Disdaining the Media in the Post 9/11 World

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August 2002

Paper prepared for delivery at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston MA, August 2002. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual meeting of the International Society for Political Psychology. We would like to thank Lance Bennett, Robert Eisinger, and Doris Graber for comments, John Brehm and Steve Procopio for advice; and Aaron Rabiroff for research assistance.

This research was supported in part by the Corbett-Goldhammer Summer Research and Stillman-Drake Faculty Research Funds of Reed College and the Reilly Center for Media and Public Affairs at Louisiana State University. The authors are solely responsible for any errors in interpretation.

Electronic copies available at: http://www.reed.edu/~gronkep/papers.html.

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Paul Gronke and Timothy Cook

Introduction

The news media in America act as the main source of political information for the mass public and as the primary "transmission belt" communicating public desires to political elites and governmental actors. Darrell West (2001) describes the "media establishment" as a "major power broker" which exerts "unprecedented power over the dissemination of news" (p. viii). Drawing on David Easton, Timothy Cook deems the news media a "political institution" because it presides over a particular political sector and "…engages, along with other political institutions, in the authoritative allocation of values in American society" (1998 p. 85-6). Not only does it act as an intermediary between the mass public and the government, but also within and among branches of government. We may wish to push Cook's metaphor even further. In a system of declining rates of affiliation with political parties and falling levels of participation in community, civic, and other political organizations, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the news media is the dominant intermediary organization in American democracy.

The news media's power stems in large part from its control over public information about politics, and to some degree, its ability to shape, certify, and even embody public opinion (c.f. Herbst 1998). While some may bemoan the performance of the news media, especially in the past twenty years, its role as political informer remains crucial. David Paletz writes that the "media are indispensable to democracy, a political system predicated on the consent of the governed" (1999 p. 3). Without the news media, the public would remain ill-informed about the world "outside of our heads," incapable of managing the "information tide" (Graber 1984) and unable to render rational decisions at the ballot box or even coherently answer questions on a public opinion poll.[1]

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[1] Delli Carpini and Keeter (1997), Geer (1996), and Brehm (1993), among others, view public opinion polls as an important form of political participation, not comparable to the franchise, but undeniably important

Putting aside for now politically prominent, and popular, accusations of bias, distortion, and scandal mongering in the press, the current concern among scholars is that the media may be losing its ability to fulfill its informative role. The proportion of Americans who subscribe to a daily newspaper has declined over the past thirty years from more than a third of the population to less than a fifth. Over the past twenty years, the percentage of TV watching households who report viewing one of the network news broadcasts fell from near unanimity, over 90% in 1978, to just 45% in 1999. And Americans, in general, are paying less attention across the board to the news, regardless of the source, even during a "war on terrorism" (Pew report, June 9, 2002). The content demands of Americans are harder to satisfy as well. Graber (2001) points out the difficulty for news directors of satisfying a public that is split between those who demand tabloid coverage and those who desire more serious news. Add to this mix the increasing reliance on "soft" news and "news you can use" (Cook 2001; although see Baum 2002 for a optimistic assessment of the impact of soft news). Consumers have a dizzying array of choices, thus undermining the ability of any one news outlet to dominate coverage. Ironically, diversification of outlets has not resulted in homogenization of coverage. Cook also reports higher levels of formal cooperation between various news outlets and greater reliance on a few dominant wire services as the news hole has progressively shrunk.[2]

These rapid changes in the news media have occurred in an unsettled period in American politics, during which the mass public's trust and respect for their political and social institutions has, by most reports, eroded substantially. Confidence in the media has declines as well, but at an accelerated pace (Cook and Gronke 2001). Presumably, there is some relationship between changes in the news media as an institution and changes in the public's assessment of that institution. Few scholarly efforts have been devoted to relating the two. Journalism and communications scholars primarily concentrate on newsgathering and news-production, while public opinion and elections scholars care about the media insofar as it provides information that may alter public attitudes and behavior.

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in modern democracies.

[2] Others suggest that narrowcasting and diversification have polarized and divided public opinion (Mendelsohn and Nadeau 1996, Jones 2002).

The events of September 11 brought into question many conventional wisdoms in the United States: our sense of security, our tolerance for intrusions into our personal freedoms, and, most importantly for our project here, the seemingly inexorable decline of trust in government and governmental leaders. The news media was subjected to particularly sharp scrutiny during this period. It's not hard to imagine why. News coverage during wartime has been a topic of controversy since at least Vietnam, if not before (for an excellent presentation of the issues, see the Newseum's "War Stories" exhibit, http://www.newseum.org). One could imagine two scenarios; in the first, the news media serves to unify Americans, fostering our sense of patriotism, fanning the flames of outrage, and eventually broadcasting the outcome of a successful campaign to overthrow the Taliban. Alternatively, one can imagine a news media acting as critic of the established order, asking uncomfortable questions about government foreknowledge of terrorist activities in the U.S., broadcasting videotaped interviews with Osama bin Laden, publicizing civilian casualty figures, and criticizing Afghani relief efforts. Both are valid roles for the media, but it is unclear whether the public approves more of the press as watchdog or as lapdog, nor how the relative weight of these assessments may change over time. That is the focus of our larger project.

In this paper, we use public opinion about major social and political institutions, post September 11, as a lens through which we examine and extend our previous work on trust and confidence in the media. In the next section, we review our previous work on confidence in the media, summarizing the theoretical expectations and empirical findings. After that, we examine the spike in American's confidence in institutions post 9/11 and the subsequent "return to normalcy" by spring 2002, highlighting the path taken by public confidence in the media. Our expectation is that the media will experience a smaller rally, and a more rapid return to normalcy, than that experienced by any other institution. Finally, we turn briefly to a more detailed examination of public attitudes towards press coverage during this period, drawing on a new public opinion poll conducted for this purpose.

Defining and Explaining Confidence in the Press

Trust and confidence are often used interchangeably when referring to public attitudes about a specific institution. For the purposes of this paper, we put aside the

question of the meaning of "trust" and how it is solicited from the mass public. We are primarily concerned with confidence in a particular institution or set of institutions. Confidence is undoubtedly related to trust in government (and for that matter, trust in others), but is a distinct theoretical and methodological concept.

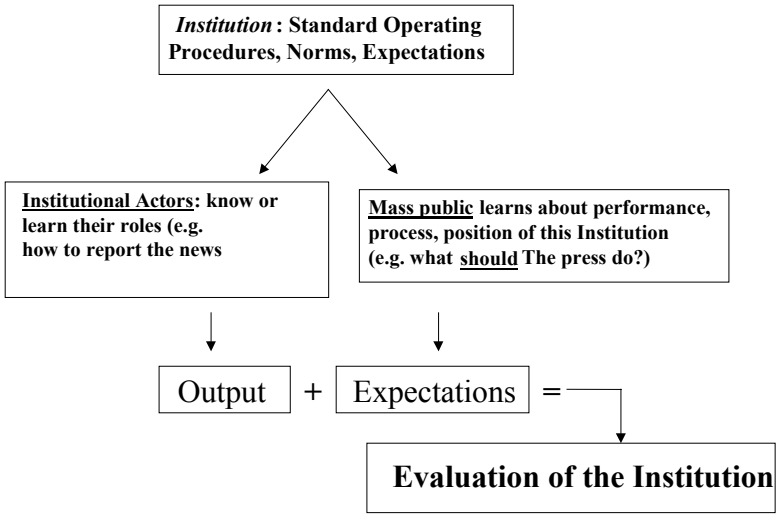
Most survey organizations (General Social Survey, National Election Study, Gallup, Harris, and CBS/NY Times) employ a relatively simple and brief query to measure confidence:

> "I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the *people running* these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?"

followed by a list of institutions ("the executive branch of the federal government", "big business", etc.). The question is far from ideal. It tends to fuzz over any differences between the institutions, in terms of a set of practices that transcend individuals therein, and the leaders of those institutions. It must be possible for an individual to hold both positive and negative attitudes towards a particular institution, its leadership, and its past and current performance (analogous perhaps to the multidimensional nature of partisan identity). "Confidence" does not exhaust all the possibilities of understanding how Americans react to their set of political and social institutions, as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (1995) outstanding study of attitudes to Congress, the presidency, and the Supreme Court attests. The varied bases of assessments become particularly relevant during a period of institutional stress, where performance may deviate significantly from traditional procedures and mission.

Furthermore, what specifically might we expect about public confidence in the leadership of the press? How does the press, as an institution, differ from other political and social institutions? To help structure our thinking about these questions, we employ a general model of institutional evaluations (including confidence), sketched out in Figure One. This figure, meant more as a heuristic than as a causal model, captures the main elements of the evaluative process.

Figure One: A Model of Institutional Confidence



Outputs for the news media consist of the stories, reports, analyses, and video footage that are produced as part of the newsgathering process. This might be described traditionally as the workways of the newsroom. The development of these standard operating procedures—what constitutes "news"—has been the focus of an extensive literature (e.g. Hess 1996; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996; Gans 1979) and will not be reviewed here. *Institutional actors*--journalists, editors, and publishers--control output, in part by acting according to their proscribed roles, but also by reacting to the political environment. The *mass public* develops expectations about what constitutes appropriate media coverage, drawn in part from their social and political positions as well as from past performance of the institution. Then, far in the background lies "institution," a difficult to grasp bundle of SOP's, rules, constitutional or legal provisions, and the like.

For the time being, we are being purposely agnostic about how output has changed over time, and more importantly for this paper, what performance expectations are, how they develop, and how they are weighed against output. We hope to develop a more detailed set of measures of the mass public's sense of media performance, drawing on the excellent work by the Pew Center for the People and the Press, the American Society of News Editors, the Committee for Concerned Journalists, and other professional organizations and scholarly works. However, as will become clear below, we have made a first attempt at both expectations and performance evaluations in our Reilly Center poll.

In order to form a *summary evaluation* of institutional performance, we posit that individuals weigh performance or outputs against expectations. This is a similar approach as that inferred, though not explicitly stated, in the Durr et al. model of Congressional approval: "If Congress were to do its job…aggregate approval would rise" (Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997), some models of presidential approval (e.g. Gronke 1999), and of course is central to the process/policy distinction forwarded by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995). We hypothesize a similar attitudinal structure underlies summary statements of trust and confidence in a particular institution. Superior performance and exceeding expectations result in a positive shift in evaluations, while inferior performance would erode evaluations. Ideally, we would test this model on a wider variety of summary evaluations, rather than the single set which we examine here ("confidence in the leaders of …").[3]

In summary, in this paper, we try to understand <u>when</u> citizen evaluations change, in the hopes that this will provide us some leverage to infer <u>why</u> they change. Our empirical examination focuses on changing attitudes during a period of national crisis: the six months following the terrorists attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. What are our theoretical expectations regarding citizen evaluations immediately after 9/11?

Recent findings of Mutz and Martin (2001) may shed light on public attitudes during this period. Mutz and Martin highlight the importance of exposure to conflicting viewpoints in a democratic polity. Such exposure promotes "strong talk" (Barber 1984), encourages reflection and deliberation (Fishkin 1991), and enhances rational decision making (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). A purely homogenous set of viewpoints militates against such reflective democratic decision-making (Sunstein 2001). Mutz and Martin show that the mass media presents a set of viewpoints that are perceived to be more at odds with an individual's own opinions than at least one other major source of political information: interpersonal communications (at least respondents reported higher levels of perceived disagreement with political viewpoints from newspaper and television).

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[3] We included more measures of "general" confidence in the Reilly poll. We will include these in the next iteration of this paper. For the time being, we also leave open what constitutes superior or inferior performance. For instance, Marc Lynch, an expert on the international media at Williams College, points out that the Arab press is disliked but highly valued, because they provide one of the few independent sources of

It is interesting to puzzle over these results in light of Cook's claims of increasing formal cooperation, and presumably homogeneity, in the mass media. A diverse set of viewpoints, at least as measured by Mutz and Martin, means that respondents say they disagree with the content of the news (validated by content coding). This is not news you can use but news you don't like. Our personal network of friends, colleagues, and co-workers, in contrast, is primarily made up of those who agree with us. Yet, what is the role of the mass media if not to expose us to the uncomfortable realities of the world outside of our local network of friends? Certainly no journalist would want to suppress certain facts or viewpoints simply because the public will find them distasteful. On the other hand, if the media are becoming more homogeneous, as Cook shows, then it should be true that some segments of the population will find themselves in regular disagreement with the media while others will find themselves in regular agreement. It all depends on heterogeneity (or homogeneity) in individual beliefs, values, and ideologies; homogeneity or heterogeneity in media coverage; and how these two map onto one another.[4]

To bring us back to the topic of this paper, it is precisely the shape of this mapping that we wish to examine, within the context of a "war on terror." A wartime situation is quite different from an election campaign (the context studied by Mutz and Martin). In a time of national crisis, it is possible that the public is little interested in deliberating or engaging in "strong talk" over military policy, as expansive as "national security" has turned out to be. Put in the language of the model presented above, "expectations" are contextually determined. We do not know the causality of these expectations, although we have found in earlier work that perceptions of bias vary by ideology. We do not intend to challenge the utility of democratic discourse, but rather am attempting to identify situations where the public may display little tolerance for dissent, and furthermore, blame the messenger who carries signs of public discord. Thus, the media may be faced with an irresolvable dilemma during times of crisis. If the media expose flaws in the war effort, they may be scapegoats; if

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information in the Middle East. We hope to pursue the diverse bases of media confidence in subsequent work.

[4] The causality can be complex. It might be that the media see their role as presenting viewpoints which are contrary to the prevailing wisdom. In that case, it would be true that a more homogeneous media would spark more disagreement with citizen viewpoints. But then this further assumes that citizen viewpoints reflect the prevailing wisdom—as learned from the media (Zaller 1992). We are caught in a tautology.

they simply parrot government propaganda, they will be accused of being sycophants.[5]

Some argue that it has been incumbent on the press to report the facts, however unpleasant they may be. Rosensteil and Kovach, in a recent editorial, write: "…a review of news coverage reveals that over time Americans are getting fewer facts and more opinion—a narrow range of opinion at that—(and at) the same time, polls show the press losing a measure of the respect that it had gained in September, when the public overwhelmingly applauded the timely, comprehensive and informative news coverage" (Rosensteil and Kovach 2002). As Alex Jones, director of the Joan Shorenstein Center put it: "the media can be totally oblivious to what public opinion is, but they have a great opportunity to be tough and illuminative in their coverage" (Gavel 2001). Illuminative perhaps, but also possibly disdained for being so. It is an open question for the time being whether the media, when acting as critics of the established order, will necessarily be penalized by the public for doing so. While previous poll findings indicate that the public endorses the watchdog role of the media, we wish to ask this question again in the context of a national crisis.

There is one additional way that changes in the "mapping" of public attitudes may have been altered: the interrelationship among perceptions of confidence. If 9/11 caused individuals to reconsider a wide array of personal, social, and political attitudes (c.f. Brader 2002; Schildkraut 2002; Smith et al 2001), then it is also quite possible that it led to a reshuffling of the centrality of different social and political institutions. We try to capture this in part by reestimating a set of factor analyses that we have presented in previous work. There we discovered a smaller set of underlying dimensions which accounted for much of the observed variation in the sixteen confidence measures, from 1973-1998 (using GSS data). Over this twenty-five year period, we identified a most typical pattern where "press" and "TV" loaded on the same factor with confidence in labor unions. This pattern reinforces Lipset and Schneider's (1987) finding that confidence in the press follows a different logic from confidence in other institutions. In other years, though, especially more recently, there are some evidence for a dimensional pattern such as that suggested by Ola Listhaug, with the

[5] The labels are borrowed from Smith's (1999) chapter title, "The Mass Media: Scapegoats and Sycophants).

main cleavage being between institutions perceived as part of civil society (executive branch, military, police, courts) and those standing in opposition (unions, education, media). Since we are especially interested in whether the press, as a political institution, has migrated from being viewed as "oppositional" to "civil" or political, we also take the opportunity to examine any changes that may have occurred over the past year.

To sum up, periods of crisis such as September 11 may help us identify the contextual determinants of media trust and confidence. In a period of heightened public concern over security, and widespread feelings of fear, the media will receive positive boosts insofar as it reports examples of national success and accomplishments. After all, if American are rallying around their government during a period of national crisis, should not the mass media enjoy a similar surge in acclaim? We believe it should not. When the media acts as critic of the established order, however, its stature will further erode. Our expectation is that the latter is a far more likely outcome, because the press, while is may fit Easton's definition of a governing institution, it is either not viewed as such, or not legitimized as such, by the public. It is this possible disjuncture between the perceived role of the press (is it a watchdog, lapdog, or carping critic) and changes in the role of the institution (performance) that may have resulted in declining confidence over the past twenty years. In order to examine this hypothesis, we next review the available data on confidence in institutions, and the press, post 9/11.

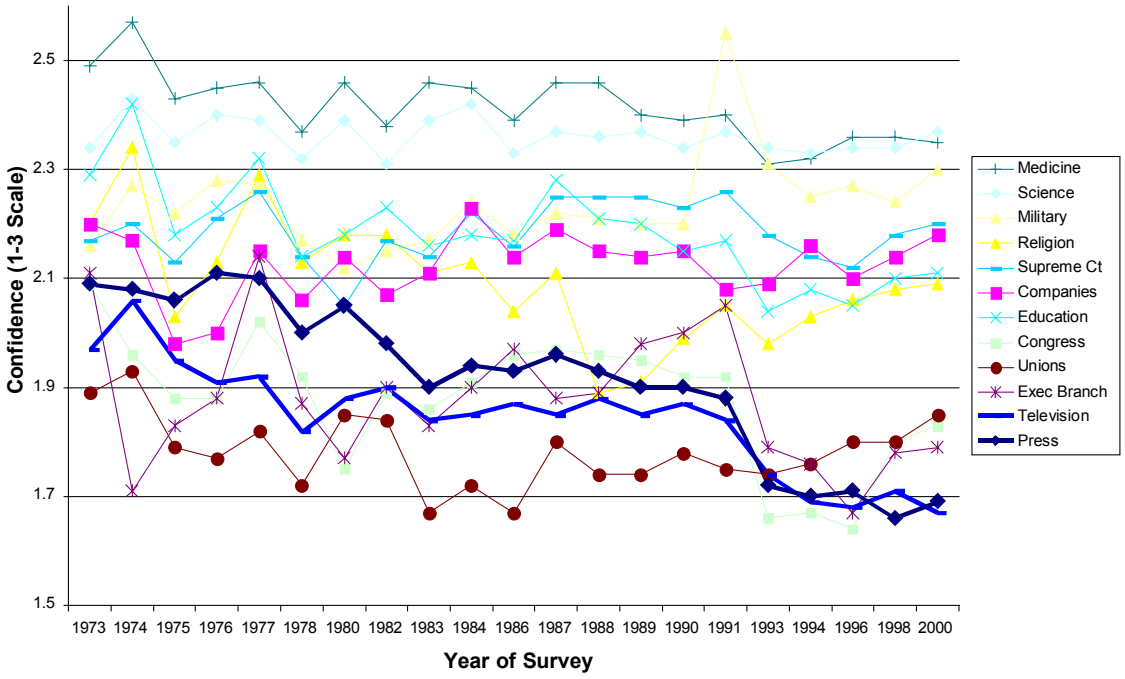
Measuring Confidence in the Press

In a series of other papers (Cook and Gronke 2001; Cook, Gronke and Ratliff 2000), we reported on our progress in empirically disentangling confidence in the media from confidence in other institutions, as well as identifying some outlines of public expectations about the press. In brief, we have discovered that, while declining confidence in the media can be partially explained by overall lower levels of institutional confidence, the news media has experienced a decline that is deeper and more sustained than either the general trend, or the trend displayed by any other social or political institution.

This is illustrated in Figure Two, which plots confidence in various institutions over the past two decades, using data drawn from the General Social Survey. For convenience,

the lines for "television" and "press" are boldfaced. The decline in the press outpaces other institutions during this period. The number of respondents who express a "great deal" of confidence, never especially high for the press, declined to nearly nothing pre 9/11. The percentage difference between the most confident and the least confident has also grown to be the highest for the press during this period. Most importantly, if we wish to answer the question, "confident compared to what", confidence in the press ranks lower than any other institution. This latter measure accounts for the linear decline in confidence since 1972. Even when the trend is removed, public confidence in the press declined further than any governmental or social institution.[6]

Figure Two: Confidence in Institutions (GSS)



It bears further examination, though, whether the press is really distinct. Cook's theory posits that the press is viewed more and more as a "political institution," analogous to the Congress of the Presidency, and as such should be subject to the tides of opinion that sweep over those institutions. After approximately 1988, there does seem to be a good

[6] These results are reported in much more detail in Cook and Gronke (2000), available at http://www.reed.edu/~gronkep

argument for this point. Public confidence in the presidency, the congress, television, and the press all followed a roughly comparable path (although the presidency recovered substantially after 1996, ironically at the same time that Clinton, the officeholder at the time, was being roundly attacked). While we explore more fully the links across institutions in other works (e.g. Cook and Gronke 2001), we show next that, at least for the post 9/11, the press followed a very different path from Congress or the presidency. These institutions may have some shared fate in the eyes of the public, but in at least one period of crisis, they were not viewed similarly at all.

Confidence in Institutions, Post 9/11: The More Things Change …

It is well known that the seemingly inexorable decline in trust in government, and trust in social and political institutions, was dramatically reversed in the first few months after September 11. An early ABC News poll trumpeted "the end of 30 years of growing distrust of government," with Robert Putnam declaring a turning point in Americans' relationship to their governing institutions (ABC, Sept. 28 2001).[7] Some warned against reading too much into the early data (e.g. Gallup reports, Oct. 12, 2001), yet a few weeks later, a well-respected academic survey organization, NORC, released a report entitled "America Rebounds." Americans were "more prideful of nearly all national aspects," wrote survey director Tom Smith, expressing high levels of confidence in government and society (NORC, October 2001). The NORC report is particularly powerful, since it uses a comparison of crises to illuminate public attitudes. Using the Kennedy assassination as a way to put 9/11 into context, Smith and his co-authors write that the September attacks resulted not only in a surge in confidence, but also increases in trust in others, and a dramatic growth in self-reported acts of volunteerism and community service. Patriotism, pride, self-confidence were buoyed, even at a time when American's sense of safety and security was shaken.

However, one institution stood apart from this trend. While the figures to date are spotty due to incomplete coverage across survey organizations, rumblings began to appear of

[7] All survey reports, including newspaper stories, are referenced in a separate section at the end of the paper.

a backlash against media coverage of 9/11 and its aftermath as early as November. Gallup reported on November 16, 2001 that most government officials and governmental institutions continued to show historically high levels of support, but that the news media's surge in support had been very short lived. The Pew Center reported somewhat more optimistic results in late November, indicating that public confidence in the media had increased, although "traditional sour spots have not gone away." (Pew Center, Nov 28, 2001). By March 2002, six months after the tragedy, the Pew Center reported that trust in government was "coming back to earth," although ratings of the President and the military remained in the stratosphere.

Our own survey, conducted by the Reilly Center for the Media and Politics in March-April 2002, confirms the Pew findings.[8] Our respondents were a bit less enthusiastic than many other survey audiences were. However, the general pattern is identical. Trust in the military is very high, likely at a ceiling. The Executive Branch and the Supreme Court rank next, followed closely by a bundle of institutions. Our respondents expressed the lowest levels of confidence in the press. For comparison, we also report the results from a Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll taken at the midpoint of our polling period. Neither the survey prompt, nor the response categories are precisely the same. The Fox poll obtained far higher levels of confidence than reported by our respondents. The relative placement of the institutions, however, remains the same.

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[8] The Reilly Center poll was conducted by the Public Policy Survey Research Lab at Louisiana State University from March 11 to April 27, 2002. This was a national, random digit dial, telephone survey of 1140 respondents (the cooperation rate was 65%). The sample overrepresents women (58%), liberals (33% reported "liberal" or "somewhat liberal", and respondents with some college or a college degree (64% reported either "some college", "college degree", or "post graduate degree"). In order to compensate for the sampling bias, all statistics reported in this paper are weighted by sex, age, and educational level. We created the weights by calculating the proportion of the population in combined sex, age, and educational categories using the most recently available Census data (the 2000 Census Supplementary Survey data, based on twelve monthly samples during 2000). These were applied to the sample so that the total working sample size is identical to the original sample size. The weights vary from a high of 8.2 (for males, over 65, with less than a high school education), to .09 (for females, 18-24 years old, with a graduate or professional degree). While these extreme values are large, 95% of the calculated weights fall between .51 and 1.52; 99% of the calculated weights fall between .39 and 4.0.

Table 1: Reilly Center Poll (March 2002), Percent Expressing Confidence in Various Institutions

	Percent "Great Deal" or "Somewhat"	FOX News/Opinion Dynamics Poll, April 2-3, 2002 ("A Great Deal" + "some")	
Executive Branch	54%	"The President"	86%
Congress	47%	"The Congress"	76%
Supreme Court	56%		
Military	81%	"The Military"	96%
Religion	48%		
Education	48%		
Labor Unions	45%		
Press	**41%**	"The News Media"	63%
Television	**41%**		

Source: Reilly Center for Media and Public Affairs. Data are weighted by education, gender, and age. FOX poll data were obtained from http://www.pollingreport.com

We report two final replications. In Figure Three, we plot Gallup observations, broken up into governmental and social institutions, from 1996 until the most recent observation in June 2002 (although not for all institutions).[9] These lines mirror the GSS up to 2000, but most interesting is the divergence post September 11. The military experienced a strong surge in public acclaim, something commented on soon after the event by numerous pollsters (e.g. Wirthlin Reports, assorted dates; Pew Center March 7 2002; Gallup October 12, 2001), followed to a lesser degree by confidence in the "executive branch of the federal government" and the Congress. This last distinction is important, because presidential job approval surged dramatically, as did congressional approval (the Reilly Center poll also showed a 79% approval rating). This highlights the point made during the theoretical discussion: confidence is a multifaceted concept, and cannot be understood with reference to a single answer to a single survey item. There is a crucial difference between asking about "leaders of" and institution, approval of the performance of a particular occupant or set of occupants, and the institution itself (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995).

[9] Gaps appear in this plot, as well as in Figure Four, due to incomplete data series. We have not found a survey organization which asked these questions on a regular basis throughout the past two years, not to mention the last twenty. We have assembled as comprehensive a dataset as we can.

Figure Three: Confidence in Governmental Institutions

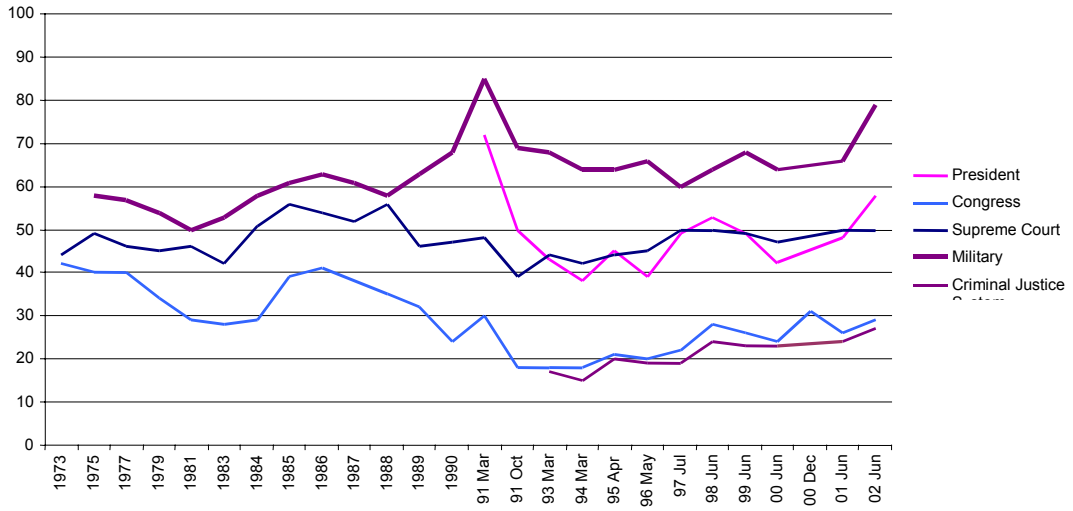
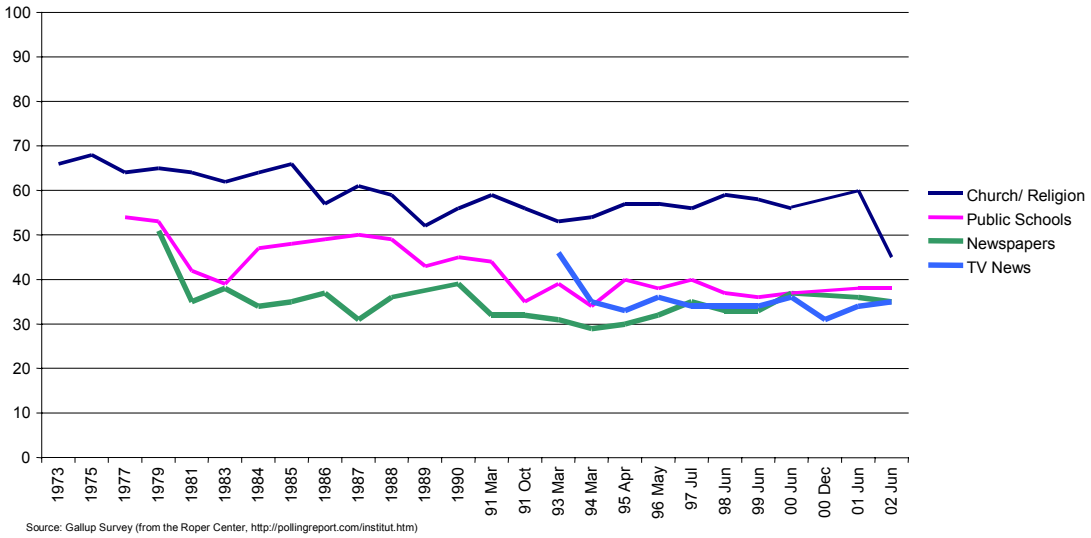


Figure Three (con't): Confidence in Public Institutions

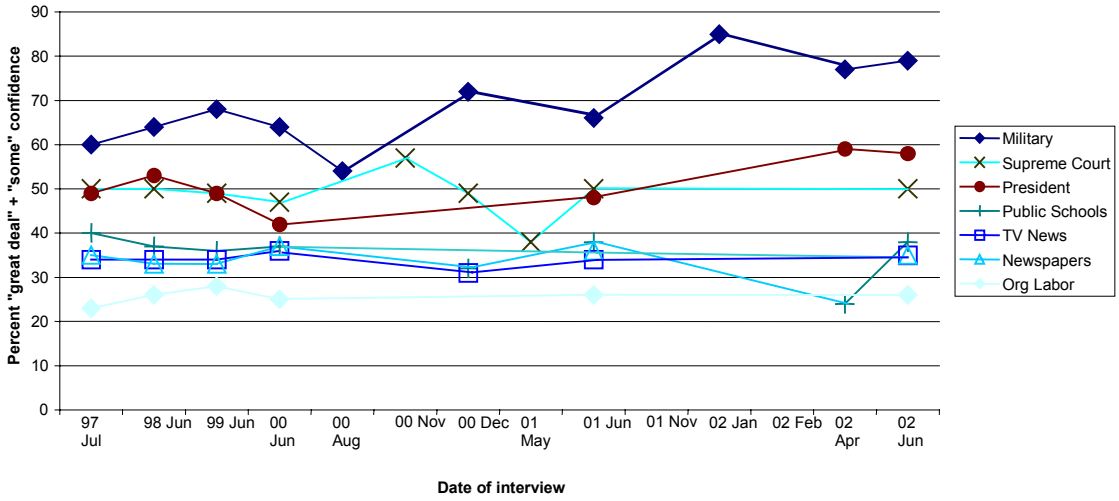


Source: Gallup Survey (from the Roper Center, http://pollingreport.com/institut.htm)

The second replication is obtained by plotting <u>all</u> survey observations taken during this period. For this figure, we merged the top two categories in the confidence item. Most times, this comprises the "great deal" and "somewhat" options. However, while there is substantial coherence across these organizations, a few observations have had to be dropped (most commonly because the Internet sources which we relied upon only reported the percentage who expressed a "great deal" of confidence.) Figure Four reports these data, and it generally sustains our previous results. The military and the president experienced the greatest surge in confidence in the post 9/11 period; confidence in the Supreme Court, TV

News, and Newspapers was unaffected, although many reported significant surges in the short term.[10] Similar results have been recently reported by the Pew Center for the People and the Press (Pew Center, April 4, 2002). Six to nine months after the event, whatever surge there had been had withered away.

Figure Four: Institutional Confidence, Post 9/11 (Various Survey Sources)



These figures demonstrate that "institutional confidence" is clearly a misnomer. Institutional confidence standing alone is meaningless. The institutions, which are routinely asked about by survey organizations, occupy very different positions in the social and political life of the United States. The much-vaunted "rally" did not extend across all aspects of public life, as might have seemed to be the case immediately after the terrorist attacks. Americans rallied around their governing institutions (the executive branch and the Congress) and the forces of law and order (military, police, and the legal system). They did not, however, rally around institutions that are perceived to be outside of the governing

[10] One problem with these data is that the surge in confidence in the press, as reported in many of the survey reports and press releases documented at the end of the paper, is not evident. We conducted an extensive search through online and printed sources and were unable to find evidence to back up claims of a surge in support for the press, even though this is a common theme in survey reports in the few months following the events. Most survey organizations were asking only about confidence in a few institutions (the military, the presidency, the Congress) along with presidential approval, and generalized to all social and political institutions. More importantly, when organizations asked about the media, all the questions dealt with the specifics of the conflict in Afghanistan, without also including a measure of more generalized attitudes towards the press. The is an unfortunate omission, since it means that the relationship between specific performance and general evaluations cannot be examined.

order (a distinction made nicely by Listhaug and Wiber 1995).[11]

Another common thread runs through all of these results: the news media, much as it may function as a "political institution," is not viewed by the public as part of government. Richard Wirthlin wrote, in April 2002, of an unprecedented swing of public trust for most major institutions and leaders, but that this trust remained strong only for those responsible for protecting the people. The military, the president, and to a lesser degree, the Supreme Court, fall into that category. The press, organized labor, and in some respects Congress, do not. Yet both Congress and the press are in a difficult position, seen as part of the governing order, but also acting as critics of that order. The press criticizes because of its fourth estate role as critic of the established order, while Congress criticizes because it is the constitutionally prescribed holder of the power of the purse. Like Congress, which seems to have borne the brunt of criticism for poor governmental performance (Washington Post December 2001), the press may have lost public confidence because of its organizational mandate: to report all the news, good or ill.

Positive News for the Press?

All the news is not bad, however. A multidimensional concept means that all parts may not be moving in the same direction, and this appears to be the case with the media. In previous work we showed that, while the public holds negative attitudes about the press as an institution, they continue to hold positive attitudes about particular news outlets. Approval ratings of news organizations (local television news, network television news, and hometown daily newspapers) were almost flat during the same thirty-year period (since 1972). Even if we wanted to conclude (and we do not) that "Americans hate the media," these results do not signal a crisis for the public's relationship with American journalism as a whole. Americans do not disdain the news, even though they are increasingly critical of the news media as a whole. Much of this may reflect a split not only between their preference for the known quantity of the news, what they read in their daily paper or watch on TV, over

[11] One problem with this claim is the lack of a rally around the Supreme Court, certainly an "institution of order." However, the lack of rally is quite rational, since the Court has no role to play in protecting citizens against terrorism.

a distant and poorly understood institution known as "the press", but also between their approval of the information they receive and their disapproval of the practices and procedures that they see journalists pursuing.

We included a set of items in the Reilly Center poll intended to probe deeper in the public's attitudes towards the news media as an institution, and particularly towards news gathering during the war on terrorism, to see if these patterns continued during a crisis. In general, the news was good. 67.3% of our sample approved of the news media in terms of its institutional setup, and 66.7% approved of the "job that journalists are doing." As other surveys conducted by the Pew Center suggest, a large majority endorses the journalistic mission of covering the war on terrorism. 64.7% of our sample advised the media to "dig for facts" about the war rather than just "trust government officials." Almost three-quarters (72.5%) of the respondents thought that the news coverage of Afghanistan has been "accurate for the most part," and even blame what mistakes were made on misleading information on the part of the government rather than poor reporting on the part of journalists.

There are some more negative aspects in our results, however. 57% of our sample think that the news media "look out for a few big interests," far fewer than business (81%), but also far more than the military and about the same percentage as government. Many in our sample believe reports of media distortion, bias, and unproductive reporting: a majority (52-34%) thought that stories were "often inaccurate", 66% charge the press with political bias, and a bare majority (51.6%) think that the press "gets in the way of society solving its problems."[12]

If confidence in the press, along with most other institutions, has returned to its pre 9/11 levels, perhaps the determinants of confidence have changed in some substantial way. After all, a national tragedy may force individuals to reconsider their attachments to government, society, and each other (Greenberg 2002). Americans felt personally threatened

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[12] Interestingly, as part of a split sample experiment, we altered the wording of these questions so that they mentioned either "the news media" or "the press." Across the three sets of items, "the press" is viewed marginally less negatively than "the news media."

after the attacks, more protective of their personal security, but also confident in the government's ability to protect them from future attacks (Huddy, Khatib, and Capelos, 2002; *Political Psychologist*, Summer 2002). In our final table, we analyze the determinants of confidence in the press. This serves a dual purposes. We can compare the results to comparable analyses for the GSS in order to further test the validity of the Reilly Center data. Furthermore, because we asked a far more elaborate set of questions about attutides about the state of the nation, trust in government and in others, and specifics of press performance than were included in the GSS, we can test directly some of the relationships posited in our opening model.

In previous work, we were able to demonstrate that, by late 1998, the press had no remaining core group of supporters. Subgroups in the population, especially liberals, Democrats, and better-educated respondents, who in past had reported higher levels of confidence in the media, were expressing levels of confidence as low as all other groups. At the time (Cook and Gronke 2000, Figure 8), we speculated that this was a consequence of the Lewinsky scandal. For Republicans, who had traditionally viewed the Fourth Estate with some misgivings, perceived press misdeeds during this period only confirmed their suspicions. For Democrats and liberals, the press became a convenient scapegoat for Clinton's troubles, blamed as they were for overly aggressive, prurient, and scandal driven coverage..[13] The partisan and ideological support base for the press had disappeared. As we wrote at the time, at least for the press, familiarity seems to breed contempt. By 1998 everyone, it seemed, disdained the media (Cook and Gronke 2000, Figure 8).

By 2000, however, there were some indications of a return to normalcy. Confidence in the press overall did not rise, yet as shown below, the traditional partisan and ideological divisions returned. Among educational groups (results not reported here), there continued to be little to discriminate among well educated and poorly educated respondents; this does seem to be an enduring change from most of the 1990s, although it is a return to patterns

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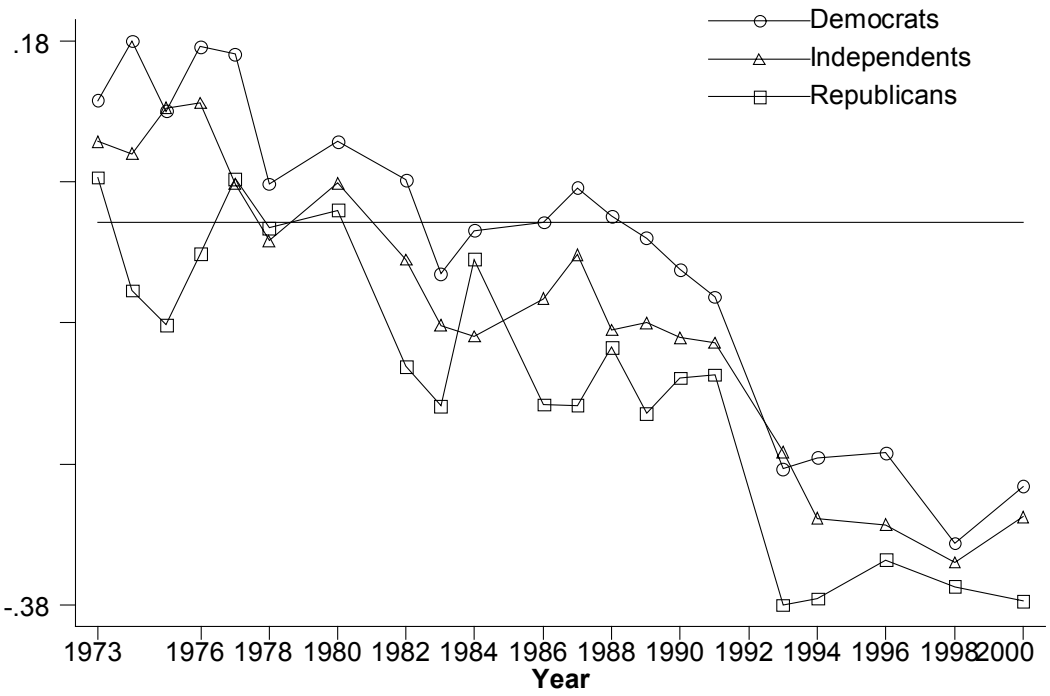
[13] C.f. Grossman 1998 and other articles in a special issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review* devoted to the Lewinsky coverage. Journalists themselves, at least when asked, approved of the coverage (CJR poll cited in the special volume), although a series of special reports issued by the Committee for Concerned Journalists are much more critical (see "The Clinton/Lewinsky Scandal" at http://www.journalism.org/publ_research/index.html).

obtained during from 1973 through 1990. Finally, the dimensional relationship between these measures which we identified earlier (Cook and Gronke 2001) was unchanged in 2000.

FigureThree: Confidence in the Press Across Partisan Groups



In short, while the Lewinsky scandal did seem to shake public confidence in the media among Democrats and liberals, these groups returned to their traditional position as the most trusting groups by the time of the 2000 GSS. Our other claims about confidence in the media remain valid for 2000. It is against this backdrop that we next examine changes in the determinants of public attitudes towards the press, six months after 9/11. In similar fashion, although comparisons with the General Social Survey results are preliminary at this point, there seems to be little change in the structure of attitudes post 9/11. At least by six months after the event, the same subgroups view the press in the same ways that they before the crisis.

These results are preliminary at this time, especially considering the substantial loss in case count by our final model.[14] Nonetheless, a few patterns emerge. The model is presented in four stages, analogous to what we reported in Cook and Gronke (2000). First, we include only demographic indicators in the model to provide something of a baseline set of relationships. Next, we add indicators of partisan affiliation, to test the hypothesis that Democrats are more approving of the press. We follow this by adding a measure of "generalized confidence" in institutions.[15] Finally, we add a set of measures that indicate the individual's feelings about the state of the nation, performance of the sitting president, and the job that the media has performed in covering the war on terrorism.

Similar to the patterns which we observed in previous years, older, better educated, and higher income respondents express lower levels of confidence in the press. These are the same groups that are likely to have a higher level of exposure to the institution. Partisan patterns are different than we found in the past, although the 2000 General Social Survey (reported in Figure 3) gave us some indication of this shift. Democrats once again express the highest levels of confidence, although when compared to Independents, Republicans are also express significantly higher levels of confidence. While we have not estimated a comparable model for the 2000 GSS, just a cursory glance at Figure Three shows that a different pattern will be obtained from these data. Finally, as we found in previous years, the inclusion of a generalized measure of confidence, obtained via a principal components analysis of the remaining institutitonal confidence measures, dramatically increases the explanatory power of the model. When generalized confidence is added, only the impact of Democratic affiliation and higher income remain statistically significant.

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[14] The dependent variable in this model is confidence in the press, a 4 point scale, where 4=a great deal, 3=somewhat, 2=not much, and 1=none at all. Democrat, Republican, Black, and Presidential Approval ar all coded as dummy variables. Active Trust in government is a 11 point scale, ranging from 10 (trust in the government to do what is right) to zero (distrust in the government, it will do what is wrong). Both media job variables are also coded as dummies; for the "war on terror," we asked whether the respondent approved or disapproved of the media's job covering the war on terrorism. For "big interests," we asked whether the respondent thought that the news media looked out for big interests. For ease of interpretation, coefficients which are statistically significant at the 95% of higher level of probability are boldfaced.

[15] Generalized confidence is a factor scale from a simple principal components analysis of and individual's expressed level of confidence in all other institutions except the press and television. We restricted the analysis to produce only a single factor. This first factor had an eigenvalue of 3.0761. Even if we relax the

Table 2: Probit Results, Explaining Confidence in the Press (Reilly Center Poll)

	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Democrat			**0.098**	3.34	**0.296**	0.13	0.168	0.15
Republican			**0.226**	0.11	-0.048	0.14	0.064	0.16
Black	-0.146	0.14	-0.207	0.14	0.044	0.18	0.085	0.20
Age	**-0.008**	0.00	**-0.008**	0.00	0.005	0.00	0.003	0.01
Income	-0.019	0.01	**-0.023**	0.01	**-0.049**	0.02	**-0.058**	0.02
Education	-0.027	0.02	-0.025	0.02	-0.018	0.03	-0.019	0.04
General Confidence					**0.654**	0.07	**0.569**	0.09
Direction of Nation							0.224	0.16
Presidential Approval							-0.139	0.17
Active Trust in Government							**-0.069**	0.03
Media Job: War on Terror							**0.695**	0.13
Media Job: Big Interests							**-0.407**	0.13
_cut1	-1.366		-1.22		-1.202		-1.346	
_cut2	-0.282		-0.124		0.063		-0.010	
_cut3	0.606		0.776		1.113		1.092	
N of Cases	679		679		503		344	
Log Likelihood	14.55		26.22		28.76		139.7	
Pseudo R2	0.008		0.0149		0.0221		0.155	

We are most interested in the final column, however. These data go beyond the measures available in the General Social Survey, and speak directly to our hypotheses about individual expectations about media performance, as well as the distinction between the more abstract "confidence" in the leaders of an institution versus approval (or disapproval) of performance carrying out a specific task. We are sure that the two are related, but up to now, there has been no way to test this in a multivariate context. Not surprisingly, each of the measures tapping an individuals evaluation of the media in different contexts—its performance covering the war on terrorism, and whether or not it looks out for "big interests" instead of the interests of the mass public—are significantly related to levels of confidence. Finally, we note that a new measure which we developed for this survey, "active trust" in government (ranging from 0=very strong distrust in government to 10=very strong trust in government) is negatively related to confidence in the media. This finding will be explored further in subsequent versions of this paper.

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number of factors, no other dimension has an eigenvalue greater than .3.

We close with a brief discussion of the factor analysis we conducted on the Reilly center dataset. The story here can be quickly summarized: little change from the past. The press loads most strongly on a dimension with television and labor unions, precisely the pattern suggested by Lipset and Schneider, although Congress loads as well, something we did not find in previous analyses (a pattern evident at the aggregate level in Figure 2). The first factor also is mainly unchanged from our analyses of the GSS. It is described as confidence in the institutions of "order" or "civil institutions" (depending on the particular order), and consists of confidence in the leaders of religious institutions, companies, the executive branch, the Supreme Court, Congress, and the military. These results increase our confidence in the quality of the Reilly Center poll, while once more reminding us that, six months after September 11, little seems to have changed.

Table 3: The Dimensionality of Institutional Confidence

Variable	Factor 1	Factor 2
Banks	0.30992	-0.28959
Companies	**0.34047**	-0.28075
Religion	**0.37081**	-0.21298
Educational Establishment	0.21421	-0.31486
Executive Branch	**0.57824**	-0.20003
Labor Unions	0.13867	**-0.43756**
Medicine	0.2359	-0.19995
Supreme Court	**0.48513**	-0.29215
Scientific Establishment	0.13443	-0.20498
Congress	**0.45527**	**-0.43701**
Military	**0.47478**	-0.07792
Television	0.2043	**-0.58766**
Press	0.15391	**-0.63101**

Factor loadings were produced by varimax rotation run in Stata 7.

These final results serve as additional confirmation of the points made above. First, overall and subgroup levels of confidence in the press, and its causal determinants, are mainly unchanged by the historic events of 9/11. Much as this event may shape foreign affairs, military preparedness, and Americans' sense of safety and security, it has not changed their relationship with at least one important institution, the news media. Second, when asked to evaluate a specific target—recent coverage of Afghanistan for instance—most have positive things to say. Similarly, when asked to evaluate the structure of the institution in the abstract, most respondents approve. Yet, when questions allow respondents to reflect

prevailing criticisms of the press (bias and distortion), and especially when asked to evaluate the abstract institution of "the news media", they are quite willing to express their condemnation.

Conclusion

We started this paper by suggesting that, in a period of crisis, we may be able to observe cracks and fractures in public support for political and social institutions. By peering into these cracks, we may gain further insights in the nature of institutional confidence, how it is structured and how it changes. The events of 9/11 resulted in a dramatic growth in trust in government, leaders, and confidence in an array of social and political institutions. However, as many concluded at the 2002 meetings of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, no sustained changes in the structure of attitudes seems to have occurred (NY Times, May 20, 2002). Most of the patterns that we observed in citizens' attitudes towards the news media were also evident in their expressions of that confidence post 9/11.

The 9/11 period did further highlight, however, the relative position of the news media versus other institutions in the public's eyes. For reasons explored in previous work, the news media has moved from an institution that ranked, at worst, in the middle range of confidence. By 1998, at the time of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the media rank at or near the bottom. The press is no longer viewed in the glowing terms of the 1970s. Instead, the press and journalists are seen in terms very similar to another collective institution: Congress. Like Congress, press activities are out in the open, subject to public scrutiny and withering criticism by other elites (most often members of the same press corps!). 9/11 has not changed this picture.

We speculated previously (Cook and Gronke 2000, 2001) that this may have been due to reactions to Lewinsky. If true, coverage of a successful war effort in Afghanistan has done little to resuscitate public faith in the press. Any possibility that sustained public attention to the news during the crisis may increase public confidence seems to have been either misplaced or an opportunity lost. So where do we stand on trust, confidence, distrust in the press and other American political institutions? It is clear that there was an upward trend in trust in government following the September 11 attacks. But the data reported here

suggest that this was a momentary blip caused by the focus of Americans on national security and threats to the homeland. As September 11 fades and as people turn back to domestic political issues, we should expect, as we have already seen, the trust in government and confidence in various institutions to fall back to levels similar to those prior to September 11.

But does this mean that the American public is disaffected and distrusting of American government in general, or just losing confidence in particular institutions? Preliminary analyses of the Reilly Center poll indicate that the public is no more trusting of private power than public power. We have also seen that lack of trust does not prevent people from approving the job performance of a wide variety of institutional set-ups, and even of the officeholders within those institutions. The nation is more confident in the leaders of the military and the executive branch, but this is precisely what would be expected when both have engaged in a successful war effort.[16]

The post 9/11 reaction, in this respect, was quite rational. Perhaps, then, we need not wring our hands about declining confidence in institutions over the past 10 years. Nor should we overemphasize the growth in confidence after 9/11 and what this might mean for trust in government, civic participation, and social capital formation (see, for example, Robert Putnam's comments, quoted in Stille 2001). What this means is that Americans are now a "nation of Missourians." We all come from the show-me state. Americans do not expect that the leaders of social and political institutions will necessarily do the right thing, but, with differing levels, neither do they anticipate that government will do the wrong thing either. Instead, they are willing to suspend their presumptions and to watch the workings of politics and judge institutions and political actors accordingly. In this light, the decline over the past thirty to forty years of trust in government and of confidence in institutions is not such bad news. It may represent the rise of a public that is healthily skeptical of many forms of power.

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[16] We will report more on these data, encompassing items developed to capture "active trust" and confidence in the media as an institution and as a set of actors (mirroring the Hibbing/Theiss-Morse categories).

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[17] Special credit is due to Aaron Rabiroff for assembling and summarizing these sources.

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