

# Why Americans Don't Trust the Media

## A Preliminary Analysis

*David A. Jones*

---

An alarming number of Americans no longer trust the media to report the news fairly—a serious problem in a democracy that depends so much on news organizations to inform its citizens. As a first step toward explaining this phenomenon, this study explores various factors that explain individual-level variation in media trust. One key factor appears to be trust in government, suggesting that the media's lowly stature may stem more from general political malaise than from the many shortcomings of contemporary news coverage. Interestingly, trust in the media is particularly low among conservative Republicans, especially those who listen to political talk radio. For these Americans, perhaps the problem with the media rests on what they see as a liberal bias, not declining journalistic standards.

**Keywords:** *media and politics; political communication; public trust; public opinion; media bias*

---

The vitality of a representative democracy rests in large part on a voting public that is sufficiently informed about public affairs. Where citizens get their information—and particularly how they view their information sources—is thus a crucial element of understanding the health of a democratic system. It is no secret that Americans now depend almost entirely on the media for political information (Graber 1997). What is striking about today's media environment is the degree to which Americans distrust the sources they rely upon so comprehensively (Dautrich and Hartley 1999).

This article will provide a preliminary step toward understanding this lack of trust. Specifically, it will focus on some of the factors that help explain variation in public trust in the media. By doing so, it will lay the groundwork for developing a more comprehensive model for explaining this phenomenon as data become available.

Press/Politics 9(2):60-75

DOI: 10.1177/1081180X04263461

© 2004 by the President and the Fellows of Harvard College

The media were not always held in low regard. In the mid-1970s, as much as 30 percent of Americans said they had “a great deal” of confidence in “the press,” according to the National Opinion Research Center’s measures of confidence in institutions. Confidence in the press remained high throughout the 1970s, sustaining levels comparable to “major companies” and considerably higher than levels of trust reported for “Congress” and the “executive branch.” As the 1980s approached, however, public confidence in the media began dropping. By 1988, only 15 percent said they had “a great deal” of confidence in the press. By 1994, that number was approaching 10 percent (Dautrich and Hartley 1999: 13–14). And as the impeachment trial of President Clinton drew to a close in 1999, only 35 percent of survey respondents said they approved of the job done by the media (West 2001: 104). More recently, although the media’s reputation improved during the coverage of 9/11, a year later it was “back in the toilet—lower, even, than before that fateful day” (Kurtz 2002).

Why be concerned about the public’s low regard for the media? After all, news organizations are private-sector enterprises primarily geared toward making profits (Patterson 1993), not formal political institutions established as such in the U.S. Constitution. Political media may be miscast in this crucial role as information source, but this is a responsibility that was thrust upon them, not one they chose (Patterson 1993).

The problem lies in the media’s heightened role in a modern democracy. Even if the media do not make up one of the three branches of the federal government, they exhibit all the characteristics of a political institution and should be treated as such (Cook 1998; Sparrow 1999). Accordingly, just as declining trust in formal government institutions warrants our attention (Chanley et al. 2000; Hetherington 1998), so should falling confidence in the media. After all,

Lower levels of confidence in the media may deprive the public of some of the essentials of democracy: a source of current information and public education that it can trust and a watchdog for public officials in which it has confidence. Without a trustworthy source of information, the public is left without the ability to discern the important issues of the day, the differences between candidates in elections, and whether what the candidates and advertisers are telling them is accurate. And a public that does not know which candidate stands for what may be less likely to vote and more likely to become cynical regarding elections. (Dautrich and Hartley 1999: 15)

## Related Research

Why do so many Americans distrust the media? Several explanations may be suggested in the numerous studies that focus on the shortcomings in political news coverage, most of which focus on media *content*. When covering elections, news organizations are much more likely to focus on the “game” aspects of the

campaign (Patterson 1993)—“horse-race” dynamics such as who is ahead, who is behind, and what strategies each side is employing to win (Robinson and Sheehan 1983). “Issues” by contrast get minimal coverage. Yet voters need information about policy differences to help them cast an informed vote choice. This disconnect frustrates voters (Dautrich and Hartley 1999) and electoral campaign organizations (Matalin and Carville 1994).

The public also may resent the media’s propensity to *interpret* rarely than merely *report* the news. Since Vietnam and Watergate, the relationship between the media and politicians has grown increasingly adversarial. Reflecting this heightened skepticism, news organizations are more likely to employ an aggressive interpretive approach that raises cynical questions about politicians’ motivations (West 2001). Thus, for example, when a politician proposes to “reform” welfare, news stories do not merely cover the details of the proposal (in fact, they may ignore the policy particulars); they focus on what must have motivated him/her to make such a proposal. The lead paragraph might read: “With an eye toward the November election, Senator Jane Smith proposed a comprehensive welfare reform measure—a move widely seen as an effort to court moderate voters in key swing states.” Reporters and editors, reflecting an assumption that readers are incapable of interpreting “the facts” on their own, tell their audiences not only *what* a public official did but *why* he or she did it. And the *why* usually suggests purely political motivations rather than an elected official’s desire to make good policy (Patterson 1993). Not only might such a cynical approach contribute to “videomalaise” (Robinson 1976; Bennett et al. 1999) and declining trust in government (Cappella and Jamieson 1997), it may be fueling a public backlash against the media: “The adversarial relationship that previously had been evident between reporters and public officials now has spread to the public’s view of the press” (West 2001: 104).

The public also may be growing weary of the media’s apparent obsession with political scandal and politicians’ personal lives. The phenomenon is a familiar one: A politician makes an embarrassing mistake during a speech or debate, or allegations emerge about his or her recent or distant past, or he or she gets caught in an extramarital affair. Either way, the result is the same: “The news media, print and broadcast, go after a wounded politician like sharks in a feeding frenzy” (Sabato 1991: 1). Fueled by higher ratings and readership that follow, news organizations cover the story for weeks on end. CNN and other twenty-four-hour news networks cover the “issue” around the clock, approaching the matter from a variety of different angles, in part to fill their massive “news holes.” Under certain conditions, scandals are followed by a significant decline in public trust in government (Chanley et al. 2000). And audience numbers suggest that many viewers and readers embrace these stories. Yet survey evidence suggests that many Americans have grown tired of this type of coverage (Dautrich and Hartley 1999)—even if they have a difficult time turning away.

Having to rely on news sources that are so preoccupied with scandal, the horse race, and other distractions, many voters are not getting the information they need to make meaningful political decisions (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). To be sure, when it comes to news sources, Americans have more choices than ever. Yet perhaps television-soaked Americans are merely being “seduced” into thinking they are informed (Hart 1994). Despite being “saturated with bits and bytes of information,” many Americans lack the contextual knowledge and belief systems necessary to sort it all out (Schudson 1995).

The media's focus on political strategy, scandals, and celebrity, its propensity to interpret rather than simply report the news—all of these factors may partly explain low information levels and declining trust in government and public life (although Pippa Norris 2000, makes a convincing case disputing these “media malaise” theories). But what about trust in the *media*? As Dautrich and Hartley (1999) point out, political scientists and communication scholars have focused their media critiques on news content and its effect on information gain and attitudes. What remain unanswered are questions surrounding citizens' perceptions of media performance. Dautrich and Hartley's study remedies that, underlining the importance of understanding and explaining confidence in the media from the *public's* perspective. The news media have long been the target of criticism for scholars, politicians, professional media critics such as Stephen Brill and Rush Limbaugh, and even journalists themselves (Graber 1997: 381–84). How does the public perceive the media? More important, what are some of the factors that help explain variation in public perceptions of the media?

## Data

To explore attitudes toward the media, I analyzed data from the 2000 National Election Study (NES). As part of the 2000 survey, respondents were asked, “How much of the time do you think you trust the media to report the news fairly? Just about always, most of the time, some of the time, or almost never?” This *Media Trust* measure is characterized by a reasonable level of variance, with 132 respondents (8.5 percent) indicating they “almost never” trust the media, 669 (43.1 percent) indicating “some of the time,” 642 (41.3 percent) saying “most of the time,” and 110 (7.1 percent) saying “just about always.” Thus, slightly more than half of respondents leaned against trusting the media, and slightly less than half said they trusted the media at least “most of the time.” As explanatory factors, I drew upon traditional NES measures of trust in government, partisanship and ideology, and other variables.

Limitations in this data set prevent testing a full model explaining media trust. The first problem lies with the *Media Trust* indicator—specifically the phrase, “the media.” My assumption is that when subjects were asked whether they trusted “the media,” most of them had in mind a definition limited to mainstream

news organizations staffed by professional journalists. I assumed that respondents' top-of-the-head conception did not include political talk radio and other opinion-based "new media." To be sure, some respondents had a broader definition in mind. But for most Americans, "the media" means TV news, newspaper reporters, and the Washington press corps—and not much more. This explains why conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh can criticize "the media" without confusing his audience; listeners know he is referring to the mainstream media, not his own show.

Also problematic is the lack of indicators measuring many of the potential explanatory factors raised in previous research, such as respondents' perceptions of media aggressiveness, of news agendas, and of the media's preoccupation with scandal. Finally, the analysis relies on cross-sectional data to explore what are essentially causal relationships. Thus, although the interpretations that follow will suggest the possibility of cause-and-effect dynamics, my justifications are primarily theoretical.

## Hypotheses

*Partisanship and ideology.* I expected to find a significant partisan and ideological component to respondents' level of trust in the media. Among many conservatives and/or Republicans, there is a widespread perception that the media has a "liberal bias." In other words, they cover Democrats more favorably than Republicans; they are more likely to portray poor people sympathetically while portraying big businesses as villains; news stories on the environment tend to reflect a proenvironmentalist slant; foreign affairs coverage carries an internationalist bias. These suspicions are reinforced by survey research indicating a preponderance of self-identified Democrats who pursue journalism as a career (Lichter et al. 1986; Wilhoit and Weaver 1991). Whether such tendencies consistently find their way into news coverage is less than clear (Graber 1997). Yet I suspect that many conservative Republicans see evidence of a liberal bias every time they open a newspaper or turn on the news. Accordingly, I expect to find particularly low levels of trust in the media among both self-identified Republicans and conservatives.

*Political talk radio.* Many of these disgruntled conservatives have turned to political talk radio as an alternative to traditional news programs. With hosts such as Rush Limbaugh consistently attracting the largest audiences, conservative voices dominate the political talk radio airwaves (Davis and Owen 1998). Limbaugh and other hosts portray their programs as ideological safe havens from the liberal media, frequently targeting news anchors and journalists for on-air criticism. I suspect that many conservatives view political talk radio as a long-overdue correction to the left-leaning, pro-Democrat messages that dominate

traditional news outlets. Accordingly, I expect to find particularly low levels of trust in the media among self-identified Republicans and/or conservatives who regularly listen to political talk radio.<sup>1</sup>

*Internet.* Like talk radio, the Internet provides alternatives to conventional news outlets (Davis and Owen 1998). Similarly, much of Internet programming is “narrowcast” to small subsets of the population. More important for this study, many political Web sites also provide a forum for minority viewpoints that traditional media either ignore or underplay. That said, despite a strong libertarian streak among Internet users, the political Web lacks the partisan Republican flavor that characterizes much of political talk radio (Davis and Owen 1998). Therefore, I do not expect Internet users who accessed the Web for information about the most recent elections<sup>2</sup> to indicate unusually low levels of trust in the media.

*Traditional media exposure.* If it true that declining media trust is a product of Americans’ growing disgust with the shortcomings of political news coverage, might there be a relationship between exposure to conventional news coverage and trust in the media? In other words, is it possible that the more media people watch and read, the less trusting they become? Probably not. Presumably many “political junkies” watch and read a lot of news because they like it. Offsetting this would be other heavy consumers who tune in despite misgivings about the source. Accordingly, I expect to find no meaningful relationships—positive or negative—between media trust and respondents’ consumption of (1) network television news, (2) local television news, and (3) daily newspapers.<sup>3</sup>

*Trust in government.* In a study that revisited the “videomalaise” phenomenon, Bennett et al. (1999) found that attitudes toward the media are strongly related to political trust. I also expect to find a positive relationship between *Media Trust* and trust in government.<sup>4</sup> In other words, I expect many of the respondents who express low levels of trust in government also will indicate low levels of trust in the media. This expectation stems from a broad conceptualization of “political trust” that includes not only trust in government institutions but also the political process in general, elected officials, and nongovernmental political actors such as news organizations. Under this conceptualization, public evaluations of all of these entities would be highly correlated.

## Results

To test these hypotheses, I first analyzed a set of bivariate relationships. The key variable of interest was *Media Trust*. Of particular interest were what I will

**Table 1**

Party identification and trust in the media, in percentages

Media Trust	Strong Democrat	Weak Democrat	Independent Democrat	Independent	Independent Republican	Weak Republican	Strong Republican
Almost never	5.1 (15)	3.9 (9)	7.5 (17)	7.1 (12)	12.7 (26)	6.3 (12)	18.5 (39)
Some of the time	37.4 (111)	40.8 (93)	44.7 (101)	45.2 (76)	43.6 (89)	38.7 (74)	51.2 (108)
Most of the time	45.8 (136)	46.5 (106)	41.6 (94)	41.7 (70)	40.2 (82)	47.1 (90)	26.5 (56)
Just about always	11.8 (35)	8.8 (20)	6.2 (14)	6.0 (10)	3.4 (7)	7.9 (15)	3.8 (8)
<i>n</i>	297	228	226	168	204	191	211
$\chi^2 = 80.7, p = .000$							
Tau-c = -.132							

Source: National Election Study (NES) 2000.

Note: Number of respondents appears in parentheses. The NES respondents were asked, "How much of the time do you think you trust the media to report the news fairly? Just about always, most of the time, some of the time, or almost never?"

call "media skeptics"—the 132 respondents who said they "almost never" trust the media to report the news fairly.

*Partisanship and ideology.* On one level, the relationship between partisanship and media trust is statistically significant but weak (Tau-c = -.132). Yet the weakness of the overall relationship masks the striking differences in the media skeptic category. Among strong Republicans, 18.5 percent said they "almost never" trust the media to report the news fairly, compared with only 5.1 percent of strong Democrats. Combined, only 16.5 percent of Democrats (including Democratic-leaning independents) can be classified as media skeptics compared with nearly 40 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents. Clearly, trust in the media is low among Republicans, particularly strong partisans (Table 1).

A similar but less striking pattern emerged for ideology (Table 2). Overall, the relationship is weak (Tau-c = -.119). Yet self-identified strong conservatives were far more likely to say they "almost never" trust the media than respondents in other ideological categories. Less than 30 percent of them indicated trust in the media at least "most of the time." Liberals, by contrast, were much more likely to express at least a minimal level of trust. About 14 percent of strong liberals said they "just about always" trust the media—roughly the same as all of the conservative groups combined. So as with partisanship, there appears to be an ideological component to varying levels of trust in the media.

**Table 2**  
Ideology and trust in the media, in percentages

Media Trust	Liberal		Moderate-Leaning		Moderate-Leaning		Strong
	Strong	Weak	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	Conservative	Conservative
Almost never	11.1 (8)	6.7 (9)	3.9 (12)	4.3 (4)	8.5 (38)	8.8 (19)	22.4 (30)
Some of the time	37.5 (27)	40.3 (54)	40.4 (124)	43.6 (41)	39.3 (175)	48.8 (106)	48.5 (65)
Most of the time	37.5 (27)	43.3 (58)	46.9 (144)	46.8 (44)	45.6 (203)	37.3 (81)	26.9 (36)
Just about always	13.9 (10)	9.7 (13)	8.8 (27)	5.3 (5)	6.5 (29)	5.1 (11)	2.2 (3)
<i>n</i>	72	134	307	94	445	217	134

$\chi^2 = 72.2, p = .000$

Tau-c = -.119

Source: National Election Study (NES) 2000.

Note: Number of respondents appears in parentheses. NES respondents were asked, "How much of the time do you think you trust the media to report the news fairly? Just about always, most of the time, some of the time, or almost never?"

*Political talk radio.* It is no secret that the political talk radio audience is dominated by conservative Republicans (Barker 1998; Davis and Owen 1998). On the medium's most popular program, host Rush Limbaugh frequently lambastes the media for being biased to the Left (Cappella et al. 1996). Were frequent talk radio listeners more likely to express lower levels of trust in the media? In general, media distrust was high for talk radio listeners of all political stripes (Table 3). About 17 percent of respondents who said they listen at least "most days" fit into the media skeptic category, compared with only 6 percent of nonlisteners. But those differences grew more striking when the analysis is limited to conservatives (Table 4). About 75 percent of conservatives who listen to talk radio every day said they either "almost never" trust the media or do so "some of the time," compared with roughly 44 percent for nonlisteners. Only three conservatives who listen to talk radio frequently (i.e., either "most days" or "every day") said they "just about always" trust the media.

In sum, media distrust is unusually high for regular listeners of political talk radio. This was especially true among conservatives. It is beyond the scope of this study to assess whether these negative views were shaped by media bashing on talk radio or whether conservatives are simply turning to this medium for an ideologically compatible "correction" to what they see as a liberally biased mainstream news media.

**Table 3**

Talk radio listening and trust in the media, in percentages

Media Trust	Don't Listen	Only Occasionally	One or Two Days per Week	Most Days	Every Day
Almost never	6.0 (60)	11.3 (28)	10.4 (15)	20.8 (16)	14.1 (13)
Some of the time	40.0 (397)	47.6 (118)	52.8 (76)	44.2 (34)	47.8 (44)
Most of the time	46.7 (463)	33.1 (82)	32.6 (47)	32.5 (25)	27.2 (25)
Just about always	7.3 (72)	8.1 (20)	4.2 (6)	2.6 (2)	10.9 (10)
<i>n</i>	992	248	144	77	92

 $\chi^2 = 59.6, p = .000$ 

Tau-c = -.108

*Source:* National Election Study (NES) 2000.*Note:* Number of respondents appears in parentheses. NES respondents were asked, "How much of the time do you think you trust the media to report the news fairly? Just about always, most of the time, some of the time, or almost never?"**Table 4**

Talk radio listening (conservatives only) and trust in the media, in percentages

Media Trust	Don't Listen	Only Occasionally	One or Two Days per Week	Most Days	Every Day
Almost never	6.0 (28)	15.1 (21)	14.3 (12)	28.0 (14)	22.2 (12)
Some of the time	38.4 (180)	48.9 (68)	53.6 (45)	48.0 (24)	53.7 (29)
Most of the time	50.1 (235)	28.1 (39)	28.6 (24)	22.0 (11)	20.4 (11)
Just about always	5.5 (26)	7.9 (11)	3.6 (3)	2.0 (1)	3.7 (2)
<i>n</i>	469	139	84	50	54

 $\chi^2 = 72.822, p = .000$ 

Tau-c = -.193

*Source:* National Election Study (NES) 2000.*Note:* Number of respondents appears in parentheses. NES respondents were asked, "How much of the time do you think you trust the media to report the news fairly? Just about always, most of the time, some of the time, or almost never?"

**Table 5**  
Political Web use and trust in the media, in percentages

Media Trust	No Web Use	Used Web for Election Info
Almost never	7.5 (82)	10.6 (49)
Some of the time	41.2 (448)	47.6 (221)
Most of the time	43.2 (470)	37.1 (172)
Just about always	8.1 (88)	4.7 (22)
<i>n</i>	1,088	464
$\chi^2 = 14.8, p = .002$		
Tau-c = $-.094$		

Source: National Election Study (NES) 2000.

Note: Number of respondents appears in parentheses. NES respondents were asked, "How much of the time do you think you trust the media to report the news fairly? Just about always, most of the time, some of the time, or almost never?"

*Internet.* To what extent did political Internet users share talk radio listeners' dissatisfaction with the media? Counter to expectations, there were some similarities. Web users were somewhat more likely to express more distrust in the media, with 10.6 percent falling in the media skeptic category compared with 7.5 percent for non-Internet users (Table 5). Among the latter, more than half expressed at least minimal levels of trust, while less than 42 percent of Web users did the same. The differences are small (Tau-c =  $-.094$ ), but the relationship was statistically significant.

*Traditional media.* As expected, there was no relationship between any of the three indicators of news consumption and trust in the media. Distrust did not increase with either higher levels of newspaper reading ( $R = -.003$ ), local news watching ( $R = .097$ ), or network television watching ( $R = .069$ ). The latter two relationships are statistically significant but too weak to be meaningful.

*Trust in government.* As expected, many of the respondents who expressed low levels of trust in the government also expressed low levels of trust in the media (Table 6). But the relationship was much stronger than anticipated (Tau-b =  $-.283$ ). About 63 percent of respondents who said they trust the government either "some of the time" or "never" said roughly the same thing about the media. Only three respondents who said they "just about always" trust the government said they "almost never" trust the media. Perhaps such a strong correlation

**Table 6**

Trust in the government and trust in the media, in percentages

Media Trust	Never Trust Government	Sometimes Trust Government	Most of Time Trust Government	Just About Always
Almost never	56.3 (9)	11.8 (100)	3.1 (19)	4.7 (3)
Some of the time	37.5 (6)	51.0 (433)	34.0 (209)	23.4 (15)
Most of the time	— (0)	33.2 (282)	53.5 (329)	46.9 (30)
Just about always	6.3 (1)	4.0 (34)	9.4 (58)	25.0 (16)
<i>n</i>	16	849	615	64

$\chi^2 = 194.0, p = .000$   
 Tau-b =  $-.283$

Source: National Election Study (NES) 2000.

Note: Number of respondents appears in parentheses. NES respondents were asked, "How much of the time do you think you trust the media to report the news fairly? Just about always, most of the time, some of the time, or almost never?"

should not be so surprising given the similarities in how the questions are worded, with the terms *media* and *government* being among the few significant differences between the two measures. Still, similar (albeit weaker) patterns emerged when this particular government trust measure was replaced with three related measures: (1) respondents' sense of the extent to which "people in government waste . . . the money we pay in taxes" (Tau-c = .132), (2) whether respondents felt "government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people" (Tau-c = .177) and (3) whether respondents agreed that "quite a few of the people running the government are crooked," "not very many are," or "hardly any of them are crooked" (Tau-c = .189). In all of these cases, respondents who indicated low levels of satisfaction with the government were much more likely to express low levels of trust in the media.

*A multivariate test.* At the bivariate level, there is now a clearer, albeit incomplete, picture of public trust in the media. Media trust appears to be unusually low among conservative Republicans. This is particularly the case for regular listeners of talk radio. Political Web users also expressed low levels of trust. Finally, people who expressed low levels of trust in government tended to feel similarly distrustful toward the media.

The ideological and/or partisan component of this phenomenon provides perhaps the most compelling avenue for further analysis. Charges of liberal bias

in the media remain largely overlooked by political scientists (Graber 1997: 95), with only a few exceptions (e.g., Dautrich and Hartley 1999; Lichter et al. 1986; Wilhoit and Weaver 1996). Even if the bias charges are exaggerated—or even if liberal tendencies are offset by even more dominant elitist, procapitalist orientations (see, for example, Parenti 1993)—the strikingly lower levels of trust indicated for conservatives suggest that media trust has a distinctly conservative flavor.

To explore the depth of these relationships, I developed a basic logistic regression model that regressed media trust on the factors analyzed above at the bivariate level. This allowed me to isolate the effect of partisanship, ideology, Internet use, and talk radio listening while controlling for government trust.<sup>5</sup>

As Table 7 (model 1) shows, the relationships hold even with the controls. Particularly notable is the persistence of the talk radio factor despite controlling for ideology; conservatives are more likely to distrust media than nonconservatives, and so are regular listeners to a medium that is so dominated by conservatives. To explore this dynamic further, I added to the model a simple interactive variable that isolates conservatives who regularly listen to talk radio. The model 2 results suggest that it is these listeners who are distinctly distrustful of the media. Also notable is that political Web use remains negatively associated with media trust, suggesting a potentially fruitful avenue for further study.

As with previous scholarly attempts to model “trust in government” (e.g., Norris 2000), this model explains only a small amount of the variance in media trust. Clearly, other important factors remain overlooked (and, indeed, unmeasured), particularly those tapping into respondents’ specific criticisms of the media. Still, these analyses represent an important first step that warrants further discussion.

## Discussion

Given the results reported here, perhaps journalists should not take it personally that public trust in the media is so low. Trust in government institutions and politics more generally—here and abroad—has been weak for decades, a phenomenon that scholars have struggled to explain (Chanley et al. 2000; Norris 1999; Nye et al. 1997). This analysis suggests that the two phenomena are related. Thus, the media’s lowly stature may be more related to general political malaise than to the many shortcomings of contemporary news coverage. Drawing upon similar evidence, Bennett et al. (1999: 17) posited that “as [the media and government officials] attack and criticize each other, they pull down evaluations of themselves and related societal institutions.”

Among one set of individuals, however, distrust in the media is unusually high. Conservative Republicans—especially those who tune in to talk radio—exhibit much lower levels of trust in mainstream news sources. It is no secret that

**Table 7**  
Predictors of trust in the media

	Model 1			Model 2		
	Media Trust	SE	Significance	Media Trust	SE	Significance
Conservative <sup>a</sup>	-.582	.138	<.01	-.452	.147	<.01
Regular talk radio listener <sup>b</sup>	-.421	.192	<.01	-.089	.237	
Political Web use <sup>c</sup>	-.506	.127	<.01	-.519	.127	<.01
Government trust factor <sup>d</sup>	.622	.063	<.01	.627	.063	<.01
Conservative talk radio listener <sup>e</sup>	—	—		-1.025	.437	<.05
Constant	.317	.079	<.01	.292	.079	<.01
$\chi^2$		151.85	<.01		161.73	<.01
<i>N</i> = 1,327						

Source: National Election Study 2000.

a. Either weak or strong conservatives.

b. Listen to talk radio either “most days” or “every day.”

c. Used internet during the election.

d. Combines four indicators.

e. Conservatives (weak and strong) who listen to talk radio either “most days” or “every day.”

many conservative elites accuse the media of harboring liberal biases (Golberg 2002). Are such charges justified? Research results are mixed. On one hand, survey research indicates that the journalism profession is dominated by liberals and Democrats (Lichter et al. 1986; Wilhoit and Weaver 1991). And one set of experiments suggest that even though journalists may be more “left of center” than decidedly liberal, their personal views do affect the decisions they make, “from the stories they select to the headlines they write” (Patterson 1995: 20). Still, there is little evidence that the news stories these journalists actually produce are slanted to the Left in a consistent manner (Beck et al. 2002; Page 1996; Robinson and Sheehan 1983). Some critics argue that the opposite is true: that the media’s corporate ownership push editorial decision making in a relatively conservative, proestablishment direction (Bennett 1996). Others portray the media as fundamentally centrist entities that foster political moderation and conformity (Gerbner et al. 1982).

In any case, many discontented conservatives appear to be turning to talk radio. In light of the popularity of programs hosted by conservatives, this tendency should not be surprising since “people invoke their own political preferences when they search out sources of information—they attempt to locate a bias that reflects their own predispositions and self-perceived interests” (Huckfeldt et al. 1995: 1049). With political talk radio, many dissatisfied

conservatives and Republicans now have more choices that reflect their own ideological leanings.

Other alternate sources of political information can be found on the Internet. And as with talk radio, distrust is high among those who reported using the Web for information during the latest election. The persistence of this relationship even when controlling for other factors suggests this subject is ripe for further research. Are Web users turning to the Internet because they lack trust in mainstream news sources, or does Web-based political communication foster distrust in the media? Similar chicken-and-egg questions could be applied to the talk radio audience.

Additional measures are needed to test a fully specified model of media trust. Especially crucial would be indicators addressing individuals' perceptions of the media shortcomings identified in so much of the political communication literature: feelings toward coverage focusing on scandal, horse-race, and strategic aspects of politics; attitudes toward coverage that interprets rather than merely reports the news; and of course, explicitly expressed perceptions of ideological bias.

## Notes

1. The National Election Study question reads, "There are a number of programs on radio in which people call in to voice their opinions about politics. Do you ever listen to political talk radio programs of this type?" The 561 respondents who said yes were then asked, "How often do you listen to those programs—every day, most days, once or twice a week, or only occasionally?" From these two measures I created a new variable, *Talk Radio Frequency* (0 = *never listen* [n = 944], 1 = *listen only occasionally* [n = 248], 2 = *listen once or twice a week* [n = 144], 3 = *listen most days* [n = 77], 4 = *listen every day* [n = 92]).
2. Respondents who said they had access to the Internet or World Wide Web were asked, "Have you seen any information about this election campaign on the (Internet/Web)?" Respondents who said yes were coded 1; respondents were coded 0 if they either said no or indicated no Internet/Web access in the previous question, "Do you have access to the internet or World Wide Web?"
3. Respondents were asked, "How many days in the past week did you" (1) watch "national network news on TV," (2) watch "local TV news shows such as 'Eyewitness News' or 'Action News' in the late afternoon or early evening?" and (3) "read a daily newspaper." Answers ranged from zero to seven days weekly.
4. Respondents were asked, "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?" Sixteen respondents volunteered the answer, "never."
5. For the logistic regression models, I used factor analysis to create a single *Government Trust* variable that combined the government trust indicator with three related measures: respondents' views on whether (1) the government "wastes taxes," (2) the government is in the hands of "big interests," and (3) politicians are crooked. Each of the items loads high on a single unrotated factor (loadings range from .637 to .730), which has an eigenvalue of 1.937. This factor explains 48.4 percent of the variance in the four items.

## References

- Barker, David. 1998. "Rush to Action: Political Talk Radio and Health Care (Un)Reform." *Political Communication* 15:83–97.
- Beck, Paul Allen, Russell J. Dalton, Steven Greene, and Robert Huckfeldt. 2002. "The Social Calculus of Voting: Interpersonal, Media, and Organizational Influences on Presidential Choices." *American Political Science Review* 96(1):57–73.
- Bennett, Stephen Earl, Staci I. Rhine, Richard Flickinger, and Linda L. M. Bennett. 1999. "'Videomalaise' Revisited: Public Trust in the Media and Government." *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 4(4):8–23.
- Bennett, W. Lance. 1996. *News: The Politics of Illusion*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Cappella, Joseph N., and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. 1997. *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cappella, Joseph N., Kathleen Hall Jamieson, and Joseph Turow. 1996. *Call-In Political Talk Radio: Background, Content, Audiences, Portrayal in Mainstream Media*. Report of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Chanley, Virginia, Thomas J. Rudolph, and Wendy M. Rahn. 2000. "The Origins and Consequences of Public Trust in Government." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64:239–56.
- Cook, Timothy E. 1998. *Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dautrich, Kenneth, and Thomas H. Hartley. 1999. *How the News Media Fail American Voters: Causes, Consequences and Remedies*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Davis, Richard, and Diane Owen. 1998. *New Media and American Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Delli Carpini, Michael, and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Gerbner, George, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli. 1982. "Charting the Mainstream: Television's Contributions to Political Orientations." *Journal of Communication*, 3(3):10–29.
- Golberg, Bernard. 2002. *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing.
- Graber, Doris. 1997. *Mass Media and American Politics*. 5th ed. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Hart, Roderick. 1994. *Seducing America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hetherington, Marc J. 1998. "The Political Relevance of Political Trust." *American Political Science Review* 92:791–808.
- Huckfeldt, Robert, Paul Allen Beck, Russell J. Dalton, and Jeffrey Levine. 1995. "Political Environments, Cohesive Social Groups, and the Communication of Public Opinion." *American Journal of Political Science* 30(4):1025–54.
- Kurtz, Howard. 2002. "Public Gives the Press a Thumbs Down." *Washington Post*, Aug. 5.
- Lichter, S. Robert, Stanley Rothman, and Linda S. Lichter. 1986. *The Media Elite: America's New Powerbrokers*. New York: Adler and Adler.
- Matalin, Mary, and James Carville, with Peter Knobler. 1994. *All's Fair: Love, War, and Running for President*. New York: Random House.
- Norris, Pippa, ed. 1999. *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Norris, Pippa. 2000. *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Nye, Joseph S., Jr., Philip D. Zelikow, and David C. King, eds. 1997. *Why Americans Don't Trust Government*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Page, Benjamin I. 1996. *Who Deliberates? Mass Media in Modern Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Parenti, Michael. 1993. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of New Media*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Patterson, Thomas E. 1993. *Out of Order*. New York: Vintage.
- Patterson, Thomas E. 1995. "News Decisions: Journalists as Partisan Actors." Paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Aug. 31–Sep. 3.
- Robinson, Michael J. 1976. "Public Affairs Television and the Growth of Political Malaise: The Case of 'The Selling of the Pentagon.'" *American Political Science Review* 70(2):409–32.
- Robinson, Michael J., and Margaret A. Sheehan. 1983. *Over the Wire and on TV: CBS and UPI in Campaign '80*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Sabato, Larry. 1991. *Feeding Frenzy: How Attack Journalism Has Transformed American Politics*. New York: Free Press.
- Schudson, Michael. 1995. *The Power of News*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sparrow, Bartholomew H. 1999. *Uncertain Guardians: The News Media as a Political Institution*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- West, Darrell M. 2001. *The Rise and Fall of the Media Establishment*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Wilhoit, G. Cleveland, and David H. Weaver. 1991. *The American Journalist: A Portrait of U.S. News People and their Work*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

### Biographical Note

David A. Jones is an assistant professor of political science at James Madison University. He has published related articles in *Political Communication* and the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*. At JMU, he teaches a variety of courses on political communication and U.S. politics.

Address: Department of Political Science, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA 22807; phone: 540-568-3771; e-mail: jones3da@jmu.edu.