

Determinants of Confidence in U.S. Institutions: Comparing Congress and Corporations

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Objectives. The political discourse surrounding the 2016 U.S. presidential election highlighted discontent with both Congress and corporations, a reality corroborated in recent scholarship highlighting declines in institutional confidence among U.S. citizens. Here we test theories of institutional confidence to understand the social and cultural determinants of confidence in Congress and corporations prior to the start of the 2016 presidential campaigns. *Methods.* We draw on data from the Religious Understandings of Science Survey, a nationally representative survey conducted in 2013–2014 ($N = 9,416$). *Results.* We find that political ideology largely explained confidence in corporations while social location (particularly racial-ethnic identity and gender) strongly related to confidence in Congress. Seemingly opposing factors converged to predict trust in both institutions. *Conclusions.* Institutional confidence is shaped not only by social and cultural factors but also by the symbolic functions of institutions themselves.

During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, then-candidates Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders both campaigned by challenging establishment power structures (Oliver and Rahn, 2016). Trump took aim at the ineffectiveness of Congress, a message that found emotional resonance among disillusioned middle- and lower-class white voters. Meanwhile, Sanders lamented the hegemony of American corporations. Though these candidates came from opposite ends of the political spectrum, indicators point to a partial convergence of their constituencies. In fact, 12 percent of those who voted for Sanders in the Democrat primary voted for Trump in the general election (Kurtzleben, 2017).

Both candidates positioned themselves as anti-establishment, tapping into seemingly widespread sentiments of institutional resentment. Recent work suggests that populist political movements are often spurred by declines in trust of governing institutions (Doyle, 2011). Indeed, confidence in both Congress and major U.S. companies reached near-historic lows in the last decade; in 2010 only 13 percent of Americans reported having a great deal of confidence in corporations and in 2012 only 6.6 percent reported a great deal of confidence in Congress (Smith and Son, 2013).

Studies of political trust in the United States suggest that institutional confidence is shaped by an individual's social location (Wilkes and Wu, 2018), institutional representation (Fowler, Merolla, and Sellers, 2014), and perceptions of government performance (Nicholls and Picou, 2013). Further, research consistently documents that confidence

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SOCIAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY

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DOI: 10.1111/ssqu.12921

in the government is positively associated with confidence in various—and seemingly adversarial—societal institutions, *including* major corporations (Smith, 2012). While public institutions such as Congress are founded upon democratic, regulatory principles intended to broadly serve public interests, private institutions such as corporations are built upon capitalist principles that primarily serve shareholders (Uslaner, 2010).

While prior literature has employed a number of theoretical frameworks to explain confidence in political and economic power establishments, data limitations have limited our ability to understand patterns of divergence and convergence in the predictors of confidence in these two distinct institutions at a given point in time. To better understand the dynamics at play in the political landscape leading up to the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, we need to understand how factors related to both social location *and* cultural affiliation influenced institutional confidence in Congress and major corporations. Here we test theories of institutional confidence by drawing upon a nationally representative survey of 9,416 U.S. respondents collected in 2013–2014. The results shed light on latent patterns of institutional skepticism among the U.S. public, which have important implications for understanding public responses to elite discourse both during and after the historically significant 2016 campaign season.

Determinants of Institutional Confidence

Trends in Institutional Confidence

A large body of social scientific literature explores *institutional confidence*, or the extent to which individuals perceive particular sectors of society (e.g., the educational system or the military) to be reliable. While there remain debates about the best way to measure such confidence (PytlikZillig and Kimbrough, 2016), many scholars have argued that confidence is slightly different than the related concept of “trust” and a lack of confidence is not the same as distrust, mistrust, or cynicism (Cook and Gronke, 2005). Similarly, a lack of confidence in societal institutions is not simply a result of dissatisfaction with leaders of such institutions, but low levels of trust can actually spur such dissatisfaction (Hetherington, 1998). For the present article, we focus specifically on institutional confidence while also acknowledging related and often overlapping literature on institutional trust.

Confidence in most U.S. institutions has declined over the past 50 years (Smith, 2012), and recent work argues that scholars might better understand the mechanisms driving this decline by looking specifically at Congress. As Jones argues, “[c]ompared to other institutions, the problem in Congress appears more severe, more intractable, and carries greater political consequences” (2015:375). In general, Congress engenders the least confidence among all branches of government (Smith and Son, 2013). Scholars have hypothesized several explanations for these low levels of confidence, such as an increasingly polarized political environment (Citrin and Stoker, 2018). Other scholars highlight the importance of the perceived “performance” of such institutions (Nicholls and Picou, 2013), as economic downturns erode confidence in the government (Uslaner, 2010).

Among the U.S. public, confidence in major corporations has historically been much higher—and more stable—than confidence in Congress (Uslaner, 2010). Yet, even more than confidence in the government, trust in corporations is linked to the state of the economy (Smith and Son, 2013; Uslaner, 2010). This finding proves consistent across levels of analysis, as residents of states with high unemployment rates report less confidence in

major companies than residents of states with low unemployment (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2011).

Demographic Predictors of Institutional Confidence

Contextual factors such as economic growth, therefore, influence confidence in government and corporations alike. Yet, this does not preclude notable differences in the *determinants* of confidence in different types of institutions. For one, social location shapes confidence. Gender and race/ethnicity, in particular, consistently correlate with institutional confidence (Smith, 2010; Citrin and Stoker, 2018). Scholars have adopted several theoretical frameworks to explain why certain demographic groups trust more in particular institutions and less in others. One explanation for these structured relationships relates to perceived representation, as people tend to trust more in institutions that are run by people like them. This *theory of descriptive representation* has found relatively consistent support in surveys and experimental studies (Sanchez and Morin, 2011; Fowler, Merolla, and Sellers, 2014). Reports of descriptive representation can also decrease trust among out-groups; Scherer and Curry (2010) found that reports of increased racial diversity in the U.S. justice system increased trust in the justice system among black respondents, but they *decreased* trust among white respondents.

Racial and ethnic minority groups generally report less confidence than whites in most societal institutions (Avery, 2006; Smith, 2010). Yet, some scholars suggest that certain institutions engender greater institutional confidence among racial and ethnic minority groups *because* they can provide economic opportunity and social mobility. Extending the work of Wilson (1997), Klugman and Xu (2008) call this the *particularistic mobility thesis* of institutional trust. This theory predicts that traditional forms of human capital, such as educational attainment or work experience, matter less for the social mobility of racial minority groups and women than they do for whites and men, respectively. Such marginalized groups will trust more in institutions that can help them overcome barriers to social mobility. This trust, however, dissipates as members of such groups become “closer” to such mobility. For example, Klugman and Xu find that college-educated black Americans, when compared to those without a college education, report less trust in the U.S. educational system.

Cultural Predictors of Institutional Trust

Research also suggests that demographic factors alone cannot explain patterns of institutional confidence. Political ideology, for one, consistently correlates with trust in institutions (Habibov, Cheung, and Auchynnika, 2018), although its effect depends on the institution in question. Some scholars suggest that the influence of political ideology may be about particular moral logics and feelings (Haidt, 2012; Lakoff, 2002); an approach that has been referred to as *moral foundations* (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek, 2009). Conceivably, conservatives chafe against governments that regulate the marketplace in liberal democracies while liberals react against demands for loyalty by governments at the expense of harming or oppressing marginalized groups.

Applied to Congress and corporations in the U.S. context, the *moral foundations thesis* predicts opposing influence of political ideology. Central to the moral logic of conservatism, according to Lakoff (2002), is the idea that humans are free, rational actors, and

that society benefits most from unregulated competition in a free market. Corporations thus represent a moral good, while government, insofar as it regulates free competition in the market, can represent a moral bad. The moral logic of liberalism suggests that the imposition of social costs, especially upon the most vulnerable of society, by corporations for the sake of private gain is morally bad, while government—when it functions to regulate corporations—can be morally benevolent.

Due to their similar moral foundations, religious traditionalism may function in ways similar to political conservatism in shaping institutional trust. Initial evidence suggests, for instance, that religious interests played a particularly acute role in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Whitehead, Perry, and Baker (2018) found that Christian nationalism—or belief that the United States ought to reflect specifically Christian values—was significantly associated with voting for Trump. A Congress that functions to democratize religious and cultural inclusion, then, should draw the ire of dominant religiously conservative groups, particularly evangelical Christians.

Divergence and Convergence

Here we examine whether extant theories of institutional trust can sufficiently explain individual-level factors that shape confidence in these two economic and political institutions both individually *and* together at an important historical moment. With regard to cultural affiliation, the *moral foundations thesis* suggests that ideological conservatism has *a different relationship to Congress than corporations*. It suggests:

H1: Ideological conservatism is associated with (a) *less confidence in Congress* and (b) *more confidence in corporations*.

Given this expected divergence, we also expect that ideological conservatism will not relate to confidence in *both* institutions simultaneously.

With regard to social location, the *particularistic mobility thesis* (Klugman and Xu, 2008) infers that disadvantaged groups will have more confidence in redistributive institutions, such as Congress, that can level the economic playing field by enacting nondiscrimination laws, and less confidence in accumulative institutions like major corporations. Given substantial inequality by race/ethnicity, gender, and social class persists in U.S. society, we hypothesize:

H2: Individuals with lower levels of social privilege (women, racial-ethnic minorities, those with lower education and income) will have (a) *more confidence in Congress* and (b) *less confidence in corporations* than individuals with high levels of social privilege (men, whites, those with higher education and income).

Conversely, the *theory of descriptive representation* predicts that social location will have similar effects on confidence in Congress and corporations (Fowler, Merolla, and Sellers, 2014). In other words, because men and whites are overrepresented in positions of power in both Congress and corporations, they will have more confidence in both institutions than women and racial-ethnic minorities, respectively. We therefore expect, in contrast to H2:

H3: Groups that are well represented in both Congress and major corporations (men and non-Hispanic whites) will have *more confidence* in each institution than underrepresented groups (women and racial-ethnic minorities).

Data and Methods

Our data come from the Religious Understandings of Science (RUS) Study. The study was conducted by the survey firm GfK using KnowledgePanel, a nationally representative panel of 50,000 Americans. A total of 16,746 members of the panel were invited to participate in the study based on a statistically valid sampling procedure with a sampling frame of residential addresses that covers 97 percent of U.S. households. A total of 10,241 valid responses were completed, yielding a participation rate of 61.2 percent and a cumulative response rate of 5.6 percent. The survey was conducted from December 2013 to January 2014. We applied a poststratification weight that uses estimates from the 2012 Current Population Sample to adjust for oversamples and nonresponses. The final analytic sample ($N = 9,416$) includes only respondents who provided valid responses for each of the measures utilized in analyses.

An inherent limitation of cross-sectional data is that findings can only be contextualized to a given moment in time, and thus analyses are often insensitive to longitudinal trends. Yet, we argue that the particular moment in time we explore here is critically important, given that data were collected just prior to the start of the campaigns for the 2016 U.S. presidential race. The large sample size of the RUS data set allows for sensitivity to point-in-time patterns that might be missed in pooled, longitudinal analyses. However, we also conducted supplemental analyses using data from the General Social Survey (GSS; 2006–2016) to explore the extent to which our findings were consistent over time (available in the Online Appendix).

Institutional Confidence

Mirroring the language of a battery of questions used on the GSS since 1973, the survey asked respondents how much confidence they have in seven different societal institutions. Specifically, the prompt asks: “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?” The seven institutions were U.S. Congress, Corporations, religious institutions and leaders, the military, the scientific community, the press, and colleges and universities. Given the low proportion of respondents who reported “a great deal of confidence” in either Congress (3 percent) or corporations (7 percent), we dichotomized responses for each of the seven institutions into two categories, those reporting at least some confidence (=1) and those reporting hardly any confidence (=0). The share of respondents expressing at least some confidence in Congress and corporations was 31 and 59 percent, respectively (Table 1).

To further test convergence of confidence in both institutions, we also cross-tabulated confidence in corporations and confidence in Congress. Response combinations including “at least some confidence in both” (25 percent of sample) “confidence in Congress only” (6 percent), “confidence in corporations only” (34 percent), and “hardly any confidence in both” (35 percent).

Independent Variables

Our primary cultural affiliation measure of interest was ideological conservatism, which we operationalized to include variables of political ideology and religiosity. The survey

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlation Coefficients: Religious Understandings of Science (2013–2014)

Variable	Range	Mean or Percentage	SD	Pearson Correlation Coefficients	
				Confidence in Congress	Confidence in Corporations
Dependent variables					
Confidence in Congress	0, 1	31%		–	0.31*
Confidence in corporations	0, 1	59%		0.31*	–
Cultural affiliation					
Political conservative	1–7	4.12	1.51	–0.05*	0.17*
<i>Religious tradition</i>					
Not religious	0, 1	16%		–0.06*	–0.10*
Evangelical Protestant	0, 1	26%		–0.04*	0.04*
Mainline Protestant	0, 1	14%		–0.05*	0.00
Black Protestant	0, 1	5%		0.09*	0.00
Catholic	0, 1	24%		0.07*	0.06*
Jewish	0, 1	2%		0.00	0.01
Mormon	0, 1	2%		–0.02*	0.01
Other religion	0, 1	11%		0.02*	–0.04*
Religious attendance	1–9	4.15	2.75	0.04*	0.12*
Structural location					
Female	0, 1	52%		0.07*	–0.02
<i>Racial-ethnic status</i>					
Non-Hispanic white	0, 1	68%		–0.21*	0.01
Non-Hispanic black	0, 1	11%		0.12*	–0.01
Hispanic	0, 1	13%		0.13*	–0.03*
Other race	0, 1	7%		0.07*	0.02*

Continued

TABLE 1
Continued

Variable	Range	Mean or Percentage	SD	Pearson Correlation Coefficients	
				Confidence in Congress	Confidence in Corporations
<i>Education</i>					
Less than high school	0, 1	12%		0.08*	-0.04*
High school	0, 1	29%		0.01	-0.02*
Some college	0, 1	29%		0.01	-0.02*
Bachelor's or higher	0, 1	30%		-0.03*	0.06*
Household income	1-19	11.84	4.59	-0.11*	0.10*
<i>Controls</i>					
Employed	0, 1	57%		0.01	0.02
South	0, 1	37%		0.02*	0.02*
Age	18-93	47.37	16.97	-0.11*	0.04*
Married	0, 1	54%		-0.05*	0.05*
Children	0-21	1.58	1.60	0.02	0.02
Composite confidence	0, 5	3.59	1.42	0.37*	0.46*

NOTE: $N = 9,416$. All data were weighted. Observations constrained by listwise deletion; * $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed tests).

asked respondents “Would you describe your political views as extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate, slightly conservative, conservative, or extremely conservative?” We operationalized *political conservatism* as an ordinal variable, ranging from 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative). We also included measures of *religious tradition* (as a proxy for religious identity) and *religious attendance*. We adapted the coding scheme advocated by Steensland et al. (2000) to create categories for religious tradition, which include Evangelical Protestant (reference), nonreligious, Mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, and Other religion. An ordinal measure of service attendance ranged from 1 (never attends services) to 7 (attends several times a week).

Our primary social location variables of interest were gender and racial-ethnic status, as both are consistently associated with institutional trust (Evans et al., 2017; Wilkes and Wu, 2018). For gender, we created a dichotomous measure indicating whether the respondent identified as *female* (1) or *male* (0). We conceptualized racial-ethnic status as a categorical variable including *non-Hispanic white* (reference), *non-Hispanic black*, *Hispanic*, and *other race*. Education was measured with four categories based on highest level of attainment, including *less than high school* (reference), a *high school* degree, *some college*, and a *bachelor’s degree or higher*. *Household income* was coded ordinally, with categories ranging from 1 (less than \$5,000 annually) to 19 (\$175,000 or more annually).

Finally, we controlled for a number of factors that might also relate to confidence in social institutions. These include dichotomous measures of geographic region (*South* = 1), marital status (*married* = 1), and employment status (*employed* = 1), along with continuous measures of *age* and *number of kids*. Finally, given literature suggesting that institutional confidence is a disposition that is often highly consistent across institutional types (Smith, 2012), we also created a measure of *composite confidence* in the other five institutions (religious institutions, the military, the scientific community, the press, and universities) asked about in the survey. Values ranged from 0 (hardly any confidence in all five institutions) to 5 (at least some confidence in all five institutions).

Analytic Strategy

We employed a two-phase multivariable modeling strategy. In the first phase, we tested for symmetry or asymmetry of cultural affiliation and social location determinants of institutional confidence by discretely estimating binary logistic regression models for each of our two institutions of interest: Congress and corporations. Our modeling strategy included first regressing a model to assess covariates related to cultural affiliation (political ideology, religious tradition, and religious attendance), then a second model to assess covariates related to social location (gender, race/ethnicity, education, and income). A third model combined cultural affiliation and social location covariates. The second phase of analysis entailed performing a multinomial logistic regression analysis for the matrix of response combinations related to variables of confidence in Congress and corporations, suppressing “hardly any confidence in both Congress and corporations” as the reference outcome category.

In addition to our main analyses using data from RUS, we conducted supplemental analyses using the GSS (see Online Appendix). Because the GSS is conducted every two years, these analyses allowed us to evaluate the role of shifting temporal patterns on our findings. To assess patterns leading up to the 2016 election, we merged data files for cross-sectional samples ranging from 2006 to 2016 ($N = 7,307$). We replicated binary logit models for confidence in Congress and confidence in corporations while also controlling

for year of survey. The only modeling differences between the RUS and GSS analyses were minor; for the GSS, we omitted the Mormon category of religious tradition (due to sample size) and we modeled the institutional confidence measures as independent variables given that they did not load reliably onto a single variable.

Results

Confidence in Congress

Table 2 reports odds ratios from binary regression models estimating confidence in Congress. Findings partially supported H1. Contrary to expectations, political conservatism did not have a significant relationship with confidence in Congress independent of religious and demographic controls (Model 1). Evangelical identity, however, did relate to confidence in Congress relative to three other religious traditions. Specifically, Black Protestants, Catholics, and respondents with other religious affiliations had 154, 36, and 65 percent higher odds, respectively, of reporting confidence in Congress when compared to Evangelical Protestants.

With regard to social location, multivariate analyses consistently supported H2 but not H3. Specifically, women had 31 percent higher odds than men of reporting at least some confidence in Congress. Similarly, compared to non-Hispanic whites, non-Hispanic black respondents, Hispanic respondents, and those identifying with another race had 134, 117, and 146 percent higher odds, respectively, of expressing confidence in Congress (Model 2). Education was also associated with institutional confidence in Congress. Compared to respondents without a high school degree, those with some college and those with a Bachelor's degree had 37 and 34 percent lower odds, respectively, of reporting at least some confidence in Congress. Furthermore, for every incremental rise in household income, the odds of expressing at least some confidence in Congress decreased by 4 percent. In Model 3, each of the social location effects remained significant, as did Catholic and other religion relative to Evangelical Protestants. Nonaffiliation was also significant in Model 3, as those identifying as nonreligious had 32 percent higher odds than Evangelicals of reporting at least some confidence in Congress.

Confidence in Corporations

Table 2 also reports odds ratios for models estimating confidence in corporations. In support of H1, which predicts that conservatives will have greater confidence in corporations, political ideology did indeed correspond significantly with confidence in corporations (Model 4). For every incremental rise in political conservatism, the odds of reporting at least some confidence in corporations increased by 40 percent. The effect of religious identity was more complex. Evangelicals did not differ significantly from other religious groups. Counter to H1, however, nonaffiliates had 26 percent higher odds than Evangelical Protestants of reporting at least some confidence in corporations.

In contrast with both H2 and H3, variables related to gender, race, and education did not relate to confidence in corporations (Model 5). Income, however, was significantly related to the outcome. For every incremental rise in household income, the odds of reporting confidence in corporations increased by 3 percent. When modeling cultural and social location factors together (Model 6), both political ideology and income remained

TABLE 2
Binary Logits Estimating Confidence in Congress and Major Corporations

Independent variable	Confidence in Congress						Confidence in Corporations					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	OR	SE	p	OR	SE	p	OR	SE	p	OR	SE	p
Political conservatism	0.99	0.02		1.04	0.03		1.40	0.03	***	1.40	0.03	***
Religious tradition ^a												
Not religious	1.18	0.15		1.32	0.17	*	1.26	0.14	*	1.14	0.13	
Mainline Protestant	0.86	0.09	***	0.96	0.11		0.87	0.09		0.83	0.09	
Black Protestant	2.54	0.40	***	1.38	0.28		1.04	0.18		1.09	0.22	
Catholic	1.36	0.13	***	1.31	0.13	**	1.08	0.10		1.07	0.10	
Jewish	1.18	0.28		1.58	0.40		1.41	0.32		1.24	0.28	
Mormon	0.06	0.18		0.70	0.20		0.74	0.18		0.74	0.18	
Other religion	1.65	0.20	***	1.48	0.18	**	1.25	0.15		1.18	0.14	
Religious attendance	1.00	0.01		1.48	0.18	***	1.02	0.01		1.02	0.01	
Female				1.31	0.09	***	1.33	0.09	***	0.90	0.06	
Racial-ethnic status ^b												
Non-Hispanic black				2.34	0.26	***	2.22	0.32	***	0.87	0.10	
Hispanic				2.17	0.23	***	2.06	0.23	***	0.82	0.09	
Other race				2.46	0.31	***	2.32	0.29	***	1.24	0.16	*
Education ^c												
High school				0.78	0.11		0.79	0.11		1.04	0.14	
Some college				0.63	0.09	***	0.64	0.09	**	1.04	0.14	
Bachelor's or higher				0.66	0.09	***	0.96	0.01	***	1.05	0.15	

Continued

TABLE 2
Continued

Independent variable	Confidence in Congress												Confidence in Corporations											
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5			Model 6								
	OR	SE	p	OR	SE	p	OR	SE	p	OR	SE	p	OR	SE	p	OR	SE	p						
Household income				0.96	0.01	***	0.96	0.01	***				1.03	0.01	***	1.03	0.00	***						
Employed				1.15	0.09		1.15	0.09					0.98	0.07		0.98	0.07							
South	1.01	0.07		0.92	0.06		0.95	0.07		0.97	0.07		1.06	0.07		1.00	0.07							
Age	0.98	0.00	***	0.98	0.00	***	0.98	0.00	***	1.00	0.00		1.00	0.00		1.00	0.00							
Married	0.82	0.06	**	1.03	0.08		1.04	0.08		1.09	0.07		1.06	0.08		0.95	0.07							
Children	1.14	0.03	***	1.06	0.03	*	1.07	0.03	**	0.97	0.02		1.02	0.02		0.99	0.02							
Composite confidence	2.47	0.10	***	2.44	0.09	***	2.48	0.10	***	2.36	0.06	***	2.24	0.06	***	2.36	0.07	***						
AIC	9,474.0			9,205.0			9,176.3			10,022.1			10,367.6			9,977.2								
BIC	9,581.3			9,312.3			9,347.9			10,129.3			10,474.8			10,148.8								

^a Reference=Evangelical Protestant.

^b Reference=Non-Hispanic white.

^c Reference=Less than high school.

NOTE: N = 9,416. All data were weighted.

* p < 0.05;

** p < 0.01;

*** p < 0.001 (two-tailed tests).

significantly associated with confidence in corporations, but differences between Evangelicals and the nonreligious became nonsignificant.

Confidence—and Lack of Confidence—in Both Congress and Corporations

Table 3 reports results from multinomial regression analyses performed for the matrix of possible response combinations for variables representing confidence in both Congress and corporations. Political conservatism was associated with expressing at least some confidence in corporations only (relative to a lack of confidence in both institutions). Specifically, for every incremental rise in political conservatism, respondents had 43 percent higher odds of expressing confidence only in corporations when compared to having hardly any confidence in both institutions. Political ideology was not significantly related to confidence only in Congress relative to hardly any confidence in both. Interestingly, however, Jewish and nonreligious respondents had 205 and 71 percent higher odds than Evangelical Protestants of expressing confidence only in Congress rather than hardly any confidence in both institutions.

The influence of social location on expressing at least some confidence in either Congress only or corporations only (versus not expressing confidence in both) was largely consistent with H2, which predicts that disadvantaged social location will be associated with more confidence in Congress and less confidence in corporations. Women had 41 percent higher odds than men of reporting confidence in Congress only, as opposed to expressing confidence in neither institution, while black and Hispanic respondents had 82 and 191 percent higher odds than whites, respectively, of confidence in Congress only rather than hardly any confidence in both. Further, relative to expressing hardly any confidence in both, incrementally increasing income was associated with 5 percent higher odds of expressing confidence in corporations only and 4 percent lower odds of expressing confidence in Congress only.

H3, which predicts that underrepresented groups will have lower levels of confidence in both institutions, was not supported. Specifically, women had 21 percent higher odds than men of reporting at least some confidence in both Congress and corporations as opposed to reporting hardly any confidence in both. Racial-ethnic status was also surprisingly significant; compared with whites, blacks, Hispanics, and those identifying with another race had 83, 68, and 154 percent higher odds, respectively, of expressing at least some confidence in both institutions versus hardly any confidence in both.

While we expected the effects of ideological conservatism on expressing confidence or not expressing confidence in both institutions to wash out because trust in political and economic institutions tends to emerge from opposing ends of the political spectrum, this was not the case. For every incremental rise in political conservatism, the odds of expressing confidence in both versus expressing confidence in neither increased by 36 percent. Further, the nonreligious, Catholics, and members of other religious faiths had 44, 34, and 62 percent higher odds than Evangelicals, respectively, of expressing confidence in both versus confidence in neither.

Supplemental Analyses: GSS (2006–2016)

Given the dynamic character of institutional confidence over time, we performed supplemental analyses using GSS data, merging data from surveys conducted between 2006

TABLE 3
Multinomial Logits Estimating Confidence in Congress and Corporations

Independent Variable	Confidence in Corporations Only ^a			Confidence in Congress Only ^a			Confidence in Both ^a		
	OR	SE	p	OR	SE	p	OR	SE	p
Political conservatism	1.43	0.04	***	1.02	0.05		1.36	0.04	***
Religious tradition ^b									
Not religious	1.18	0.15		1.71	0.42	*	1.44	0.23	*
Mainline Protestant	0.91	0.10		1.46	0.35		0.80	0.12	
Black Protestant	1.07	0.30		1.67	0.62		1.43	0.36	
Catholic	1.03	0.11		1.40	0.29		1.34	0.17	*
Jewish	1.38	0.33		3.05	1.38	*	1.75	0.60	
Mormon	1.02	0.27		1.78	1.02		0.54	0.18	
Other religion	1.11	0.16		1.56	0.37		1.62	0.25	**
Religious attendance	1.03	0.02		1.01	0.03		1.01	0.02	
Female	0.90	0.07		1.41	0.20	*	1.21	0.02	*
Racial-ethnic status ^c									
Non-Hispanic black	0.72	0.13		1.82	0.52	*	1.83	0.32	***
Hispanic	0.90	0.13		2.91	0.57	***	1.68	0.24	***
Other race	0.95	0.15		1.30	0.37		2.54	0.43	***
Bachelor's degree ^d									
High school	1.12	0.19		0.87	0.21		0.84	0.14	
Some college	1.22	0.21		0.71	0.19		0.74	0.13	
Bachelor's or higher	1.39	0.24		0.76	0.21		0.85	0.16	

Continued

TABLE 3
Continued

Independent Variable	Confidence in Corporations Only ^a			Confidence in Congress Only ^a			Confidence in Both ^a		
	OR	SE	p	OR	SE	p	OR	SE	p
Household income	1.05	0.01	***	0.96	0.02	*	0.99	0.01	
Employed	0.92	0.08		0.99	0.16		1.13	0.22	
South	0.95	0.07		0.77	0.11		0.97	0.09	
Age	1.01	0.00	**	0.99	0.01		0.98	0.00	***
Married	1.00	0.08		1.26	0.20		0.99	0.10	
Children	0.96	0.02		1.03	0.05		1.06	0.03	
Composite confidence	2.00	0.06	***	1.82	0.10	***	4.60	0.27	***

^a Reference=Lack of confidence in both.

^b Reference=Evangelical Protestant.

^c Reference=Non-Hispanic white.

^d Reference=Less than high school.

NOTE: N = 9,416. All data were weighted.

* p < 0.05;

** p < 0.01;

*** p < 0.001 (two-tailed tests).

and 2016 (see Online Appendix). Descriptively, we report levels of confidence in Congress and corporations over this period in Figure A-1. Overall, the share of GSS respondents reporting at least some confidence in Congress declined steadily from 65.6 percent in 2006 to 46.1 percent in 2016. By contrast, confidence in corporations was both consistently higher than confidence in Congress and remained relatively constant, typically above 80 percent. Confidence in corporations dipped slightly in 2010 to 76.2 percent but rebounded in the next survey year (2012).

Binary logits modeling confidence in Congress and corporations using the GSS largely mirrored those using RUS data (Table A-1). In Model 1, political ideology was nonsignificant while Evangelicals had lower odds of expressing confidence in Congress than Black Protestants and Catholics. Unlike the primary analyses, religious attendance was significant using the GSS. Specifically, the odds that respondents expressed at least some confidence in Congress increased by 3 percent for each additional rise in religious attendance, net of controls. Similar to our primary analyses, supplemental analyses suggested that women and racial-ethnic minorities had higher odds of expressing confidence in Congress when compared to their men and white counterparts, respectively. Confidence in corporations related significantly to political ideology but largely not to gender and racial-ethnic status, similar to RUS results. Confidence in corporations increased with rising income, however.

And similar to patterns observed in Figure A-1, binary logits suggested that confidence in Congress declined over time leading up to the 2016 election. Compared to 2006, respondents had progressively lower odds of expressing confidence in Congress until 2014, where odds were lowest. That is, respondents had on average 56 percent lower odds of affirming the outcome in 2016 than they did in 2006. In contrast, respondents had similar odds of expressing confidence in corporations in every year except 2010, when respondents had 31 percent lower odds than those sampled in 2006.

Discussion

Prior literature provides a wealth of theorizing about how cultural affiliation and social location shape institutional confidence (Klugman and Xu, 2008; Nicholls and Picou, 2013), but the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaigns present a unique case that challenges the limits of these theories. Our analysis of general population data from a period just prior to the start of the 2016 presidential campaign season reveals patterns of institutional confidence that possibly contributed to the resonance of anti-institutional rhetoric leveraged by politicians from both sides of the political aisle. As we expected, we found substantial evidence for both divergence and convergence of social forces relating to expressing confidence and lack of confidence in both Congress and corporations at the time of the survey. While confidence in Congress was largely driven by social location, confidence in corporations correlated significantly with cultural affiliation (particularly political ideology). Yet, when looking at predictors of confidence in both institutions, we found both sets of factors to be highly salient.

For example, we observed evidence for social location explanations of confidence in Congress while cultural explanations—except for evangelical identity—were largely not salient. Specifically, women and racial minorities, who have less privilege across a range of social domains, expressed much more confidence in Congress when compared to men and whites. These findings are consistent with the particularistic mobility thesis of institutional trust (Klugman and Xu, 2008; Wilson, 1997), which suggests that groups with little societal privilege trust more in institutions that can help facilitate their social

mobility. Conversely, our findings are inconsistent with the theory of descriptive representation (Sanchez and Morin, 2011; Fowler, Merolla, and Sellers, 2014; Evans et al., 2017), since women and racial minorities are underrepresented in Congress. Whether or not Congress has been effective at leveling the playing field, our findings suggest that underprivileged groups recognized it as a *potentially* democratizing institution at this particular moment in time. Such a perception might have important implications for understanding preelection civic engagement given past research highlighting links between trust in government and political participation (Lee and Schachter, 2019).

While theories of descriptive representation suggest that socially advantaged and well-represented groups (by race, gender, and social class) will have more trust in corporations, we found little support for this in our data. We observed, however, that antecedents of confidence in corporations were overwhelmingly cultural and largely *unrelated* to social location. Predictably, on the basis of moral foundations theory and given the preference of ideological conservatives for limited regulation, political conservatism related consistently to more confidence in corporations (Lakoff, 2002; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek, 2009). But surprisingly, given stratified opportunities for success and disproportionate underrepresentation among the highest ranks in business, women, and racial-ethnic minorities did not express less confidence in corporations than men and whites.

While gender and racial-ethnic status did not consistently relate to confidence in Congress and confidence in corporations as discrete outcomes, income did. Specifically, with rising income, confidence in Congress diminished while trust in corporations increased. This set of findings is consistent with the notion of Congress as a regulating agent (at least symbolically) while corporations represent the virtues of a free market (at least symbolically). Patterns observed here thus have implications for understanding support of governmental programs, as recent work finds a positive association between institutional trust and willingness to pay more taxes to strengthen the social safety net (Habibov, Cheung, and Auchynnikava, 2018).

Supplemental analyses further indicated that confidence in Congress was declining in the decade leading up to the election, but that confidence in corporations remained relatively stable. Though the latter dipped in 2010, possibly in reaction to the financial crisis of 2008, it rebounded quickly. As expected, we also found evidence that confidence in Congress and confidence in corporations are not independent of one another (Smith, 2012). Rather, these two sentiments are intrinsically intertwined over time, much as (and perhaps owing to) the real interdependence of economic and political structures (Smith and Son, 2013; Uslaner, 2010). To focus on attitudes about Congress independent of the economy, and vice versa, would be to misconstrue the complexity of the economic-political landscape prior to the 2016 election season.

Our multinomial modeling sheds light on how sentiments of confidence in Congress and trust in corporations overlap and contrast with one another. We found, for example, that those who expressed some confidence in corporations tended to be more politically conservative than those who expressed hardly any confidence in both Congress and corporations. But we also found that those who express confidence only in Congress were politically similar to those expressing hardly any confidence in both Congress and corporations. While the distinction between confidence in corporations and lack of confidence in both political and economic institutions was largely ideological, the distinction between congressional confidence and a broad lack of confidence related more to social location. That is, women and racial minorities had much higher odds of reporting some degree of confidence in Congress *only* rather than lacking confidence in both.

Thus, our data indicate that seemingly different social forces converged as primary drivers of confidence in both institutions. More precisely, political conservatives, racial-ethnic minorities, and women each had net higher odds of reporting confidence in both Congress and corporations than their politically liberal, white, and men counterparts. This convergence suggests a sort of unlikely coalition of political conservatives, racial/ethnic minorities and women, which is notable given that women and racial minorities tend to be more progressive than men and whites.

Our findings also reveal interesting patterns related to evangelical identity that partially align with recent work on Christian nationalism (e.g., Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, 2018). When considering confidence in Congress and confidence in corporations discretely, the associations between evangelical affiliation (compared to other religious affiliations) and the outcomes were inconsistent. Unsurprisingly, given that Evangelicals have aligned with the political right over the past few decades (Putnam and Campbell, 2010), they reported less confidence in Congress than other religious groups, but their confidence in corporations only differed from nonaffiliates. And compared to nonaffiliates, Catholics, and those in other religious traditions, Evangelicals had lower odds of expressing confidence in *both* Congress and corporations. Conservative religious affiliation, therefore, might underlie sentiments of institutional skepticism at the heart of contemporary political discourse (Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, 2018).

But our findings suggest that Evangelical Protestants were not alone in their broad institutional skepticism. In fact, we found confidence in both institutions (versus lack of confidence in both institutions) to be related to both cultural affiliation *and* social location in ways that prior theorizing on institutional trust failed to predict. These forces seem to emerge from very distinct sources. Even though evangelical identity correlated positively with political conservatism ($r = 0.26$, $p < 0.0001$), political conservatism was positively associated with confidence in both institutions rather than confidence in neither, while Evangelicalism was negatively associated (relative to the nonaffiliated, Catholics, and members of other religions). Said differently, political progressivism and Evangelicalism independently drove convergent lack of trust in both Congress and corporations.

Conclusion

We acknowledge that our study has several limitations. First, in contrast to other work on institutional trust (Klugman and Xu, 2008; Smith, 2012), our primary analysis utilizes cross-sectional data, which are unable to track patterns over time. Our supplemental analysis of GSS data (2006–2016), however, suggests our findings were not unique to 2013–2014. Second, while prior work links government (dis)trust and political populism (Doyle, 2011), we lack a measure to capture the latter phenomenon. Future research should further examine populism's association with economic institutions, especially given the recent economic downturn precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic and increased societal calls for racial justice. Limitations notwithstanding, the convergent and divergent patterns of confidence highlighted here demonstrate how institutional confidence is tied to the symbolic functions of institutions themselves, both individually *and* together.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Table A-1. Binary Logits Estimating Confidence in Congress and Corporations (GSS)
Figure A-1. Share of respondents expressing "only some" or "a great deal" of confidence in U.S. Congress and major corporations from 2006 to 2016. *Source:* General Social Survey.