

Why They Don't Trust the Media: An Examination of Factors Predicting Trust

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Tien-Tsung Lee¹

Abstract

Political communication literature reveals an ongoing scholarly interest in issues surrounding the credibility of news media. Despite scientific evidence to the contrary, many consumers continue to believe U.S. news media have a political bias and, therefore, are not to be trusted. This study seeks to explain media trust using a new theoretical model. The findings, based on national survey data, suggest that political ideology and partisanship, trust in government and fellow citizens, and one's view of the economy influence the degree to which audience members trust the news media.

Keywords

media trust, media bias, liberal bias

The issue of news media's credibility has interested scholars and journalists for many years. Many have focused on whether the news media possess political bias (e.g., Alterman, 2003; Dennis, 1997; Goldberg, 2001; Groseclose & Milyo, 2005; Niven, 2002), and some are convinced the general news media have, in particular, a liberal and/or pro-Democrat bias.

According to a survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2002), 47% of respondents believed that news media in general are politically biased in their reporting. Conservative critics argue that journalists tend to be liberal Democrats, which biases their reporting (Corry, 1996; Goldberg, 2001; Lichter, Rothman, & Lichter, 1986; Limbaugh, 1993; Maddoux, 1990; Maitre, 1994; Olasky, 1988; Rusher, 1988; Sowell, 1992). Critics from the left argue the opposite. They insist conservative voices dominate the media because most news organizations are controlled by large

¹University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA

Corresponding Author:

Tien-Tsung Lee, University of Kansas, William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications, 1435 Jayhawk Blvd., Lawrence, KS 66045-7575
E-mail: ttlee@ku.edu

corporations and cover only political elites. In their eyes, the news media are merely “agents of power” that promote and maintain the conservative status quo (Alterman, 2003; Altschull, 1995, 1996; Bagdikian, 2004; J. Cohen, 1990; J. Cohen & Solomon, 1993; Croteau & Hoynes, 1994; Croteau, Hoynes, & Carragee, 1996; Gitlin, 1980; Hanson, 1992; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; M. A. Lee & Solomon, 1990; McChesney, 1997; Murdock, 1982; Parenti, 1988, 1993, 1995, 1996).

To investigate such conflicting arguments, media scholars have examined partisanship among journalists and their stands on social issues. Even though media professionals in large media organizations are found to lean liberal and/or Democrat (Dennis, 1996, 1997; Lichter et al., 1986; Lichter & Rothman, 1981; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996), a link between their political beliefs and actual news coverage has never been convincingly established (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999; Gans, 1985; Merrill, 1965; Niven, 2002; “Public Television Study,” 1993; Severin & Tankard, 1992; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999).

Domke and colleagues (Domke et al., 1999; Watts et al., 1999) argue that repeating accusations of bias by conservative politicians and critics have successfully convinced consumers and even some journalists to believe in a media bias that is not supported by scientific study. Using regression models based on two surveys from the 1990s, a recent study by T. Lee (2005) took an alternative approach to examining the media bias debate. Findings from that study suggest that perceptions of media bias are, in fact, caused by the audience’s own partisan or ideological biases.

The present study further examines consumers’ trust in the news media by using national survey data gathered from 1996 to 2004. By employing a more comprehensive data set and developing a deeper conceptualization as reflected in path models, the present research seeks to both replicate and expand T. Lee’s (2005) study on perceived media biases.

Enduring Concerns of Media Credibility and Predictors of Mistrust

Mistrust in the media can lead to inattention and nonconsumption (Gaziano, 1988; Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Kioussis, 2001; for a thorough literature review on media credibility, see Kioussis, 2001). Interestingly, a large number of studies on media credibility focus on cross-media comparison. Carter and Greenberg (1965) argue that television news is perceived as more believable than newspapers, whereas Kioussis (2001) reports that consumers consider newspapers to be more credible than online and television news. Johnson and Kaye (1998) suggest that online media are perceived to be more credible than their traditional counterparts.

Researchers who investigate why audiences perceive media biases have discovered that supporters of political groups or issues tend to perceive the media as unfair or hostile to their own viewpoints while favoring those of their opponents (Beck, 1991; Dalton et al., 1998; Gunther, 1992; Gunther & Chia, 2001; Mason & Nass, 1989; Perloff, 1989). Most studies of this nature focus on two groups surrounding a single issue—such as political conflict, a controversial type of research, or a labor strike—that tend to

believe the media unfairly favor their opponents (Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 1998; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001; Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Perloff, 1989; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). Simply put, an observer's involvement with an issue or group is likely to determine his or her views on whether media coverage is credible or biased (Gunther, 1988, 1992). "Additionally, the audiences' own ideological preferences would affect their choice of media (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009)."

Dalton et al. (1998) analyzed media content, then polled public opinion on media coverage to see whether a connection exists between news content and perceptions of media bias. Although their content analysis reported no partisan bias, and a portion of respondents perceived no bias in newspapers or television news, they did find that citizens with stronger partisan views were more likely to consider the media unfair.

A more recent study advanced the understanding of perceived media bias further. Relying primarily on multiple-regression models, T. Lee (2005) reported that higher levels of conservatism and Republican partisanship, as well as personal and political cynicism, are significant predictors of mistrust in the media. Although this method offers side-by-side comparison of possible predictors, conceptually, a path model would offer a better understanding of the direction and sequence of the relationship. In addition, T. Lee's study employed data from 1996 and 1997; more comprehensive and up-to-date data may produce different outcomes.

Another salient factor may also have been missing in T. Lee's (2005) study. As Bill Clinton once commented, "It's the economy, stupid," pointing out that elections are about people's pocketbooks ("Procrasti-nation," 1997). Scholars, too, have discovered connections between economic conditions and voting behavior (Anderson & Geckil, 2004; Kernell, 1978; Meltzer & Vellrath, 1975; Monroe, 1979). There is also evidence that a good or improving national economy can reduce its citizens' political cynicism (A. Lee & Glasure, 2002)—that is, if one believes the economy of the nation is good, his or her level of political cynicism, which is operationalized as one's evaluation of government (T. Lee, 2005), tends to be more favorable. As a result, one's assessment of the economy could directly influence trust in government and indirectly affect media mistrust. This variable is therefore included in the present study.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

As suggested in the literature reviewed, the present study tests the proposition that stronger ideology and partisanship and higher levels of political and personal cynicism lead to increased perceptions of media bias. The effect of respondent beliefs in the economic well-being of the country is also tested.

The following hypotheses and research question are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: The less conservative consumers are, the more they will trust the news media.

Hypothesis 2: The less consumers lean toward the Republican party, the more likely they will trust the news media.

Hypothesis 3: The less politically cynical consumers are, the more likely they will trust the news media.

Hypothesis 4: The less personally cynical consumers are, the more likely they will trust the news media.

Hypothesis 5: Evaluation of the economy directly affects trust in government and indirectly affects media trust.

Research Question 1: How are the predictors of media trust related to each other?

Method

Data

The present study employs the aggregated data from 1948 through 2004 of the National Election Studies (NES; $N = 47,438$), which are conducted every other year by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan. Using both face-to-face and telephone interviews, the NES surveyed a national quota sample of U.S. residents 18 years or older (Asher, 1992; Flanigan & Zingale, 2002). The survey included hundreds of questions about general political knowledge, various candidates and issues, ideology, partisanship, political interests, media consumption, trust in the media, and so on. Only variables relevant to the present study were used. The NES included the measure of media trust and distrust ($n = 5,411$) only in years 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2004.

Dependent and Independent Variables

Because the present research seeks to replicate and expand upon the study by T. Lee (2005), similar measures are used—adding only the item pertaining to the economy. Trust in the media was operationalized by the question, “How much of the time do you think you can trust the media to report the news fairly? Just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, or almost never?” (1 = *just about always*, 2 = *most of the time*, 3 = *only some of the time*, 4 = *almost never*, 5 = *none of the time*; $M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.75$). This scale was reversed so that a higher value indicated a higher level of trust.

Demographic variables include age (exact age), education (1- to 5-point scale; $M = 2.37$, $SD = 0.95$), gender (dummy coded; female = 1), and income (1- to 5-point scale; $M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.16$). Other control variables include political efficacy, political interest, and media exposure. Political efficacy is measured using a 100-point external efficacy index in the aggregated NES data ($M = 53.62$, $SD = 42.05$). Political interest was measured by the question, “Some people don’t pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you; would you say that you have been/were: 3) very much interested, 2) somewhat interested, or 1) not much interested in the political campaigns this year?” ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 0.75$). Level of media exposure is measured on a 1- to 5-point campaign media exposure index (1 = *no media*, 5 = *all four media*; $M = 3.24$; $SD = 1.15$). Political efficacy and interest, along with media usage, were also included as control variables because they may affect one’s cynicism and perception of media bias (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001; Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman, 1998).

The key independent variables include evaluation of the economy, personal trust, political trust, a liberal-conservative ideology, and Democrat-Independent-Republican partisanship. Economy is measured by "Would you say that over the past year the nation's economy: 1) has gotten better; 3) stayed about the same; or 5) gotten worse?" ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.58$). This scale was reversed so that a higher value indicated a more favorable opinion of the national's economy.

The decision to include the measures of personal and political cynicism and partisanship and ideology is based on previous research (e.g., Cappella, 2002; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; T. Lee, 2005; Wilkins, 1995, 2000). Personal trust was measured by the question, "Generally speaking, would you say most people can be trusted (5), or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people (1)?" ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 2.00$). Political trust was measured on a 100-point trust-in-government index from *least trusting* (0) to *most trusting* (100) ($M = 35.95$, $SD = 24.48$). Ideology was measured on a 1-to 5-point scale of liberal-moderate-conservative positions ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.76$). Partisanship was measured on a 1-to 7-point continuum ranging from Democratic to independent to Republican affiliations; apolitical respondents and members of other parties were excluded ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 2.08$).

Using an ordinary least squares multiple regression procedure, we entered variables in three blocks: (a) demographic variables (age, gender, race, education, and income); (b) political efficacy, political interest, and media exposure; and (c) economy, political trust, personal trust, conservative ideologies, and Republican partisanship. A final "clean" model was produced after gradually excluding nonsignificant standardized β coefficients ($p > .05$). Next, two path models were tested and compared to theorize the relationships between variables. Additional analyses were also reported. Because of the large sample size of present data, the cutoff point of statistical significance is set at the .01 level.

Findings

Regression models in Table 1 show that media trust is positively predicted by trust in government ($\beta = .25$, $p < .001$) and is negatively predicted by conservatism ($\beta = -.06$, $p < .01$) and Republican leaning ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .001$). In other words, the more consumers trust the government to do what is right, and the more liberal and pro-Democrat they are, the more likely they will trust the media to report fairly. However, their evaluation of the economy does not affect their trust in the news media. Therefore, on the basis of regression models, Hypotheses 1 to 3 are supported, whereas Hypothesis 4 is rejected. Additionally, because consumers' evaluation of the economy is not expected to directly affect their opinions of media's credibility as predicted by Hypothesis 5, data in the regression models shown in Table 1 have offered some support to the last hypothesis.

Although the assessment of the economy is not a significant factor in the regression models, there is still a possible connection between the two variables conceptually. According to the literature mentioned earlier, it is likely that one's opinion on the economy affects trust in government. Therefore, as Hypothesis 5 theorizes, economy evaluation may still indirectly influence media mistrust through political trust.

Table 1. Factors Predicting Trust in the News Media

Dependent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 ("Clean")
	β	β	β	β
Block 1				
Age	.00	.01	.00	
Gender (male)	-.01	-.01	.01	
Race (White)	-.04	-.04*	.00	
Education	.02	.00	.00	
Income	-.07**	-.08**	-.04	
Block 2				
Political efficacy		.11***	.03	
Political interest		-.04	-.02	
Media exposure		-.00	-.01	
Block 3				
Economy evaluation			.02	
Political trust			.23***	
Personal trust			.03	
Liberal-conservative ideology			-.06*	
Democrat-Republican partisanship			-.19***	
R^2	.00	.02	.11	

$N = 2,203$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 1 is a simple initial path analysis model to illustrate and test the relationships between three layers of variables. Trust in government (Level 2) regresses on four Level 1 exogenous variables (economy evaluation, Republican partisanship, conservative ideology, and personal cynicism). The ultimate (Level 3) endogenous or dependent variable is trust in media. The weak relationship between trust in government and partisanship ($\beta = .01, p < .05$, which is lower than the .01 standard chosen for this study because of the large sample size) as well as conservatism ($\beta = .01, p > .05$) is expected conceptually. Between 1996 and 2004, both a Democratic and Republican presidential administration had been in office. It is likely that liberals and conservatives, and Democrats and Republicans, each held conflicting attitudes toward the government during this time. Therefore, political ideologies and partisanship likely had contributed little to how much citizens trusted the government during those years. By contrast, people's evaluation of the economy affected their trust in the government. Whether one trusts other people would affect their trust in government as well.

If political ideologies and partisan affiliations do not significantly influence political trust in a path model, where would they fit in among all variables in questions? Considering the persistent attacks on media's partisan and ideological bias, it can be theorized that a direct connection exists between media trust and conservatism as well as Republican partisanship. At the same time, the effects of economic evaluation and

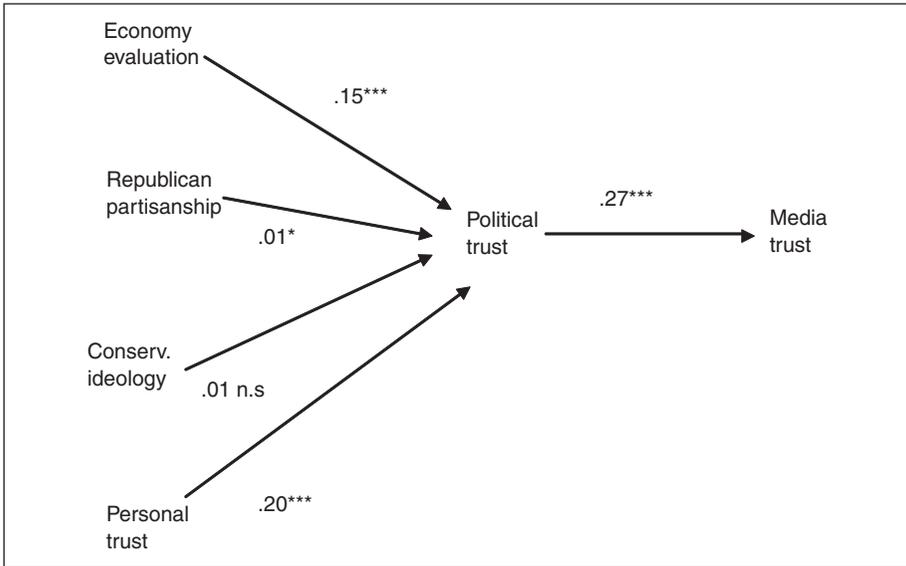


Figure 1. Path Diagram I

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$. ns, $p > .05$.

personal trust on media trust are mediated through political trust. This alternative system of relationship is illustrated in Figure 2. Fit indices (see notes under that figure) indicate that the hypothesized structural model represents a good fit. The significant path coefficients in this model support Hypothesis 5, which posits that evaluation of the economy directly affects trust in government and indirectly affects trust in the news media. The model in Figure 2 also answers the research question on how predictors of media trust are related to each other.

Additional Analyses

It is natural to wonder whether Americans' trust in the media have changed between 1996 and 2004. Did the constant and intensified attacks on the media's purported liberal bias (e.g., Brown, 2005; Goldberg, 2001), the increasing popularity of conservative Fox News (Greppi, 2003), and the change of presidency between parties affect the level of media trust among consumers? An ANOVA test comparing media trust in 1996 ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.75$), 1998 ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.79$), 2000 ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.75$), and 2004 ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.68$) demonstrates the difference in means is significant ($F = 21.96$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$). A post hoc Tukey test reveals that 2000 differs ($p < .05$) from the other 3 years.

Dividing all partisan and ideological positions into three categories each and then plotting them against years and media trust (Figures 3 and 4) reveals more detail regarding changes in media trust. Democrats appeared to trust the media more in 1996 than in 2004. Republicans, by contrast, trusted the media less in 1996 than in 2000.

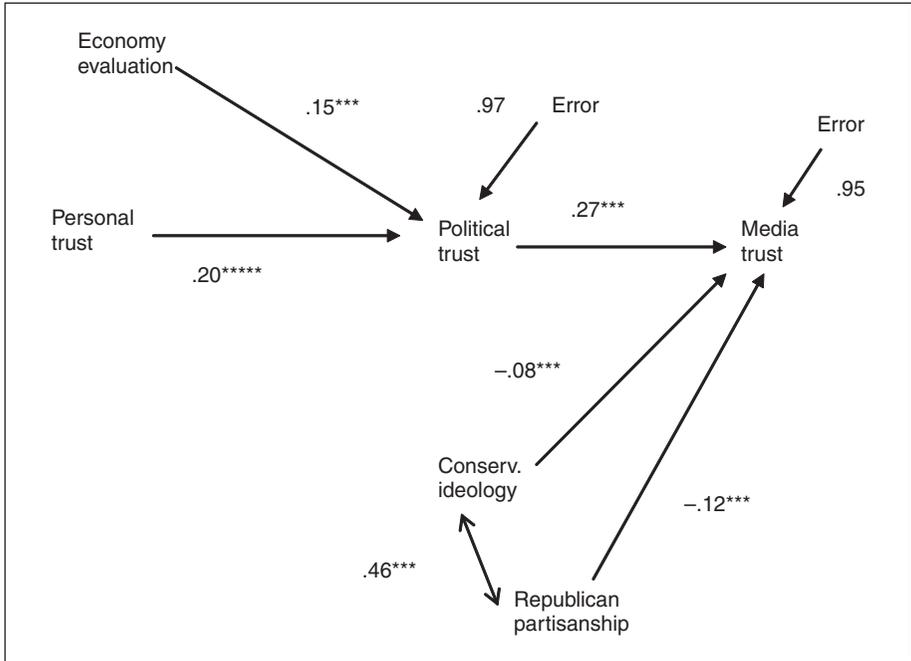


Figure 2. Path Diagram 2

Path coefficients are standardized β s; coefficient between ideology and partisanship is Pearson's correlation. Model's goodness-of-fit statistics: independence model, $\chi^2 = 1557.56$, $df = 15$; $\chi^2 = 126.63$, $df = 9$; model AIC = 108.63; model CAIC = 42.40; normed fit index = .919; non-normed fit index = .873; comparative fit index = .924; root mean residual = .281; root mean square error of approximation = .055; AIC = Akaike's Information Criterion; CAIC = Consistent Akaike's Information Criterion. *** $p < .001$.

Democrats' and Liberals' favorable attitudes toward the news media dropped from 1996 to 1998, whereas Republicans' attitudes improved, likely because of media coverage of the Monica Lewinsky scandal and Clinton impeachment proceedings (Isikoff & Thomas, 1998). The 2000 presidential election was very close, implying that both Gore and Bush received roughly equal amounts of news coverage. This may also explain why trust in the news media was high overall in 2000. The differences between Republicans' and Conservatives' trust in the news media (Figures 3 and 4) suggest media distrust is more closely associated with partisanship than ideology. This interpretation is supported by the higher β coefficient for partisanship as compared to ideology (Table 1).

Conservative trust in the media remained roughly the same throughout the years 1996, 1998, and 2004, although Republican trust in the media waned in 2004, which is likely attributable to increased media coverage regarding the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq—the primary justification for war and invasion—and other negative

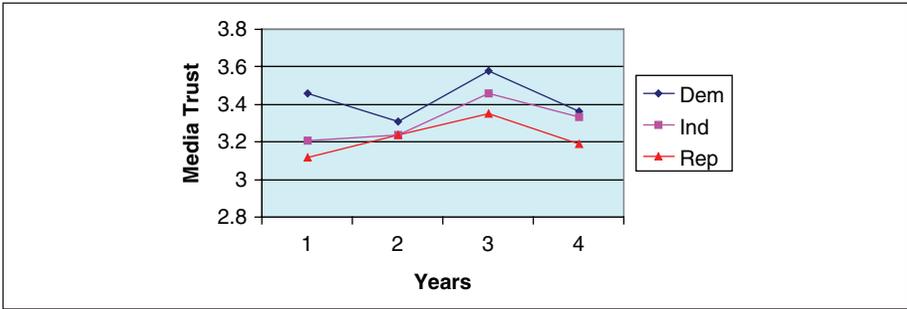


Figure 3. Media Trust Versus Partisanship Across Years
Means (and Standard Deviations) of Media Trust

Year	Democrat	Independent	Republican
1996	3.46 (0.74)	3.21 (0.78)	3.12 (0.73)
1998	3.31 (0.77)	3.24 (0.82)	3.24 (0.80)
2002	3.58 (0.73)	3.46 (0.72)	3.35 (0.76)
2004	3.36 (0.66)	3.33 (0.70)	3.19 (0.68)

$F(2, 5326) = 48.25, p < .001.$

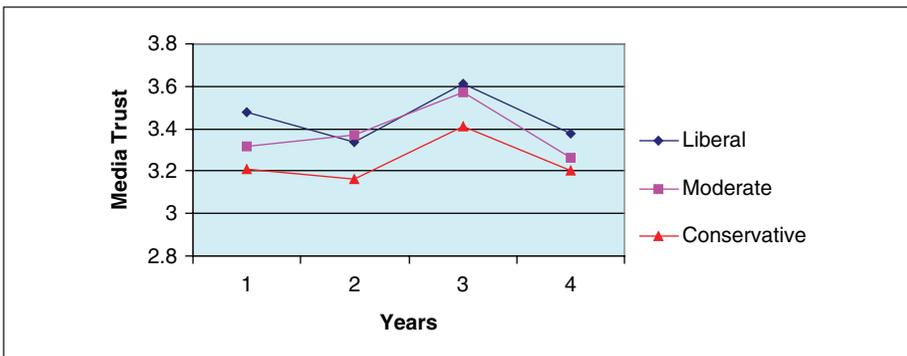


Figure 4. Media Trust Versus Ideology Across Years
Means (and Standard Deviations) of Media Trust

Year	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
1996	3.48 (0.69)	3.32 (0.77)	3.21 (0.77)
1998	3.34 (0.79)	3.37 (0.80)	3.16 (0.77)
2002	3.61 (0.72)	3.57 (0.63)	3.41 (0.75)
2004	3.38 (0.66)	3.26 (0.60)	3.20 (0.68)

$F(2, 4370) = 37.52, p < .001.$

coverage of the Bush administration preceding the 2004 election (R. Cohen, 2004; Scheer, 2004). This suggests that trust may be more about partisanship than ideology.

Discussion and Conclusion

Echoing previous findings (T. Lee, 2005), the present study lends further support to the argument that political trust, ideology, and political partisanship are associated with consumers' trust in the news media. Unlike that study, however, the present data suggest that political ideology and partisanship have limited effects on trust in the government. The reason may be, as mentioned earlier, that the federal government, at least the presidency, was controlled by different political parties and dominated by conflicting ideologies at different times during the years reviewed. A new explanatory variable—consumers' evaluation of the nation's economy—is also introduced in a theoretical model to explain media trust.

In his 2005 study, T. Lee's conclusion was based on two surveys conducted during the Clinton administration. During the years reviewed in that study, conservatives and Republicans were probably not content, and scandals related to President Clinton may have also intensified political cynicism. In comparison, the present study examines data from 1996 to 2004 and, in theory, may have balanced out the effects of President Clinton's troubles with the inclusion of troubled times for the George W. Bush administration. The insignificant paths in Figure 1 support this argument, given that partisanship and ideology show no link to trust in government.

A weakness of the present study is one shared by all research using secondary data. The aggregated NES data set did not explain how certain scales were constructed, such as political efficacy and media exposure. Also, some constructs, such as personal trust, were measured by a single item. Future research is encouraged to collect primary data in an effort to overcome these limitations. Also, EQS or other advanced statistical software might be employed to better analyze the validity of the path models using data from separate years.

Despite these limitations, the present study has provided a better understanding of the issue of media credibility, particularly regarding the mechanisms of media trust and mistrust. More significantly, the relationships between predictors of media trust have been examined in more detail. Consumers' evaluation of the economy as well as their cynical personalities directly affect their evaluation of the government, which then predict their attitudes toward the news media. By contrast, partisanship and ideology have a weak connection with trust in the government yet show a strong connection with trust in the news media.

In conclusion, T. Lee's (2005) research relies only on multiple regressions to create a one-dimensional report of predictors of perceived media bias. The present study, in comparison, provides a more conceptually developed model that explains three layers of variables concerning media trust. Therefore, more sophisticated knowledge of why some consumers do not trust the media has been produced.

One final issue to be addressed is a possible misunderstanding that may occur in examining present findings: Higher levels of liberals' and Democrats' trust in the news

media should not be taken to indicate a liberal or pro-Democrat bias in the news media. Trust is a matter of audience perception, whereas bias is a matter of media content. As discussed before, systematic content analyses (e.g., Dalton et al., 1998; Niven, 2002) have detected no evidence of partisan bias in the news media in general.

The present research focuses on audience trust in the news media as a whole. One interesting follow-up question is whether a relationship exists between the variety of media one consumes and one's perception of a media bias. For instance, if a conservative or Republican watches only Fox News, would that person still believe the media possess a liberal bias? Therefore, a recommendation for future research on perceptions of media bias might be to identify respondents' total media consumption and then to evaluate the perceived political bias of each media outlet.

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Bio

Tien-Tsung Lee received his PhD from the University of Oregon and is an associate professor at the University of Kansas. His research interests include media effects, political ideologies, and race and gender issues. His works have appeared in such journals as *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *Newspaper Research Journal*, and the *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. He is also the co-author of *Media, Politics, and Asian Americans*.