

Polarization and partisanship: Key drivers of distrust in media old and new?

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Abstract

Some worry that increased partisanship is lowering trust in the news media, as people increasingly come into contact with cross-cutting news coverage. We use multilevel analysis of online survey data from 35 countries and find that left-right partisans (1) have slightly less trust in the news media in general, (2) slightly higher levels of trust in the news they consume and (3) perceive a larger 'trust gap' between the news they use and the rest of the news available within their country. However, we do not find evidence to support the idea that people in more politically polarized countries have less trust in the news, or that the association between partisanship and trust is strengthened in polarized political environments. Although in most cases the relationship between partisanship and trust is weak, it is noticeably stronger in the United States. However, the United States is home to a unique media system, and our analysis highlights the problems of assuming that the processes at work in one relatively well-understood country are playing out in the same way globally.

Keywords

International communication, journalism, media systems, political communication, trust

Introduction

Given the centrality of news media to informing the public, trust in news media is recognised as an essential element of a functioning democracy. Consequently, declining trust is a cause for concern.

Trust in many institutions has declined in the past decade and more (Dalton, 1999; Hetherington, 2005; Newton and Norris, 2000). Research has focused on a wide range of institutions, including the church (Bjornskov, 2007), judiciary (Sherman, 2002), politics (Torcal and Montero, 2006) and the media (Ceron and Memoli, 2015; Daniller et al., 2017; Fletcher and Park, 2017; Williams, 2012). The picture is varied and nuanced, and there is an argument that a decline in respect and trust for institutions over the past half century is at least in part inevitable – perhaps even desirable – as an age of deference to authority gave way to an age of scepticism. Reasons for growing distrust of media are myriad, with some researchers highlighting growing cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997) and others arguing it is a result of greater critical thinking and emancipation from authority (Dalton, 2005, 2008), while scandals could have also had an influence (Bowler and Karp, 2004; Thompson, 2013)

In some countries, trust has been declining in government, church, parliament and the media – with the link between declining trust in government and politicians and the media strong, and becoming stronger over time (Hanitzsch et al., 2017). Researchers have focused on a number of possible relationships with trust as both a dependent and an independent variable. One interesting avenue, for example, is that the negative tone in media towards politics can lead to an erosion of trust in the media (Hopmann et al., 2015). This of course also works in the other direction, and media actors can often be maligned by political actors as the issue of so-called ‘fake news’ as Trump has aptly demonstrated (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Newman et al., 2017).

Other studies have examined the role of both the media and political system in driving down levels of trust. Hanitzsch et al. (2017) point to polarization in the English-speaking world and in particular to the relatively long history of a two-

party system in the United States, a system that is arguably more vulnerable to ideological polarization than more diverse political systems. Ariely (2015) finds that varying levels of trust are explained by three structural components within the media environment, and that countries with more media autonomy and journalistic professionalism evince a weaker relation between media trust and political trust. Others examine differences in terms of levels of democracy and authoritarianism (Tsfati and Ariely, 2014).

Whatever the explanatory variable, it is clear that media trust matters because a decline will likely have important societal consequences. It matters, of course, for the media themselves because trust influences what outlets people choose to use (Tsfati and Cappella, 2003). But the consequences for democracy are more wide reaching. Liberal theorists have long argued that the existence of an unfettered and independent press is essential to the process of democratization, by contributing towards the right of freedom of expression, thought and conscience; strengthening the responsiveness and accountability of governments to all citizens; and providing a pluralist platform and channel of political expression for a multiplicity of groups and interests (Newton and Norris, 2000; Sen, 1999). In terms of fulfilling these normative functions, the digital age has placed the media under considerable pressure (Tumber, 2001). Networked individuals can now source and distribute their own information (Newman et al., 2012), while the proliferation of media populism (Mazzoleni, 2003, 2006) undermines trust (Bakir and Barlow, 2007) and can underpin authoritarian populism (Kellner, 2016).

Although we can also assume that a critical attitude towards politicians and indeed the media can also be healthy for democracy, citizens should nevertheless be able to put some trust in the democratic procedures and institutions. Individual politicians can be easily replaced through elections and media outlets through non-consumption, but strong distrust in the fundamental institutions of a

democracy is less easily restored (Anderson et al., 2005; Dalton, 2004; Fuchs and Klingemann, 1995).

To date, much of the research on media trust focusses on the US. More recently, scholars have undertaken comparative work, drawing in particular on data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and the European Values Study (EVS), both of which ask the standard survey questions about trust in various institutions including ‘the press’ (e.g. Hanitzsch et al., 2017; Tsfati and Cappella, 2003). However, as a measure of media trust, we argue that that this focus on the press is anachronistic in a time of hybrid media (Chadwick, 2017). For example, distributed discovery means over half of people in most countries primarily access news indirectly through social media, search engines, and news aggregators (Newman et al., 2017). In addition, despite their important contributions, previous studies are limited by the necessarily very small number of questions on media, an absence of focus on social and digital media and the lack of some key country-level variables. We attempt to go beyond existing studies by deploying data from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2017), a comparative data set of 36 countries with key variables across the hybrid media system, as well as gradated trust questions.¹ Our analysis of this data contributes towards a more nuanced understanding of trust in the media from a truly comparative and hybrid perspective. This allows us to discover whether the United States is in fact anachronistic in terms of the link between trust in the media and in politics.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we set out our understanding of trust. Second, we review the literature on the core individual and system level factors influencing trust and form our hypotheses. Third, we describe our data and its

¹ More accurately, the dataset contains data from 36 media ‘markets’ given that two of the regions covered are Hong Kong and Taiwan, and their status is disputed. We acknowledge this, but use ‘countries’ as shorthand throughout the rest of the document to save space.

limitations as well as setting out our three dependent variables. Fourth, we present our findings before concluding with a discussion.

Theorizing trust

Scholars from various fields have investigated trust - including political trust, media trust, and social trust - as a force of stability. However, they rely on different definitions. There are two general schools of thought: institutional and cultural. The latter treats trust as exogenous extension of social trust, whereas for the former emphasises the endogenous influence of institutions and their choices (Hanitzsch et al., 2017). Fukuyama (1995) defined trust as the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest and cooperative behaviour, based on commonly shared norms. Those norms can be based on deep 'value laden' questions such as the nature of God, or from secular considerations such as professional standards and codes of behaviour (p. 26). In line with much social science research, we follow the secular norms approach, which relies to some extent on the rational concept of trust based on 'encapsulated interest' (Hardin, 2006a, 2001). Here, trust is defined as a relationship between three actions: (1) we must trust you to (2) serve our interests, broadly conceived, (3) about this issue (Hardin, 2006b: 68). Applying this concept to the media, we therefore define media trust as a form of institutional trust that is predicated on the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content across different platforms based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner. It can thus be trust in one's own media consumption choices or trust in the professional standards of news media generally.

Apart from different definitions of trust, the issue of measurement is an important consideration. Although researchers have validated multidimensional trust measures for survey research (e.g. Kohring & Matthes, 2007), at a more basic level it is important to identify what precisely survey respondents are likely to understand when asked particular questions. Much prior work has been based on long-standing questions in the WVS and EVS that ask about confidence in 'the

press' (Catterberg and Moreno, 2006; Newton, 1999, 2001; Rothstein and Stolle, 2008; Tsfati and Ariely, 2014). Yet we intuitively know this potentially confuses a number of key distinctions within the hybrid media environment, such as news on broadcast news, news from digital-born outlets, news on social media or combinations thereof. Previous studies, for example, have found differences in trust in online and print (Johnson and Kaye, 1998), between mainstream and marginal media (Jackob, 2010; Tsfati and Cappella, 2003), between mainstream and non-mainstream online media (Tsfati, 2010), between online and social media (Ceron, 2015) and between information, journalists and media corporations (Williams, 2012).

One dimension of trust which has received considerably less attention is the categorical difference between trust in the 'news media I consume' and the 'news media overall'. We should expect differences here in much the same way that I may hold politicians in general in low regard but retain a liking for my local MP or representative. In the same way, we can see that there may be very different levels of trust towards media in general and the media an individual consumes. Some will trust both media in general and the media they consume to a small extent or hardly at all. Others may trust both to a reasonably large extent. Conceptually we propose that those with lower than average trust in both may be more likely to have reason to doubt the veracity of the news they consume. Those with greater than average trust in both may have what they perceive as a stable and trustworthy diet. However, individuals expressing a large trust difference between both categories - that is, individuals who trust the media 'I consume' far more than the media 'overall' - are likely to be more aware of the media environment in general insofar as they feel able to make differentiated judgements. Given what we know about partisan selective exposure (e.g. Iyengar and Hahn, 2009), an individual with strong, more polarizing views, is more likely to be over-exposed to attitude-confirming media (media 'I consume') and to have strong opinions about attitude-challenging media (media 'others consume'). In other words, the greater the gap, the greater the potential polarization. Thus, we

argue that it is important to differentiate between trust in news generally, trust in the news a person consumes, and the difference between the two.

With this in mind, it is important to consider what Vallone et al. (1985) called the 'hostile media phenomenon'. In short, hostile media is a perceptual effect whereby polarized groups perceive media coverage to be biased against their views. The theory describes how polarized groups evaluate the fairness of the media's facts and arguments differently in light of their own divergent views about the objective merits of each side's case and their corresponding views about the nature of unbiased coverage. It states that people report different perceptions and recollections about news content itself – that is, each group report more negative references to their side than positive ones, and each predicted that coverage would sway non-partisans in a hostile direction. These effects have been empirically demonstrated since. For example, Tsfati and Cohen (2005) advance the argument that people's perceptions of hostile coverage shape their trust in mainstream media institutions. Arpan and Raney's (2003) findings indicate strong support for the hostile media effect among sports news consumers. Kim (2011) found partisanship played a significant role in perceptual differences with regard to media bias in coverage of climate change. Jones (2004) found early signs of the impact of polarization on trust in the media, with trust particularly low among conservative Republicans, especially those who listened to political talk radio. Later research found that partisanship was a predictor of trust among US voters (Lee, 2010), while Hanitzsch et al. (2017) found that the link between press trust and political trust was considerably stronger in politically polarized societies, and that the relationship between press trust and political trust is becoming stronger over time.

Of course, partisanship and polarization are not synonymous despite an occasional tendency to treat them as if they are. Much Congressional research has, for example, found that the extreme partisanship and resultant polarization visible on The Hill is not necessarily reflected among voters at large (Iyengar

and Westwood, 2015). Although others have found that political trust is indeed highest in countries with very proportional electoral systems and very disproportional election outcomes, and lowest in countries that fall in between (Marien, 2011), we must also understand the difference between individual and the country level factors. A number of factors have been found to be important in predicting polarization, including measures of proportionality and, in particular, the effective numbers of parties (Marien, 2011).

The standard dependent variable in trust studies is a Likert scale from strong distrust to strong trust. We also deploy this. However, we also argue that this is unlikely to uncover a consistent relationship with political views because in some countries people will trust the media if they think it represents them on the whole - especially in countries where the media switches allegiance to support the ruling party. As such, we consider the relationship between left-right partisanship and trust in the news media.

This discussion leads us to our second area of focus for this article. Until now, we have talked as if the media is one single institution. This is partly because much of the literature is based on work which used single questions in WVS and EVS modules asking about trust in 'the press'. This is often assumed to cover all types of media, but where this may once have been indisputable, in an era of hybrid media it is far less so. We must now deploy a more nuanced understanding utilizing the concept of the hybrid media system, which blends newer and older media logics, and where politics is increasingly defined by organizations, groups and individuals who are best able to blend them. In particular, digital technologies engender a hybrid media system in which traditional news cycles are replaced with more dynamic information cycles. Access to decentralized online and social communication platforms creates 'new opportunities for non-elite actors to mobilize and enter the news making process' (Chadwick, 2017: 6). Thus, power is diffused and 'exercised by those who are successfully able to

create, tap or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals and in ways that modify, enable or disable other's agency' (Chadwick, 2017: 207).

This hybridity of the media system is arguably enabling the spread of polarizing political sentiment. Polarizing rhetoric is more pronounced on new digital and social media, partly because traditional journalism norms are likely to be less salient on these platforms and partly because politicians can utilize these platforms to communicate directly to the public (Suiter et al., 2018). In addition, social media may also encourage the emergence of ad hoc publics around specific themes and topics (Bruns and Burgess, 2015). Publics can emerge in a bottom-up fashion from within communities of users and are likely to increase polarization.

According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report data (Newman et al., 2017), 33% of those aged 18–24 say social media are their main source of news – that is more than online news sites (31%) and more than TV news and printed newspapers put together (29%). The reality is that, for most people, social media are not something different but increasingly just part of the everyday media mix. Two-thirds of social media news users in the United States also watch television news (67%) and two-thirds also visit mainstream websites or apps (66%). Just 2% only use social media for news in an average week. But of course where people are on the distribution will matter a good deal to whether they are living a polarized media life or one with diverse sources and platforms.

Hypotheses

With this in mind, we can form a series of hypotheses about the associations between partisanship, polarization and trust in the news. Based on what we know about the hostile media phenomenon, we expect the following:

H1a. Partisans will have less trust in the news in general.

H1b. People in more polarized countries will have less trust in the news in general.

H1c. Partisans will have even less trust in the news in general in countries which are more polarized.

We also expect the opposite to be true concerning the news people themselves use:

H2a. Partisans will have more trust in the news they use.

H2b. People in more polarized countries will have more trust in the news they use.

H2c. Partisans will have even more trust in the news they use in countries which are more polarized.

Finally, we expect there to be implications for what we refer to as the trust gap (the difference in trust between the news people use and the rest of the news that is available where they are):

H3a. Partisans will perceive a larger news trust gap.

H3b. People in more polarized countries will perceive a larger trust gap.

H3c. Partisans will perceive an even larger news trust gap in countries which are more polarized.

Data

Our data come from the 2017 Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2017). The report is based on an online survey of over 70,000 respondents across 36 countries. The survey was conducted by YouGov (and their partners) and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford in early February 2017, and was designed to gather data on all important aspects of attitudes towards the news and news use. Four of the countries/markets

included are located in Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico), six in Asia-Pacific (Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan), two in North America (United States, Canada) and one in Australia. The remaining 23 countries are all located in Europe (Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom). Though this sample spans four continents, it should be acknowledged that – from a global perspective – these are all highly developed countries with, for example, a Human Development Index score of over 0.75 (out of 1). As the data are from an online panel survey, respondents were not selected completely at random, but invited to respond based on quotas for age, gender and region.

The main weakness of the dataset is that it was collected using an online survey. This means that people without Internet access were not able to respond. This issue is most pronounced in countries where Internet penetration is relatively low. In many of the countries included, Internet penetration exceeds 90%, but Internet penetration was (at the time of data collection) below 70% in Brazil, Greece, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Turkey (see Table 1). In these countries, the sample is more representative of the urban population, which is typically wealthier and more educated than the national average. However, the main strength of the dataset is that data collection was conducted at the same time in every country, using the same (translated) questionnaire. This allows for a truly comparative analysis.

Measures

We use three separate dependent variables. The first is overall trust in the news media. This was measured by asking respondents across all countries to indicate their level of agreement (on a five-point scale) with the following statement: ‘I think you can trust most news most of the time’ ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.01$). To measure trust in the news that people use, we asked a similar question, where the

statement read, ‘I think I can trust most of the news I consume most of the time’ ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.96$). As expected, the mean of this variable is slightly higher than the previous one. Therefore, for each respondent we can measure what we call the trust gap, which is simply trust in the news people consume minus the overall trust in the news ($M = 0.36$, $SD = 0.65$). The mean figure indicates that for most people in most countries, this gap is small or non-existent.²

At the individual level, our main independent variable is partisanship. To measure partisanship, we asked respondents to place themselves on a seven-point scale ranging from very left-wing (1) through centre (4), to very right-wing (7). Then, we recoded this into partisanship by taking the absolute difference between the response and centre (4) so that both very left- and very right-wing responses were recoded as 3 and so on ($M = 1.11$, $SD = 0.94$). Don’t know responses were removed. This is important to keep in mind because as many as 26% in France, Finland, and Chile selected this option, reducing the total sample size significantly. It is also important to acknowledge that this variable measures left-right partisanship only, and not partisanship along other dimensions. It is likely that the left-right dimension is more important in some countries than others, and that left-right labels mean different things to different people at different times. That being said, it is still considered to be one of the most meaningful single-item measures of ideology (Caughey et al., 2019). However, we acknowledge that populist attitudes, for example, have been shown to be more important for predicting attitudes towards the news media in some Western European countries (Pew Research Centre, 2018).

At the national level, our initial aim was to use an indicator for political polarization. However, to our knowledge, there was no measure available for a

² Technically the trust gap scale ranges from -4 to 4 because someone can in theory indicate that they have the maximum level of trust in the news in general and the minimum level of trust in the news they consume. However, this is an unrealistic situation for most respondents, and almost all had a trust gap greater than or equal to 0.

reasonable number of the countries in our sample. We therefore used Effective Number of Parties. Effective number of parties (Eff N) was devised in the late 1970s by Markku Laakso and Rein Taagepera as a measure of party system fragmentation (Laakso & Taagepera 1979). It can be measured at the level of votes (N_v) or of seats (N_s). The formula generates a number that conveys information about fragmentation. For example, a figure of 4.14 tells us that the party system is 'in effect' as fragmented as if there were 4.14 equal-sized parties. We use N_v because it should be better at measuring the degree of fragmentation in society, given that N_s will reflect not only the fragmentation in voting but also the way the electoral system converts those votes into seats. So even if voting (N_v) is quite fragmented, the distribution of seats (N_s) might appear to be not very fragmented because of the operation of the electoral system. The data used in this paper was downloaded from the accompanying website to the Politics of Electoral Systems (Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005) which contained data up to the end of 2019.³ We used the data for each country that was closest to the survey fieldwork date of February 2017. Data was available for all markets in the sample except for Hong Kong (M = 5.27, SD = 2.94). The Eff N_v ranged from 1.97 in Singapore to 18.01 in Brazil (see Table 1). We assume that countries with a lower effective number of parties are more polarized. Effective number of parties is not a measure of polarization per se, but previous cross-national studies of trust in the press have nonetheless suggested that it could be a meaningful indicator because 'two-party systems are arguably more vulnerable to ideological polarization than ideologically more diverse political systems' (Hanitzsch et al., 2017: 16). More specifically, Hanitzsch et al.'s observation that trust in the press is falling in the English-speaking world prompted them to wonder whether this might be linked to the 'the relatively long history of a two-party system in many of these countries, in which two major political ideologies struggle over political dominance' (Hanitzsch et al., 2017). Of course, effective number of parties will

³ https://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/staff/michael_gallagher/EISystems/index.php

not entirely get at polarisation in that it is designed to capture the degree of fragmentation, and while high polarisation in a society is likely to be inversely proportion to fragmentation if there are many distinct segments, or if blocs are internally divided, a low effective number of parties could be associated with low polarisation if attitudes and the party system are both monolithic.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Country	Sample size	Internet		
		penetration (%)	HDI	Eff Nv
Argentina	2001	79	0.825	4.11
Australia	2004	92	0.939	4.47
Austria	2000	83	0.908	4.08
Belgium	2009	88	0.916	10.94
Brazil	2003	68	0.759	18.01
Canada	2000	93	0.926	3.33
Chile	2005	80	0.843	4.03
Croatia	2005	74	0.831	3.82
Czech Republic	2003	88	0.888	6.92
Denmark	2011	96	0.929	6.46
Finland	2007	92	0.920	7.46
France	2000	86	0.901	6.82
Germany	2062	89	0.936	6.18
Greece	2002	65	0.870	3.68
Hungary	2004	81	0.838	3.31
Ireland	2002	81	0.938	6.57
Italy	2011	63	0.880	3.42
Japan	2000	94	0.909	4.22
Malaysia	2108	70	0.802	7.00
Mexico	2003	56	0.774	2.39
Netherlands	2006	96	0.931	8.56
Norway	2056	96	0.953	5.55
Poland	2013	68	0.865	4.45
Portugal	2007	68	0.847	3.59
Romania	2029	56	0.811	3.76
Singapore	2000	81	0.932	1.97

Slovakia	2002	83	0.855	7.31
South Korea	2002	89	0.903	3.68
Spain	2006	77	0.891	5.03
Sweden	2021	95	0.933	5.79
Switzerland	2005	87	0.944	5.83
Taiwan	1017	88	0.907	3.23
Turkey	2005	60	0.791	2.99
UK	2112	92	0.922	2.89
US	2269	90	0.924	2.14

Data on Internet penetration taken from Internet World Stats (internetworldstats.com). Human Development Index scores taken from United Nations Development Programme. Data on Effective Number of Parties from: https://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/people/michael_gallagher/EISystems/

We also include a number of control variables, namely, age (in years, $M = 45.58$, $SD = 15.64$), gender (male or female, 48.88% male), education (six-point scale, $M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.31$), interest in news (five-point scale, $M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.84$), frequency of Internet use (eight-point scale, $M = 5.83$, $SD = 1.41$) and perceptions of news media independence from political interference (five-point scale, $M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.12$) and commercial interference (five-point scale, $M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.07$). To measure these final two control variables, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the following two statements: ‘The news media in my country is independent from undue political or government influence most of the time’ and ‘The news media in my country is independent from undue business or commercial influence most of the time’.

Results

We address our hypotheses with a series of multilevel models run using the `lme4` package for the statistical language R. A series of preliminary tests showed that random slope models fit the data best for all three dependent variables, meaning

that the intercepts and the influence of partisanship are allowed to vary between countries.⁴

H1a. Partisans will have less trust in the news in general.

H1b. People in more polarized countries will have less trust in the news in general

H1c. Partisans will have even less trust in the news in general in countries which are more polarized.

First, we address H1a, H1b and H1c by setting the dependent variable to overall trust in the news. Model 1 in Table 2 shows, as hypothesized, that partisanship is negatively associated with overall trust in the news ($\beta = -0.03$, $p < .001$). Hypothesis 1a is therefore supported. However, Model 1 also shows that the coefficient for Eff Nv is not significant

Table 2. Multilevel models where the dependent variable is overall trust in the news.

	Model 1	Model 2
Random effects		
Intercept	0.14	0.14
Partisanship	0.03	0.03
Residual	0.86	0.86
Fixed effects		
Intercept	1.15 (0.06)***	1.15 (0.06)***
Age	0.01 (0.00)***	0.01 (0.00)***

⁴ Dependent variable = overall trust in news: fixed intercept null model compared to random intercept null model (likelihood ratio = 5539.49, $p < .05$) and full (included all independent and control variables) random intercept compared to full random slope (likelihood ratio = 29.81, $p < .05$). Dependent variable = trust in news people consume: fixed intercept null model compared to random intercept null model (likelihood ratio = 5274.36, $p < .05$) and full random intercept compared to full random slope (likelihood ratio = 23.35, $p < .05$). Dependent variable = trust gap: fixed intercept null model compared to random intercept null model (likelihood ratio = 3782.53, $p < .05$) and full random intercept compared to full random slope (likelihood ratio = 121.8, $p < .05$).

Gender (ref. = female)	0.05 (0.01)***	0.05 (0.01)***
Education	-0.01 (0.00)*	-0.01 (0.00)*
Partisanship	-0.03 (0.01)***	-0.03 (0.02)*
Interest in news	0.10 (0.01)***	0.10 (0.01)***
Frequency of Internet use	0.01 (0.00)**	0.01 (0.00)***
Political independence	0.23 (0.01)***	0.23 (0.01)***
Commercial independence	0.25 (0.01)***	0.25 (0.01)***
Eff Nv	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Interaction		
Partisanship × Eff Nv		-0.00 (0.00)
AIC	146,782.95	146,795.34
BIC	146,908.39	146,929.74
Pseudo R2	0.29	0.29
N	57,527	57,527

Eff Nv: effective number of parties; AIC: Akaike information criterion; BIC: Bayesian information criterion. Random effects rows show standard deviation. Fixed effects rows show beta coefficients followed by standard error in parentheses. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Table 3. Multilevel models where the dependent variable is trust in the news people use.

	Model 3	Model 4
Random effects		
Intercept	0.13	0.13
Partisanship	0.03	0.03
Residual	0.84	0.84
Fixed effects		
Intercept	1.44 (0.06)***	1.43 (0.06)***
Age	0.00 (0.00)***	0.00 (0.00)***
Gender (ref. = female)	0.03 (0.01)***	0.03 (0.01)***
Education	0.01 (0.00)***	0.01 (0.00)**
Partisanship	0.01 (0.01)*	0.03 (0.01)**
Interest in news	0.12 (0.01)***	0.12 (0.01)***
Frequency of Internet use	0.02 (0.00)***	0.02 (0.00)***
Political independence	0.18 (0.00)***	0.18 (0.00)***
Commercial independence	0.22 (0.01)***	0.22 (0.01)***
Eff Nv	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Interaction		
Partisanship × Eff Nv		-0.00 (0.00)

AIC	143,428.88	143,438.12
BIC	143,554.32	143,572.52
Pseudo R2	0.24	0.24
N	57,527	57,527

Eff Nv: effective number of parties; AIC: Akaike information criterion; BIC: Bayesian information criterion. Random effects rows show standard deviation. Fixed effects rows show beta coefficient followed by standard error in parentheses. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

($\beta = 0.01$, $p > .05$), meaning that no support was found for the idea that people in more polarized countries have less trust in the news in general. In Model 2 in Table 1, we test for an interaction between Eff Nv and partisanship. However, there was no statistically significant support for the idea that living in a more polarized country accentuates the negative association between partisanship and overall trust in the news media ($\beta = -0.00$, $p > .05$). Therefore we do not find any support for H1b or H1c.

H2a. Partisans will have more trust in the news they use.

H2b. People in more polarized countries will have more trust in the news they use.

H2c. Partisans will have even more trust in the news they use in countries which are more polarized.

We can now consider H2a, H2b and H2c by switching the dependent variable to trust in the news people use (Table 3). As predicted, partisanship was significantly and positively associated with trust in the news people use ($\beta = 0.01$, $p < .05$), as shown in Model 3 in Table 3. We therefore find support for H2a. However, as earlier, the coefficient for Eff Nv in Model 3 ($\beta = -0.00$, $p > .05$) and the interaction between this and partisanship in Model 4 ($\beta = -0.00$, $p > .05$) were not significant. This means that there is no evidence that trust in the news people use is higher in more polarized countries, or that the positive

association between partisanship and trust in the news people use is accentuated in more polarized countries. We therefore did not find support for H2b or H2c.

H3a. Partisans will perceive a larger news trust gap.

H3b. People in more polarized countries will perceive a larger trust gap.

H3c. Partisans will perceive an even larger news trust gap in countries which are more polarized

Finally, if we set the dependent variable to the trust gap and examine Model 5 in Table 4, we see that partisans are significantly more likely to perceive a trust gap ($\beta = 0.04, p < .001$). This is consistent with the idea that partisans have lower trust in the news overall, but higher trust in the news they consume. However, we did not find a significant association at the country level between effective number of parties and a larger trust gap ($\beta = 0.00, p > 0.05$), or any support for the idea that partisanship matters more for the trust gap in countries that are more polarized ($\beta = -0.00, p > 0.05$). H3a is therefore supported, but H3b and H3c are not.

Discussion and conclusion

In summary, we find support for our hypothesized associations at the individual level (in terms of partisanship), but not at the country level (in terms of polarization as understood through Eff Nv). Partisans trust the news less, trust the news they use more and perceive a larger gap between the news they use and the news everyone else uses. However, people in more polarized countries do not have significantly lower levels of trust in the news, and partisanship does not have a larger effect on trust for those people who happen to live in more polarized countries.

It is important to be clear that the predicted individual-level associations between partisanship and trust in the news are generally very weak. For example, all else being equal, a one unit increase in left-right partisanship increases the trust gap

by 0.04 on a scale from that ranges from 0 to 4. In other words, across the countries examined here, the impact of partisanship on trust is small.

Table 4. Multilevel models where the dependent variable is the trust gap.

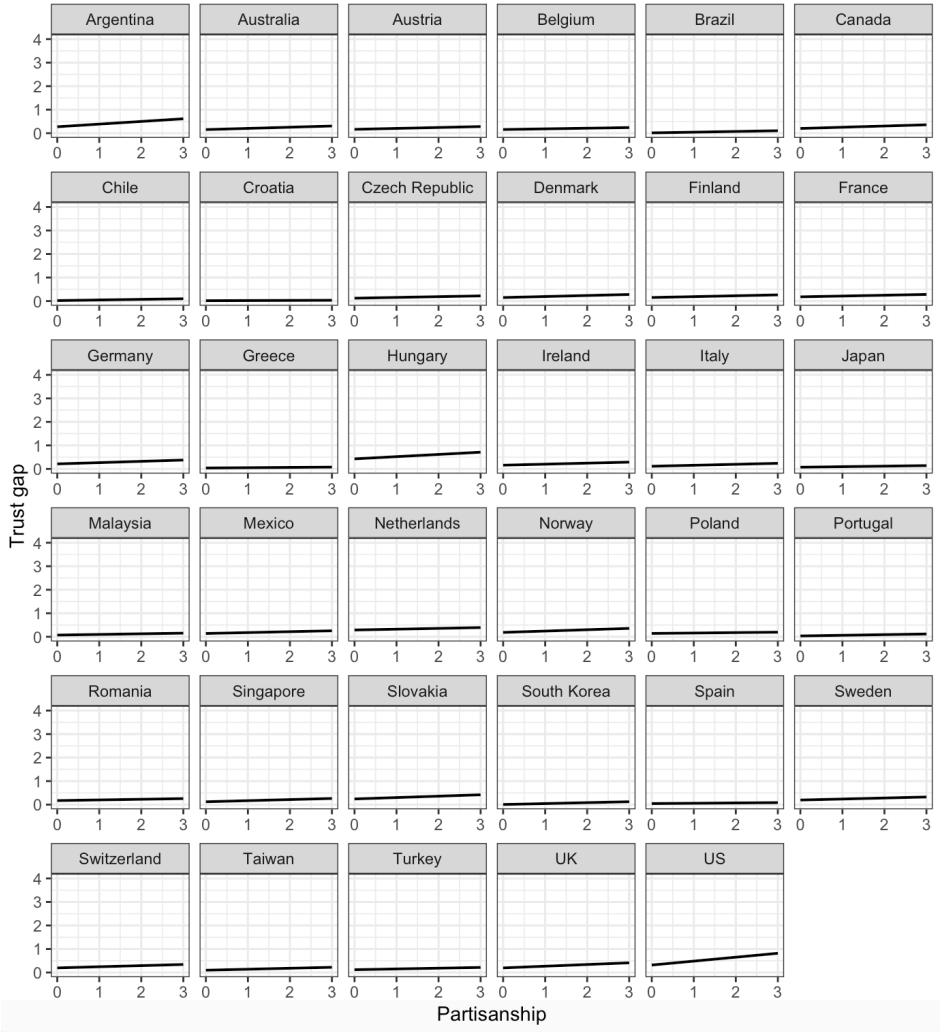
	Model 5	Model 6
Random effects		
Intercept	0.10	0.10
Partisanship	0.03	0.03
Residual	0.72	0.72
Fixed effects		
Intercept	0.27 (0.04)***	0.28 (0.04)***
Age	-0.00 (0.00)***	-0.00 (0.00)***
Gender (ref. = female)	-0.02 (0.01)***	-0.02 (0.01)***
Education	0.01 (0.00)***	0.01 (0.00)***
Partisanship	0.04 (0.01)***	0.06 (0.01)**
Interest in news	0.01 (0.00)**	0.01 (0.00)**
Frequency of Internet use	0.01 (0.00)**	0.01 (0.00)**
Political independence	-0.05 (0.00)***	-0.05 (0.00)***
Commercial independence	-0.03 (0.00)***	-0.03 (0.00)***
Eff Nv	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)
Interaction		
Partisanship × Eff Nv		-0.00 (0.00)
AIC	126,481.54	126,492.08
BIC	126,606.98	126,626.48
Pseudo R2	0.05	0.05
N	57,527	57,527

Eff Nv: effective number of parties; AIC: Akaike information criterion; BIC: Bayesian information criterion. Random effects rows show standard deviation. Fixed effects rows show beta coefficient followed by standard error in parentheses. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

If we use the sjPlot package for R to visualize the predicted associations between partisanship and the trust gap by country, we can get a better idea of what is happening beneath the surface. Although the trust gap increases slightly with partisanship everywhere, the increase in the United States is noticeably stronger. Even compared to other English-speaking countries which tend to have low scores for Eff Nv, such as the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, the

increase in the trust gap in the United States is visibly sharper (see Figure 1.) Furthermore, in the United States the trust gap among the least partisan is roughly as high as the trust gap among the most partisan in these other countries. The only other country in our sample with as strong an association between partisanship and the trust gap was Hungary.

Figure 1. Predicted association between partisanship and the trust gap in each country (Model 5).



One of the primary motivations for carrying out this research was to see whether our understanding of the importance of partisanship is too influenced by what we know about dynamics in the United States. Our results here suggest that this is indeed the case, even when the United States is compared to other countries with something close to two-party systems. Elsewhere, partisanship still matters, but other factors – both endogenous and exogenous – are likely to be more salient. Elements of this can be seen in our own models, where the coefficients for variables, such as individual perceptions of news media independence from political interference, independence from commercial interference and individual levels of interest in the news, are all typically better predictors of trust than partisanship. However, there is also the possibility that the association is stronger in the United States because we understand partisanship exclusively through a single left-right dimension. It may be that left-right differences are more salient in the United States than they are in other countries. There are, of course, numerous other ways to measure political attitudes, and thus numerous ways of conceptualizing partisanship. Some of these may be important, but we were unable to test for them here.

Following on from this, we do not see a role for levels of political polarization at a national level when it comes to understanding individual level trust in the news. Or perhaps more accurately, the potential role is unclear and not straightforwardly captured by our measures and approach. As we mentioned earlier, our sample consisted of countries with a high Human Development Index, so it does not contain some of the more extreme examples of polarization (or lack of), possibly making it harder to find associations with trust. But we must again sound a note of caution about our use of the EffNv as a national level measure of polarization. It is of course possible for a political environment to have multiple parties but still be a polarized system. Nonetheless, we still think it is instructive that for now we cannot find any significant impact of party structure – which we suspect some instinctively see as important for understanding the public's relationship with politics and the news media.

Again, the United States is perhaps slightly unusual in the way it fits this pattern, exhibiting both high polarization and low trust in the news. This makes intuitive sense, but we also know from other studies – including the WVS and the Edelman Trust Barometer – that patterns of trust in the news can be somewhat counterintuitive, especially if viewed from a distance. According to the WVS, trust in the press is considerably higher in China than in Sweden. Sweden ranked second in the 2018 World Press Freedom Index. China placed 176th out of 180. Of course, this may be partly due to the way survey respondents tend to give socially desirable answers to certain questions, and in certain countries under certain circumstances this can misrepresent true feelings and beliefs. But there is a broader issue that can manifest itself anywhere: sometimes people trust untrustworthy things. This may make it difficult to find sensible associations between trust and other variables at the national level.

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