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MECHANISMS OF TRUST

News Media in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes

campus

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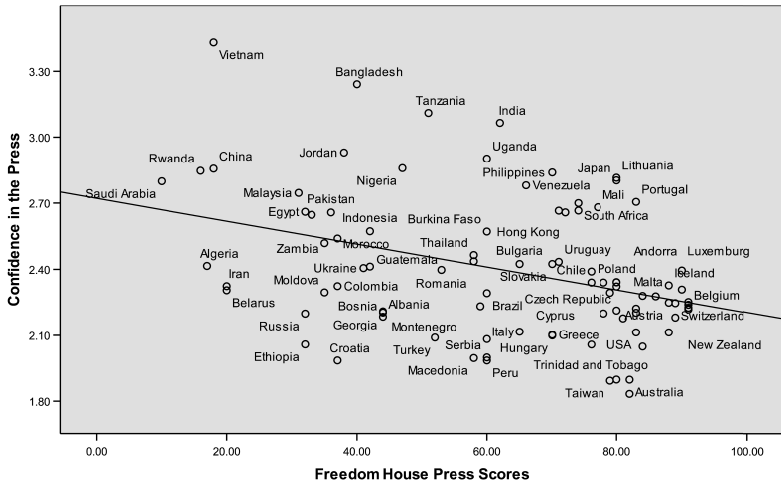
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1. Introduction

Trust in the institutions of democracy has been extensively studied in the past (see Catterberg/Moreno 2005; Dogan 2005; Levi/Stoker 2000 for an overview). Much of the research was prompted by the fear that increasingly skeptical attitudes towards political institutions in democratic countries could undermine the stability of democratic systems. The study of political trust is, however, complicated by different levels of political support. It is often not obvious whether questions that pertain to political trust relate to the political system in general, the regime in power, or to specific politicians. Trust in the news media has received less attention. This is astonishing since the news media has a central role in democratic systems: it should keep the audience informed about policies and politicians and thereby enable citizens to cast an informed vote or to engage in political action. In authoritarian regimes, the news media are equally important because they spread a shared ideology that aims at legitimizing the regime in power. It is questionable whether or not the news media could perform such a function in the absence of the audience's trust in the news media.

Most studies on trust in political institutions are limited to Western democracies. While a number of studies address trust in institutions in non-Western democratic and authoritarian contexts (Pharr 1997; Inoguchi 2002; Kim et al. 2002; Kabashima et al. 2000; Chen/Shi 2001; Mishler/Rose 2005; Wang 2005; Kim 2005; Shlapentokh 2006; Lianjiang 2004), levels of trust in institutions in democratic and authoritarian countries are rarely compared. However, such a comparison might be instructive because levels of trust in the news media are often higher in authoritarian countries (figure 1.1).

High levels of trust in the news media are obviously not necessarily conducive to democratization. High levels of trust in authoritarian regimes are not restricted to the news media.



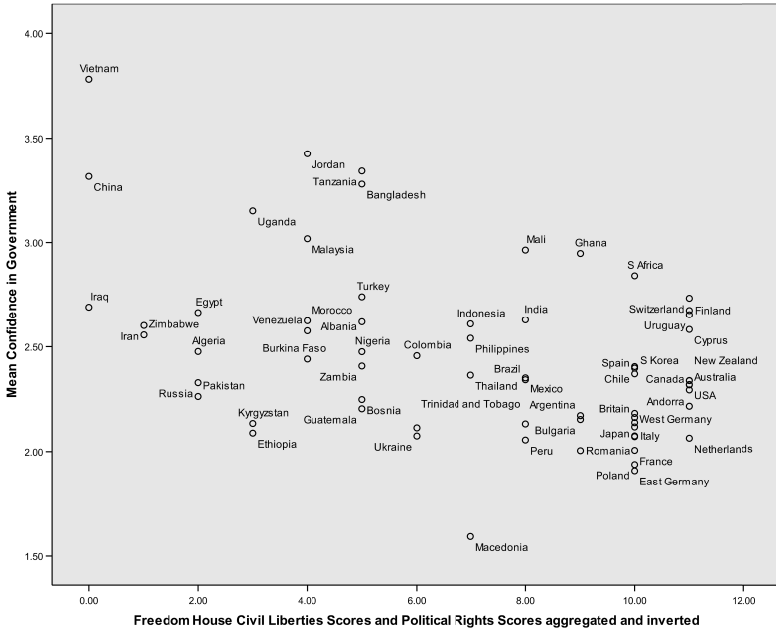


Figure 1.2: Trust in government and Freedom House scores.

Data sources: World Values Survey waves four and five and Freedom House scores of the corresponding years (2000 and 2005)

of distrust healthy? What is actually meant when citizens answer survey questions referring to trust or confidence in the news media?

The present chapter deals with explanations given in the scientific literature. The following chapters then review these explanations in light of theories of the public sphere. The concept of trust is related to market-oriented, deliberative, and critical theories of the public sphere. There is no well-developed theoretical framework that embeds trust in a theory of the public sphere. Therefore, the aim is to arrive at a more thorough understanding of the notion of trust in the context of the news media, to develop a theoretical framework that covers the role of trust in different types of public spheres, and to generate a set of hypotheses that can be empirically tested. This study argues that trust in the news media refers to the expectation of the audience that the news media can be believed, e.g. provide complete, relevant, and unbiased information. Trust may be based on three factors: it can be based on a rational analysis of the incentive struc-

ture of the trusted institution and the trusting actor, on a limitation of the horizon of alternatives, or on a belief or disbelief in the trusted actor to conform to expectations based on past experience. Based on Giddens and Beck, this study argues that an expansion of alternatives is one of the implications of societal modernization and differentiation. With more options at the disposal of the individual, it becomes more difficult to trust just on the basis of the absence of alternative options. The explanations that are generated on the basis of the theoretical framework are tested in the empirical part of this study.

This study shows that there are two paths to trust in the news media. High levels of trust in authoritarian regimes can be explained by a high degree of censorship and closeness to authorities. An emancipative value change leads to a distancing from authorities and to a loss of trust in the news media. In democratic regimes, a differentiated media system with interventions of the state to ensure plurality (e.g. in the form of public service media) is conducive to trust in the news media.

1.1 Trust in Democratic Institutions

It has been shown that social trust is an important ingredient of social capital, which, in turn, is an important factor in the cooperation of individuals and in setting up and maintaining institutions (Putnam 1995, 2000, 1993). Trust in democratic institutions has generated an equally large share of research.

1.1.1 Levels of Trust

A loss of trust in political institutions in some Western democracies over the last several decades has prompted a large number of studies over the last 50 years.² According to Orren (1997), the share of the US population that “always” or “most of the time” trusted the government to do “what is right” fell from 72 percent in 1958 to 35 percent in 1996. The decline mostly took place in the 1960s and 1970s, with a small rise of trust during

² See the studies in Norris (1999); Klingemann and Fuchs (1998); Pharr and Putnam (2000); Dogan (2005) and especially Levi and Stoker (2000) for an overview.

the 1980s and a decline again in the 1990s. The share of individuals agreeing to questions relating to political cynicism rose sharply between 1964 and 1994. This is true for questionnaire items like “Government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.” (1964: 29 percent; 1994: 76 percent), “Public officials don’t care what people like me think.” (1964: 36 percent; 1994: 66 percent), and “Quite a few people running government are crooked.” (1964: 29 percent; 1994: 51 percent). The loss of trust in the USA is not limited to the government. Figure 1.3 shows the development of trust in various institutions in the USA over the last three decades.³

The loss of trust in the USA is not only restricted to political institutions. It affected religion and the news media as well. On the individual level, the trust in the news media and in political institutions correlates positively (Capella 2002). However, not every institution is affected by a loss of trust. In the USA, trust in the army and trust in science escape the negative trend. A similar finding was reported by Mishler/Rose (1997) in their analysis of trust in institutions in nine Eastern European countries: the trust in the army is high compared to trust in parties, in the parliament and in the unions.

The USA is the prime example of a loss of trust in democratic institutions. There is mixed evidence in other countries. According to Listhaug (1998), trust fluctuated over time without a clear trend in Norway, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands. Holmberg (1999), in contrast, presents evidence for a loss of trust in political institutions in Sweden. Catterberg/Moreno (2005) reported falling levels of trust in legislative institutions (trust in parliament and civil service) in Australia, Finland, West Germany, the USA, Britain, Canada, France, Japan, and Norway. Trust in legislative institutions increased in Belgium, Italy, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden. The authors base their analysis on data from the World Values Survey, waves one to four (1981–2001).

³The data is based on the General Social Survey which is conducted by the National Opinion Research Center. Question text: “I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?”

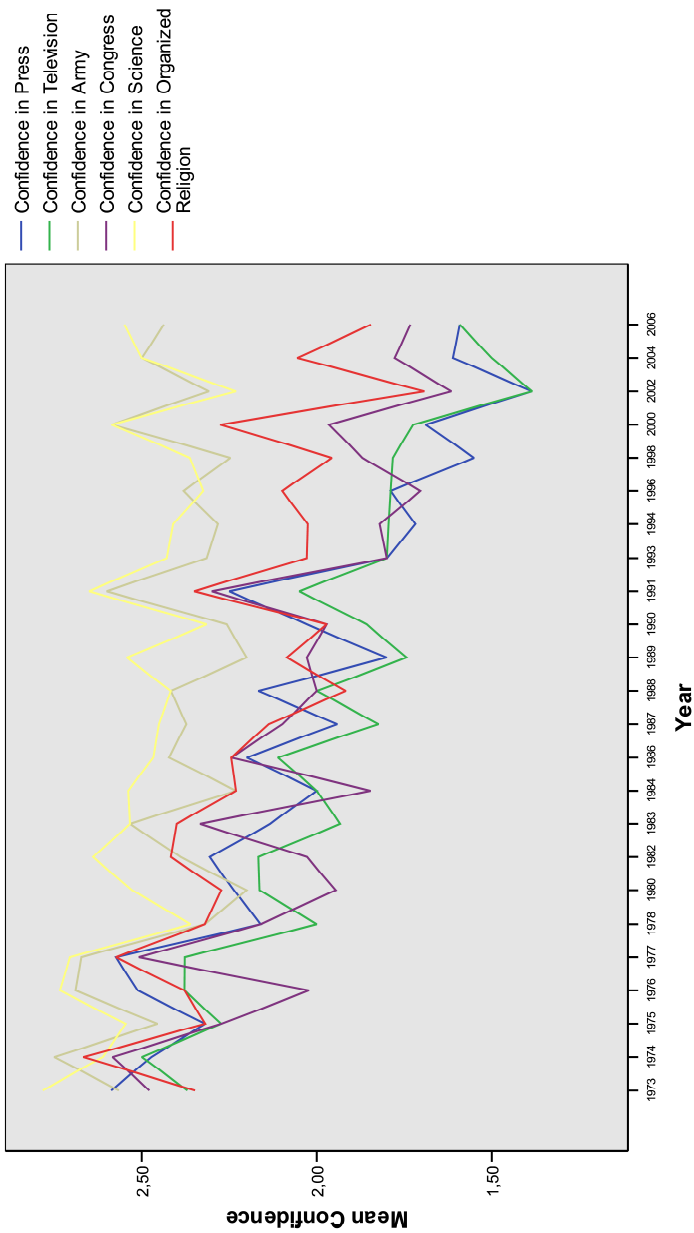


Figure 1.3: Levels of trust in various institutions in the USA, 1973–2006

Data source: General Social Survey