

# Association Between Legacy Media Consumption and Confidence in the Federal Government

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## Introduction

- Political trust is fundamental for the stability of democratic regimes. The United States, like other countries around the world, has seen a steady decline in confidence in our political system since the post-WWII era (Echeverría, 2020).
- Several factors have been credited for this decline, including the media we consume. For decades, television has been condemned by some social critics as poisonous to the public's morals and attitudes (Norris, 2000).
- Studies have been mixed on traditional media's role in influencing the public, although print news has been shown to produce more positive opinions than television (Näsi, 2020).
- The media we consume is strongly correlated to our political affiliations (Echeverría, 2020).
- While in the past the effect of television and print media on political trust was examined, the advent of social media and the decentralization of information creates the need for another look.

## Research Questions

- Does television and/or newspaper consumption correlate with confidence in the three branches of the U.S. Federal Government?
- What do those correlations look like when controlling for political party affiliation?

## Methods

### Sample

- Respondents (n=1039) were drawn from the 2021 General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative sample of English-speaking, non-institutionalized adults in the U.S.

### Measures

- Respondents were asked to rate their confidence in the executive branch, the Supreme Court, and Congress separately. In all cases, possible responses ranged from 2 (a great deal of confidence) to 0 (hardly any confidence).
- Using these three variable I created an index score of government ranging from 0-6.
- Television watched was measured in average daily hours with responses ranging from 0-15. I rebinned these as 0, 1, 2, 3, and 4 and up.
- News was measured by weekly consumption, which I binned as never, rarely, once or more a week, and daily.

## Results

### Television Consumption

- A graph comparing television consumption levels to average confidence shows a very slight negative correlation with confidence in government
- ANOVA analysis showed the correlation was seen as **not significant** ( $F=0.21$ ,  $p=0.936$ ).

### Newspaper Consumption

- The same graph with newspaper consumption instead of television and a corresponding ANOVA analysis showed that there is a **significant positive association** between newspaper consumption and confidence in federal government ( $F=11.21$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).
- Compared to those who never read newspapers, those who answered 'once or more a week' and 'daily' had a significant increase, while those who answered 'rarely' didn't.

### Controlling for Political Party

Figure 1. Television Consumption as Associated with Confidence in the Federal Government by Political Party

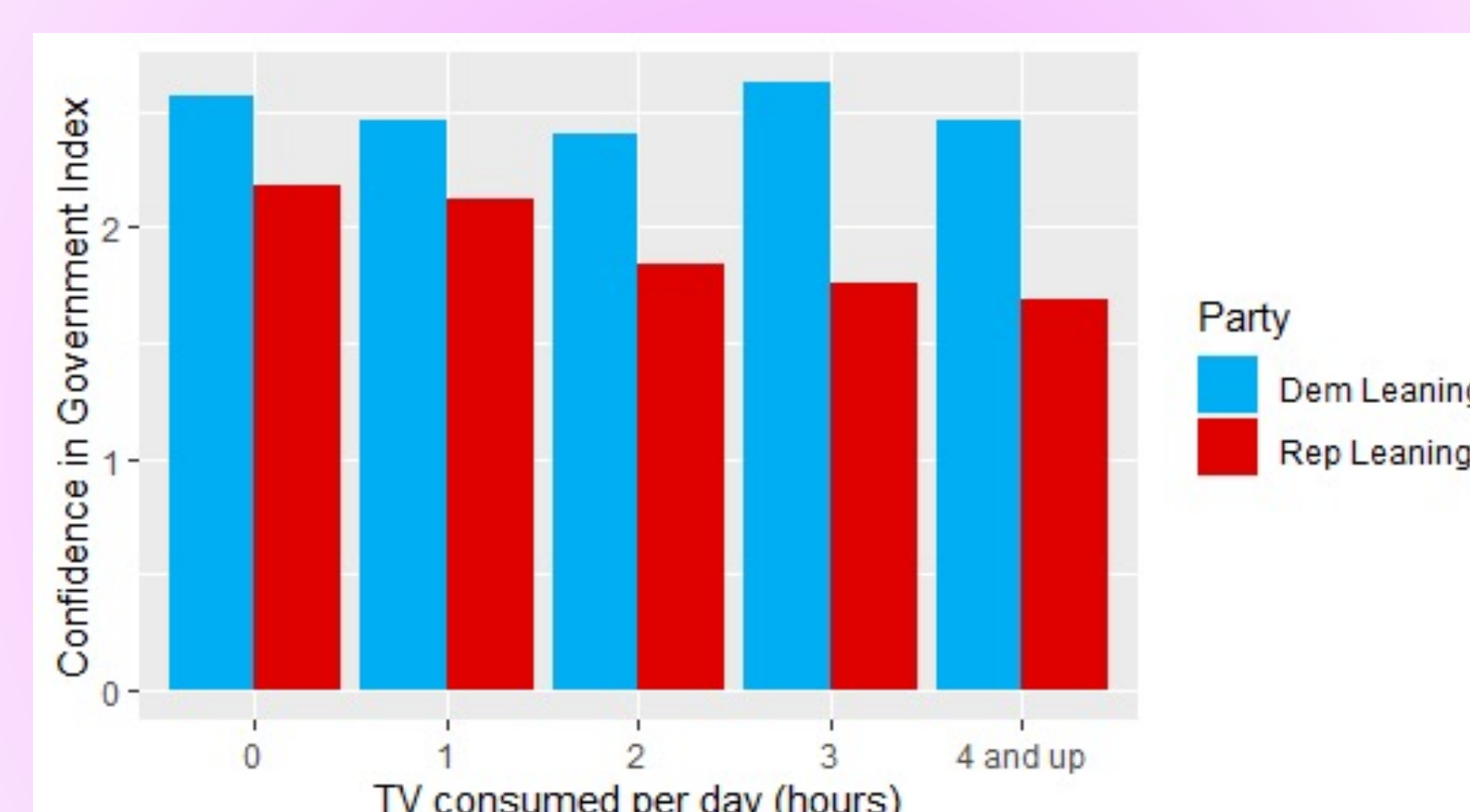
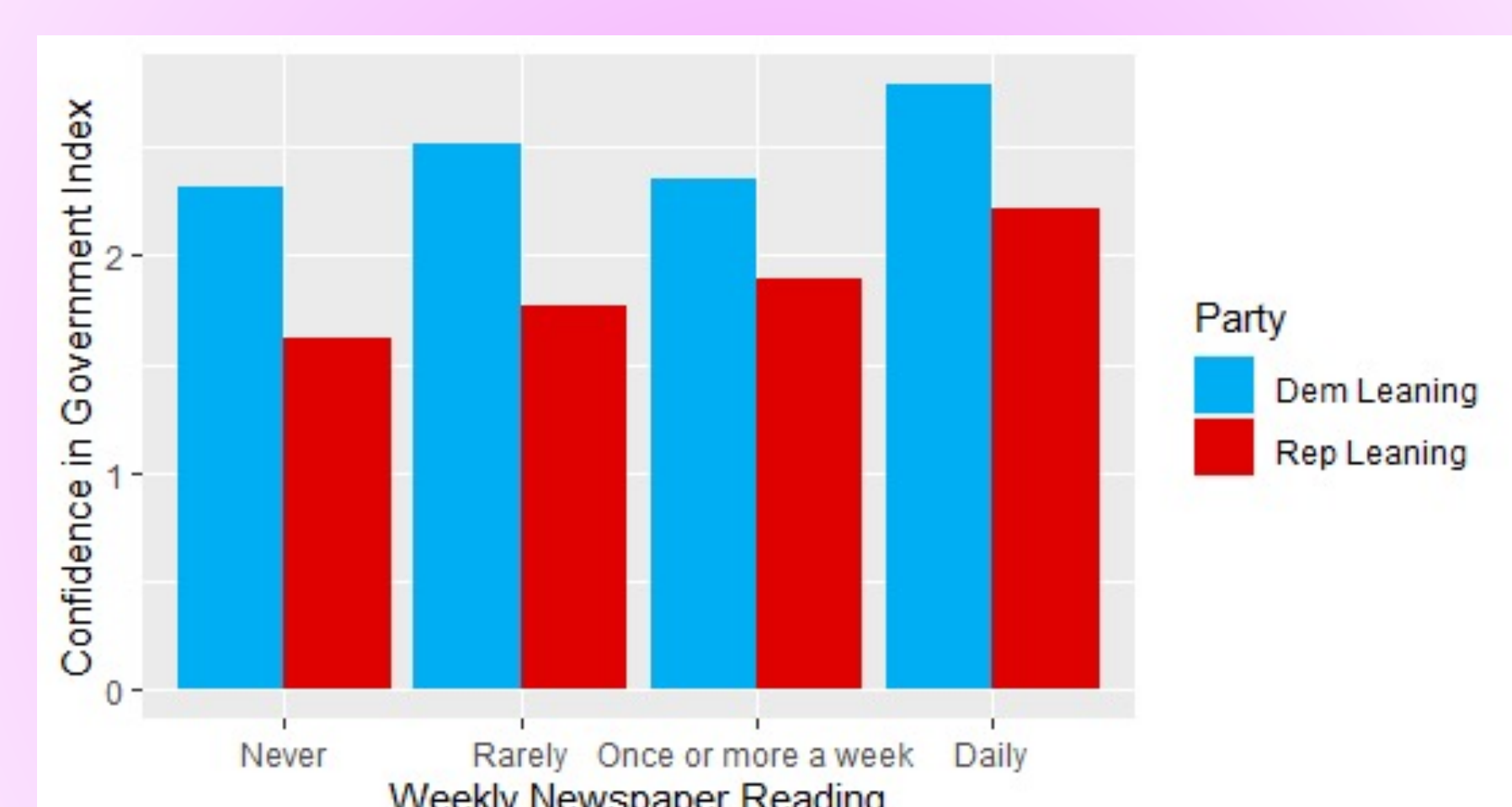


Figure 2. Newspaper Consumption as Associated with Confidence in the Federal Government by Political Party



### Television

- After controlling for political party and running a linear regression model, leaning Republican is **significantly negatively associated** with confidence. (Beta=-0.65, CI: 0.44-0.61,  $p<0.001$ )
- No significant association was found** between television consumption and confidence in government (Beta=-0.26, CI: 0.53-1.10,  $p=0.15$ ).
- Given the visible trend for Republicans, I isolated the Rep Leaning responses for a regression model, finding **no significant association** (Beta=-0.50, CI: 0.35-1.07,  $p=0.08$ )

### Newspaper

- We can observe the same association for Republicans
- Through linear regression we can still observe a **significant positive association** between newspapers and confidence.
- After controlling for political party, 'once or more a week' is no longer significantly increased from 'never,' but 'daily' readers still have a significant increase (Beta=0.53,  $p>0.001$ ).
- This remains the same after isolating 'Dem Leaning' and 'Rep Leaning' responses

## Discussion

- Watching television has no statistically relevant correlation on confidence in government, which is likely related to the broadness of the survey. Someone watching five hours of Fox News would be statistically indecipherable from someone watching five hours of Paw Patrol.
- Regular newspaper readers are correlated with a higher confidence level. This could be because those who engage more with government have more confidence in it, and also because those who have higher confidence are more willing to engage.
- These data were collected after the election of President Biden. This is likely related to higher rates of trust in Democrats and lower rates in Republicans.
- Additionally, this survey was conducted in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis. We have seen crises have dramatic effects on confidence in the government, such as the dramatic short-term increase in government confidence after the 9/11 attacks (Gross, 2004). The pandemic could have instilled confidence in the government to some, or shaken the confidence in others.

Echeverría, M. and E. Mani (2020). "Effects of Traditional and Social Media on Political Trust." *Communication & Society* 33(2): 119-135.

Näsi, M., Tanskanen, M., Kivivuori, J., Haara, P., & Reunanen, E. (2021). Crime News Consumption and Fear of Violence: The Role of Traditional Media, Social Media, and Alternative Information Sources. *Crime and delinquency*, 67(4), 574-600. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128720922539>

Norris, P. (2000). The Impact of Television on Civic Malaise. In S. J. Pharr & R. D. Putnam (Eds.), *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691186849>

Gross, K, S. A., Paul R Brewer. (2004). A Panel Study of Media Effects on Political and Social Trust after September 11, 2001. *Harvard international journal of press/politics*, 9(4), 49-73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1081180X04269138>