are serving.

This concern about the survey data and individual attitudes of trust – and distrust – have led me to focus on behavior: compliance, noncompliance, protests, and so on. Those who believe government is trustworthy will be more likely to engage in behavioral trust, complying with policies without undo coercion or persuasion. Those who do not find the institutions or their agents trustworthy are more likely to protest, refuse to comply, and withdraw support from the elected political actors they hold accountable. However, as the body of my work attests, the assessment of behavioral trust is contextual, requiring deep understanding of the communities engaging in the relevant behavior. Sometimes, for example, protest of a particular practice or policy depends on an assessment that the government is trustworthy in general, but less so regarding a specific policy or practice or in the treatment of a subgroup of the population.

To make this concrete, consider the variation in the willingness of young men in democracies in their response to calls for volunteers during the two world wars and the Vietnam War.<sup>8</sup> The decision was individual but informed by social networks and communities, producing significant differences in both public support and how potential recruits responded. In the United States, even those who had confidence that government was serving them relatively well in general and who supported many of its programs protested the war in Vietnam. Of course, some did this out of self-interest. They did not want to disrupt, let alone risk, their lives, but there were many who were willing to pay a very high price for their convictions. In the twenty-first-century U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we see a very divided public and a decline in support over time.<sup>9</sup>

In Canada, many Francophones questioned the legitimacy of the world wars and of the Canadian government’s insistence they serve in them. From their perspective, the federal government was violating the constitutional justification that conscription could be considered only if Canada was invaded. Anglophone Canadians volunteered in high numbers for the world wars, Francophone Canadians almost not at all. Francophones generally believed the federal Canadian government was untrustworthy, failing to keep its promises of bilingual education and general respect for their language. They also worried – and reasonably so – that they would receive military orders in English, which not all of them comprehended.

Francophone Canadians during both world wars, working-class Australians in World War I, and dissidents throughout history have used avoidance of and outright refusal to serve in the military to proclaim their opposition to specific wars and governments. As political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott has shown, noncompliance is an important “weapon of the weak.” He documents agricultural laborers shirking their work and destroying property in response to landlords’ reductions in the protections of their welfare during the Green Revolution.<sup>10</sup> Disobedience to the law, tax evasion, inoculation resistance, and even refusing to vote can represent active noncompliance. Of course, how to read the meaning of these actions depends on the motivations of the actors. Sometimes noncompliance is simply a reflection of venality, laziness, or ignorance. However, by studying the context in which actions occur and understanding the meanings of the acts to those engaged in them (as conveyed in sermons, novels, proclamations, and social media), qualitative information makes it possible to infer likely motivations and thus analyze hypothesized variations of reasons for noncompliance.

I have elaborated and built on this argument for years. Aware that there are also vicious circles of distrust, it seems important to clarify how building a government that more effectively contributes to the flourishing of its citizens can create a virtuous circle of trustworthy government for those who never experienced one. It still is. However, the current and extreme polarization in the United States, combined with the disparate reactions to vaccinations and masks in the COVID-19 pandemic, raises the question of why the virtuous circle appears to have been broken for so many Americans.

The first answer is that there have been concerted efforts to undermine citizen confidence in and reliance on government. Democratic theory emphasizes the importance of citizen skepticism for a healthy democracy. Keeping government trustworthy requires citizen – and media – scrutiny. There has also been an ongoing debate about the appropriate role of government in the economy and society: Adam Smith was neither the first nor the last to raise this question.<sup>11</sup> However, in the decades before the ascendancy of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and American President Ronald Reagan, the discussion of less government came to rely on a belief of the ineffectiveness as well as the inappropriateness of government in many spheres of society. Ascendent populist parties around the world and Trumpism in the United States have self-consciously “weaponized distrust” of government and indeed of many authorities, including scientific experts and technocrats.<sup>12</sup> Resistance to masks and vaccines is but one of many indicators. When a citizen distrusts government and holds an ideology emphasizing freedom from government restrictions and an electoral steal, the result is more than distrust: it is a delegitimation of government authority.

One consequence of the campaign to reduce the size of government is that it then provides less and less of what many in the population expect of it, thus increasing their reasons to mistrust it. This, of course, is the intended effect: the perpetuation of a non-virtuous circle in which government proves itself untrustworthy by failing to deliver. In the United States, the deterioration of physical infrastructure and public health and safety protections are but two of the many instances in which a reduction in its coffers inhibit government from delivering on its promises.

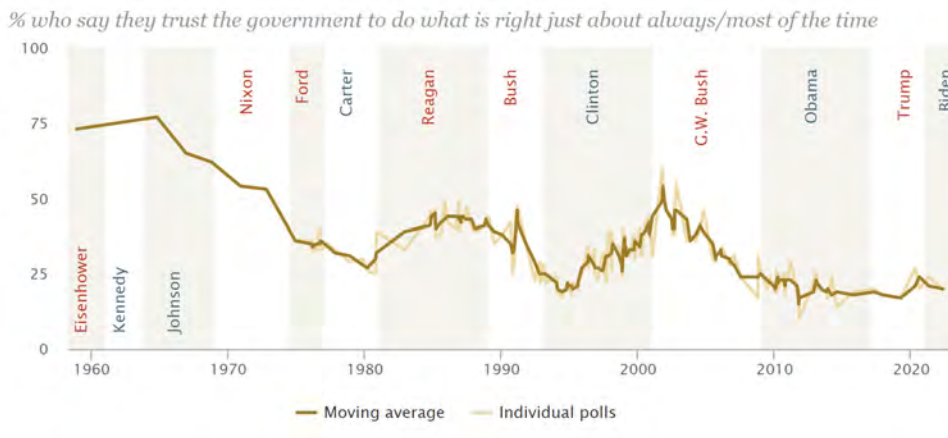
Politicizing government agencies and expertise is another weapon in the arsenal of those trying to undermine trustworthy government. The Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and other agencies once considered above the fray are now mired in it. There are yet other grounds for distrust of government institutions. When government is believed to ignore due process, discriminate, or otherwise violate norms of fairness, this stimulates behavioral distrust.<sup>13</sup> It is thus hardly surprising that we see the emergence of Black Lives Matter and other movements that protest police when they violate rights and threaten lives.

Another reason for popular antagonism toward government is the belief that one is disadvantaged by policy changes (or, sometimes, simply not advantaged). Some even feel government has betrayed them, particularly when they observe others getting ahead while they are falling behind. This perception has led to a politics of resentment throughout the world.<sup>14</sup> It has a distinctive racialized form in the United States, where some White Americans resent what they perceive as special treatment given to people of color, and feel they must protect their privilege in the face of demographic changes that are likely to make them the minority population.<sup>15</sup>

The basis of such resentment lies in the norms that have become prevalent in capitalist democracies: the conviction that individual effort is the motor of mobility, a view of society – and government benefits – as zero-sum, and a belief that those who are doing well earned what they have by patiently waiting in line and following the rules.<sup>16</sup> Each of these perspectives is contestable for the given status quo, and they certainly do not capture what could be. Social interactions, networks, and the public goods provided by government more often are a greater generator of mobility than individual effort. It is possible to grow the pie so that more get pieces. What is on offer as benefits need not be finite.

**A** distorted view of history further contributes to the politics of resentment. Many Americans wear rose-colored glasses when they recount the post–World War II era of prosperity, homeownership, good jobs, and the absence of social conflict. According to the surveys, trust in government was high then, and it has descended, with ups and downs, ever since. Graphs like Figure 2 are common in the literature – and in the essays in this volume.<sup>17</sup>

Figure 2  
Public Trust in Government, 1958 – 2022



Source: Pew Research Center, “Public Trust in Government: 1958–2022,”  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/public-trust-in-government-1958-2022>.

But there is an alternative story, too often neglected in the public conversation. The graphs do not start until after World War II. If they started in the 1930s, the 1950s might look like a blip. Equally important, the reigning narrative of the 1950s golden age neglects how much those who prospered depended on trustworthy and large-scale government programs to build the highway system and other major infrastructure and subsidize house construction, homeownership, and college educations, among a whole array of other goods and services. The narrative also neglects the fact that there was always an “other America” left out of these programs and benefits.<sup>18</sup> Trust in government, even as measured by surveys, was hardly uniform among the U.S. population. There were racial, class, and generational differences. It is also obvious in the surveys that who is president affects public perceptions. There have always been partisan divides. Although, arguably, they are significantly deeper now than in the 1950s. There has also always been a gap between the respective assessments of local, state, and federal government. People generally feel more confident in the governments closest to them. Recent surveys confirm the persistence of that gap generally in the United States.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, as argued above, there are other ways to approach the relationship between citizens and government than a focus on surveys that ask what people think of government in general. These questions evoke answers that can reflect how much the respondents like particular politicians, or how irritated they are by the

federal tax authority or their state's Department of Motor Vehicles. The focus of survey questions should instead be on specific agencies and actors within government.<sup>20</sup> Even better is to consider not just answers to survey questions but actual behaviors in terms of compliance and resistance. Then the investigation can turn to how and why people vary in their perceptions of relatively objective attributes of a trustworthy government, its agents, and agencies.

**T**he COVID pandemic, while a nightmare for all of us, is also a dream opportunity for social scientists trying to tease out such questions as: How does a trustworthy government affect both the course of the disease and the response of the citizens? What are the best mechanisms for informing the public about science and having them believe it? And how can we determine the variation in responses among populations within a given polity, as well as responses of subgroups to different levels of government and different agencies? Experiences with COVID since February 2020 provide a wealth of data within countries and across them, and some first-rate analyses are beginning to emerge from the flood of papers taking advantage of the data.

In any kind of regime, it is important to evoke as much willing compliance as possible, even when compliance is legally required.<sup>21</sup> In a democracy, behavioral consent is foundational to the system and thus even more critical to achieve. And it appears, as I expected, that rates of voluntary compliance with government recommendations for social distancing, mask wearing, business and school closures, and vaccinations reflect the perceived trustworthiness of government and its agencies.<sup>22</sup> The more a subset of the population has confidence in a government agent or agency, the higher the behavioral consent will be, and the lower the level of resistance to mandates, *ceteris paribus*.

There are, of course, always complicating factors. Conformism can sometimes do much of the work, but, as we know from simple perception as well as from historical cases, different groups develop different social norms. In the United States today, party identifications determine, and are determined by, different sets of norms. There is a partisan difference in confidence in the information provided and in the federal government, and there is also a partisan divide in behavioral responses. Republican voters are less trusting but also often less informed, and Republican governors are less likely to impose stringent rules on their constituents.<sup>23</sup> Other subgroups, particularly those who are less educated and less well-off, are also less likely to comply, but trust is only part of the reason. As a British study reveals, those less able to afford compliance are, not surprisingly, less likely to comply, and as the U.S. data show, some people hesitate to get vaccinated out of fear of losing work time and, thus, pay.<sup>24</sup>

The source and content of the message also matter: They can resonate with the social norms of the group, or not; and alleviate the group's reasons for dis-



trusting government, or not. Some of the most compelling work on this question comes from studies of the mobilization of religious practices in the control of smallpox and Ebola. For example, in her study of the variation to the uptake of the smallpox vaccine in China and India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, political scientist Prerna Singh uncovered profound distrust of anything that came from the colonizers. However, China employed messengers – and messages – that resonated with its culture, thus essentially ending smallpox. India did not effectively eradicate the disease until the 1970s, when local religious leaders joined the effort.<sup>25</sup> In these studies of earlier vaccines, as well as in the present case, it is becoming very clear that community engagement in how to handle public health mandates and recommendations is an important component of securing willing compliance.<sup>26</sup>

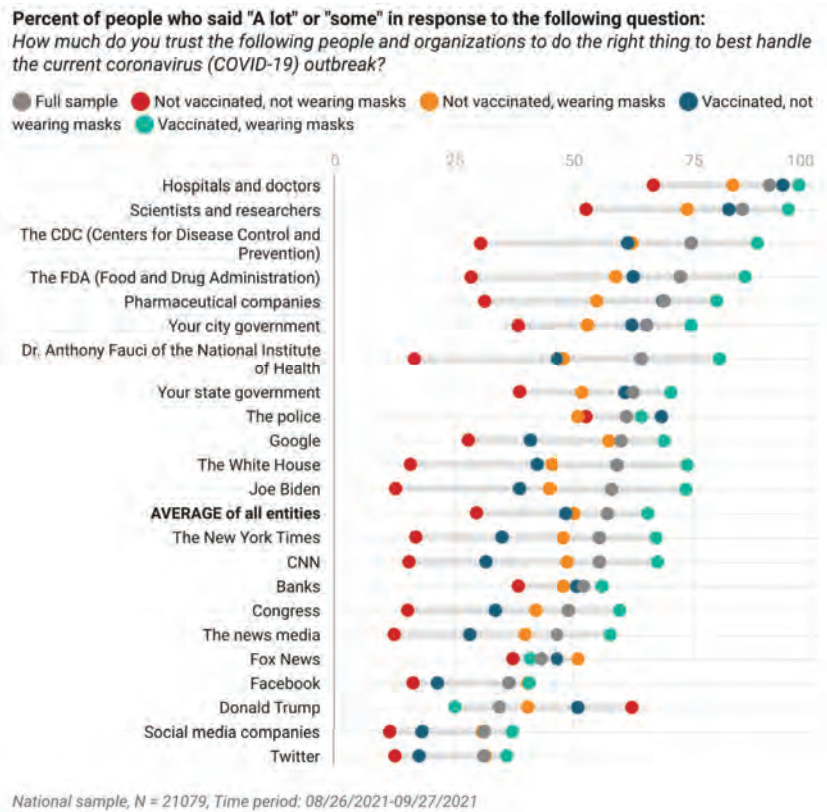
COVID vaccination uptake in the United States is the story of an objectively trustworthy federal government facing disbelief and distrust in its messaging by at least some of the population. A recent study reveals that vaccine-hesitant Republicans are likely to take positive cues from Republican elites, but to harden their opposition to cues from Democratic elites.<sup>27</sup> One cross-country analysis suggests that when the government leader's policies are put in terms of the harms noncompliance would cause, trust in the leader decreases. Framing the policies in terms of benefits enhances trust in the leader.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, compliance increases when the message comes from more trusted local sources, be they municipal governments, religious leaders, pharmacists, or one's own doctors.<sup>29</sup>

Some of the most interesting observations appear in the COVID States Projects series, one of which examines decisions about vaccination and masking among the U.S. population. Using online surveys that include both open-ended and close-ended questions, the authors found that 67 percent of the respondents were vaccinated, 15 percent were unvaccinated but “willing,” and 18 percent were both unvaccinated and “resistant.”<sup>30</sup> Focusing on the unvaccinated, they found that the major reasons had largely to do with perceptions of risk, often reflecting lack of good communication more than misinformation. Also significant, though not nearly to the same degree, was distrust of various institutions, agencies, and actors who were critical to the creation and delivery of the vaccine. These results get further confirmation in a later study in the series, in which the authors analyze groups who choose not to wear masks.<sup>31</sup> This report also confirms the argument that the messenger matters. Indeed, the data shown in Figure 3 suggest that there may not be a widespread distrust in science per se, but a lack of confidence, particularly (but not only) among the unvaccinated, in agencies and agents of governments interpreting and applying science.<sup>32</sup>

When democratic governments move toward mandating vaccinations and lockdowns, the question becomes whether the public reacts positively or negatively to legal requirements. Mandating vaccinations could crowd out voluntary com-

Figure 3

Trust in Handling the Coronavirus Pandemic by Vaccination Status and Mask Use



Source: Anjali Shere, Kristin Lunn Trujillo, Alexi Quintana, et al., “The COVID States Project #67: Who Are the Masked Unvaccinated and the Unmasked Vaccinated?” The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public’s Policy Preferences across States, October 15, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/4cr7a>.

pliance among many who would otherwise be willing to get vaccinated.<sup>33</sup> However, the most recent evidence suggests that, at least in the United States, a mandate can enhance vaccine uptake by those who were hesitant rather than resistant.<sup>34</sup>

Cross-national and cross-regional data reveal that the objective effectiveness and capacity of government positively correlate with compliance with COVID requirements.<sup>35</sup> However, effectiveness is but should not be the only basis for trustworthiness. There is also procedural fairness and, as I will argue and as the evidence on COVID reveals, engagement of various communities. So, there is a lot left to learn from the pandemic experience.

There is also a lot we have learned: most importantly, perhaps, how different subpopulations need distinctive messages from authorities they find credible and who listen to requests and concerns expressed by the subgroup members.

Democracies fail to be perceived as trustworthy by some of their crucial publics when there is inadequate institutional attention to the many groups that constitute those democracies. Yes, most democracies guarantee minority rights and recognize the varied demands of multiple races, ethnicities, and creeds. But how we recognize those demands comes up against the standard of universalism, a defining quality of rule of law and of liberal democracies. Democratic polities still hold high the value of treating all citizens the same, *ceteris paribus*. The vote count, the law, and many bureaucratic regulations are based on universalistic principles, even if not always implemented universalistically. Yet, in considering something like social distancing, perhaps rules need to be better tailored to varying contexts. Rural populations are not the same as urban, and poor people have different problems than the rich. Many public policies do indeed tailor policies and implementation to the needs and norms of particular constituencies, but with COVID – as in many other cases – the starting point lacked nuance. Universalism is not the same as uniform treatment.

The introduction of the principle of impartial government was a corrective to the corruption and favoritism that long pervaded American democracy.<sup>36</sup> In the nineteenth and even much of the twentieth centuries, nearly all high-income capitalist democracies suffered from significant corruption and discriminatory practices that infused their courts, legislatures, executives, and bureaucracies, among other institutions.<sup>37</sup> Although the low-scale and petty corruption of political machines has been virtually obliterated (versus bribes by big companies or campaign contributors, let alone the “big lie”), discriminatory practices still persist. However, the corrective introduced new problems that themselves now require correction: impartial bureaucratic and technocratic decision-making and implementation became an excuse for indifference and a way to ignore difference.

Indeed, many bureaucratic agencies appear to interpret universalistic principles as one-size-fits-all. As a member of the Societal Expert Advisory Network of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, I was struck in some of our earlier meetings by how many of the public health experts believed a single top-down communication by experts would work generally.<sup>38</sup> As policy-makers and experts soon realized – and as this essay documents – different publics need distinctly different messages and messengers.<sup>39</sup>

But the recognition that universalism does not always require uniform policy also increases already existing tensions in the creation and maintenance of trustworthy government. Whether in the form of affirmative action or school choice or lockdown exceptions, distinctions may introduce new bases for mistrust by those who feel the programs create inequities. And a process that permits engage-

ment by affected communities may lead to reductions in effectiveness in some domains in order to respect community norms. For example, the outsourcing of certain welfare and education functions to nonprofits and religious institutions in the United States made some groups happier and perhaps even better off, but it increased disparities and lowered standards of service overall.<sup>40</sup>

The research as well as our recent experience with COVID produce yet another finding or, perhaps, a reminder. When a policy depends on the most up-to-date science, military intelligence, or other expertise, too much trust of experts can lead to tragic mistakes – à la the war in Iraq or the deadline for the withdrawal from Afghanistan – and too little trust can lead to populations resisting what might save their lives – à la vaccines for COVID. As with so much of life, we need to find the balance.

William H. Smyth, a California engineer, invented the word *technocracy* in 1919 to describe “the rule of the people made effective through the agency of their servants, the scientists and engineers.”<sup>41</sup> Inspired by Edward Bellamy, Thorstein Veblen, and others who were eager to design a better world and government, as well as by the ideas of the scientific management school of Fredrick Taylor, there developed a belief that reliance on experts would lead to socially optimal outcomes.<sup>42</sup> But that logic followed from three fundamental and mistaken assumptions that persist today. The first is that individuals, albeit rational in many ways, always make decisions based on the best evidence and strategy for their personal self-interest. The second is that experts can adequately forecast problems, despite the complexity of both the world and the problems. The third is that understanding of issues in one domain is necessarily transferable to another.

The disarray and polarization in so many democratic polities serve as a wake-up call that a democratic government has a responsibility not only to enact policies but to enhance social solidarity among the citizens, even those distrustful of each other. The experience of COVID in the United States is an example of how *not* to do this. One would have hoped that COVID would bring the polity together, the way wars and natural disasters often do. It had the reverse effect, amplifying preexisting divisions and perhaps creating new ones. This effect was, in part, because sharp partisan divides fueled mistrust of the political leadership, whether President Trump or President Biden. But there is no question that the Trump administration fumbled the initial response and undermined the credibility of its own agencies that had been designed to be apolitical. Trump illustrates the case of elected politicians not only mistrusting the government apparatus but ensuring their constituents did as well.

**I**f properly designed and managed according to norms of fairness, the best governments meet their obligations while assisting citizens to define and meet theirs. Governments can do this through a set of participatory democratic in-

stitutional arrangements that enable people to gain, elicit, and challenge information, and thus develop realistic beliefs about the world and their own ability to act in it. Such a government elicits an expanded and inclusive community of fate whose members are willing to make sacrifices on behalf of those with whom they believe their destinies, and their descendants' destinies, are entwined, even distant strangers who can never directly reciprocate.<sup>43</sup> Certainly, there will be disagreements and conflicts, but these can be civil and lead to compromises that make everyone better off.

To build an expanded and inclusive community of fate requires adequate recognition and incorporation of diversity in its myriad forms.<sup>44</sup> In practice, that means developing empathy for those who seem different. Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild's application of the metaphor of standing in line patiently waiting might be appropriate to a world of limited resources and relative stability. But as COVID and climate change both make clear, the better analogy may be that we are all confronting natural disasters that could hit us at any moment, but each of our communities faces different threats (floods, droughts, disease, hurricanes, earthquakes) with variable impacts. While we all know for sure that something will affect us sooner or later, we have no certainty about exactly where and when and to what degree. Each of these disasters requires remedial resources beyond either individual or local capacities; we are interdependent. All of us must be ready both to protect ourselves and to help those who are directly in harm's way with our own contributions.

But as COVID and natural disasters reveal, such efforts will not be enough. Our responsibility as citizens of a democracy requires us to engage in establishing a government capable of effective and fair intervention, a competent and trustworthy government that has built the infrastructure, physical and social, that allows us to respond rapidly and to good effect. Democratic citizenship carries the additional responsibility of holding the government accountable, ensuring it will be there to do its part for the common weal. We must reestablish the virtuous cycle of government and our belief in its trustworthiness.

If there is one takeaway from the overview of efforts to evoke citizen compliance in a democracy, it is that one size does not fit all. There are multiple reasons for the lack of behavioral consent with recommendations and mandates. We are only relearning the lesson that in highly pluralistic and democratic societies, trustworthy institutions must be built upon the variety of contexts and understandings that constitute the populace. There is not one public, but many. Respecting differences while building the capacities of people to engage productively with each other and with government can transform mistrust of each other and our institutions into trust – or at least tolerance.

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of the virtuous circle appeared in Margaret Levi, Audrey Sacks, and Tom R. Tyler, "Conceptualizing Legitimacy, Measuring Legitimizing Beliefs," *American Behavioral Scientist* 53 (3) (2009): 354–375, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764209338797>; and Margaret Levi and Audrey Sacks, "Legitimizing Beliefs: Concepts and Measures," *Regulation & Governance* 3 (4) (2009): 311–333, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5991.2009.01066.x>.
- <sup>2</sup> Autocracies may also try to evoke willing compliance, of course. It lowers transaction costs of enforcement by reducing the need for coercion. However, democracies are built on concepts of citizen consent. Although what *consent* means in theory and in practice is subject to continuing debate, it is nonetheless a fundamental basis of democracy.
- <sup>3</sup> Margaret Levi, "Trustworthy Government, Legitimizing Beliefs," in *NOMOS* 61 (2019): 362–384, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26786321>.
- <sup>4</sup> World Justice Project, "World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2021," <https://worldjusticeproject.org/our-work/research-and-data/wjp-rule-law-index-2021> (accessed September 15, 2022). For details on the ranking of the criminal justice system in the United States, see Factor 8 of the "World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2021," <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/2021/United%20States/Criminal%20Justice>.
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- <sup>8</sup> This example is drawn from Margaret Levi, *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
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- <sup>11</sup> For a discussion of this debate, see Federica Carugati and Margaret Levi, *A Moral Political Economy: Present, Past, and Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
- <sup>12</sup> There are numerous accounts, popular and scholarly, revealing how some members of the Republican Party and various antigovernment groups have deliberately worked to undermine confidence in government by “weaponizing distrust.” See, for example, Amy Fried and Douglas B. Harris, *At War with Government: How Conservatives Weaponized Distrust from Goldwater to Trump* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021). Others document delegitimation, which involves instilling the belief that government is not worthy of support. See, for example, Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum, *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019). On growing distrust in scientific authorities, see Andrew Jewett, “How Americans Came to Distrust Science,” *Boston Review*, December 8, 2020, <https://bostonreview.net/science-nature/andrew-jewett-how-americans-came-distrust-science>.
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- <sup>16</sup> The zero-sum viewpoint is well argued and documented by McGhee, *The Sum of Us*. The metaphor about following rules was popularized by Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers*

*in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

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- <sup>19</sup> John O'Leary, Sushumna Agarwal, and Angela Welle, "Improving Trust in State and Local Government: Insights from Data," *Deloitte Insights*, September 21, 2021, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/trust-in-state-local-government.html>.
- <sup>20</sup> Citrin and Stoker, "Political Trust in a Cynical Age;" Bo Rothstein, *The Quality of Government: Corruption, Social Trust, and Inequality in International Perspective* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011); and Margaret Levi and Laura Stoker, "Political Trust and Trustworthiness," *Annual Review of Political Science* 3 (1) (2000): 457–507, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.475>.
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- <sup>22</sup> See, for example, Pauline Jones, Anil Menon, Allen Hicken, and Laura S. Rozek, "Global Adoption of Personal and Social Mitigation Behaviors during COVID-19: The Role of Trust and Confidence," *PLOS ONE* 16 (9) (2021): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0256159>.
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- <sup>25</sup> Perna Singh, "State, Society, and Vaccines," filmed July 2021 at The Long Now Foundation for "Seminars about Long-Term Thinking," San Francisco, video, <https://longnow.org/seminars/02021/jul/27/state-society-and-vaccines>. At the end of this webcast, Singh talks with Dr. Larry Brilliant, who worked with religious communities in India to help finally eradicate smallpox in India in the twentieth century. Larry Brilliant, *Sometimes Brilliant: The Impossible Adventure of a Spiritual Seeker and Visionary Physician*



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- <sup>42</sup> E. Glen Weyl, “Why I Am Not a Technocrat,” RxC Media (blog), RadicalxChange, August 19, 2019, <https://www.radicalxchange.org/media/blog/2019-08-19-bv61r6>.
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# Trust in Elections

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*The sometimes violent movement to reject the outcome of the 2020 U.S. presidential election draws our attention to the topic of trust in the institution of American election administration. An examination of this topic must make an important distinction between trust in elections (a psychological construct) and the trustworthiness of election results (a legal construct). The history of election administration in the United States is full of examples of efforts to increase the trustworthiness of elections to ensure that results are based on fair and competent administration. The resilience of these efforts was on display following the 2020 election, as formal institutions rejected claims that the election was fraudulent. Still, the past two decades have seen a decline in trust in American elections that has primarily been driven by a slow but steady decline in trust among Republicans. Surprisingly, the increased polarization in trust most recently has been due more to Democrats suddenly becoming more trusting. Election officials must continue to try to overcome attacks on trust in the system, but it is unclear how long they can sustain the legal system guaranteeing free and fair elections without broad-based public trust in how we administer elections.*

Trust is declining in American institutions of all sorts. Elections are thought to be no exception. It is difficult to pin a precise date on when trust in elections became a concern, but academic and commercial polling on the subject did not begin until the recount-controversy in Florida during the 2000 presidential election, when the results of the election were determined by poor ballot design, poorly maintained election technologies, and shifting recount standards.<sup>1</sup> Two decades later, the persistent claims by supporters of Donald Trump that the outcome of the 2020 election was fraudulent; the invasion of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, in support of those claims; and activity in state legislatures to impose greater controls on the administration of elections in the name of “voter confidence” all suggest that trust in American electoral institutions has reached a new low.

But the reality is more complicated than this. By the most common measures of voter confidence, Americans were *more* confident in the electoral machinery following the 2020 election than they were in 2016. The difference is they were more polarized over the question in 2020. This polarization was not fueled by ev-

idence of the shortcomings of election administration, but by basic psychological factors, such as emotions and motivated reasoning.

Concern over the trustworthiness of American elections stretches back centuries. Controls against ineligible voters casting ballots and the stuffing of ballot boxes have been in place since the beginning of the Republic. Greater attention to controlling access to the ballot box and preventing procedural irregularities was a major feature of Progressive Era reforms pursued around the turn of the twentieth century. With the rights revolution of the mid-twentieth century, greater attention was paid to expanding access to voting, leading to major enactments such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and passage of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which granted eighteen-year-olds the right to vote. States made it easier to vote by eliminating excuse-requirements to cast absentee ballots, establishing in-person early voting, and generally innovating in “convenience voting” measures. The passage in 1993 of the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) mandated the elimination of barriers to register, limited the removal of voters from voting rolls, and was nicknamed “Motor Voter” because it required departments of motor vehicles to offer voter-registration forms to anyone applying for a state identification card.<sup>2</sup> Still, the NVRA contained requirements that states regularly perform “list maintenance” to keep the voter rolls accurate. The Help America Vote Act of 2002 ushered in a two-decade-long trend toward increasing voter ID requirements.<sup>3</sup>

Discussing trust in elections requires an examination of two major ways of understanding the topic: through law and public opinion. In this essay, I first set the terms of debate, distinguishing confidence in the conduct of elections from related ideas of trust in the electoral process overall and government legitimacy. I then examine the layering of legal controls over election administration in the United States, and evidence about how well they have performed. Next, I turn my attention to the public-opinion data. In concluding, I discuss the difficulty of restoring trust in American elections and the value of maintaining trustworthiness even if many Americans remain distrustful.

**W**hat do I mean when I speak of confidence in American elections? How can confidence in American elections be differentiated from related ideas of trust in the American electoral process, trust in government, and political legitimacy?

When I write of confidence in American elections, I refer specifically to the work of election managers who are charged with ensuring that elections are fair. For ease of discussion, I will call the institution in which election managers toil *election administration*. Election administration is an institution to the degree that it is distinct from other governing processes and guided by formal rules and regularized practices. However, election administration is not a single organization, so we cannot think of it being institutionalized or trusted in the sense that the U.S.

president or Congress might be.<sup>4</sup> Still, it is no more of a stretch to call election administration an institution than it is to call journalism, organized religion, or law enforcement institutions.

Election administration interacts with a larger set of institutions, actors, and processes to help form the American electoral system. The performance of all these agents together lends credibility to the outcome of an election: whether it is considered by citizens and the international community to be fair and legitimate.

Academic studies evaluating the performance of the American electoral system often conflate the institution of election administration with the larger American electoral system itself. This conflation is most easily seen in surveys when Americans are asked if they believe an election was “free and fair,” or when academics score the United States and other countries according to the integrity of their elections. One highly visible project that rates national elections around the world, the Electoral Integrity Project, assesses aspects of elections that easily fall within election administration (the accuracy of voter registration rolls), exist on the boundaries (bribery of voters), and are clearly outside it (media coverage of candidates).<sup>5</sup>

Focusing the question even more narrowly, scholars have sought to understand how confidence or trust in *election administration* relates to the broader question of confidence in the *electoral process*, and the still broader question of trust in *government*. Political scientist Paul Gronke has noted that, since 2000, the topic of election trust in the United States has tended to be framed in terms of the competency of the process – whether votes were counted accurately, for example – rather than in terms of overall system-fairness, which is the tendency in studies of other countries.<sup>6</sup> In the United States, research has tended to show that public trust in the administration of elections is judged on performance, and is quite distinct from attitudes about regime legitimacy or trust in the performance of government overall.

Public trust in U.S. election institutions comes down to whether voting machines accurately record votes, voter registration systems accurately record those eligible to vote, geographic information systems accurately assign voters to voting districts, election-night reporting systems accurately aggregate and communicate election results to officials and the public, and postelection audit and canvassing procedures proceed impartially and in accordance with the law. The canonical question to gauge voter confidence focuses specifically on the tabulation of ballots – how confident are you that votes counted in the recent election were counted as intended? – but studies have found that answers to this specific question are highly correlated with the varied ways the auditors pose the question.

What, then, of trust in the institution of election administration? Here I make an important distinction between *trustworthiness* and *trust*. I use *trustworthy* in the simple sense of its definition from Merriam-Webster,

“worthy of confidence: dependable.”<sup>7</sup> It is a quality that can be attached to the conduct of a particular election. It measures the degree to which a reasonable, impartial observer would agree that the declared winner of an election actually won, and that the election was conducted as prescribed. Trustworthiness is built by the rules of the game. It forms the basis on which formal authorities, ranging from local elections boards to state and federal courts, adjudicate the results.

I use *trust* to distinguish the psychological construct that describes the conclusion reached by the public about the functioning of the process. Trust is influenced by a combination of factors, most notably: direct observation of the process, hearsay from friends and neighbors, and interpretations of the trustworthiness of the election as communicated by the media and political elites.

To understand the trustworthiness of American elections, we must consider the formal procedures by which elections are conducted, both in theory and practice. Here, I focus narrowly on the process that regulates the interaction of voters with the process: how voters are registered, which candidates they can vote for, how votes are collected and tabulated, and how results are certified. If the process is conducted fairly and competently, and the results are determined by the actions of voters – rather than actors such as military juntas, corrupt party machines, or private oligarchs – we can call this a trustworthy election.

The trustworthiness of elections is guarded worldwide by electoral management bodies (EMBs). In the United States, they go by many names: Secretary of State, elections department, board of elections, supervisor of elections, and so on.<sup>8</sup> EMBs are – or should be – separate from the other actors and processes that constitute the electoral system. To borrow a sports metaphor, they are responsible for ensuring that the playing field is level and that the outcome is determined solely by the competitors’ activity on the field. The metaphor is imperfect, of course. It breaks down to the degree that American EMBs are not charged with adjudicating and punishing those who “play dirty,” leaving much of the refereeing to other actors, such as the courts, the media, and voters themselves.

One major strand in the history of election administration in the United States has been the accretion of laws, rules, and practices aimed at guarding the fairness and accuracy of elections, and making them more trustworthy in the process.<sup>9</sup> Because American election administration is a subject for the states, the regulation of elections has largely been left to state constitutions and legislatures.<sup>10</sup> States typically delegate the conduct of elections to local governmental units – counties in most of the country, but municipalities in New England, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

The greatest explosion of efforts to safeguard the lawfulness of elections and limit the influence of violence and particularism occurred during the Progressive Era, stretching from roughly 1890 to 1920. This period gave the United States a host of integrity-enhancing features most now take for granted, including the secret

ballot, government printing of the ballot, regulation of ballot access, widespread voter registration, prohibitions against electioneering near the polls, mechanical vote-tabulation, and publication of precinct-level registration and election-return statistics.<sup>11</sup> These developments remain the touchstone for thinking about the challenges that beset the integrity of elections and the best approaches to securing elections regardless. The cultural influence of late-nineteenth-century frauds and their “cures” have so dominated thinking in the election administration field that more modern threats to election integrity, such as hacking, disinformation campaigns, doxing, and cyberattacks, have been difficult to acknowledge and address using modern tools.

Nonetheless, the evolution of voting practices in the United States has led to advances in security procedures. These advances have given rise to the adoption of business-control practices in election administration, most importantly, post-election auditing, but also practices such as logic-and-accuracy testing of election equipment and chain-of-custody requirements for election materials.<sup>12</sup>

This account of efforts to shore up the fairness and accuracy of elections has hewed close to the standard good-government narrative that usually accompanies discussions of the history of election administration reform. Undoubtedly, polling places are less violent than they were a century and a half ago, and election results are much less likely to be undermined by corrupt dealing. These advances have been possible in large part because of the developments just reviewed. Still, most of these reforms have come with costs.

Take voter registration. Having accurate election registries is an internationally recognized sign of clean election administration. At the same time, the motivations behind requiring registration in the United States have often been suppressive. The first widespread adoption of voter-registration requirements coincided with the surge of late-nineteenth-century immigration, especially into the cities of the North and the Midwest. State legislatures, dominated by rural members, sought to limit the political influence of cities and their large ethnic populations. Thus, the earliest voter registration laws only applied to cities. As late as the 1960s and 1970s, eight states imposed voter-registration requirements, but generally only on their largest municipalities.<sup>13</sup>

Another cost of voting reform came through voter-identification laws. In recent years, conflict over these laws has emerged through the competing interests of security and access, with supporters advocating for what seems like an obvious barrier against fraud, and opponents decrying their suppressive effects. Despite charges that identification laws are discriminatory because fewer people in racial minority groups have state-issued photographic identification, the Supreme Court has generally upheld the laws. In writing the majority opinion in the Supreme Court’s *Marion County* decision, Justice John Paul Stevens argued that Indiana had a right to protect public confidence “in the integrity and legitimacy of



representative government,” further quoting the 2005 report from the Commission on the Federal Election Reform: “the electoral system cannot inspire public confidence if no safeguards exist to deter or detect fraud or to confirm the identity of voters.”<sup>14</sup> Although legal justifications for strict photo ID laws have rested on the states’ interest in safeguarding public confidence in elections, academic research following on the *Marion County* decision has consistently shown that the presence of photo ID laws has not increased voter confidence.<sup>15</sup>

The controversy over auditing the results of the 2020 elections is the most recent example of intuition colliding with evidence over how to maintain the trustworthiness and trust in elections. Starting with California in the 1960s, states began passing laws mandating statistical sampling of ballots after elections so they could be recounted and the results audited. Such postelection audit laws are now common. More recently, advances in the statistical literature have led to more sophisticated techniques that go under the heading of risk-limiting audits, which are slowly being rolled out.<sup>16</sup> Georgia, one of the states with such a law, used it to demonstrate the correctness of its presidential election tally in 2020. However, 2020 election deniers still insisted on conducting entirely irregular “forensic audits” in states such as Arizona (by a company called Cyber Ninjas) and Wisconsin (by Michael Gableman, former state supreme court justice), which were without standards or precedent in election administration.<sup>17</sup> These audits have confused efforts to provide rigor to postelection review. They have likely reinforced distrust among skeptics while doing nothing to bolster trustworthiness itself.

Considerable effort has been spent over the past century and a half to reinforce the integrity of American elections. What does the public think about this? Unfortunately, the answer is far from straightforward. Research by political scientists Shaun Bowler and Todd Donovan suggests that institutional reform has little influence on whether citizens believe elections to be clean, either in the United States or the rest of the world.<sup>18</sup>

Analysis of the question often starts with comparing the United States with other countries. Since 1981, the World Values Survey has regularly surveyed residents of scores of nations about social and political issues.<sup>19</sup> Between 2016 and 2020, respondents from fifty-two countries were asked how often they believed votes were counted fairly and that election officials were fair in their country. Respondents from the United States were in the middle of the pack of democracies in terms of trust, but lagged the most developed democracies that many would consider America’s peers: New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and Japan.

Studies like this are vague with respect to which levels of election administration respondents have in mind and, in the American case, are limited in the degree to which they help reveal the dynamics of trust.<sup>20</sup> With those objections in mind, I turn to the questions that have been used most often to gauge voter confidence

in the two decades since *Bush v. Gore*. The core question, first asked in the context of the breakdowns of voting machines and election procedures in Florida in 2000, is: How confident are you that your vote was counted as you intended in the most recent election? Variants can gauge attitudes about anticipated elections (How confident are you that your vote *will be counted* as you intend?), and about the accuracy of election administration at different levels of government (How confident are you that *votes in your state* were counted as intended?).

In prior research coauthored with political scientist Michael Sances, we assembled all public opinion studies about trust in U.S. elections, starting with data collected surrounding the 2000 election and continuing to 2012.<sup>21</sup> Working with political scientist Jesse Clark, I have here updated the data collection to include studies through the 2020 election.<sup>22</sup>

Figure 1 summarizes responses to all polls from academic and commercial sources over the past two decades that have asked about voter confidence. Although the various polling organizations ask questions that are worded slightly differently, they are nonetheless very similar and track similarly across time. Polling organizations have regularly asked about confidence that the respondent's "own" vote and votes nationwide were counted properly. Polling organizations generally give respondents the option of using a four- or five-point scale. Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents who gave the "most confident" response to the question posed.

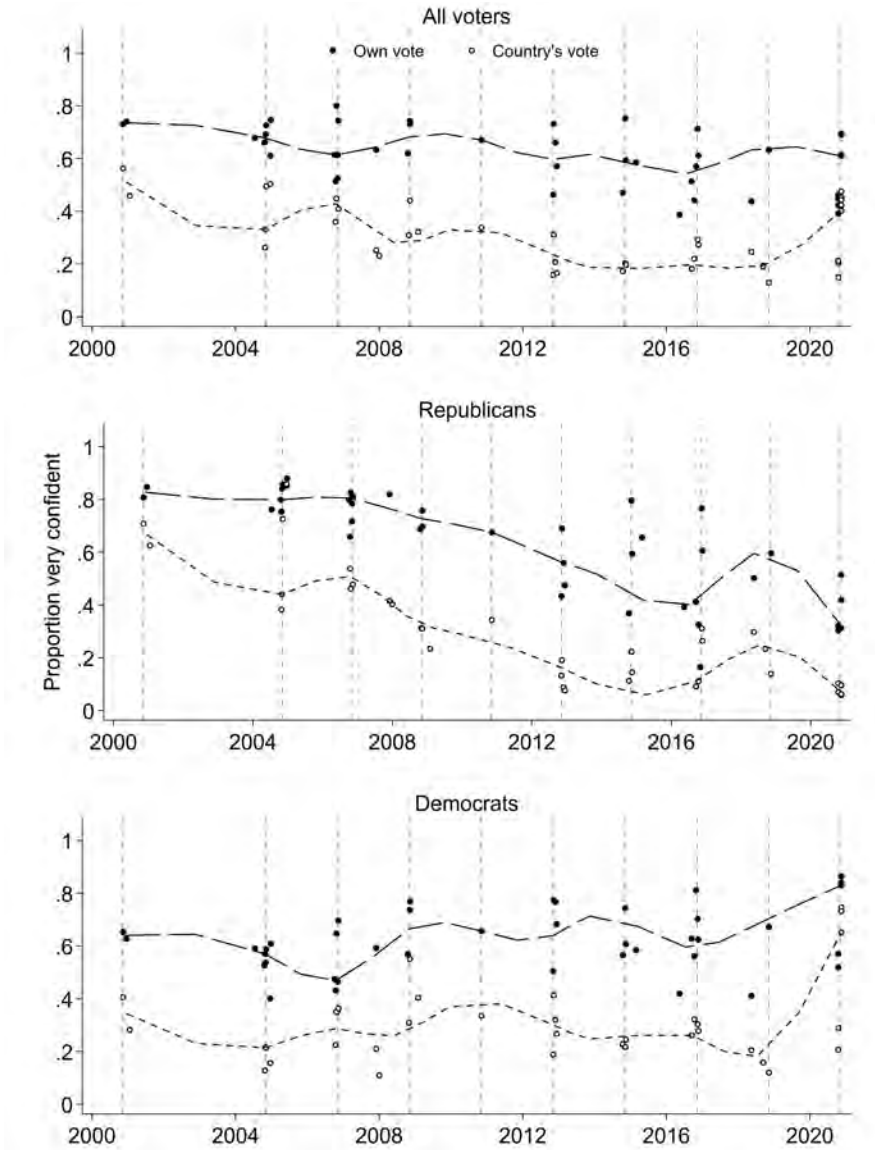
Regardless of whether results are broken down by party identification, confidence that one's own vote has been counted typically outpaced confidence in the counting of the nation's votes by approximately 40 percentage points over the past two decades. Among all voters, confidence in the counting of both one's own vote and in the nation's votes gradually declined slowly in parallel during the years 2000 – 2016.

When we examine responses by identifiers of the two main parties separately, we see that downward pressure on confidence – of both measures – has been exerted primarily by Republicans. In the Republican "own vote" series, we see a result that suggests that confidence among Republicans declined by an average of 10.8 percentage points every presidential election across those five presidential elections.<sup>23</sup> The average decline in the "country's vote" series was even greater at a decline of 14.9 points per presidential election cycle. Democrats, on the other hand, exhibited no secular trend throughout this period, going up a little when Democrats were doing well nationally and down a little when they did poorly.<sup>24</sup>

These series took a turn in 2018 that accelerated in 2020. Nationwide, the average level of confidence in one's own vote being counted as intended rose slightly among all voters from 54 percent in 2016 to 56 percent in 2018. For the country's votes, it rose from 24 percent to 32 percent.<sup>25</sup> After rising from 44 percent in 2016 to 57 percent in 2018, Republican confidence in the counting of their own vote fell back

Figure 1

Voter Confidence in the Accuracy of the Vote Count, 2000 – 2020



Each point represents an individual poll. Trend lines are calculated using median-spline regressions. Original data reported in Michael W. Sances and Charles Stewart III, “Partisanship and Confidence in the Vote Count: Evidence from U.S. National Elections since 2000,” *Electoral Studies* 40 (1) (2015): 176–188. Data updated by Jesse T. Clark and Charles Stewart III, “The Confidence Earthquake: Seismic Shifts in Trust and Reform Sentiments in the 2020 Election,” presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, virtual conference, April 15–18, 2021.

down to 37 percent in 2020. Republican confidence in the counting of the country's votes was around 20 percent in both 2016 and 2018 before falling to 8 percent in 2020. In contrast, Democratic confidence grew to historic highs (at least for this twenty-year period). Confidence in counting one's own vote grew from 62 percent in 2016 to 72 percent in 2020. Confidence in counting the nation's votes rose a staggering amount among Democrats, from 29 percent in 2016 to 52 percent in 2020.

These long-term trends frame the rest of the empirical analysis in this essay. The sudden turn in 2020 among all respondents is striking, but it is important to distinguish the paths taken by respondents who identify with the two parties. For Republicans, the decline in 2020 was a continuation of a two-decade-long decline in confidence in the vote count, after an uncharacteristic uptick in 2018. For Democrats, the upward swing in confidence in 2020 was uncharacteristic of the steady pattern of the preceding two decades.

Perhaps the 2020 Democratic upswing was due to the euphoria over the victory of Joseph Biden over Donald Trump, but one must wonder whether Democrats' responses to the confidence questions in 2020 were influenced by a strong negative repudiation of Trump's calling the results of the election into question. At the very least, it bears underscoring that if the two parties diverged dramatically in how confident they are in the voting process, that divergence seems to be more affected by changes in Democratic responses than to changes among Republicans.

**T**his discussion of voter confidence over the past two decades suggests there are two major dimensions of voter confidence to explore. The first is the sharp divide in confidence across levels of voter experience, national and personal. The other is partisan. These two dimensions suggest different dynamics that drive attitudes about election administration, one based on direct experience, and the other mediated by political elites.

When it comes to experience, there is little doubt why voters express such high confidence that their votes are counted as intended: their experiences voting are remarkably positive. This has been documented quadrennially since 2008, through the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAЕ), which asks questions of voters about their experience while casting a ballot. In 2020, it queried 18,200 respondents who were registered to vote.<sup>26</sup>

Among validated in-person voters who responded to the 2020 SPAЕ, almost everyone reported a positive experience when they went to cast a ballot. For instance, 98 percent of in-person voters reported no problems with their registration when they went to vote, 97 percent reported no problems with the voting equipment, 98 percent reported that the polling place they used was run very well or okay, and 96 percent reported that the performance of the poll workers they encountered was excellent or good. Eighty-seven percent of respondents agreed that their voting experience had been mostly positive.

Although the reported experience of voters was overwhelmingly positive, the answers from those who had negative experiences help to further illustrate the connection between voters' experience and voter confidence. Among the 94 percent of in-person voters who agreed their experience was mostly positive, 94 percent were confident their vote was counted as intended; for the 6 percent who had a negative experience, only 68 percent trusted that their vote was counted as intended.<sup>27</sup>

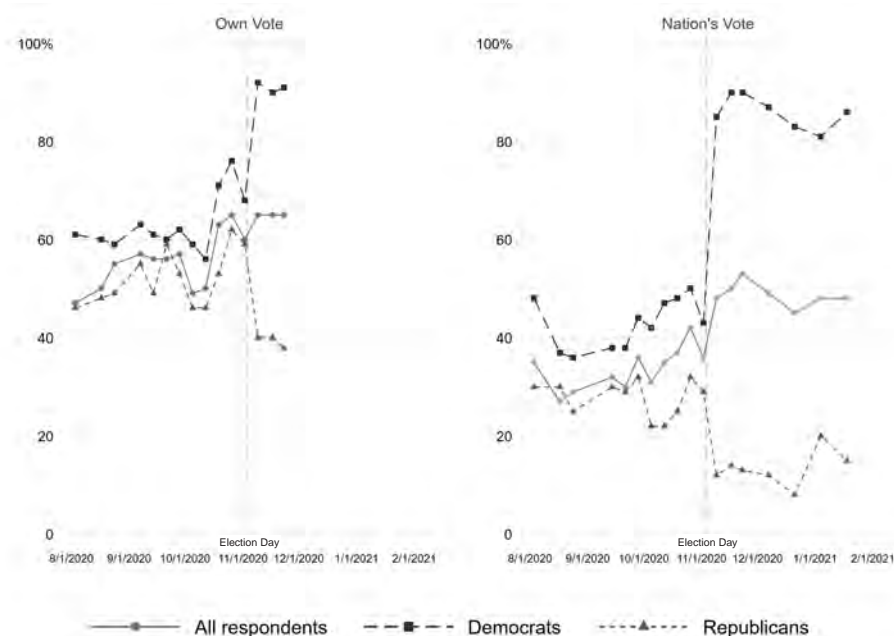
Some might object that framing the question in terms of the accuracy of the vote count only partially reflects the confidence a voter might have that their ballot and the ballots of their neighbors were treated fairly. To address this objection, the SPAE asked a series of questions in 2020 about perceptions of fairness by officials at various levels of election administration.<sup>28</sup> Among those who reported a mostly positive experience, 89 percent said they thought local election officials were committed to "making sure elections in the United States are fair and accurate," compared with 62 percent among those who did not report a mostly positive experience.<sup>29</sup>

Direct voter experience is not the only driver of voter confidence: party also determines attitudes about electoral trust. Experts have long recognized that party influence complicates voter confidence according to which party is in power and which is in opposition. Research into this question has focused on the winner-loser gap in trust. The pattern by which supporters of the winning party tend to express greater trust in the election has been well-established. In addition, the role of losing candidates in consenting to their losses has been shown to be a powerful factor in maintaining regime legitimacy, beyond the assessment of how well the election was run.<sup>30</sup>

The winner-loser gap was clear in the 2020 election. One of the most visible examples was the Economist/YouGov tracking poll that regularly posed two voter confidence questions several times before and after the 2020 election: "How much confidence do you have that your vote in the 2020 presidential election [will be/was] counted accurately?" and "How much confidence do you have that the 2020 presidential election [will be held/was held] fairly?" The percentage of respondents answering "a great deal" or "quite a bit" is displayed in Figure 2.<sup>31</sup>

The Republican-Democratic divide was present both before and after Election Day, but the change that occurred immediately after Election Day was stark. Before Election Day, an average 63 percent of Democrats expressed a great deal or quite a bit of confidence that their vote would be counted accurately in the election, compared with 52 percent of Republicans, for an 11-point gap. Within a day of the election, that gap grew to 45 points (93 percent for Democrats versus 48 percent for Republicans). The same was true when respondents were asked about the 2020 election being fair. What had been an average 8-point gap before Election Day (54 percent Democrats to 46 percent Republicans) grew to 59 points (84 percent Democrats to 25 percent Republicans) as soon as the results were known.

Figure 2  
Trust in an Accurate and Fair Presidential Election, 2020



Graphs show the percentage of respondents who answered “a great deal” or “quite a bit” to the following questions: “How much confidence do you have that your vote in the 2020 presidential election [will be/was] counted accurately?” And “How much confidence do you have that the 2020 presidential election [will be held/was held] fairly?” Answers from independents are not displayed, but are included in the “all respondents” plots. Source: Author’s compilation of data from Economist/YouGov polls.

The dynamics of electoral trust in 2020 was a product of the campaign and elite rhetoric. Because of the exigencies of voting amid the COVID-19 public health emergency, many states made accommodations to their absentee-ballot laws to discourage large numbers of voters congregating in person on Election Day.<sup>32</sup> Although these accommodations were mostly bipartisan during the primary season in the spring and summer, as the general election loomed, they became much more politicized. President Trump frequently made statements casting doubt on the legitimacy of mail balloting, which were amplified by his surrogates, notably, Attorney General William Barr.<sup>33</sup>

We can see evidence that the Trump team’s relentless rhetoric against mail balloting influenced trust in the election in answers respondents made to the 2020 SPAE question, “How confident are you that votes *in your state* were counted

as intended?” Figure 3 displays the average responses of Democratic and Republican partisans in each state, plotting the percentage responding “very confident” against the percentage of the two-party vote received by Trump. The lines superimposed on the data tokens were estimated by linear regression and summarize the various factors that influenced citizen trust in their states’ election administration in 2020. The figure, first, displays the responses from Republican and Democratic identifiers separately. Then, in each panel, I show the average answers from respondents who lived in states where more than half the ballots were cast by mail (solid squares) and fewer than half the ballots were cast by mail (hollow squares). The regression lines fit to the data in Figure 3 are based on one final subset of the data: whether Donald Trump won the state (that is, the two-party vote share was greater than 50 percent) or lost.

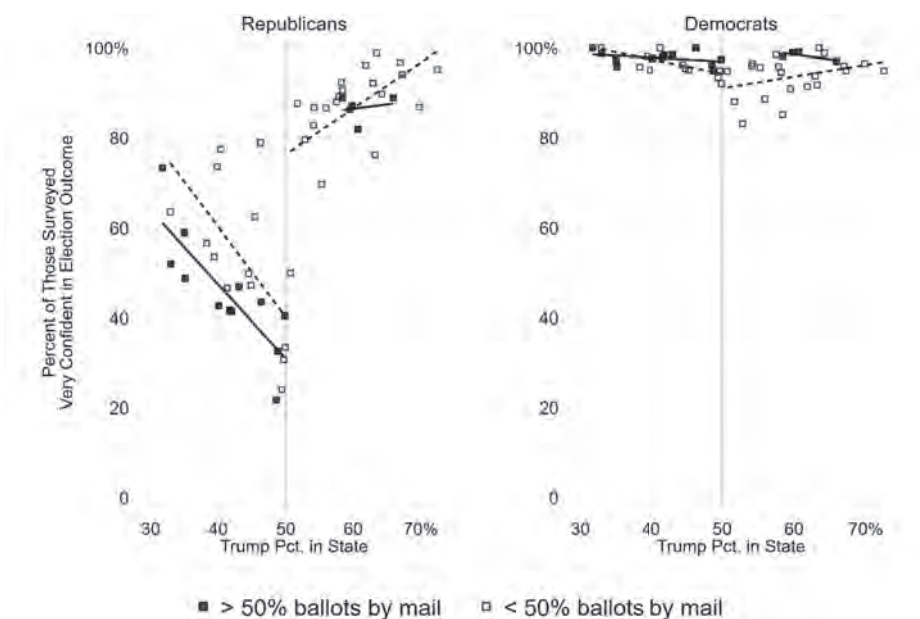
Four patterns stand out in Figure 3, all of which are related to the winner-loser effect interacting with elite rhetoric. First, Democrats were much more confident in their state’s vote count than Republicans. Second, Republicans were much less confident in their state’s vote count when Trump lost the state than when he won. (The analogous pattern among Democrats was much less prominent.) Third, whether or not Trump won the state, Republicans were much less trusting when the results were close. Finally, in states Trump lost, confidence was lower still when most ballots had been cast by mail – by an average of 15 percentage points. Figure 3 quantifies how elite framing of election-administration issues influenced citizen trust after the election. These are patterns not regularly seen in recent elections.<sup>34</sup>

Voter confidence can be influenced not only by national politicians, but by state politicians as well. Following the 2020 election, Republican-controlled state legislatures produced a flurry of activity, writing a record number of legislative proposals to restrict voter access and, in at least two cases, sponsoring highly visible forensic audits that relitigated the outcome of the election, and keeping partisan questions about the reliability of local election administration in the public eye for a long time.

It is notable that although the 2021 state legislative sessions produced a record number of bills to restrict voting access, these sessions did not produce a record number of passages.<sup>35</sup> Many states narrowly lost by Trump had both Republican state legislatures and Democratic governors who threatened to veto Republican election legislation. In addition, many of the proposals thrown into the legislative hopper were simply bad ideas that died once local election officials and political consultants – especially Republican consultants – caught the ear of legislative leaders with information about how some of these proposals could backfire on Republicans. The important thing for confidence, however, is that the sheer presence of so many bills provided state legislators the opportunity to take positions against election fraud, amplify often unfounded claims about fraud during the election,

Figure 3

Voter Confidence in the 2020 Presidential Election, Relative to Trust in Mail Ballots



Voter confidence among Republicans declines as the Trump margin of victory declines, and as more votes were cast in the 2020 presidential election, relative to trust in mail ballots. Confidence among Democrats was little impacted by outcome or use of mail ballots. Source: Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAЕ), <https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/projects/survey-performance-american-elections>.

and keep negative media messages about election administration in the public eye long after they would have faded from view in any other election year.

Although confidence in election administration has been trending slowly downward over the past two decades, the matter took a qualitatively different turn in 2020 that seems out of proportion with the overall public opinion trends displayed in Figure 1. The partisan split in attitudes because of the election results was large, as seen in Figure 2, but not all that much greater than in the past. Certainly, the changes in responses to the stock voter confidence questions in 2020 are not so large that one would have predicted the riot at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, nor would we have predicted the degree of personal violence that has been threatened against state and local election officials for simply doing their jobs and following the law.<sup>36</sup>



Not so long ago, the election results would have led to grumbling and “good, old-fashioned” proposed legislation aimed at simply hobbling, but not annihilating, the political opposition. What is the “extra sauce” that turned a lack of trust into a movement that has produced political violence?

Scholarship that addresses this question is only in its infancy, so any answer must remain speculative. It is obvious, though, that electoral distrust has broken through a barrier such that the negative emotions of anger and anxiety have been engaged to a degree never before seen. This prominence of emotions in contemporary political life has been noted throughout the world, and appears to be a special hallmark of right-wing populist political parties.<sup>37</sup> In the United States, the rise of affective or negative partisanship has been associated with intense dislike of out-partisans, weakened commitment to democratic values, and a willingness to endorse violence against political opponents.<sup>38</sup>

There is one small detail that suggests the quality of partisan polarization over electoral trust is not purely the work of strong negative emotions creeping into public opinion. Democrats have become much more trusting of election administration than they have ever been – by some measures, more trusting on the margin than Republicans have become distrustful. Could it be that Republican anger and anxiety are being met with Democratic happiness and gratitude? Perhaps. Or it could be that Democrats have been fed such a steady diet of laudatory comments about election administrators over the past two years that other processes are at work, such as motivated reasoning and confirmation bias.

One reason to believe that the origins of (dis)trust in American elections may differ between the parties is that the coalitions composing them have become quite different, potentially leading to differences between partisans in how they approach the issue of electoral trust. With the rise of the importance of White Christian nationalism within the Republican Party, it is likely that many – even if not most – Republicans are willing to ascribe electoral loss to the operation of malevolent supernatural forces in the world.<sup>39</sup> Thus, a process that seems arrayed against Donald Trump, who is seen by many Republicans as fighting to restore a White Christian nation, would engender anger and disgust. On the other hand, the Democratic Party is rapidly becoming a party of “nones,” that is, people who eschew religion and highly value scientific evidence.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the heightened trust of Democrats in election administration, especially in light of the 2020 election, may not be due to the excitement of positive emotions because of winning, but assurances by secular authorities that the election was “the most secure in American history.”<sup>41</sup>

The issue of whether Republicans and Democrats draw on different cognitive and precognitive sources may seem like splitting hairs, but it is of the utmost importance in considering how, or even whether, overall trust can be improved and the partisan divide can be narrowed. If distrust is being fueled by a negative emo-

tional reaction to the loss of a candidate who is considered the leader of an apocalyptic fight over the future of the nation, fact-based communication strategies by election officials to explain their procedures and the regular branding of Republican concerns about election fraud as “without evidence” may only entrench attitudes among the distrustful.

Unlike most of the other institutions that have lost public trust, the challenges for election administration are “coming from inside the house.” If claims about whether elections can be trusted are so thoroughly entwined in partisan competition, what are those of us concerned about democratic backsliding to do? Recent events suggest that raising levels of trust will be hard to accomplish, especially among Republicans, even with future Republican victories at the polls.

The clash over the 2020 election provides one short-term answer: emphasize protecting the trustworthiness of American elections, even as trust is under assault. One thing that must be appreciated about the assault on the results of the 2020 election is that almost without fail, the procedures to ensure the trustworthiness of elections held. Official bodies at all levels of government reached decisions based on evidence that was considered dispositive because of the protections put in place to guard the trustworthiness of the results.

Despite the considerable evidence that election administration performed admirably, the violent rejection of the 2020 election results suggests that any conclusion reached about trust in electoral institutions must be mixed. As extreme skepticism continues to motivate the far right, pressure will continue to build to undermine the impartiality of election administration and trustworthiness of the process. Efforts to communicate to the public about the fairness of the process must continue, but we also must be realistic about the limitations of these efforts so long as trusted elites find political benefits to undermining trust. The notable trustworthiness of the system can be maintained for only so long without widespread trust among Americans across the political spectrum.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> The Help America Vote Act of 2002, H.R. 3295, 107th Cong. (2002).
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- <sup>5</sup> The Electoral Integrity Project, <https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/> (accessed March 12, 2022).
- <sup>6</sup> Gronke, “Voter Confidence.” To be more precise, electoral trust in other countries has most often been examined in the context of translating votes for parties into shares of seats in the legislature. In the United States, however, it has most often been examined in the context of whether the administration of the election performed up to standards. This difference is no doubt due to the prevalence of multiparty competition in much of the world, in which the larger question of whether the balance between representation of all voices and governability is more salient.
- <sup>7</sup> “Trustworthy,” Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trustworthy> (accessed March 12, 2022).
- <sup>8</sup> On the role of electoral management bodies worldwide, see Andre Blais, Louis Massicotte, and Antoine Yoshinaka, *Establishing the Rules of the Game: Election Laws in Democracies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).
- <sup>9</sup> There are other strands in this history as well, some of which are entangled with trustworthiness. An important one is nondiscrimination of access to the polls, which has most importantly been seen in the decades-long effort to eliminate disfranchisement on the base of race, but the history of guarding access goes beyond racial violence and discrimination. For instance, Richard Benseal’s scholarship about election challenges in the nineteenth century highlights how violence around polling places was often dismissed by legislative and judicial tribunals, under the theory that an implicit qualification for voting was the literal ability to fight for it, and that those unable to overcome the gauntlet of a violent mob had no fundamental rights violated. See Richard F. Benseal, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Richard F. Benseal, “The American Ballot Box: Law, Identity, and the Polling Place in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *Studies in American Political Development* 17 (1) (2003): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X03000014>. For a comprehensive account of the history of election administration policy in the United States,

see Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

- <sup>10</sup> Sections 1 and 2 of Article I of the U.S. Constitution sketch out the election of federal officeholders—members of the House, senators, and president—in very general terms. Amendments to these sections, along with amendments addressing other features of elections, such as the limitation on the president’s term-of-office, have been similarly broad. Congress has been loath to prescribe the conduct of election administration, although it has, for instance, required House members be elected from single-member districts and set a uniform Election Day. In recent decades, Congress has been prescriptive in matters related to voting and voter registration for citizens living overseas, but states are still given considerable latitude in implementing these laws. As suggested by the politics surrounding the For the People Act and the much more narrowly constructed alternative, the Freedom to Vote Act, even when Congress has a majority on record as favoring the specification of scores of election-administration procedures, passage is unassured. See For the People Act of 2021, H.R. 1, 117th Cong. (2021); and Freedom to Vote Act of 2021, S.2747, 117th Cong. (2021).
- <sup>11</sup> Peter H. Argersinger, *Structure, Process, and Party: Essays in American Political History* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1992); Roy G. Saltman, *The History and Politics of Voting Technology: In Quest of Integrity and Public Confidence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and Joseph P. Harris, *Registration of Voters in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1929).
- <sup>12</sup> Logic and accuracy (L&A) testing is defined as “Equipment and system readiness tests whose purpose is to detect malfunctioning devices and improper election-specific set-up before the equipment or systems are used in an election. Election officials conduct L&A tests prior to the start of an election as part of the process of setting up the system and the devices for an election according to jurisdiction practices and conforming to any state laws.” U.S. Department of Commerce, National Institute of Standards and Technology, “Election Terminology Glossary,” <https://pages.nist.gov/ElectionGlossary> (accessed March 12, 2022).
- <sup>13</sup> These states were Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Stephen Ansolabehere and David M. Konisky, “The Introduction of Voter Registration and Its Effect on Turnout,” *Political Analysis* 14 (1) (2006): 83–100, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpio34>.
- <sup>14</sup> *Crawford v. Marion County Election Bd.*, 553 U.S. 181 (2008); and Electionline and The Pew Charitable Trusts, *Building Confidence in U.S. Elections: Report of the Commission on the Federal Election Reform* (Washington, D.C.: The Commission on the Federal Election Reform, 2005), [https://web.archive.org/web/20070609115256/http://www.american.edu/ia/cfer/report/full\\_report.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20070609115256/http://www.american.edu/ia/cfer/report/full_report.pdf), 10.
- <sup>15</sup> Stephen Ansolabehere and Nathaniel Persily, “Vote Fraud in the Eye of the Beholder: The Role of Public Opinion in the Challenge to Voter Identification Requirements,” *Harvard Law Review* 121 (7) (2008): 1737–1775, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40042715>; and Charles Stewart III, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Nathaniel Persily, “Revisiting Public Opinion on Voter Identification and Voter Fraud in an Era of Increasing Partisan Polarization,” *Stanford Law Review* 68 (6) (2016): 1455–1490, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43921171>.
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- <sup>18</sup> Shaun Bowler and Todd Donovan, eds., *The Limits of Electoral Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- <sup>19</sup> The World Values Survey Association, “World Values Survey,” <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp> (accessed March 19, 2022).
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- <sup>21</sup> Michael W. Sances and Charles Stewart III, “Partisanship and Confidence in the Vote Count: Evidence from U.S. National Elections Since 2000,” *Electoral Studies* 40 (1) (2015): 176–188, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2015.08.004>. For an alternative view on the subject, see Betsy Sinclair, Stephen S. Smith, and Patrick D. Tucker, “‘It’s Largely a Rigged System:’ Voter Confidence and the Winner Effect in 2016,” *Political Research Quarterly* 71 (4) (2018): 854–868, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912918768006>.
- <sup>22</sup> Clark and Stewart, “The Confidence Earthquake”; and National Conference of State Legislatures, “The Canvass: January 2022,” January 5, 2022, <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/the-canvass-january-2022.aspx>.
- <sup>23</sup> The regression uses OLS to fit the observations from 2000 to 2016 on a counter such that 2000 = 0, 2004 = 1, and so on. The slope coefficient is –0.108 (standard error = 0.017). For the “country’s vote” series, the slope coefficient is –0.148 (standard error = 0.020).
- <sup>24</sup> The regression coefficient of Democratic confidence on the counter from 2000 to 2016 is 0.0241 (standard error = 0.0153). For the “country’s vote,” the slope coefficient is 0.0028 (standard error = 0.0166).
- <sup>25</sup> These percentages were calculated from all polls in a calendar year, both pre- and postelection.
- <sup>26</sup> Data and documentation about the Survey of the Performance of American Elections may be found at Harvard Dataverse. Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, “Survey of the Performance of American Elections Dataverse,” last modified March 28, 2021, <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/SPA.E>.
- <sup>27</sup> It is possible to extend this analysis to specific problems voters report encountering. Those who reported voter registration problems, problems with voting machines, sub-

par poll workers, and poorly run polling places were similarly distrustful about the quality of the vote count.

- <sup>28</sup> These officials and entities were state election officials, local election officials, your governor, your state legislature, the U.S. Congress, President Trump, the Republican Party, and the Democratic Party.
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- <sup>38</sup> Shanton Iyengar, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, et al., “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarizations in the United States,” *Annual Review of Political Sci-*

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# Specific Sources of Trust in Generals: Individual-Level Trust in the U.S. Military

*Max Margulies & Jessica Blankshain*

*This essay explores the individual-level determinants of trust in the U.S. military. Prior research has identified five possible drivers of societal trust in the military: performance, professionalism, persuasion, personal connection, and partisanship. Using data from the American National Election Studies and the General Social Survey, we emphasize the importance of understanding trust at an individual level, as perceptions of military performance and professionalism are not objective but mediated by individual-level factors. Our findings reinforce mixed support for trust being linked to assessments of military success on or off the battlefield, and undermine arguments that relate high trust to a widening gap between the military and civilian society. We also present new evidence for generational and ideational sources of military trust consistent with recent speculation that trust in the military is declining. Overall, we show that individual-level trust may be difficult to change, but that public trust in the military has consequences for a variety of defense-oriented policies.*

In August 2021, commentators debated whether the fall of Kabul following the American exit from Afghanistan was President Biden’s “Saigon moment.”<sup>1</sup> Many juxtaposed photos of desperate crowds at Hamid Karzai International Airport with those of lines of evacuees struggling to board American helicopters during the fall of Saigon in 1975. The Taliban’s recapture of Afghanistan came approximately a year and a half after *The Washington Post* published the “Afghanistan Papers,” previously confidential internal Department of Defense interviews associated with the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, the office responsible for overseeing Afghanistan reconstruction and relief projects. The interviews contradicted public statements by civilian and military officials about the United States’ accomplishments in Afghanistan. The title, of course, evokes another secret wartime history – the Pentagon Papers, leaked and published in 1971 as the “secret history of the Vietnam War.”<sup>2</sup>

In the 1970s, the combination of Vietnam and Watergate led to a crisis of confidence in U.S. governmental institutions, including the military. Within a few



decades, the military had successfully regained public trust while other governmental institutions, by and large, had not. Will the fallout from the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, and the prolonged conflicts of the post-9/11 era more broadly, similarly reduce public confidence in the military? There is some evidence that confidence is already eroding. Most often cited is a November 2021 survey conducted on behalf of the Ronald Reagan Institute that finds Americans' confidence in many institutions, but especially the military, has fallen since 2018. Other surveys, like Gallup polls and the General Social Survey, also show a decline, though not as starkly.<sup>3</sup>

To understand where public confidence in the military is likely to head in the future, we need to understand what drives it. *Who* has trust in the military, and *why*? Answering these questions will also help us understand whether and why trust in the military matters. If trust in the military is consistently much higher in some segments of the population than in others, there is the risk of not only increasing polarization between these communities, but also that some will have a harder time making their voices heard in the policy-making process. This is particularly worrisome if trust is also associated with policy preferences. To that end, we must also examine the extent to which trust is related to specific military policies or democratic accountability. Do people with high trust in the military show more support for policies preferred by the military? And does their high trust translate to greater confidence in the use of military force abroad?

Scholarly investigations of Americans' high trust in the military in the post-Cold War era identify five interrelated Ps as possible drivers of public trust in the military: performance, professionalism, persuasion, personal connection, and partisanship.<sup>4</sup>

The first two determinants – performance and professionalism – reflect rationalist explanations for public trust. In essence, the military earns public trust by demonstrating competence and character, and can lose trust through operational and ethical failures. Accordingly, we would expect to see public trust in the military vary in response to major events, such as battlefield victory or defeat, and highly publicized acts of heroism or scandal. Polling data from the Vietnam War era through the first Gulf War lend some support to this theory.<sup>5</sup> Through the 1980s and 1990s, in particular, public trust was highly correlated with military performance, with a notable boost from the 1991 Gulf War.<sup>6</sup> And yet, high trust remains despite two decades of U.S. military occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq that was “bloodier, slower, and less decisive than the American public had come to expect.”<sup>7</sup>

Of course, even by this performance-based logic, what matters is not objective military performance but rather the public's *perception* of performance. The public may blame operational failures not on the military, as it did in Vietnam,

but on the decisions of civilian policy-makers.<sup>8</sup> In a 2019 Pew survey, 90 percent of respondents said military leaders “do a good job preparing military personnel to protect the country” all/most or some of the time.<sup>9</sup> This was the highest assessment of performance for any occupation surveyed, with members of Congress coming in last at 46 percent. It is difficult to disentangle cause and effect here. Do people trust the military because they believe the military has performed well and is not to blame for any failures? Or does the public lay blame for operational failures on civilian leaders precisely because they trust the military more than civilian government?

The “professionalism” determinant has a clear relationship to performance, but also encompasses a wider array of issues, including “the way the institution has responded to social problems” like drug abuse and barriers to racial and gender integration.<sup>10</sup> To this list, we might add barriers to the integration of other underrepresented groups (including gay and transgender service members), crime, and other ethical scandals. The perceived professionalism of the post-1980s all-volunteer force (AVF) was a marked contrast to the scandals and turmoil associated with the Vietnam War-era and early AVF-era military.<sup>11</sup> But as with operational performance, high levels of trust have continued despite major scandals, including prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, the Fat Leonard corruption investigation, and high-profile reports of sexual assault and right-wing extremism within the ranks.

The public may view some of these issues – like sexual harassment and assault – as reflections of broader societal problems, rather than as failures specific to the military.<sup>12</sup> People may also forgive ethical lapses because they believe the military is better than civilian society at holding perpetrators accountable.<sup>13</sup> This view is somewhat supported by the results of a 2019 Pew survey investigating trust in power and authority. While 50 percent of respondents thought the military behaved unethically at least some of the time (the lowest of any occupation), 57 percent thought the military faced consequences for these lapses (the most of any occupation). For comparison, 81 percent thought members of Congress acted unethically and only 25 percent believed they faced consequences.<sup>14</sup> There are many, however, who do not share this view of military accountability, as evidenced by continuing congressional efforts to reform the military justice system. Again, this argument may be somewhat circular: Do people trust the military because of its track record for accountability? Or do they believe in military professionalism and accountability, regardless of objective evidence, because they trust the military as an institution?

The degree to which perceptions of performance and professionalism are malleable highlights the possible role of the third P: persuasion. Persuasion encompasses public depictions of the military, including “the careful use of advertising, movies, and the news media to portray the military’s improved performance and

professionalism in the best possible light.”<sup>15</sup> Military recruiting efforts are one key source of persuasion. With the introduction of the AVF and associated need to compete in the labor market, military recruiting shifted toward selling a product (military service) to customers (potential recruits), which involved “sophisticated and expensive military advertising campaigns” and “intensive market research.”<sup>16</sup> Such efforts are aimed not only at those of recruiting age, but also at parents and other influencers, and may also boost the broader public’s image of the military.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond targeted recruiting efforts, the Cold War’s militarization of foreign policy and culture more broadly, from criminal justice to fashion, may have also contributed to positive views of the military: “The climate of comfort with military imagery and military organization certainly does no harm to the military’s image.”<sup>18</sup> While fewer Americans than in the recent past have personal experience with military service, images of the military are everywhere, from popular movies and TV shows to professional sporting events and commercial advertising. By this logic, trust in the military remains high despite the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in part because of “the popular militarism that is a key part of modern American culture” and shows no signs of fading.<sup>19</sup>

Persuasion may have long-lasting effects, with formative sociocultural experiences in early adulthood shaping generational attitudes for decades afterwards.<sup>20</sup> Twenty years ago, public policy scholar David King and author Zachary Karabell argued that “Generation Xers and Millennials are far more likely than their Baby Boomer parents to have confidence in the military,” because baby boomers’ views were shaped by Vietnam, while younger generations were shaped by the perceived successes of the 1990s, such as the 1991 Gulf War and the 1994 intervention in Haiti.<sup>21</sup> The 1990s also saw the fiftieth anniversary of World War II and prominent celebrations of the heroism of American soldiers fighting in “The Good War.”<sup>22</sup> According to this generational consequence of persuasion, we might expect more skeptical cultural depictions of the military during the era of inconclusive “forever wars” to lower trust among Generation Z more than for preceding generations, whose average lifetime trust may be anchored to different formative experiences.

This brings us to a fourth potential driver of trust: personal connection to the military. A personal connection to the military could affect trust by mediating perceptions of performance and professionalism, or the effects of persuasion. But personal connection could also affect trust through distinct psychological mechanisms. In the late 1990s, there was considerable support for the idea that societal trust in the military would decline as fewer members of society had a personal connection to the military.<sup>23</sup> As part of the landmark survey of civil-military attitudes from the Triangle Institute of Security Studies (TISS), political scientists Paul Gronke and Peter D. Feaver tested this hypothesis and found that among elites, military experience was linked to greater confidence in the military.<sup>24</sup> Par-

ticularly in the AVF era, a positive correlation between personal connection and trust could in part result from self-selection: those with more trust in the military might be more likely to serve or encourage their family members to do so. Trust and confidence could also be linked to the character of the experience with or connection to the military, although this could be positive or negative.

By contrast, a recent popular hypothesis, sometimes called “patriotism-lite” or “thank you for your service” culture, posits that the military’s high polling numbers are driven by those who are not connected to the military.<sup>25</sup> For those who have not served, knowing that “others bear that burden [of military service] leads to guilt and gratitude, which become expressed through superficial demonstrations of appreciation and pride.”<sup>26</sup> Security scholar David Burbach has argued that high levels of confidence in polling do not necessarily translate into real support for the military in terms of resources or policy deference.<sup>27</sup> Patriotism-lite is often described as a post-draft and distinctly post-9/11 phenomenon, as long-running wars have been fought by a small segment of the population.

Finally, a fifth P, partisanship, is becoming increasingly prominent as a source of trust in the military. Burbach found that partisanship is the strongest predictor of trust in the military, with Republicans having higher trust than Democrats, and both sets having higher trust than independents.<sup>28</sup> In data from the General Social Survey, the partisan split begins in 1980 and widens over the subsequent thirty-five years until it overwhelms other demographic variables.<sup>29</sup> Individuals are also likely to report higher trust in the military when their co-partisan is president, and when presidential approval is high.<sup>30</sup> A 2019 Pew survey similarly found a partisan gap, with Republicans having more faith than Democrats in military leaders.<sup>31</sup> One possible explanation for this partisan split is that Republicans and Democrats get their news from different sources, and process it using different cognitive biases, resulting in fundamentally different perceptions of the military’s performance and professionalism arising from their distinct persuasive environments.<sup>32</sup> There is some evidence that Republicans view the military as a part of their “in-group” in a way that Democrats and independents do not.<sup>33</sup>

There are, however, signs these partisan dynamics may be changing. As discussed above, partisans at both ends of the spectrum may trust the military less today than only a few years ago. In a 2019 survey, political scientists Ronald R. Krebs and Robert Ralston found that, during the Trump administration, Democrats were more likely than Republicans to endorse deference to the military, presumably as a check on a president they did not trust.<sup>34</sup> In a follow-up survey, Krebs and Ralston found that Democrats were less deferential when Biden, their co-partisan, became president, though Republicans’ deference did not rise as they had expected.<sup>35</sup> They also found a large decline in the percentage of Americans who strongly agree that “Members of the military should be allowed to publicly express their political views just like any other citizen,” from 55 percent in the

1990s TISS survey to 28 percent in their 2021 survey; as well as decreases in support for public-policy advocacy or criticism of civilian officials by members of the military, particularly among Republicans.<sup>36</sup> While less deference to the military is not inherently bad, it could undermine public support for the norm of civilian control if it is driven by the belief that the military is a partisan opponent.<sup>37</sup>

We now turn to two large, long-running surveys of the American public's attitudes – the American National Election Studies (ANES) and the General Social Survey (GSS) – to understand better the evidence supporting each of the drivers of confidence proposed above. The ANES uses a feeling thermometer toward the military, asking respondents to rate the military from 0 to 100: higher the warmer/more positively they feel toward it, and lower the colder/more negatively they feel. Warmth is a good measure of positive attitudes, but it is not specifically a measure of trust or confidence. To the extent people generally value trustworthiness, we should expect the feeling thermometer to correlate positively with confidence in the military. While the ANES extends further back in time to examine attitudes during the Vietnam War, questions about feelings toward the military were excluded from surveys after 2012. The GSS has current data that reflect whether respondents have “hardly any,” “some,” or “great” confidence in the leaders of the military from the end of the Vietnam War through the present, giving an up-to-date view on trends. Unfortunately, the GSS has few questions on foreign-policy preferences we would expect to correlate directly with confidence in the military.

Performance and professionalism may correlate with confidence in the military, but data from both the ANES and GSS show that they do not tell the whole story. On one hand, the ANES feeling thermometer shows warmth toward the military decreasing over the course of the Vietnam War – and after – except for a brief blip as the war was drawing to a close in 1972. Consistent with Brady and Kent's findings earlier in this volume, our analysis of both GSS and ANES data shows increases and relatively higher points in the early 2000s, when the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan seemed to be nearing successful conclusions. The GSS high point for confidence is 1991, from a survey fielded during and immediately after the Persian Gulf War, which was widely perceived as a resounding success. The ANES did not field a survey in that year, but its closest surveys both before and after show that any spike it may have picked up would have been fleeting.

While these trends seem consistent with the performance hypothesis, it is odd that both the GSS data on confidence and the ANES feeling thermometer reflect low points in the 1980s – even lower than the years immediately after the Vietnam War. Confidence dipped during the worst of the Iraq War, but it never dropped as low as during the Vietnam War, and the ANES shows no similar dip for warm feelings. Of course, this might simply be because, from a U.S. casualty perspective,

the Iraq War never came close to going as poorly as the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, even within the context of the post-9/11 wars, the performance hypothesis has a hard time explaining the GSS high point for post-9/11 military confidence in 2018, as well as the consistently high ratings in the ANES from 2004–2012.

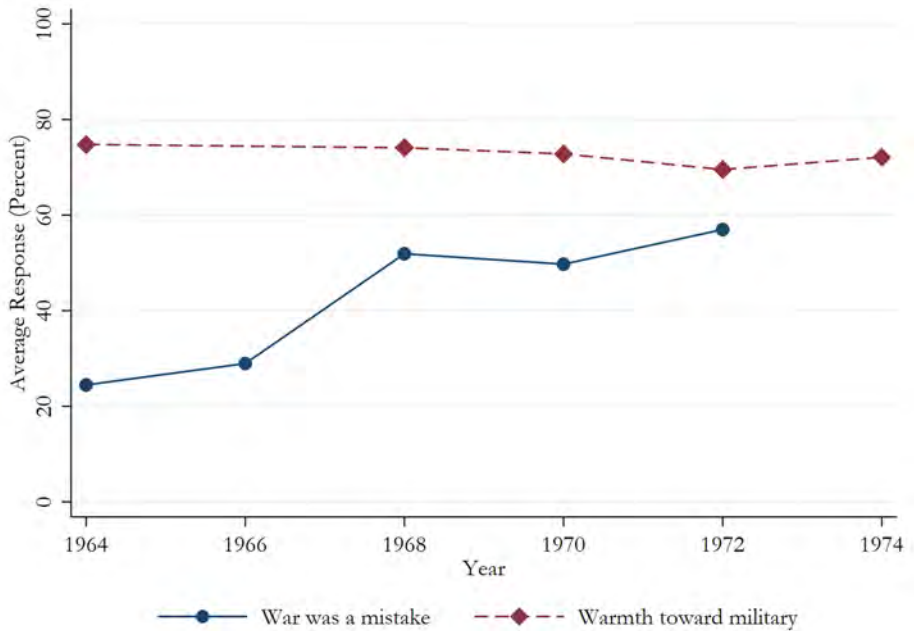
The performance hypothesis does not fare much better when we examine the ANES questions about whether invading Vietnam or Iraq was a mistake. Figure 1 shows that in general, a greater proportion of respondents viewed invading Vietnam as a mistake as the war dragged on. However, average warmth only dipped from 75 percent in 1964 to 70 percent in 1972. While the performance hypothesis expects positive attitudes toward the military to track closely evaluations of the military's success, this slight decline in warmth is not commensurate with the large shift – from 25 percent in 1964 to 57 percent in 1972 – in the public's belief that the war was a mistake. To the extent that the public may have blamed policy-makers, rather than the military, for starting an ill-advised war, this could support the argument that public trust in the military is resilient when blame is shifted to civilian policy-makers.

We expect changes in performance to affect attitudes toward the military most among people who pay the most attention to relevant military events. People who report an interest in military policy or national news might be more likely to follow events that demonstrate both military performance in foreign conflicts and professionalism in upholding domestic or organizational values. Here, the performance hypothesis again finds mixed support: while confidence in the military tracks Iraqi civilian casualties – meaning that when casualties are lower, public confidence is higher – there is no obvious difference in how confidence changes between those who report being “very interested” in military affairs versus “not at all interested.”

The data in Figure 2 suggest that people who pay a lot of attention to what the military is doing do not respond to events differently from people who pay no attention. The ANES questions that directly ask about respondents' attention to what was happening in Vietnam reach a similar conclusion. In 1968, the Tet Offensive led many Americans to realize the fight in Vietnam would be much harder than they had been led to believe, despite the military's tactical successes. As a result, we might expect the warm feelings toward the military in 1968 to be lower for people who pay attention to the war than those who did not. In contrast, a significantly greater proportion of people who reported paying attention to Vietnam had positive attitudes toward the military than did those who reported not paying attention, 79 to 70 percent.<sup>38</sup> There is no clear evidence that paying attention to events affected attitudes toward the military over the course of the Vietnam War.

**W**hile there is mixed support for the performance and professionalism views, there is strong evidence to support the hypothesis that personal connection is positively correlated with trust in the military.

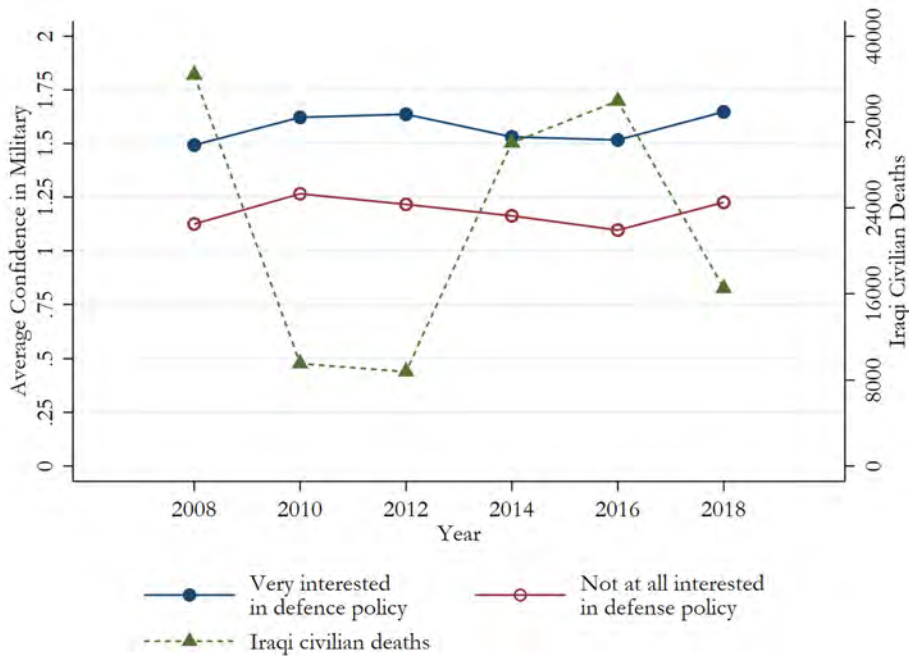
Figure 1  
Public Approval of the Vietnam War over Time



The solid line represents the data from ANES respondents who were asked whether the United States “did the right thing” by sending soldiers to Vietnam or “should have stayed out” of Vietnam. The dashed line measures warmth toward the military through the “feeling thermometer” ANES uses, asking respondents to rate the military (0 to 100), assigning higher numbers the warmer/more positively they feel toward it, and lower the colder/more negatively they feel. Source: Data from the American National Election Studies.

During the height of the Vietnam War, the ANES asked about respondents’ and their families’ or friends’ recent military service within “the past five or six years.” Data from 1968 show that people with connections to the military feel more positively toward it.<sup>39</sup> This outcome is particularly noteworthy given that many respondents were connected to the military by an unpopular draft, which if anything should create a negative impression. There is no significant difference in mean warmth toward the military between those with Vietnam War–era military service and those without. However, respondents who knew anyone who had recently served in the military (“in the past five or six years”) rated the military five points higher on average (76 versus 71) than those who did not know anyone who had served. Knowing someone who had served in Vietnam had the same effect (77

Figure 2  
The Relationship between Attention, Battlefield Performance, and Confidence in the Military



The two solid lines use GSS data to compare levels of confidence in the military among respondents who report being “very interested in military and defense policy” and “not at all interested in military and defense policy.” All figures measuring confidence in the military through the General Social Survey use a categorical measure in which respondents choose between “hardly any confidence,” “only some,” and “a great deal.” The dashed line reports Iraqi civilian casualty data from Iraq Body Count to provide additional context. See Iraq Body Count, <http://iraqbodycount.org/database>.

versus 72). Respondents who knew anyone in the military (including themselves) were also more likely to report feeling very warmly toward the military than respondents who did not know anyone in it: 34 percent of those who knew someone in the military rated it 90 or higher, compared with just 23 percent of respondents who did not know anyone in the military. In fact, the closer connections the respondents had to the Vietnam War, the more likely they were to have very positive feelings toward the military: while 37 percent of respondents who knew anyone who served in Vietnam rated the military 90 or higher, compared with just 25 percent of respondents who did not know anyone, this number rises to 41 percent for respondents who served in Vietnam themselves or had family who did.



The post-9/11 era shows similar patterns. As seen in Figure 3, mean warmth toward the military was roughly five points higher for respondents with military service than for those without in 2004, 2008, and 2012. Interestingly, the greatest difference is between respondents with no military service and older veterans: pre-9/11 veterans report the most warmth (86) and those with no military experience report the least (80). Average warmth among post-9/11 veterans was statistically indistinguishable from these other groups. Respondents with either a personal or familial connection to military service had the largest gap in warm attitudes in 2012: those with a connection to the military rated it 7 points higher on average than those without.

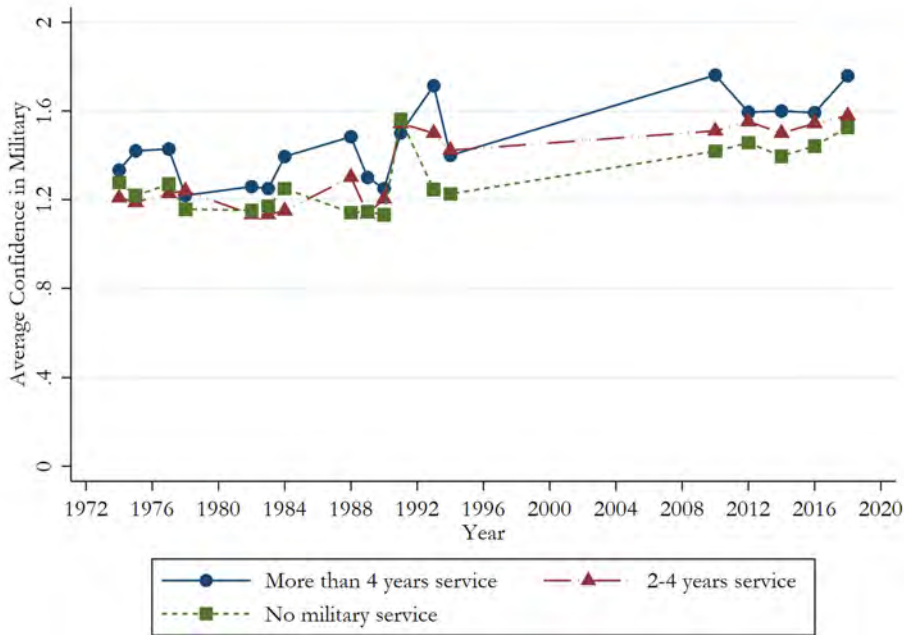
Likewise, the GSS data support the hypothesis that personal connection correlates with higher confidence in the military. There is no difference in the mean levels of military confidence between those with military service and those without in any years before 2010, except for 1988 and 1993, when respondents with military service had slightly more confidence. Further disaggregating military service into those who served more than four years and those who served fewer than four years provides more evidence that longer service is associated with greater confidence in the military: Not only do more years reflect this relationship (1975, 1977, 1988, and 1993), but the magnitude of the difference is also substantially larger in the latter two years. Between 2010 and 2018, there is a significant difference between those who served and those who did not in each year except 2012. Again, the most salient difference in this period seems to be between those who served more than four years and those who did not serve at all.

The clear relationship between military connections and higher self-reported levels of trust in the military undermines the expectations of the patriotism-lite argument by showing that familiarity does not, in fact, breed contempt. It is particularly notable that military service appears to correlate with warmer attitudes toward the military even during the Vietnam-draft era, though the difference has certainly become starker since 9/11. This correlation suggests that positive feelings toward the military are not solely a result of self-selection in the AVF era. Greater trust in the military is not driven by people with fewer connections to the military.

Our analysis also confirms a partisan divide in trust. While warmth toward the military has been on the rise among both Democrats and Republicans for decades, this shift has been most pronounced among Republicans.<sup>40</sup> Trust among Democrats has only recently reached levels comparable to those before the collapse of trust in the late 1970s and early 1980s; trust among Republicans rose sharply around the year 2000 and has stayed high since, although there are now signs confidence may be falling.

It is not clear what has driven this sharp divide in partisan attitudes. One possibility is that political partisanship is interacting with other demographic or cultural

Figure 3  
Military Service and Confidence in the Military



Source: Authors' compilation of data from the General Social Survey comparing respondents' experience in military service with their confidence in the military.

shifts. We explore whether the partisanship and persuasion explanations interact to explain recent trends in trust: formative experiences shape and secure early impressions about the military but are filtered and amplified differently through partisan lenses. If this hypothesis is correct, we would expect partisan trends in trust in the military to differ across generations and demographic groups. Conversely, if the trends over time are similar for these different groups, that would indicate that something exogenous is driving trust for all groups, despite their different formative experiences.

As context, it is important to consider the change in national demographics reflected in these surveys. The percentage of respondents who self-identify as Democrats – including independents leaning Democrat – has declined since the 1950s, while the percentage who self-identify as Republican or leaning Republican has generally risen since around 1980. The average age has risen from a low point of around forty-four in the early 1980s to over fifty in 2020. This seems to be driven by the baby boomer generation, which has had the largest share of the sur-

vey sample size since 1980. For almost the whole period since 2000, boomers have made up at least 10 percentage points more of the sample size – and often 15 points more – than the next largest group.

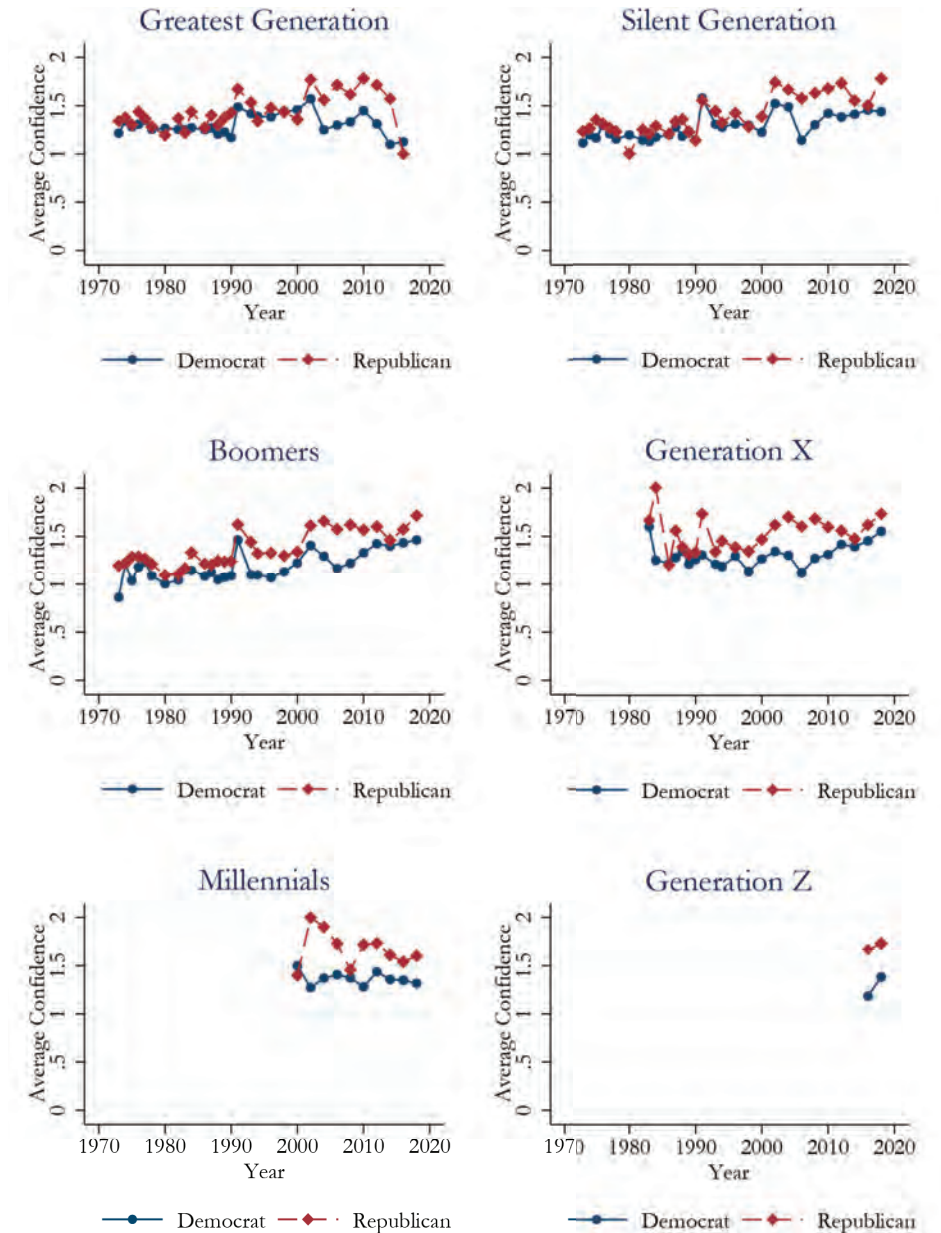
This finding is significant because age is strongly positively correlated with more trust in the military, and boomers and Generation Xers have together made up between 60 and 68 percent of the sample throughout the last two decades. At the same time, the average combined age of these generations from 2000 onward is fifty. Could attitudes from either or both generations be driving the recent rise in trust in the military? The ANES data show boomers are significantly more likely to be Republican than Democrat, and while the difference is slight, it increases over time. In addition, as Figure 4 shows, the partisan polarization that has increasingly characterized American society for the last two decades also started much earlier for boomers, at least with respect to attitudes toward the military: significant differences between Democratic and Republican confidence in the military begin in the 1980s for boomers and the early 1990s for Generation X. Conversely, the partisan divide is only evident in the silent generation starting in the year 2000.

Interestingly, millennial Republicans are the only group for whom there is a clear decrease in confidence in the military over the last twenty years. Millennial Democrats do not exhibit the sharp rise seen in older generations, and may even have declining confidence, though we should be cautious given the small numbers of Republican millennials in the sample prior to the mid-2000s. Overall, the partisan gap seems larger for the two youngest generations, though here too we must be cautious about interpreting the low number of respondents (seventy-two) from Generation Z across all survey years.

There is also evidence that exogenous factors shaped attitudes. While boomers show an unusually steep increase in warmth toward the military as they age compared with other generations, each generation saw a sharp rise in warmth regardless of party affiliation from the late 1990s through the early 2000s: when members of the silent generation were around sixty and baby boomers were approaching fifty. Together, the evidence indicates that increasing partisanship has played a role in attitudes toward the military, but the generational composition of American society, especially changes among baby boomers and Generation X, has also played a role (see Figure 5). The major, polarizing debates about the Vietnam War and the transition to the AVF during these generations' formative years may have contributed to their distinct military attitudes.

**T**rust in the military may affect public policy by shaping what resources and roles the public envisions for the military. In this section, we use the ANES survey questions on a wide range of contemporaneous policy issues to examine the consequences of trust in the military. Is there any relationship between how individuals feel about the military and their policy preferences on related issues?

Figure 4  
Confidence in the Military by Generation and Partisan Identity



Source: Authors' compilation of GSS data on average confidence levels in the military, measured according to birth year data. Generation variables follow Pew's definition of generational divisions. See Pew Research Center, "The Generations Defined," March 1, 2018, [https://www.pewresearch.org/st\\_18-02-27\\_generations\\_defined](https://www.pewresearch.org/st_18-02-27_generations_defined).

Figure 5  
Generational Attitudes to the Military by Age



Source: Authors' compilation of ANES data on average warmth toward the military, measured according to birth year data across three generations. Generation variables follow Pew's definition of generational divisions. See Pew Research Center, "The Generations Defined," March 1, 2018, [https://www.pewresearch.org/st\\_18-02-27\\_generations\\_defined](https://www.pewresearch.org/st_18-02-27_generations_defined).

The public's willingness to use military force abroad is one such issue. In 1992 and 1996 – the two years that the ANES asked both its military thermometer question and the general foreign policy question about "how willing the United States should be to use international force to solve international problems" – there was a wide gap in military warmth between those who answered "extremely" or "very willing" to use force and those who answered "not very willing" or "never willing." Respondents who were more willing to use military force felt more than 12 points warmer toward the military than those who were more reluctant to use force. In addition, more than half of the respondents who felt more warm than cold to the military were extremely or very willing to use force to solve international problems, but less than one-third of those who felt colder toward the military were willing to use force.

We should be cautious about assuming the same relationship holds today as it did in 1992 and 1996, the brief period of unchallenged American supremacy that

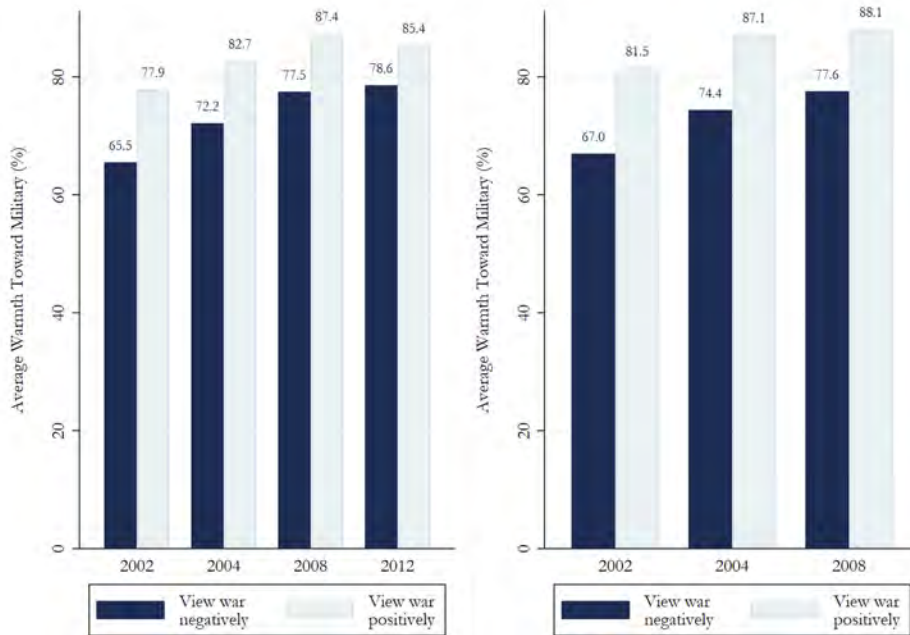
lasted from the end of the Cold War until 9/11. While the ANES does not ask about confidence in the military in its most recent surveys, we can get a closer look at this relationship through the ANES polling about attitudes toward specific uses of force in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. One such question asks whether respondents think the United States “did the right thing” in getting involved in the war, or, in the case of Iraq, whether it “should or should not have sent troops.” From 1968 through 1972, as well as during the Iraq War in 2008, respondents who thought sending in troops was the right thing to do viewed the military between 5 and 9 points more favorably than those who thought sending in troops was wrong. Similarly, in nearly every year with available ANES data, respondents with a positive view of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan felt more than 10 points warmer to the military than respondents with a negative view of those wars. As Figure 6 shows, compared with the data gathered during the Vietnam War, respondents with both negative and positive views of war feel warmer toward the military today.

Warmth toward the military is also associated, or at least was associated during the Vietnam War, with a preference for more escalatory war strategies. While Figure 7 shows that the average difference in the military thermometer ratings is not consistently large, cross-tabulations reinforce the relationship. In 1964, 1968, and 1970, respondents who felt more warm than cold toward the military were at least 10 percentage points more likely to prefer escalation as a strategy. Even in the waning years of the war (1970 and 1972), the proportion of respondents who self-identified as hawks in favor of pursuing victory was nearly double among people with warmer views of the military (39 percent versus 20 percent in 1970 and 36 percent versus 17 percent in 1972).

Lastly, this relationship is also evident for more general policies, such as defense spending. Figure 8 shows a consistent fourteen-point or greater difference in warmth toward the military between those who prefer to increase defense spending and those who prefer to decrease it. More than 53 percent of respondents who felt warmth toward the military wanted to increase defense spending, compared with less than 25 percent who did not feel warmth toward the military. The GSS shows similar results over an even longer period. From 1973 to 2018, respondents who reported having “a great deal of confidence” were most likely to believe that the United States spends too little on defense. For most of this period, respondents with “some confidence” were also more likely than those with “hardly any confidence” to feel the same. This contrasts with Burbach’s finding that confidence may be superficial and unrelated to concrete policy preferences.

**T**here is much debate about what drives public trust in the military. Our analysis leverages two different national surveys to provide a comprehensive evaluation of individual-level predictors of attitudes toward the military. The evidence does not point to any decisive factor but offers promising direc-

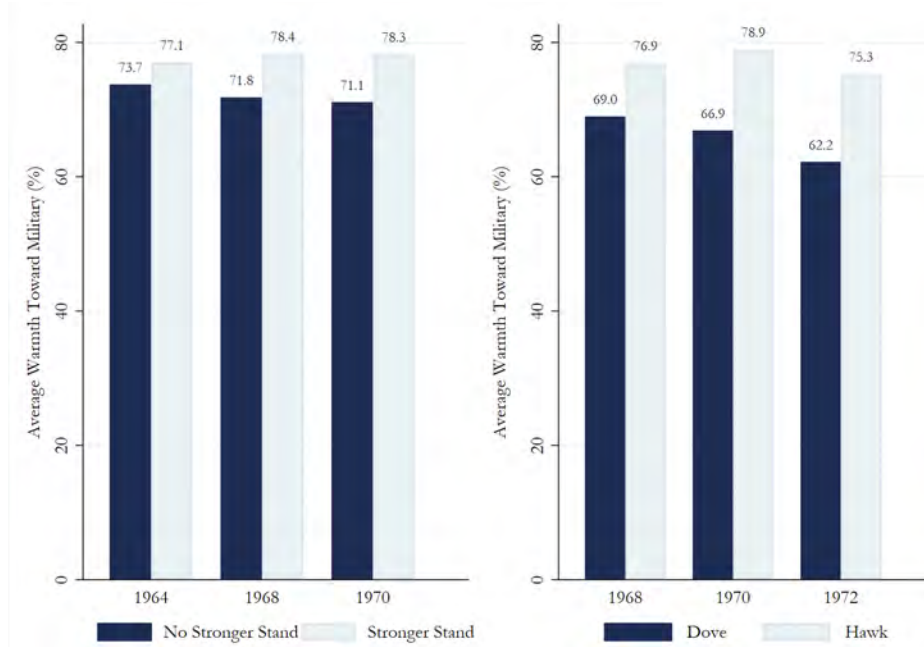
**Figure 6**  
Average Warmth toward the Military by Assessment of War Costs in Afghanistan (left) and Iraq (right)



The ANES asked different questions about respondents’ attitudes toward using force in Afghanistan and Iraq. In most years, respondents reported whether they thought the war was “worth the cost” or not. In 2008, respondents reported whether they “approve or disapprove of the way” the government handled the war in Afghanistan, while in 2002, they reported whether they “favor or oppose” military action in Iraq. Source: Data from the American National Election Studies.

tions for further inquiry. While trust is somewhat responsive to major events that reveal new information about military performance or professionalism, these shifts are inconsistent and tend to be smaller than we might expect. Instead, trust may be resilient to changes in the news cycle because it is shaped by a deeper social and personal context. Formative experiences, such as those that define generations or stretch partisan divides, may create a strong foundation for how individuals assess the military over their lifetime. Perhaps most notably, under both the draft and the AVF, evidence shows that familiarity with the military is associated with greater trust in it. This has important implications for many debates today about the consequences of an increasingly active but insular military, though

Figure 7  
Average Warmth toward the Military among Hawks and Doves



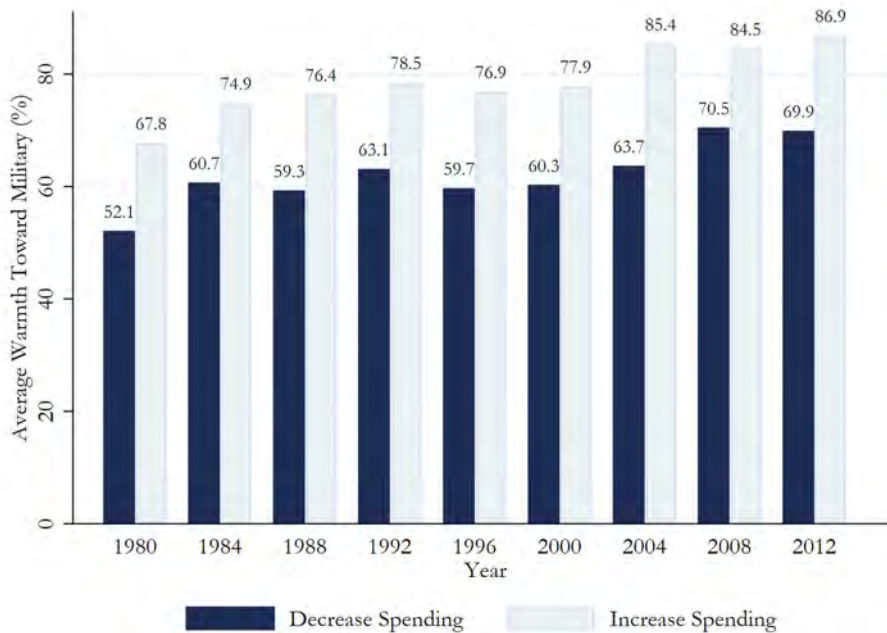
The chart on the left reflects the data from the ANES “feelings thermometer,” comparing the views of those who supported escalation during the U.S. military occupation of Vietnam (“stronger stand”) with those who supported withdrawal from Vietnam/continuing occupation but ending the fighting (“no stronger stand”). The chart on the right reflects the attitudes toward the military in ANES data, asking respondents to place themselves on a seven-point Likert scale from “immediate withdrawal” to “complete military victory” in Vietnam. Those who placed themselves closer to one (represented supporting “immediate withdrawal”) were *doves*, and those who placed themselves closer to seven (supporting “complete military victory”) were *hawks*. Source: Data from the American National Election Studies.

there remains much to learn about the relationship between personal connections to the military, attention to military affairs, and trust in the military.

At the same time, our analysis has not been exhaustive. We must continue to consider the ways these drivers interact. The drastic change in boomer trust, from the low levels in their youth to consistently high levels of support and trust as they age, shows that there is no simple story of some generations being more confident in the military than others: formative experiences matter but are not determinative. This points to the importance of differences in how individuals process broader events. Similarly, we must learn more about how the public conceives of the military to understand what the public trusts the military to do. There is evi-



Figure 8  
Average Warmth toward the Military by Defense Spending Preferences



This figure reflects the attitudes toward the military in ANES data, asking respondents to place themselves on a seven-point Likert scale from “greatly decrease defense spending” to “greatly increase defense spending.” The “decrease spending” bars represents respondents who placed themselves from 1–3 on this scale, while the “increase spending” bars represent those who placed themselves from 5–7. Source: Data from the American National Election Studies.

dence that at least some groups exaggerate their support for the military.<sup>41</sup> Who cares more about demonstrating their trust, and how does this affect their policy preferences? In different times and places, people may trust the military based primarily on their idea of its warfighting capabilities or its morals, or even on their interactions with servicemembers in daily life. One important driver for future investigation is the military’s association with gender and racial norms. The U.S. military has historically been a bastion of (predominantly White) masculine ambition and ideals; does trust change when the public perceives deviations from these ideals?

The relationship between the American public’s trust in the military and other important outcomes – the effectiveness of American foreign policy, the health of American civil-military relations, the soundness of American democracy – is also complex. Both high and low levels of trust in the military can have adverse conse-

quences. Trust in the military must be considered in the context of the American public's views of society and government. It can be counterintuitive to think there are downsides to the military enjoying consistently high levels of public trust, particularly after the experience of the Vietnam War. But this collective effort to keep trust in the military high may have blinded us to other civil-military dangers, which in turn endanger both military effectiveness and democratic foundations.<sup>42</sup>

A persistent and large gap between confidence in the military and confidence in civilian governmental institutions threatens to upend the hierarchical nature of proper democratic civil-military relations. We have seen calls for the military to have a larger role in policy-making, including on issues not directly related to military expertise or even foreign policy. We have also seen repeated calls for more veterans to enter government (likely coming at the expense of increased representation of other voices *not* already overrepresented in government), with some even campaigning on the platform that their military service makes them uniquely qualified as political leaders. We may also see a vicious cycle as civilian leaders, knowing that the military is more popular than their institutions, use the military as political shield/weapon when beneficial, which only serves to further elevate the military over civilian institutions and thereby further exacerbate the trust gap.

But there is also a danger that use of the military for political ends could ultimately have the opposite effect, turning the military into “just another political institution.” Politicization arising from high trust in the military may, down the line, cause a drop in trust. The Supreme Court may be a cautionary tale of how quickly trust can change when the public perceives that an institution has become too politically motivated.<sup>43</sup> We may be beginning to see such a shift in attitudes toward the military. For example, partisan actors have used the debates over inclusivity, military justice, and vaccine policy to create perceived divides within the military, portraying woke leadership as undermining the true warriors.<sup>44</sup> It remains to be seen whether this will have an enduring effect on who trusts the military and how much. Given the clear relationship between trust in the military and civilian views on important defense policy, it is paramount that we find a way to foster appropriate and balanced attitudes toward the military.

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#### EDITORS' NOTE

The data in Figure 4 and the accompanying description in the essay were corrected on August 6, 2024.

## AUTHORS' NOTE

All views are the authors' own and do not represent the official views or positions of their employers.

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- <sup>26</sup> Burbach, "Gaining Trust While Losing Wars," 156–159. Burbach also credits patriotism-lite to Charles Moskos in "Patriotism-Lite Meets the Citizen Soldier," *United We Serve: National Service and the Future of Citizenship*, ed. E.J. Dionne Jr., Kayla Meltzer Drogosz, and Robert E. Litan (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2003), 33–42.
- <sup>27</sup> David Burbach, "Confidence without Sacrifice," in *Reconsidering American Civil-Military Relations: The Military, Society, Politics, and Modern War*, ed. Lionel Beehner, Risa Brooks, and Daniel Maurer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 160–161.
- <sup>28</sup> David Burbach, "Partisan Dimensions of Confidence in the U.S. Military, 1973–2016," *Armed Forces & Society* 45 (2) (2019): 211–233.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 226.
- <sup>31</sup> Gecewicz and Rainie, *Why Americans Don't Fully Trust Many Who Hold Positions of Power and Responsibility*, 7.
- <sup>32</sup> Michael Robinson, "Who Follows the Generals? Polarization in Institutional Confidence in the Military," APSA Preprints (2019), <https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2019-vsfn>.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Ronald R. Krebs and Robert Ralston, "Why Conservatives Turned on the U.S. Military," *Foreign Affairs*, September 28, 2021.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Krebs and Ralston, "More Deferential but Also More Political."
- <sup>37</sup> Krebs and Ralston, "Why Conservatives Turned on the U.S. Military."
- <sup>38</sup> The difference between these groups is statistically significant at a 0.04 level. All differences we report in this essay are statistically significant at a 0.05 level at minimum, unless noted otherwise.
- <sup>39</sup> American National Election Studies, "1968 Time Series Study," <https://electionstudies.org/data-center/1968-time-series-study> (accessed September 28, 2022).
- <sup>40</sup> Both the ANES and GSS ask respondents whether they "generally think of" themselves as Democrats or Republicans. We group respondents who leaned one way or the other in with their stronger co-partisans.
- <sup>41</sup> Meredith Kleykamp, Crosby Hipes, and Alair MacLean, "Who Supports U.S. Veterans and Who Exaggerates Their Support?" *Armed Forces and Society* 44 (1) (2018): 92–115, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X16682786>; and Burbach, "Gaining Trust While Losing Wars," 169–170.
- <sup>42</sup> See, for example, Jessica D. Blankshain and Max Z. Margulies, "The Downside of High Trust in the Military," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/16/opinion/americans-trust-us-military.html>.
- <sup>43</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, "Approval of U.S. Supreme Court Down to 40%, a New Low," Gallup, September 23, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/354908/approval-supreme-court-down-new-low.aspx>.
- <sup>44</sup> Max Boot, "The Disturbing Strategy behind MAGA Complaints about a 'Woke Military,'" *The Washington Post*, September 26, 2022.

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