

# Why Have Americans Lost Faith in The Executive and Legislative Branches of Government Over the Last Half Century?

By

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## Abstract

We examine the question of why Americans have lost trust in the executive and legislative branches of government over the past half century. We challenge the notion that this loss has been due simply to the decreased efficiency of both branches by showing that declines in trust in both branches of government have been greater for Republicans than for Democrats, much greater in the case of the executive branch. We argue that the political lens worn by citizens has at least as much to do with their trust in political institutions as does the work of insiders within those institutions. We provide evidence that the party in power and people's trust in the media are significantly related to people's trust in the executive and the legislative branches.

**Keywords:** Americans' loss of trust in government, political lenses, party identification

## Introduction

The question of why there has been declining trust in many major social institutions has been one that has fascinated scholars for at least forty years (e.g., Lipset & Schneider 1983; LaFree 1997; Paxton 2005). In an article in volume seven of *Sociology Between the Gaps*, we (Ahlquist et al. 2022) addressed one promising theory of why people lose trust in institutions and what members of such institutions might do to regain that trust: a theory proposed by Yuval Levin in his (2020) book *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream*.

## Levin's Approach and Our Critique

Levin argues that the loss in Americans' trust in institutions is primarily due to the *decline in the capacity* of such institutions to meet social expectations and to their participants' *declining commitment* to their roles within the institutions. Political institutions exist because people want desirable laws created, executed and adjudicated, and political actors are expected

to pursue these ends assiduously. When such actors ("insiders") deviate from their socially expected roles by, say, mainly using their positions to call attention to themselves—as, for instance, “when the presidency and Congress are just stages for political performance art” (2020:34), people lose confidence in the institutions they represent.

Our previous article (Ahlquist et al. 2022), while showing that trust in several institutions, including the federal executive and congress, has declined over the past 50 years, critiqued Levin's theory by showing that, at least in the period from 2018 to 2021, Americans' faith in five institutions was affected by their political affiliation and *not necessarily* by how those institutions performed or how their “insiders” behaved. The five institutions were the U.S. military, education, medicine, science and the press. What we found, using General Social Survey (GSS) data, is that there was a substantial partisan divide in what happened to people's trust in these five institutions during this period. If then-President Trump expressed disapproval for an institution (as he did for the institutions of education, medicine, science and the press), Republicans trust in these institutions plummeted and Democrats trust rose. If he expressed

approval for an institution (as he did for the military), Republicans trust rose, and Democrats trust fell during the 2018 to 2021 period. These data suggested that it wasn't just the performance of institutions and their "insiders" that affected peoples' trust. Trust seemed to be a function of people's own frames of reference—in this case, their political party affiliation—as well as what the institutions and their insiders were doing.

However, our previous article really only cast doubt on Levin's general proposition for one short period in history (2018 to 2021), a period in which one man (President Trump) held an unusual grip on the national spotlight. In the present article we take a longer view, over a period when no one political figure held such sway. In it, we examine two institutions: the executive and legislative branches of the federal government. We are again particularly interested in the degree to which being a part of a major political party—Democrat or Republican—has affected people's confidence in the institutions. Our initial question is simply whether there is a difference in the degree to which Democrats or Republicans have experienced a decline in confidence in these two political institutions. If adherents of both parties have experienced similar declines in trust, then Levin's proposition that it is merely how productive these institutions have been and how conscientious their insiders have performed that accounts for declines in confidence in the executive and legislative branches (that we showed in the former paper) over the last 50 years remains plausible. But if one party has experienced greater declines than the other, this would suggest that something about the political lens worn by adherents of the parties is also important.

And we have reasons for hypothesizing that *Republicans' trust in both the executive and the legislative branches will have fallen more than Democrats' trust in the past half century*. First, while Republican presidents have been in office throughout the period, they were four of the first five (Nixon, Ford, Reagan, Bush Sr.) and only two of the last five (Bush Jr. and Trump). We assume partisans will be more partial to the executive branch when one of their own occupies the office. **Figure 1** shows that although Republicans have held office slightly more often in the last half century, Democrats have had greater success in the last 30 years. (See **Figure 1 in the Appendix**).

A similar logic, however, would lead to the conclusion that Republicans might have retained more trust in congress than Democrats. **Figure 2** shows that Republicans controlled one or both branches of the congress in only 5 of the *first* 14 congressional elections

in the period, while they controlled one or both branches in 10 of the most recent 12 congressional elections. But it's our contention that there is something more important when it comes to trust in congress (though it would be important for attitudes towards the executive too), and that is trust in the media. (See **Figure 2 in the Appendix**.)

Republicans' trust in the media has dropped much more precipitously in the last 50 years than Democrats trust has. **Figure 3** (based on GSS data) shows that both Democrats and Republicans experienced a drop in confidence in the press over the period covered here, but that the drop was far more substantial (slope of line of best fit = -1.69) for Republicans than for Democrats (slope = -0.84). There are likely a couple of reasons for this. Beginning in the late 1980s, conservative talk radio shows began to attract Republican listeners and advocated doubt about news from mainstream media—the traditional source for both Republicans and Democrats (Rosenwald 2019). Fox TV News, founded in 1996, did much the same thing (Ray 2023). With such alternative sources of perspective, Republicans were likely to feel less confident in news sources either because they accepted the view that mainstream media had an irredeemable liberal bias or because their two sources of news (conservative media, on the one hand, and mainstream media, on the other, presented differing views and therefore threw all news sources in doubt.

But why should having less confidence in the media have led Republicans to have less confidence in other institutions like the executive and legislative branches of government? Levin (2020) himself provides the answer. For, while he basically argues that it is what the "insiders" within each institution do that can enhance or degrade public perception of the institution, he does suggest that the public's trust in the media can independently enhance or degrade that perception. Thus, as we pointed out in our previous article, he observes that "journalists should recognize that their profession may have a particularly important role to play in any recovery of confidence in [other] American institutions" (2000: 86). If we had more trust in the press, it could keep us from imagining the worst about major institutions even while it uncovered abuses in them. We speculate, then, that *Republicans will have experienced a greater loss in trust of congress than Democrats, though perhaps the difference in that loss will not be as great as the difference in the loss in the executive*.

It should be recalled, however, that both Democrats and Republicans lost trust in the press over the 1973-2021 period. We have speculated that this loss should

have been a drag on trust in government for both sets of partisans. We therefore hypothesize that *confidence in the press will be positively associated with confidence in both the executive and legislative branches of government over time for both Democrats and Republicans when the party in control of the branch is controlled*. Moreover, we hypothesize that, *for both Democrats and Republicans, trust in each branch of government will be higher when their party is in control of that branch over time, when confidence in the press is controlled*. (See **Figure 3 in the Appendix**.)

## Methods

Using the General Social Survey (GSS) data, we looked at Americans' confidence in three institutions: the executive, the legislative, and the press. In measuring Americans' confidence in institutions, the GSS asks: "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?" Then, the interviewer names an institution and records one of three responses: "a great deal of confidence," "only some confidence," or "hardly any confidence."

We considered several ways of displaying Americans' confidence in each institution. We determined that the clearest way of showing overall confidence in an institution over time was to combine the categories of "only some confidence" and "a great deal of confidence" into a single category known simply as "confidence."

We are primarily interested in the differences between Democrats' and Republicans' confidence in the political institutions and the press over time. For this research, we recoded a "party identification" variable with eight categories ("strong Democrat," "not very strong Democrat," "Independent (close to Democrat)," "Independent," "Independent (close to Republican)," "not very strong Republican," "Republican," "other party") by combining the first three categories into a "Democrats" category and the fifth through seventh categories into a "Republican" category.

## Results

The falloff in Republican confidence in the executive branch was much greater than that of Democrats in the period between 1973 and 2021. **Figure 4** shows that the almost 90 percent of Republicans had either some or a great deal of confidence in 1973, but that less

than 40 percent of them had that level of confidence in 2021. The slope of the line of best fit for Republicans' confidence is -1.11, about 5 times greater than its counterpart for Democrats' (-0.23). In fact, Democrats' level of confidence in 2021 (72.2 percent) was only about 4 percent lower than it was in 1973 (76.3 percent), though it did drop dramatically (to 34.8 percent) during the Trump administration (in 2018). (See **Figure 4 in the Appendix**.)

Republicans also underwent a greater drop in their confidence in Congress between 1973 and 2021 than Democrats, but the difference in this drop was nowhere near as great as it was for confidence in the executive. **Figure 5**, for instance, shows that the slope of the line of best fit for Republicans' confidence (-1.04) is just a little bit greater than that for Democrats (-0.95).

Clearly, there has been a difference in the changing feelings of Republicans and Democrats about both the executive and legislative branches of government over time. This difference itself suggests that it is not just what the branches have done and how their insiders have behaved that informs confidence in the two institutions. Something about the different political lenses worn by Republicans and Democrats is at play here. But what kinds of changes have been filtered through these lenses in order to create the much greater decline in Republican confidence in the executive and the slightly greater decline in Republican confidence in congress? We have hypothesized that there are two such kinds of changes: changes in the political party that dominates the branch and changes in confidence in the press (or media). (See **Figure 5 in the Appendix**.)

Now we'll see how much these two kinds of changes have been associated with changes in partisans' confidence in the two branches of government. In **Table 1** we regress change in each of four dependent variables—Democrats' confidence in the executive and in the congress, on the one hand, and Republican's confidence in the executive and the congress—on changes in the party of president in power and changes in confidence in the press. From the table's first column, for instance, we discover that, the association between Democrats' changing confidence in the executive is strongly, negatively associated (beta = -.67) with Republican presidencies, when changing level of Democrats' confidence in the press are controlled. But that the two independent variables (party of the President and Democrat's confidence in the press) only explain about 30% of the variance in Democrat's confidence in the executive (adjusted R-square = .30). (See **Table 1 in the Appendix**.)

Each of the other models shown in **Table 1** explain at least twice as much variance in their respective dependent variables as the one involving Democrats' confidence in the executive branch. The second model, for instance, explains about 60% of the variance in Democrat's changing confidence in Congress over the period, though, the variable with the strongest controlled association is Democrats' confidence in the press ( $\beta = .70$ ), suggesting that as Democrats lost faith in the press, they also lost faith in Congress. Pretty strong affirmation of Levin's own hunch that faith in this other institution—the media—can affect faith in the Congress.

Diminishing confidence in the press also has a substantial controlled association with Republicans' diminishing faith in the executive ( $\beta = .46$ ) and in the Congress ( $\beta = .96$ ).

But so do Republicans' access to power in each of those branches (the  $\beta$  for occupying the presidency is  $.67$  and the  $\beta$  for having control of Congress is  $.50$ ). And the amount of variance explained by the “control of the branch” variable and the “confidence in the press” variable is extraordinary for Republicans: 72% for their confidence in the executive and .67 percent for their confidence in the Congress.

## CONCLUSION and Limitations of This Study

Our analysis, like that of Ahlquist et al. (2022), offers reason to doubt Yuval Levin's (2020) contention that the public's trust in institutions is mostly a function of how well actors in those institutions perform their roles. We find that, in the cases of the U.S. executive and legislative branches of government, one's party affiliation and trust in the media have been highly correlated with trust over time. As just one example, Republicans' trust in the executive branch has dropped enormously over the last half century and this drop has been strongly and positively associated with the declining likelihood that the presidency has been held by a Republican and the declining likelihood that Republicans' trust the media.

It is obviously true that other things besides the party affiliation of, say, the President and one's confidence in the press are going to affect a person's trust in, say, the executive branch of government. But, when, as in the case of Republicans' declining trust in the executive, 72 percent of the variance is explained by these two variables, there's not much room for other things—such as Presidents' performances—to explain variation.

But as soon as we write this, we are reminded of the limitations of our study. And one is that the

perception of a Presidents' performance is very likely to be affected by the political lens—in this case, the party affiliation—of a person. Part of Republican's greater trust in the executive during times when Republicans are Presidents may well be because such Presidents advocate policies that they approve of. In other words, Republican Presidents may well be doing things that Republicans find admirable. But even this concession to Levin's theory implies a qualification to the theory: that while doing their work assiduously may enhance the trust of some part of the larger population, doing so may also offend other parts of the population. In other words, it's not just what occupants of various roles in institutions do that is important for trust in those institutions, but it's also the various lenses that outsiders wear that will affect that trust. And these lenses are not apt to be uniform.

Another limitation of our study is that we cannot prove that it's the loss of people's confidence in the media that generates a loss of faith in the executive and legislative branches of government, even though the correlation between faith in the press and these branches is high. Levin himself suggested that a major reason that the public has lost faith in the press is that it (the public) sees most members of the press taking sides in culture wars and therefore being less likely to investigate, and certainly agree about, abuses by political actors on their side. He posits that this, in turn, may lead to a loss of faith in political institutions partly because the public cannot be sure that bad behavior by political actors will be uncovered. But we know from our previous study (Ahlquist et al., 2022) that the public has lost faith in many other institutions in the last half century, and we cannot be sure that its loss of faith in the press is what really accounts for its loss of faith in political institutions.

Finally, our study shows a number of new things about Americans' loss of confidence in political institutions over the past half century. In general, Republicans have lost much more confidence in the executive branch than Democrats have and lost a little more confidence in the legislative branch than their Democrat counterparts have. We think the difference between Republicans' greater loss in these two branches has to do with the fact that Republicans have generally been less likely to win the presidency as the half century has gone on and more likely to win control of the congress. We believe, however, that the fact that they have experienced greater losses in both branches is because of their much greater loss of faith in the media than Democrats have experienced.

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Appendix. Figures 1 through 5 and Table 1.

Figure 1. Party Controlling Executive



Note: Red arrow indicates term of a Republican President; Blue, a Democratic President

Figure 2. Party Controlling Congress

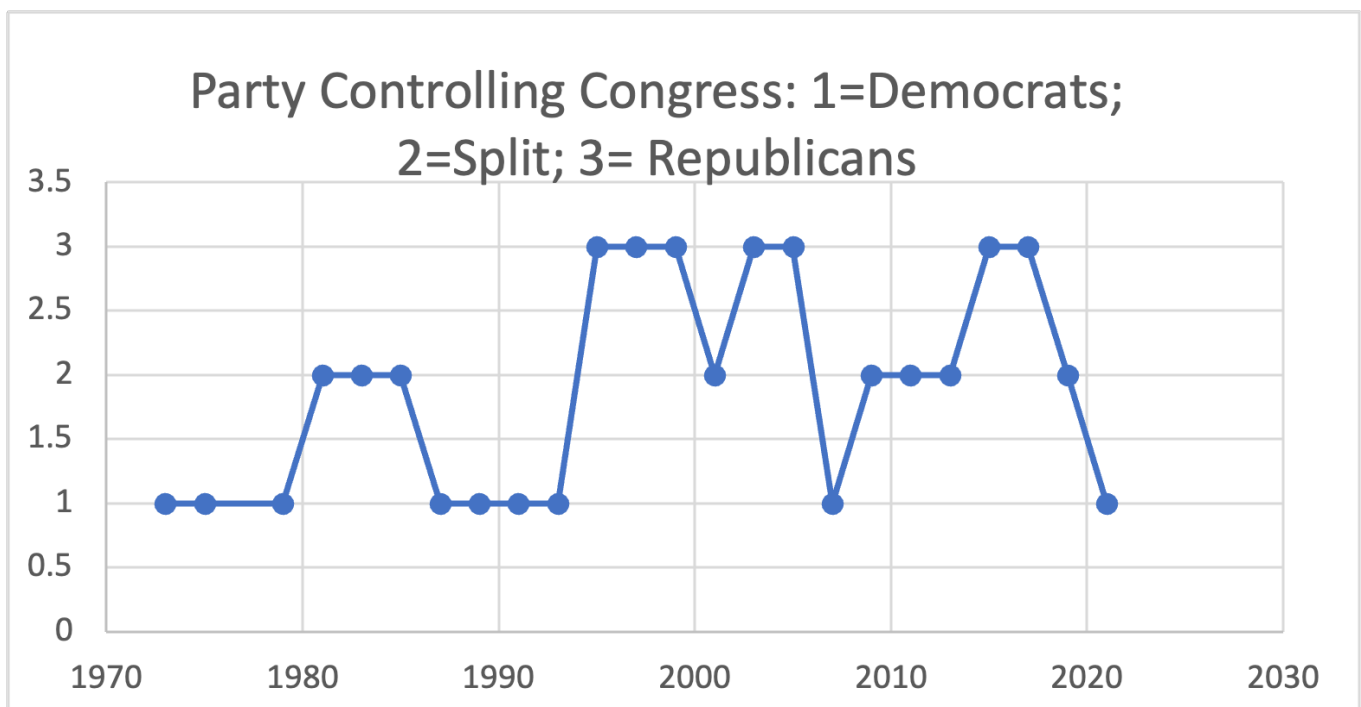
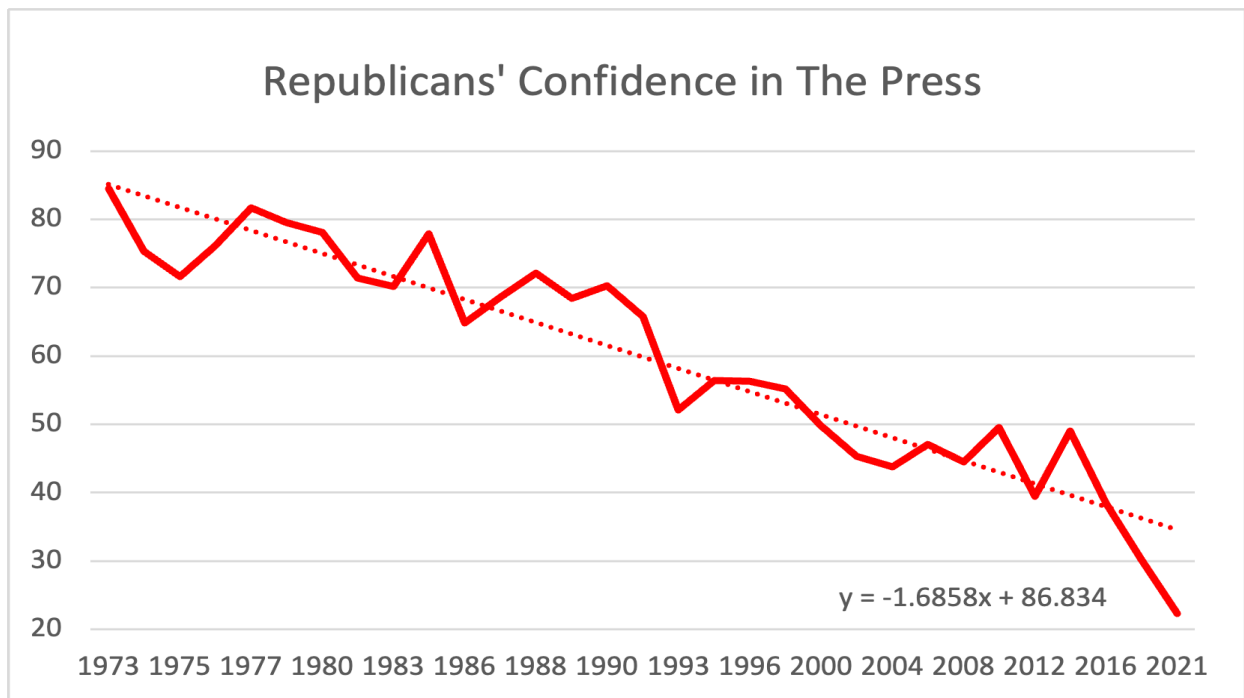
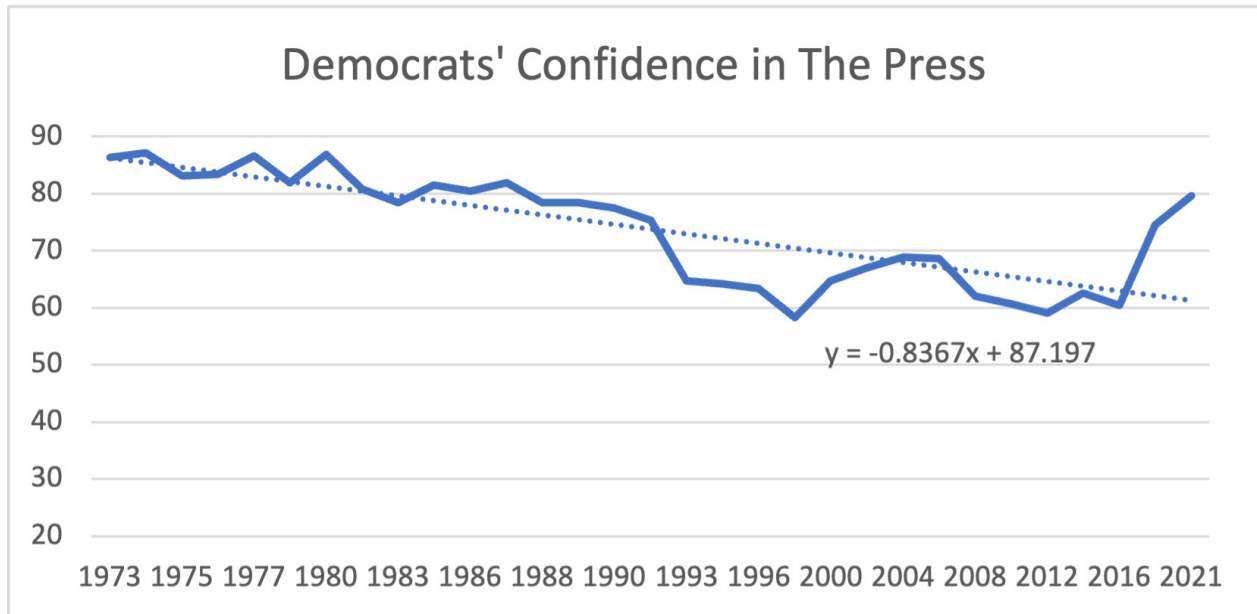


Figure 3. Democrats' and Republicans' Confidence in the Press



**Figure 4. Democrats' and Republicans' Confidence in the Executive Branch**

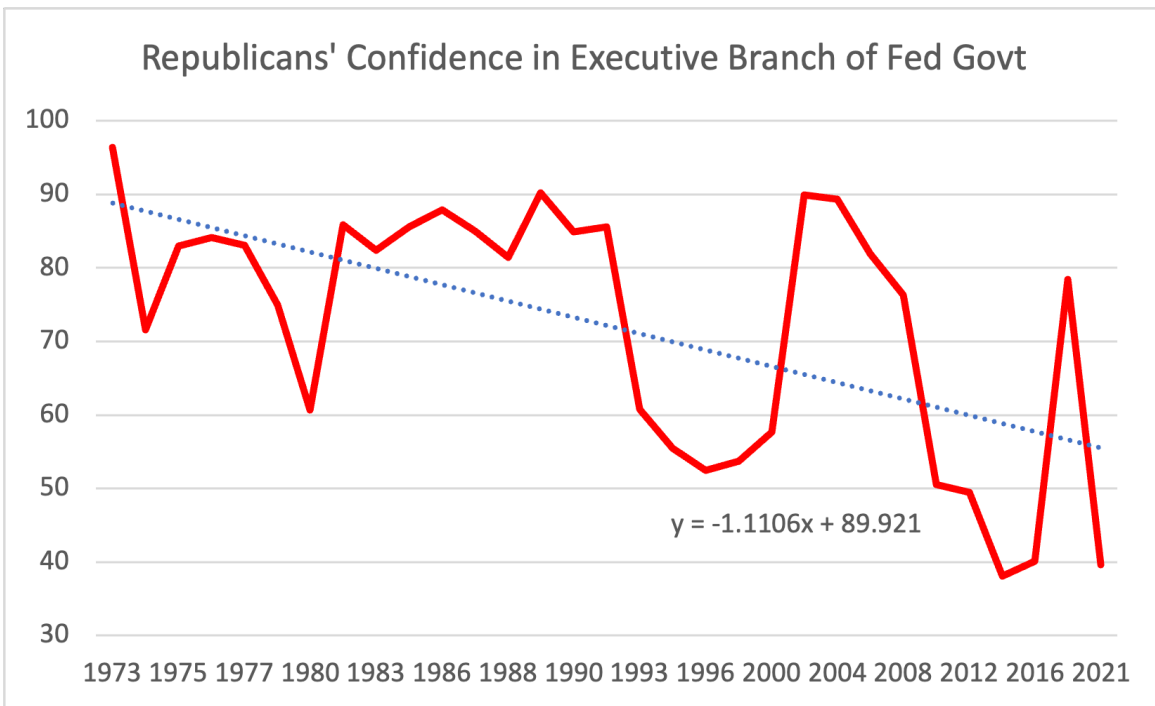
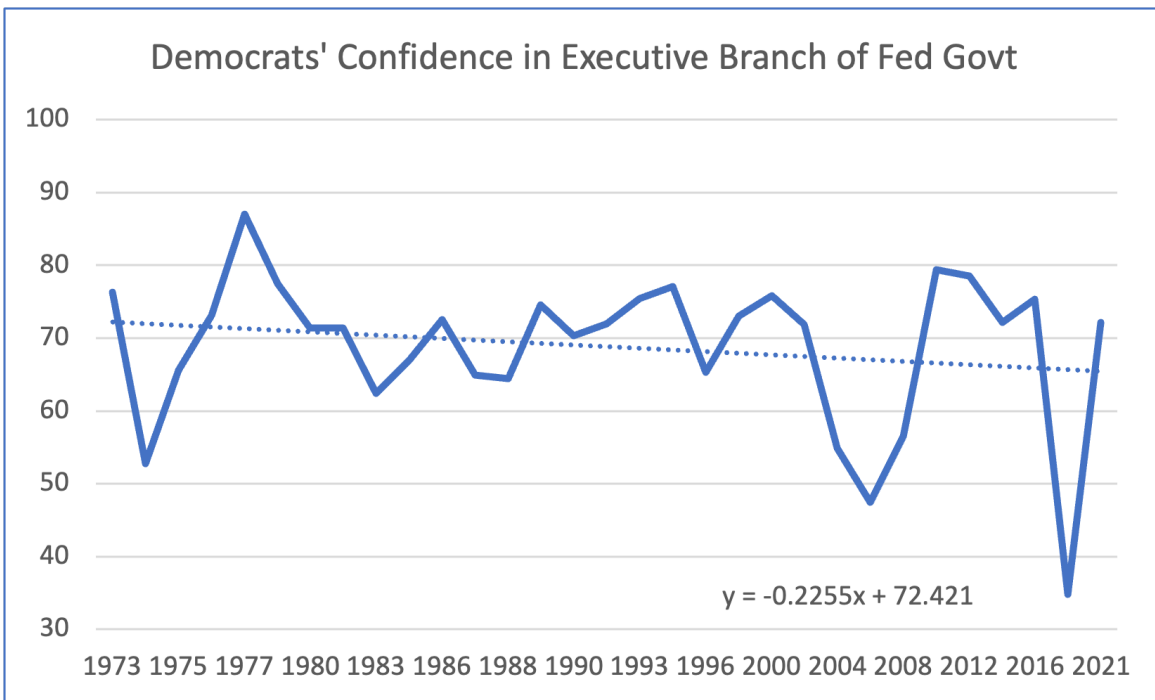
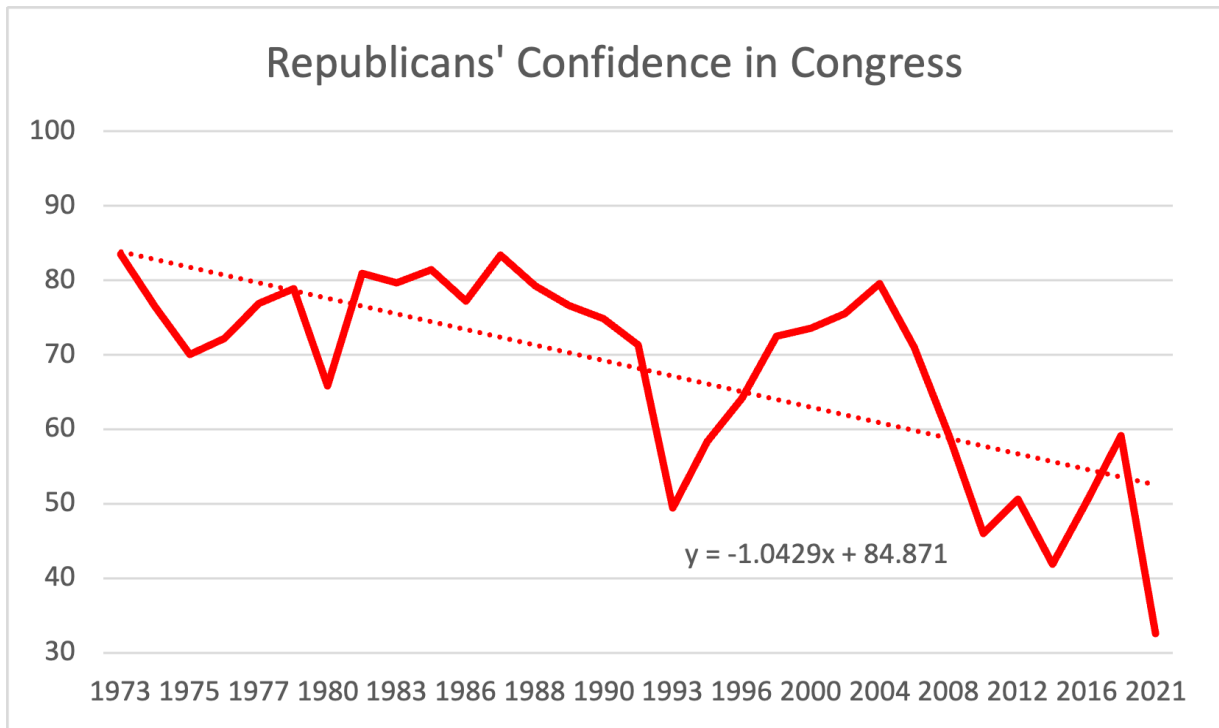
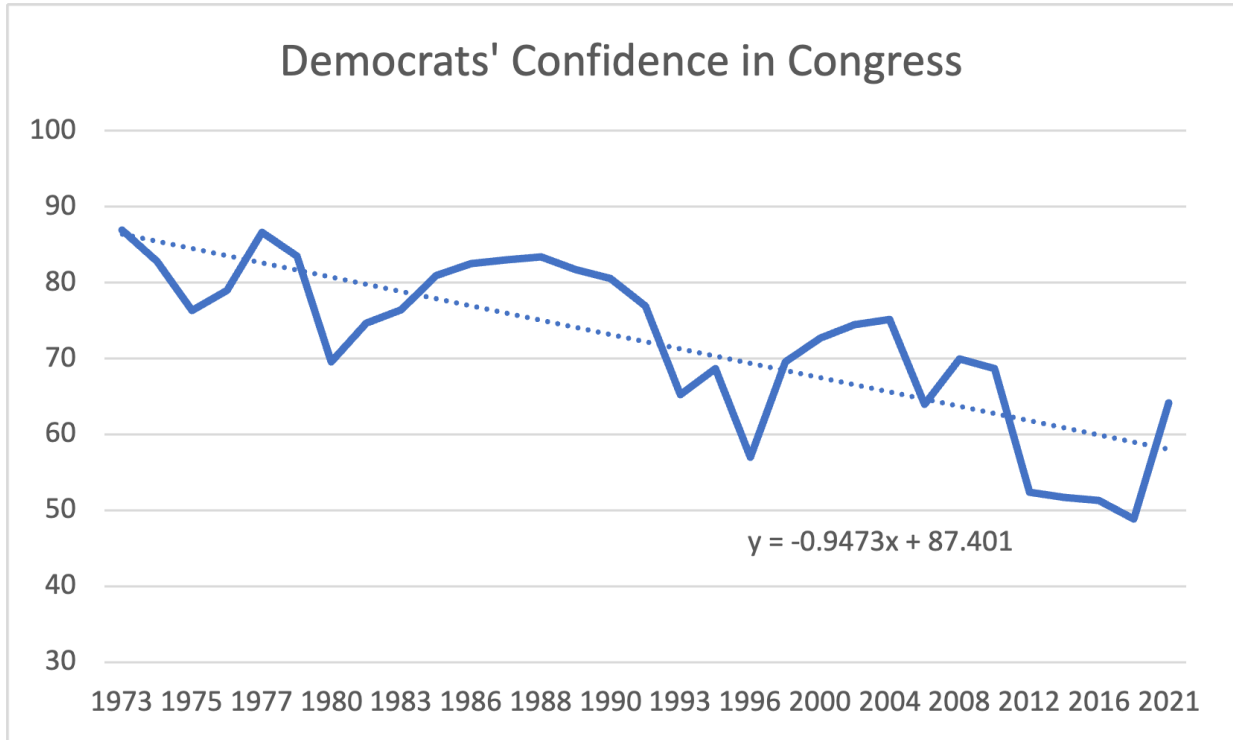




Figure 5. Democrats' and Republicans' Confidence in Congress



**Table 1. Regression of Democrats' and Republican's Confidence in the  
Executive Branch and Congress on Relevant Variables**

Independent Variables	Betas			
	Democrats' Confidence in Executive Branch	Democrats' Confidence in Congress	Republicans' Confidence in Executive Branch	Republicans' Confidence in Congress
President's Party (1) Democrats' Confidence in Press	-.67***			
Adjusted R-square	.30			
Party Dominant in Congress (2) Democrats' Confidence in Press		-.15		
Adjusted R-square		.70***		
Presidents' Party (1) Republicans' Confidence in Press			.67***	
Adjusted R-square			.46***	
Party Dominant in Congress (2) Republicans' Confidence in Press				.50***
Adjusted R-Square				.96***
				.67

**Notes:** N for all regressions = 31 years;

\*\*\* indicates statistical significance at .001 level;

(1) 1 = Democratic President; 2=Republican President;

(2) 1= Democrats the majority in both houses;

2 = Control of houses split;

3 = Republicans the majority in both houses