The Strength of Relationships Between Americans' Trust in Institutions and Their Political Affiliations

Lionel Muench, Quantitative Analysis Center, Wesleyan University

Introduction

- **Trust in American institutions has declined** for decades, with confidence becoming sharply polarized along party lines (Brady & Kent, 2022).

- **Party loyalty is becoming increasingly important** to Americans, to the point that voters will still elect candidates in their party who engage in undemocratic behavior as long as they continue to achieve partisan interests (Graham, M. H., & Svolik, M. W., 2020).

- **Information-producing institutions** such as the press and television news show some of the largest partisan divides, with conservatives reporting far lower trust than liberals (Michael & Breaux, 2021; Brady & Kent, 2022).

- **Science and research-based institutions** like university research have also become politically charged, tending to have higher trust among liberals, especially in contexts involving vaccines or government expertise (Kennedy, 2019; Magnus et al., 2025; Lim & Moon, 2023).

- **Institutions tied to authority or order,** such as the military, business, and clergy tend to receive higher confidence from conservatives than from liberals (Brady & Kent, 2022).

- Prior research usually examines one institution at a time using different data, making it difficult to compare how strongly ideology relates to trust across domains.

Methods

Sample

- Data comes from the **2021 General Social Survey (GSS)**, a nationally representative sample of non-institutionalized adults in the U.S.

- For analyses requiring a complete set of all trust and confidence variables the available sample is n = 495. For analyses run on individual items (e.g., pairwise correlations or ANOVAs), larger sample sizes are available and differ by question.

Measures

- Respondents reported their **ideological self-placement** on a 7-point scale (1 = extremely liberal to 7 = extremely conservative).

- Respondents also reported their **political party identification** on a 7 point scale (0 = strong democrat, 3 = independent, 6 = strong republican).

- Respondents rated their **trust in several institutions** on a scale from 0 ("do not trust at all") to 10 ("trust completely"). Institutions included: *the news media, university research centers, business and industry,* and *the US congress.*

- Respondents reported their **confidence in the people running major institutions** with three categories: "A great deal", "Only some", and "Hardly any". Institutions included: *major companies, organized religion, education, executive, legislative, and judicial branches, organized labor, the press, medicine, television, the scientific community, the military, banks and financial institutions, federal vaccine related agencies, and pharmaceutical companies producing vaccines.*

Research Questions

- Are different political affiliations associated with different levels of trust in institutions and confidence in those running them?
- Which institutions or institutional actors show the strongest correlations between particular institutions and trust/distrust or confidence/lack of confidence?

Results

Univariate

- The sample included a wide ideological range: **~33% liberal, ~26% moderate, and ~41% conservative**.

- Party identification was similarly balanced: **~44% Democratic identifiers, ~16% Independents, and ~40% Republican identifiers**.

- Trust and confidence ratings varied greatly.

  - Trust was highest for university research centers and lowest for the media and Congress.

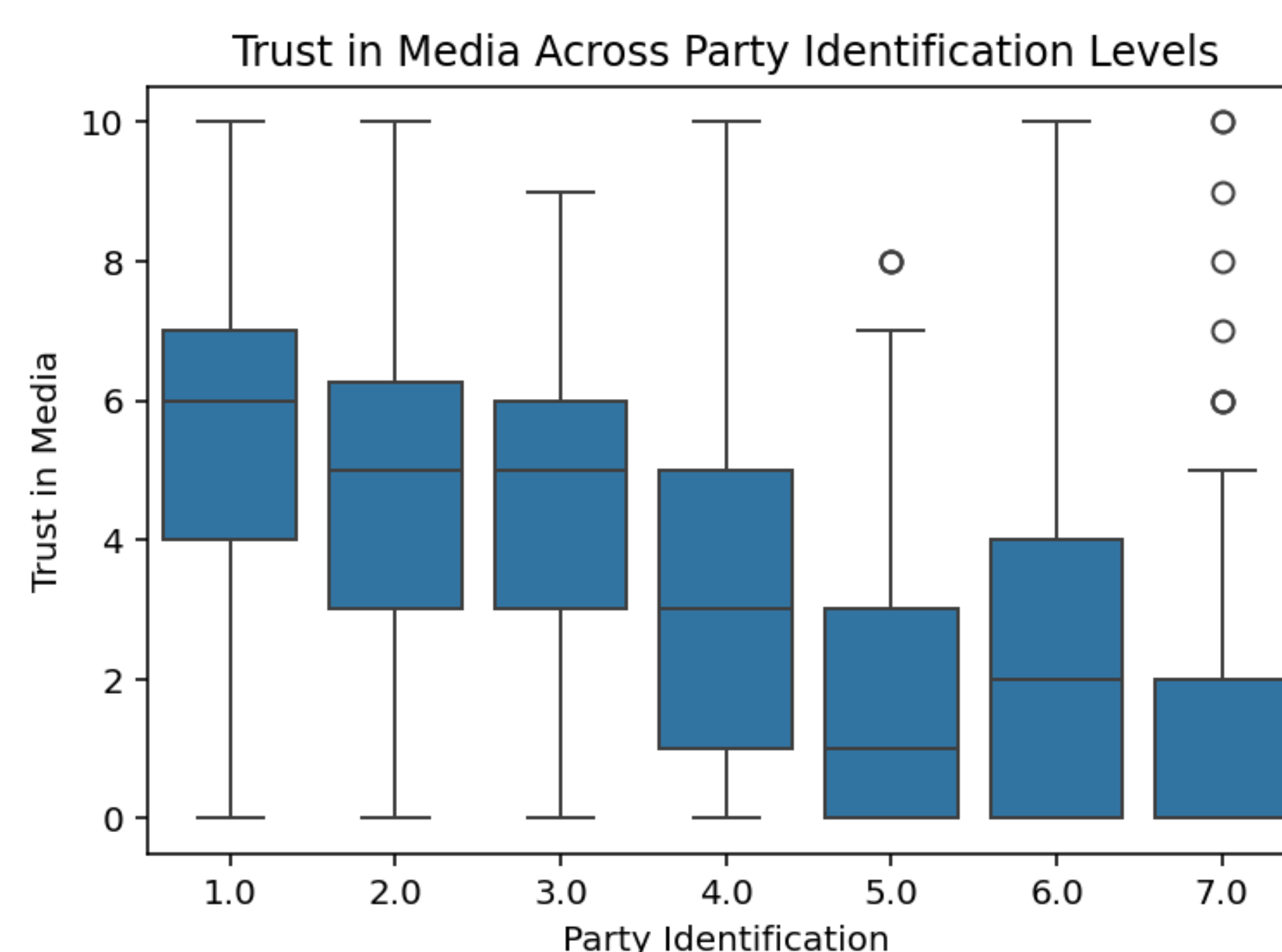 - Confidence was lowest for the press and Congress, and highest for medicine and the scientific community.

Bivariate

- **Pearson correlations** for trust measures and **ANOVA tests** for confidence measures were conducted for both ideology and party identification. **All tests were statistically significant (p < .001).**

- Trust in the media (Figure 1) showed the strongest correlations, with more conservative respondents reporting lower trust (r = -0.50 for ideology, r = -0.56 for party ID). Trust in university research centers was also strongly associated, higher trust among liberals (r = -0.38 for ideology, r = -0.35 for party ID).

- Confidence in the press produced the largest ANOVA effects, with conservatives reporting lower confidence (η^2 = .20 for ideology, η^2 = .27 for party ID). Confidence in the scientific community also showed large effects with similar patterns (η^2 = .11 for ideology η^2 = .10 for party ID).

- Several institutions showed moderate effects , including labor ($\eta^2 \approx$ .06), television news ($\eta^2 \approx$ .06-.10), the army ($\eta^2 \approx$ .045-.06), and the federal government ($\eta^2 \approx$ .06-.08).

Figure 1. Trust in Media Across Party ID Levels (1 = Strong Democrat, 7 = Strong Republican)

Multivariate

- A LASSO regression was used, which removes weaker coefficients. All trust and confidence variables were inputted. 30% of data was used for tests.

- For ideology, the largest coefficients were for trust in the media (β = -0.23), confidence in judges (β = 0.23), trust in research centers (β = -0.14), confidence in finance (β = 0.14), confidence in labor (β = -0.23), confidence in the scientific community (β = -0.18), and confidence in education (β = -0.16). The model achieved an R^2 of .41 using test data.
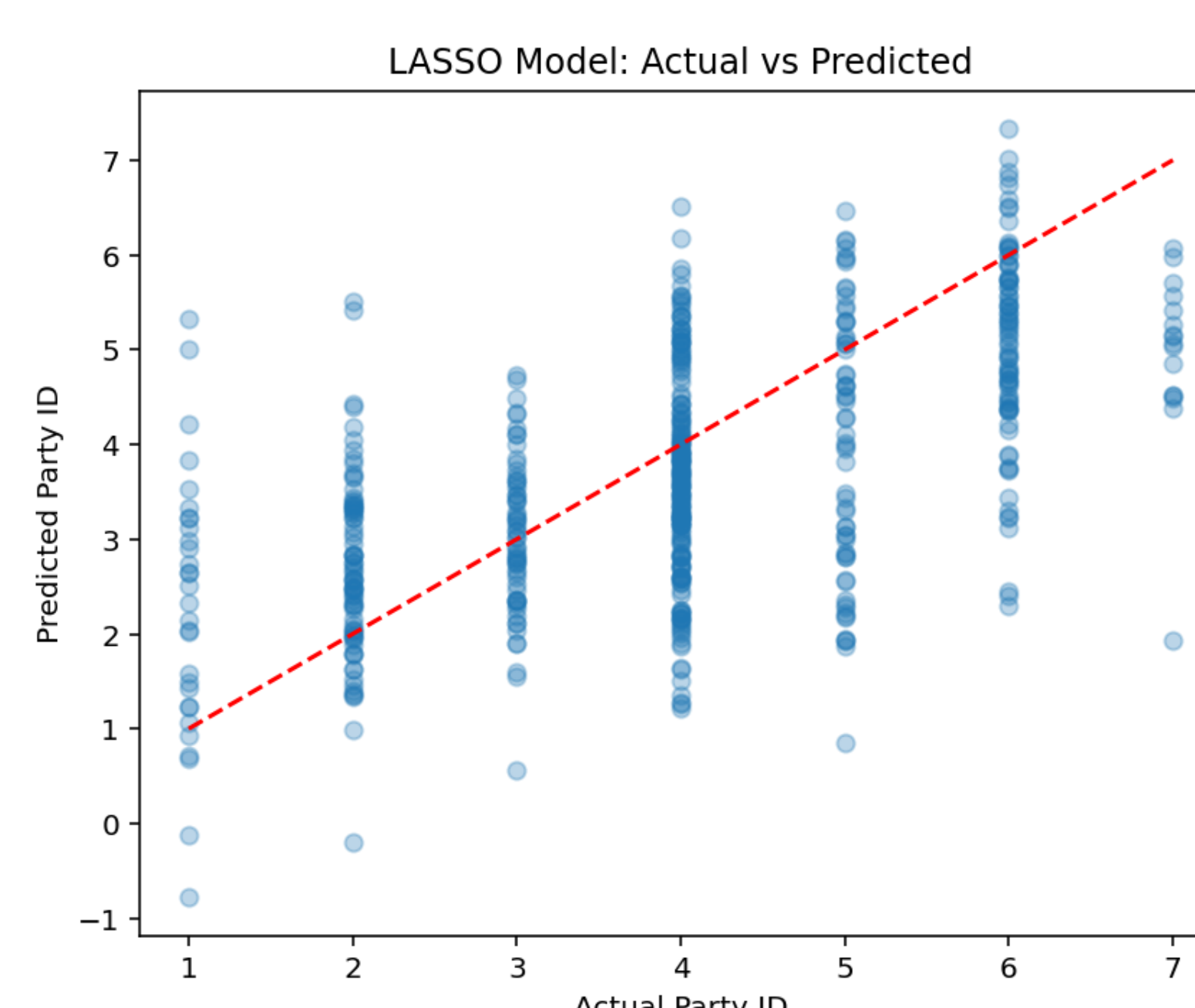
Multivariate (cont.)

- For party identification, the strongest coefficients were for trust in the media (β = -0.36), confidence in finance (β = 0.30), confidence in the army (β = 0.27), confidence in clergy (β = 0.23), confidence in labor (β = -0.38), business confidence (β = -0.28), and scientific community confidence (β = -0.19). The model achieved an R^2 of .43 using test data (Figure 2).

Discussion

- **Trust in information-based institutions showed the strongest polarization.** Conservatives reported much lower trust in the media and lower confidence in the press. Similarly, liberals reported higher trust/confidence in research centers and the scientific community. Moderate divides also appeared for labor, the military, and federal agencies.

- **Multivariate results supported these findings.** Trust in the media was one of the strongest predictors of both ideology and party identification, alongside confidence in judges, finance, the army, clergy, labor, business, and science.

- Because the data are cross-sectional and collected in 2021, some associations, like those relating to vaccines, could reflect temporary conditions.

- Future research should look at whether these patterns persist over time.

Figure 2. Lasso Model: Actual Party ID vs Predicted Party ID (1 = Strong Democrat, 7 = Strong Republican)

Brady, H. E., & Kent, T. B. (2022). Fifty years of declining confidence and increasing polarization in trust in American institutions. Daedalus, 151(4), 43–66. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01943

Graham, M. H., & Svolik, M. W. (2020). Democracy in America? Partisanship, polarization, and the robustness of support for democracy in the United States. American Political Science Review, 114(2), 392–409. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055420000052

Michael, R. B., & Breaux, B. O. (2021). The relationship between political affiliation and beliefs about sources of "fake news". Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications, 6(1), 6. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-021-00278-1

Kennedy, J. (2019). Populist politics and vaccine hesitancy in Western Europe: An analysis of national-level data. European Journal of Public Health, 29(3), 512–516. https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckz004

Magnus, K. D., Dammann, N., & Lüdecke, D. (2025). Vaccination readiness and political party preference in Germany: Trust, collective responsibility, and the populist radical right. PLOS ONE, 20(7), e0328045. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0328045

Lim, J., & Moon, K. K. (2023). Political ideology and trust in government to ensure vaccine safety: Using a U.S. survey to explore the role of political trust. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 20(5). https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20054459