

## ABSTRACT

### Ego-Tribalism in Religion, Politics, and Media: A Changing Landscape Calls for a New Theory of Trust

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Scholarship on individual manifestations of social trust typically emphasize three theoretical frameworks: rational choice, psychological/epistemological capacity, or network distribution. In this dissertation, I argue that these approaches have limited explanatory power, and instead put forth a new theory of trust that harmonizes and improves on them. I submit ego-tribalism as a new model for understanding social trust, where egocentrism and tribal identities are often in tension. Several hypotheses are drawn from this framing and are tested in three separate studies.

Using data from the 2017 Baylor Religion Survey, I analyze the impact of Internet usage, moral authority, and religiosity on generalized social trust. I find that moral individualism is negatively associated with social trust. Increasing religiosity is not significant, challenging previous research that suggested religiosity predicts an increase in generalized trust. Also, moderate religiosity amplifies the effects of a judgmental God-image on social trust relative to high religiosity. The theory of ego-tribal trust distribution illustrates how individual religiosity and moral authority relate to generalized trust as

they depend on levels of self-interest vis-à-vis tribal bonding over certain beliefs and behaviors.

A second study uses data from the 2021 Baylor Religion Survey to explore the effects of political identity, generalized trust, social media usage, and increased online political activism during COVID-19 on the belief a political party threatens the unity of the United States. An increase in social trust predicts a lower probability of perceived outgroup threat. Increased social media usage is not predictive but an increase in online activism predicts lower trust. Online activism amplifies the effect of political liberalism but not conservatism. This I suggest, is an effect of liberal ideological tribalism in concert with unilateral disclosure of personal sentiment.

Data for the final study also come from the 2021 Baylor Religion Survey. I analyze the extent to which beliefs about mainstream media and the consumption of politically biased media predict distrust of the COVID-19 vaccine. Consumption of conservative media is associated with distrust in the vaccine. Believing media exaggerate the dangers of COVID-19 significantly attenuates the negative effect of education on distrust of the vaccine. Increasing age significantly attenuates the effect of conservative media. Older conservatives are exposed to the tribal narrative that predicts distrust in the COVID-19 vaccine, but self-interest to protect personal health overrides that influence. I conclude the dissertation with a summary of findings, a review of ego-tribalism, and avenues for future research.

Ego-Tribalism in Religion, Politics, and Media: A Changing Landscape Calls for a New  
Theory of Trust

by

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A Dissertation

Approved by the Department of Sociology

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## DEDICATION

For my parents, Roy and Hollis

And for Leia Ai-Ling

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Political and ideological fractures between liberals and conservatives in American society have stoked fears that a rising tide of Christian nationalists plans to institute a theocracy (Phillips, 2006; Rudin, 2006; Whitehead & Perry, 2020a), and an increasingly progressive media-favored Left is distorting the American mind (McCarty, 2012; Shapiro, 2021). The Right accuses the Left of fake news, and the Right is charged with spreading disinformation. The World Economic Forum in 2013 named “digital wildfires” a global risk, drawing attention to the potential for social media to cause significant harm through provocative content (*The Global Risks Report 2018, 13th Edition*, 2018; Webb et al., 2016). Trust in institutions has been eroding for years (Bellah et al., 2008; Putnam, 2000). According to Edelman, a firm specializing in global surveys on trust, there was a profound shift in trust from authorities to peers in 2005; in 2021, trust in all media information sources reached an all-time low, with 61% of respondents stating the media is not objective and non-partisan (*Edelman Trust Barometer: Global Report*, 2021). As spokespeople lost credibility, only businesses were seen as competent and ethical compared with government and NGOs. Perhaps some of these reactions were based on the handling of the pandemic, but long before COVID-19 emerged, trust in institutions was declining. Botsman (2017) points to organizational corruption as a leading factor, but cites the incredible power of the Internet to create hyper transparency and “media echo chambers.” Media echo chambers are formed when people with certain political and religious ideologies narrow down the scope of trusted information to already held beliefs.

Song's (2009) content analysis of virtual online communities upholds the view that the Internet breaks up social life into political, cultural, and religious groups that rarely mingle. The literature, however, lacks a thorough examination of the interplay between social trust and religious/political identities in way that sufficiently explains social attitudes and media consumption. I hope to fill this gap by proposing a theory of trust distribution that accounts for both tribal allegiances and egocentric tendencies to satisfactorily predict social opinion of contemporary hot-button issues such as COVID-19 vaccination and believing an outgroup political party is a threat to American unity.

In sum, my research questions are as follows:

How does a person's Internet usage, source of moral authority, and religiosity shape generalized trust? And what role do generalized trust, media consumption, Internet usage, and political identity play in predicting social attitudes?

In this chapter, I review literature on a) political identification, moral authority, religion, and the Internet, and b) trust in American society. After examining theories that attempt to explain the management and distribution of social trust, I advance an improved theory of trust. In Chapters Two, Three, and Four, I present three studies that test hypotheses emerging from present literature and my proposed theory. Together these studies add to our theoretical understanding of trust and illuminate new findings in presently under-researched areas.

### *Political Identification, Religion, and the Internet*

Putnam and Campbell (2010) say the God-gap in American politics is real, but suggest there is a liberalizing trend among younger generations, citing a "weakening connection" between religiosity and the Republican party on some hot-button issues. In

Margolis' (2018) analysis of national panel data, she finds political identity formed during young adulthood shapes religious attachments as people age. Decisions about family values and whether to be involved in a religious community come after partisanship is cemented. The American political landscape since the 1970s has redefined polarizing religious and moral commitments and redrawn them along elite party lines. In short, religious voters are Republican, and secular voters are Democrat. During the life course, young adults are exposed to this environment and shaped by elite discourses. Young adults are uniquely susceptible to extensive media coverage of "highly visible political events" where they take in politically curated content. Complex social issues are reduced to bite-sized "digestible ideas." By the time they are adults, they base religious attachment decisions on pre-established political choices.

According to Bean (2017), however, media elites are not the primary influencers. Rather, "opinion leaders" within *local worlds of lived religion* link Evangelical identity to politics (Bean, 2017, p. 19). The local worlds of lived religion include family life, church life, media consumption, parachurch networks, and personal networks. Bean suggests in her study of politics in American and Canadian Evangelical churches that non-ordained opinion leaders within U.S. Evangelical congregations enforce the understanding that to vote Republican is to be a good Christian. No doubt some top-down influence comes from elite Evangelical pundits, but the narratives are played out at the grassroots level.

Media critics such as Herman and Chomsky (2008) and Nichols and McChesney (2006) attack mainstream media for causing real social damage by spinning national and world events for commercial gain. The media is accused of compromising for advertisers and failing to "challenge establishment positions and party lines" that they themselves

helped to create (Herman & Chomsky, 2008:384). In support of this claim, studies such as one by Groseclose (2012) assert that mainstream media slants Left, distorting events, congressional speeches, and bi-partisan laws with profound net effects. According to Groseclose's statistical analysis, the media distorts voters' views from actual fact. In their 2008 afterword, Herman and Chomsky (2008) state the public has been sucked into commercialization and bottom-line considerations through Internet-connected devices. Indeed, as I will show below, monetization of YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, etc., has launched ordinary people into the world of infotainment.

The power of social media to shape cultural, political, and religious identity is alarming—especially among youth (Twenge, 2017). Twenge argues the Internet may be the root cause of political polarization, especially for iGen (those born from 1995 to 2012). According to her study, this birth cohort gets all their news online. She points to their lack of traditional political action but incredible presence online as they spread social movement awareness (e.g., #BLM; #MeToo). Twenge observes that more than half of iGen (ages 18-29 in 2016) are politically independent—evidence of their individual resistance to establishment groups with their constraining rules. Despite this, the polarization of Democrats and Republicans among their ranks has increased, with moderates falling off. Twenge's study revealed that political polarization among iGen also led to surprising support for Donald Trump in the 2016 election (37% overall; 48% among White voters). iGeners are attracted to candidates who are authentic, online, and consistent; this is due in part to the fact that iGen members have lost trust in government. Botsman (2017) finds that a mind-blowing 88% of millennials 'sometimes or never' trust the media. Yet, Pew reveals nearly 50% of those between the ages of 18 and 29 get their

news from social media, and social media users are more likely to be consumers of unproven claims (Mitchell et al., 2020). Sixty-one percent of millennials use Facebook as their main source of news, and 82% say they see political posts that support their own views some or most of the time (Mitchell et al., 2015). For Lukianoff & Haidt (2018), this is further evidence of the “coddling of the American mind,” as fewer young people are engaging content and viewpoints in contradiction to their own without lashing out in anger or cowering in anxiety. Social media addiction is associated with being young, female, and single; as well as related to higher narcissism and lower self-esteem (Andreassen et al., 2017). Smith et al. (2021) propose policy interventions to curb the rising tide of social media addiction on account of lower reports of mental health in their study of 10,000 iGen users.

Compared to previous generations, young people are becoming less trusting of traditional religion as well. The “spiritual, but not religious” crowd is now becoming less religious *and* less spiritual (Twenge, 2017). Internet use is associated with decreases in religious exclusivism and increases in being religiously unaffiliated (McClure 2017).

### *Politics and Morality*

Some scholars argue that political disagreements in the U.S. are largely based on competing moral frameworks (Graham et al., 2009; Hunter, 1991; Lakoff, 2002; Schwartz, 2012). To better understand the nature of moral disagreements in the American “culture war” between liberals and conservatives, Graham et al. (2009) looked at differing sets of moral intuitions that underly human instinct and cultural agendas. This comes in contrast to Hunter’s (1991) view that political differences stem from contrasting views of moral authority and relativism among elites. Graham et al. believe moral



foundations present at varying levels in all humanity are responsible for the innate human tendencies toward social and political orientations. Their study found that liberals endorsed two of five foundations (i.e., harm/care and fairness/reciprocity), while conservatives endorsed all five more equally (the previous two, plus ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity). Haidt (2013) later added a sixth foundation of liberty/oppression and refined the previous five. According to Haidt, humanity developed universal moral intuitions in response to social threats and opportunities. He explains how cultural *preferences* for some moral intuitions over others result in contrasting policy preferences and responses to different types of triggers and authorities. Conservatives are motivated by the fairness/cheating foundation in terms of “proportionality” in contrast to the liberal preference for the care/harm and liberty/oppression foundations as “equality of outcomes.” Libertarians privilege liberty over the care/harm foundation as seen in their preference for free markets and their distaste of government interference.

Other scholars have also weighed in on the subject, such as Schwartz (2007, 2012), who argues 10 value types are present in all cultures, but suggested only some values carry a moral component. Miles and Vaisey (2014), however, believed all values can be moralized. Their intriguing study summarized each of these four main theoretical frames, and then analyzed data from the Measuring Morality study to show that the prevailing theories harmonize in interesting ways (Miles & Vaisey, 2015). Miles and Vaisey posited all four theories intersect in constructs labeled *Self-focus*, *Order*, and *Other-focus*. In their assessment, moral frameworks that speak to *Order* and *Other-focus* are the best predictors of political orientation.

Moral attitudes have also been studied as a way to measure political leaning. Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* (2008) profiled hard and soft "expressive individualism" versus civic republicanism and biblical religion, and inspired the use of survey questions designed to capture sources of moral authority (Hunter, 2000). Vaisey (2009) has used moral authority (or what he calls "overarching moral logics") to predict a more holistic model of human behavior than means-ends theory (Parsonian-Weberian) or a tool kit-repertoire theory alone (Swidler, 1986). He argues that decisions based on moral attitudes are often poorly articulated, yet can long endure in practical situations. Bročić and Miles (2021) used a moral authority measure to explain that while higher education liberalizes moral leanings (as expected), recent data revealed increasing moral absolutism among liberals. Uecker and Froese (2019) adapted the measure to show a stark difference in abortion attitudes between religious individualists and religious institutionalists. A person's source of moral authority has profound effects on their attitudes regarding moral and social issues. As Hunter (2000) pointed out, America is troubled by competing moral claims. These competing attitudes may have intriguing impacts on trust in American society.

### *Trust in American Society*

The study of trust in academia crosses a broad spectrum of disciplines: economics and game theory (Glaeser et al., 1999), psychiatry (Erikson, 1993), business and technology (Botsman, 2017), and sociology (Luhmann, 1979). A survey of the cross-disciplinary research on the subject supports the idea that trust as a social good is undisputed (Fukuyama, 1995; Gambetta, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Research shows that general trust increases giving and volunteering (Uslaner, 2008), but religious influence on

trust is mixed. While being highly religious predicts greater social trust, Mencken et al. (2009) find that image of God as angry versus loving predicts a significantly lower social trust. Later findings indicate this effect is somewhat minimized through embeddedness in a moral community (Henderson et al., 2017). Scholars often differentiate between general and particularized trust where generalized trusters build social bridges toward outsiders, and particularized trusters increase in-group bonding at the expense of out-groups (Delhey et al., 2011; Putnam & Campbell, 2010; Uslaner, 2008). Delhey et al. (2011) tested Fukuyama's claim that understanding generalized trust depends on a person's radius of trust, or who they have in mind when answering a question such as that in the World Values Survey: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted...?" In other words, what do we mean when we say "most people"—insiders or outsiders? Respondents thinking of their own group or country would be espousing particularized versus generalized trust. The authors sought to adjust the radius of trust for countries that might lean more toward their ingroup when stating they trusted "most people." Sure enough, the authors found that measures of out-group trust (trust in people from other religions and nations for instance) varied depending on the country, and with this "radius adjustment" the authors were able to confirm that out-group trust correlated strongly with a positive trust in "most people," and also mapped onto measures of positive civic engagement.

Following Durkheim, researchers have shown that moral communities—groups with a shared religious context—shape levels of individual religiosity and delinquency (Regnerus, 2003; Stark, 1996; Stroope & Baker, 2018; Wang & Jang, 2018). Graham and Haidt (2010) demonstrate that moral communities based on the binding moral

foundations of in-group, authority, and purity (which is advanced by religion) correlate with greater happiness than communities based on harm and fairness foundations. Hinze et al. (2008) maintains that conservative political ideology interacts with a view of God as angry to predict a higher likelihood of distrust toward Muslims. Religious Americans rank higher on charitable giving, volunteering, and social trust, but religious fundamentalism predicts a decrease in social trust (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). An anxious attachment to God predicts lower trust (Bradshaw et al., 2019). Trust, religiosity, and health are also linked (Schneider et al., 2011; Upenieks, 2021). Upenieks et al. (2021) show that importance of God in highly pluralistic national contexts offsets the negative health effects of low generalized trust.

Though social trust is a necessary condition for civil society, social and institutional trust in American society is eroding (Bellah et al., 2008; Botsman, 2017; Coleman, 1990; Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 2000; Uslaner, 2008; Wuthnow, 1998). While some scholars emphasize declining civic participation (Bellah et al., 2008; Putnam, 2000), others emphasize constraining social structures/networks (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1973, 1985; McPherson et al., 2001). Fukuyama (1995) points to a lack of a shared moral narrative or “language of good and evil,” as does Haidt (2013). Seligman (1997) has a similar view. He critiques Durkheim’s view that individuals navigate role diffusion in a complex division of labor by simply adhering to shared values about social roles. The shared values of civic tradition are displaced because competing values have become the norm, complicating role diffusion in modern society. For Seligman, individual choice and risks to personal freedom make the private sphere within civil society the place where trust can give a person the decisional autonomy needed to

navigate roles. This is *best* realized through friendship. In agreement with this view stands McPherson et al. (2001) who believe homophily is responsible for grouping effects in American social relations.

Botsman (2017) points out that while trust in institutions has declined, it is still the glue that holds everything together. Trust is not gone. It has shifted, redistributed to ‘the people.’ Family, friends, peers—even strangers—receive more trust than “elites, experts, and authorities.” The entire nature of trust has changed for the ages: it was historically *local*, then *institutional*, now it is radically *distributed*. Botsman argues this change from trusting vertically to trusting horizontally can be traced to information technology and its profound effects on society. The Internet exposes fraud and corruption like never before, while at the same time connecting like-minded people across the globe. In a sense, Botsman feels this new trust is a return to the old local trust of pre-industrialization. Businesses are held accountable by “reputation trails” such as Yelp. Trust is, in this sense, earned. Dasgupta (2000) suggests that the commodity of trust is *reputation*, but given the general lack of trust in institutions and spokespeople, perhaps we have moved away from reputation as the primary driver of trust. By examining broader theories of trust in the following section I will show some weaknesses in contemporary approaches and then offer a re-envisioned theory.

### *Theories of Trust*

The dominant theories of trust coalesce around three general categories: rational choice, psychological/epistemological, and network/distribution: Some scholars believe trust is formed and extended by a subjective rationalization of objectively available data (Coleman, 1990; Luhmann, 1979), others that trust is based primarily on a person’s

epistemological and psychological capacity (Giddens, 1997; Hardin, 1993); finally, trust has been theorized to manifest in lateral networks of individuals (Botsman, 2017; Granovetter, 1985; McPherson et al., 2001). Each theoretical approach has its merits, but they fall short of broad application and explanatory power. Coleman (1990) maintains trust is about satisfying self-interest, but he stipulates that a trust relation must have two parties: trustor and trustee—a seemingly obvious impediment to a broad theory of trust. Some individuals only trust in themselves. I believe this is the logical end to the analyses of Bellah, Putnam, and Botsman; i.e., a retreat to self follows a breakdown of social trust. Yet, my understanding of ego goes beyond the rational choice arguments of some trust theorists that only focus on exchanges between parties. For instance, in experiments with Harvard students Glaeser, et al. (1999) reduce the nature of trust to the “commitment of resources to an activity where the outcome depends on the cooperative behavior of others” (p. 3). This reductive outlook precludes the kind of trust that Botsman and others suggest is evident in beliefs and behaviors related to the unilateral consumption of information online; e.g., “I trust what I hear from CNN.” In my view, it is not the case that trust *must* be learned, as Luhmann describes (1979), since there are clear instances of irrational, unwarranted trust devoid of any objective rationalization. In other words, trust can be blind. For Giddens (1997:33), “*All* trust is in a certain sense blind trust!”

Giddens (1997) takes a psychological approach to social trust. Modernity has abandoned much of the tradition and fate that once governed society through religious cosmologies. Humanity is forced to manage globally entrenched abstract systems that can be maladaptive. Trust is challenged, and people use adaptive strategies to cope with changes caused by globalization. He rightly points out that when experts fail to convince

trustees of their performance, individuals will occasionally opt to fix problems for themselves. However, I believe Giddens has underestimated the extreme individualism that Bellah (2008) describes, and that is evident in today's social media. And I believe egocentrism is an adaptive strategy that deserves more attention than is afforded by Giddens.

I also reject the epistemological capacity approach taken by Hardin (1993). In his view, trust is dependent on the capacity of the knower; for instance, early childhood trauma could prevent a person from developing trust in caregivers. Botsman's approach of distributive trust has merit, but gives too much power to technological influence, and ignores the unpredictability of human desires. She envisions a society-wide redistribution, or dispensation, away from general institutional authorities and toward peers, but this ignores localized tribal influences within moral communities. Applications of trust in network theories often fail to account for the unpredictability of individual autonomy and self-preservation; for instance, I believe Granovetter's account (1985) is too heavily focused on the necessary condition of social interaction for trust when ego-motivated individuals may in fact reject their network and only trust their own decision-making.

### *An Ego-Tribal Theory of Trust Distribution*

I believe the rational choice, epistemological/psychological, and network approaches to trust distribution fail to satisfactorily account for the unpredictabilities and irrationalities of self and tribal interests, including the oft-ignored nature of indifference and blind trust. The above theories of trust are overly focused on the knowledge of the trustor and do not account for the intuitive motivations of self and tribe in distributions of

trust. At its core, trust is both emotional *and* rational, but it can easily be irrational and ambivalent; trust and distrust can have moral bases or be completely amoral. Trust is as unpredictable as personal desire. The object of trust can simply be oneself. Trust necessarily entails some risk, and trusters will vary in the amount of confidence they extend and consequently the risk they choose to take on (emotionally and rationally). Sometimes it is a matter of enhancing one's capacity to cope with ignorance (Gross, 2012).

The distribution and management of trust is best understood in the sense Simmel (1906) briefly but eloquently describes in “The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies.” In short, he suggests society rests on an economy of trust-credit, with confidence as its currency. Without confidence, relationships dissolve, and society does not function normally. Confidence may be better understood as “tolerated risk.” In response to risky economic forecasts people often withdraw their currency. Such is the case with trust in persons. Myriad possible calculations present themselves when anyone decides to trust, but bounded rationality suggests that people almost always act on limited (or no) information (Simon, 2000) (also see *Nichtwissen* “nonknowledge” in Gross’s (2012) work on trust in Simmel). Sometimes the best course of action is to only trust oneself. Trust must be continually offered as credit—as Simmel supposes—to make decisions or move forward. In the cases of a manager making decisions for the future success of a company, or a lover choosing to marry, both elicit faith in the honor of others. Sometimes, however, trust is a personal gut feeling, an intuition.

A middle-aged woman decides to bungee jump for the first time on her birthday. The trust she extends to the company, the rope, and to her cardiovascular health is



entirely up to her. Rationalized confidence in the endeavor might be suspended on account of a carefree and wild mid-life crisis yet participation irrationally granted for the same reason. A 65-year-old Evangelical man is fully vaccinated although his congregation is largely antivax. For him, the vaccine is to be trusted despite the thick relationships in his life telling him the opposite because the benefit of seeing more grandchildren and low rate of negative reaction instill risk tolerance and boost confidence. Considering his interactions in the economy of confidence, the man trusts his own decision more than the vaccine itself. Through iterative interactions with *others* inside and outside of their tribe, people learn to trust their *own* ego-centric values, attitudes, and beliefs. Trust is an external exchange, a social dialectic, *and* an internal dialogue. For this reason, and those outlined above, a theory of trust distribution must be broadened from the rational to the emotive and intuitive, and from exchanges between actors to include the purely subjective.

I propose a theory of an ego-tribal trust distribution to explain and demystify the reactionary, self-centered, yet tribalistic dimensions of the information age. The symbolic interactionists and social constructionists suggest identity is formed from the outside inward: *society informs tribe, which informs self* (see Cooley (2010) & Mead (2000)). But trust distribution originates with the self and flows in the opposite direction (self, tribe, society) (Haidt, 2013; Hardin, 1993). Vaisey (2009) points out that symbolic interactionists privilege intersubjective states to the disregard of subjective states, and have concluded subjectivity is not a significant influence upon social situations, but rather a product of them. It must be noted that the motivations for trust are at once egocentric and tribal before they ever become societal, and the strategies employed in the

conscious and unconscious willingness to trust originates with the subjective. As Hardin (1993) and Erikson (1993) describe, trust begins in infancy and is a natural outcome of human development.

The privileges and advantages of tribal solidarity include meaning-making, capital exchange/accrual, and safety (Dunbar, 1998; Durkheim, 2018; Haidt, 2013; Richerson & Boyd, 1998; Sherif, 1951), but “tribal ultra-sociality” comes about by suspending purely ego-centric tendencies (Richerson & Boyd, 1998). According to Haidt (2013), humanity continues to operate with tribal instincts to establish group membership and the temptation is to only cooperate with its members. On the ego-level, moral intuitions always ignite before strategic reasoning (Haidt, 2013). Information gathered in a situation where trust might be extended is consciously and unconsciously held up to the scrutiny of self and tribal identity. Very often, “trust-credit” and cooperation with others is worth the risk. Henrich (2016) argues that the success of the human species itself is due to cooperation and shared collective knowledge. Henrich reasons the Internet hastens the process and challenges it. If we are incentivized to share information equally, our “collective brain” will grow, but self-interest causes a free-rider problem. The theory of ego-tribal trust distribution suggests that trust is distributed as a result of egocentric and tribal tendencies in dialectical relation between reason and emotion, risk and tolerance, capacity and incapacity; it also assumes a tension between egocentric and tribal promotion or submission/deference.

### *Ego-Tribal Trust Distribution and Media*

American life is characterized by postmodern social media-driven expressive individualism. It is ego-tribal in the sense that a person can create their *own* hashtag,

tribe, authority, and commodity; yet, at once make *ad hoc* alliances with—or unilateral endorsements of—any other person, group, or authority. From scratch, an amateur influencer can attract millions of “likes” and market a company’s product by selling their *own* ego-tribal brand (e.g., Huda Kattan; Dan Bilzerian). Brand confidence is marketed vicariously through the Instagram accounts of the person on the street. Social media allows one to “follow” and “unfollow” whomever, whenever. Social media influencers—self-motivated by sales and fame—become online activists. Podcasters endorse and criticize at will, drawing in-group / out-group boundaries and cementing their own staked territory of influence. Trusting a politician or political party is motivated by self-interest: “The political office holder has no particular interest in me, need not even know about me, but may have a strong interest in supporting people in my position in relevant ways” (Hardin, 1993:157). Confidence in political leadership follows expected and delivered benefits; likewise, consumers will patronize businesses to the extent that goods and services are personally valued. Trust in media, bloggers, and YouTubers could be based upon positive reception of consistent infotainment, a friendly recommendation, or simply a tribal commitment. Political commentary and satire have a similar economy—basically selling confidence—as seen in the accounts of Joe Rogan or Stephan Colbert. People tend to trust people they like or admire, and the smorgasbord of infinite content offered by the Internet allows them to pick and choose. As regards Internet usage behaviors, the ego-tribal theoretical framing explains why a surfer will “click through” to seek more information advertised in an email. Interest piqued by attractive religious or political ideologies can be satiated with another click: “This sounds like me / my group.” Social

media companies are rewarded by using personalized algorithms that keep surfers' eyes glued on the screen, from one satisfying tidbit followed by another *ad infinitum*.

Trust works in tandem with realms of identity because it is cultivated and distributed within social groups and networks of individuals (Granovetter, 1985). Social identity theory emphasizes the way identity is formed by self-categorization in an in-group vis à vis perceived outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). The “minimal group effect” shows how arbitrarily assigning people to a group can manifest in-group favoritism (Tajfel et al., 1971). Yet, identity theories tend to minimize agency and overemphasize the social construction of identity. When making decisions or choosing how to self-identify, individuals often exhibit unpredictable behavior; i.e., their actions do not always follow logically or rationally from social interactions. What matters is the extent to which an individual internalizes social norms (Henderson et al., 2017). For example, an individual might arbitrarily break off from other allegiances, start their own group, and attract a following of their own trusters.

The theory of ego-tribal trust distribution will be developed in the following chapters where I use secondary data analysis to test hypotheses related to generalized social trust. Following a brief overview of the studies, the first of three is presented in Chapter Two.

### *Overview of Studies*

The research questions driving the overall project are: How does a person's Internet usage, source of moral authority, and religiosity shape generalized trust? And what role do generalized trust, media consumption, Internet usage, and political identity play in predicting social attitudes? The purpose of my dissertation is to address these

questions by filling a present gap in the relevant literature with three empirical studies. The theory of ego-tribal trust distribution will be put forth as an explanatory framework.

Chapter Two explores the impact of Internet usage, moral authority, and religiosity on generalized trust. I examine whether potentially *bonding* characteristics such as religiosity, God-image, and moral individualism—and whether potentially *bridging* behaviors such as increasing Internet usage and donating to local organizations or neighbors—predict differences in generalized trust. Using data from the 2017 Baylor Religion Survey ( $N = 1,463$ ) and ordinal regression models, I test four hypotheses related to bonding and two hypotheses for bridging behaviors.

Chapter Three addresses the questions: What predicts the belief a political party is a threat to the unity of America? What role does social trust play? And what effect does the interaction of political identity and online activism have on perceived political threat, if any? This study analyzes political identification, generalized trust, social media usage, and online activism during the COVID-19 pandemic, and uses these indicators to predict the belief a political party is a threat to American unity. Data for this study come from the 2021 Baylor Religion Survey ( $N = 1,248$ ), and logistic regression models are used to test five hypotheses.

Chapter Four builds on what is learned from Chapters Two and Three about the relationships among politics, religion, and media usage and their effects on social trust. Here, I analyze a specific ideological position: distrusting the COVID-19 vaccine (being “antivax”). The question driving this study is: What effect do politically conservative media and generalized social trust have on being antivax? I employ logistic regression to test five hypotheses using data from the 2021 Baylor Religion Survey ( $N = 1,225$ ).

Chapter Five concludes the dissertation by summarizing the important contribution these studies make to our understanding of generalized social trust. I report significant findings and offer a concluding overview of an improved theory of trust. Lastly, I offer directions for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Effects of Bonding and Bridging on Generalized Trust

#### *Introduction*

A recent Pew study stated that among those who attend religious services in the United States, most trust clergy as a source of information about COVID-19 vaccines over the news media, elected officials, and public health officials, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Norrey & Lipka, 2021). On the surface, this lack of institutional trust might appear like a recent development tied to a politically-charged issue. Yet, it is clear from trust studies that globally, and particularly in the U.S., trust has largely shifted from institutions to family and friends (Botsman, 2017). The independent research firm Edelman that specializes in global surveys on trust, reveals this shift happening as early as 2005 (*Edelman Trust Barometer: Global Report*, 2021).

Researchers differ in their assessment of this trend. Some argue that trust in American society has declined due to less civic participation or constraints on our social networks (Bellah et al., 2008; Coleman, 1990; Putnam & Campbell, 2010), but others feel it has to do with a lack of a shared ethical narrative—this is, basic disagreements about what is morally right and wrong (Fukuyama, 1995; Haidt, 2013). Still others blame media (Botsman, 2017). Whatever the case, we know that social trust is either cultivated and maintained, or it is weakened and damaged. Trusters may choose to withdraw and only trust themselves when they begin to distrust others.

Practices and beliefs that encourage social bonding, as Uslaner (2002, 2008) and Putnam and Campbell (2010) have said, result in higher levels of particularized trust, and

those behaviors that encourage social bridging to outsiders leads to increased generalized trust. Yet, among the religious, social bonding often predicts generalized trust as well. The religious tend to have higher levels of civic engagement. Those with fundamentalist values are more likely to volunteer both in secular and religious forums (Uslaner, 2002). The story is complex, however, because they are also more likely to have lower levels of generalized trust (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). This complexity has led to serious gaps in our studies of social trust as few researchers have yet to pull these threads together—media, religion, and moral authority—to analyze their effects on trust.

In this chapter, I will explore the relationships among Internet usage, moral authority, and religiosity on generalized trust by addressing the following research questions: Do potentially bonding characteristics such as religiosity and moral individualism predict generalized trust? And do potentially bridging behaviors such as increasing Internet usage and donating predict generalized trust?

### *Literature Review*

Social and institutional trust in American society have been on a steady decline for decades (Bellah et al., 2008; Botsman, 2017; Fukuyama, 1995), but evidence suggests generalized trust among the religious is quite high (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Putnam and Campbell (2010) point out that social capital consists of trust and reciprocity in our social networks. Bonding social capital comes from interconnectedness with in-group participants and bridging social capital builds intergroup acceptance. Scholars differentiate between generalized and particularized trust where particularized trust centers on in-group bonding over-against outgroups, and generalized trust has a more expansive view and manifests in social bridges with outsiders (Uslaner, 2008). Delhey et



al. (2011) successfully tested Fukuyama's (1995) claim that the radius of trust matters when considering how much a person trusts "most people." In short, it is important to adjust for who is meant by "most people" when individuals from different countries respond to the question such as that posed in the World Values Survey (WVS): "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted...?" Delhey and colleagues used other questions in the WVS to make this adjustment—questions asking about particularized trust (trust toward family, friends, and neighbors), and those asking about generalized trust (trust toward a person newly met, and people from other nations and other religions). What they found was intriguing. They were able to adjust for in-group / out-group bias when answering the question about trusting "most people," and they confirmed that out-group trust is predictive of believing most people can be trusted.

A religiously diverse network reduces prejudice and improves social relations, but so does devout, intrinsic faith; indeed, those with a more extrinsic, external, and politically-focused religiosity tend to be more prejudiced than those whose religious faith is an end itself (Allport, 1979; Allport & Ross, 1967; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Those who favor cultural pluralism welcome difference, but "a person who distrusts out-groups will see the differences as a menace" (Allport, 1979:104). Major studies support the assumption that being intrinsically religious is associated with greater religious involvement and lower levels of prejudice compared to those who are nominally, extrinsically religious (Gorsuch & McFarland, 1972). The intrinsically religious practice their religion as an end in itself and pursue it, but the extrinsically religious use religion as a means to some other end. Batson et al. (1993) take it a step further and argue there are three dimensions of religiosity: intrinsic ends, extrinsic means, and quest. They

suggest the intrinsic ends folks are highly religious as evidenced in their claims but fail to deliver in behavior. People in the quest dimension are the most socially conscientious, and the least prejudiced—their journey is one of religious exploration. People in the extrinsic ends dimension make up the bulk of American religiosity according to both Batson et al. and Allport; and unfortunately, this group is the most intolerant. The extrinsic ends dimension is not associated with increased mental health or social compassion; it is associated with less meaning in life and more anxiety. Essentially, it may be that the moderately religious are the least trusting of outsiders.

Theories of trust distribution fall into three categories: rational choice, psychological/epistemological, and network distribution. The rational choice approach privileges the subjective rationalization of objectively available data (Coleman, 1990; Luhmann, 1979). Hardin (1993) and Giddens (1997) lean heavily on mental and emotional capacity in their explanations of trust distribution. Others prefer to see trust as manifested in lateral networks of individuals (Botsman, 2017; Granovetter, 1985; McPherson et al., 2001; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Each has merits, but they often fail to account for counterfactuals. Where one theory fails to give a satisfactory explanation for trust in one context, another theory must be applied. I argue that trust distribution is best understood as a tension—on a continuum—between egocentric and tribal influences, where dispensations of trust are rational and irrational. In this way, the above theories are reconciled and improved. Furthermore, an ego-tribal view of trust accounts for trust in oneself—a clear omission from most approaches to trust distribution. The modern era is characterized by expressive individualism where the retreat to personal agency and personalized truth are common in American social life (Bellah et al., 2008). As an

example, in Bellah's work Sheila Larson describes her unique egocentric religion, "Sheilaism," that captures her own religiosity: a non-churchgoer who cares about others and loves herself because that is what God would want.

Giddens (1997) argues that modernity has created conditions where trust has shifted from tradition, fate, and religious cosmologies to risk management of abstract systems based on scientific knowledge and expertise. Persons in the modern era are forced to employ adaptive strategies to psychologically cope with ontological insecurities brought on by globalization. An increased concern for self-fulfillment (ego) is both a defense against threat, but also a positive appropriation of global influences. Religion, in Giddens's view, can be a source of anxiety or security, but it has been thoroughly undermined by modernity. Giddens may have underestimated the extreme retreat toward individualism on the one hand and the polarization of tribal identity with social institutions on the other. The ego-tribal trust distribution developed here suggests that people may be coping with modern angst by gripping tighter to tribal identities in religion and politics or creating their own story to be trusted.

Giddens describes "access points" as those points of dramaturgy between a truster and experts (or their lay-representatives) within the abstract systems of modernity, where trusters are expected to play along so-to-speak—take for example interactions with judges, doctors, and flight attendants (Giddens, 1997). Giddens contends that trusters are shaped by encounters at access points, and they will react with skepticism or exude trust depending on the situation. If an expert fails to impress or solve a particular problem, a truster may opt to fix it for themselves after learning the basic principles (Giddens, 1997:91). To illustrate Giddens' argument, I suggest modern Internet access has infinitely

multiplied those access points for a global population and magnified their reception (trust) or rejection (distrust). Political and religious messaging, public announcements related to COVID-19, and a host of other media incite reactions from dissenters and trusters. Some will trust the expert. Others will choose to trust their tribe or themselves instead.

### *Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses*

We know that the highly religious can be highly trusting, even if an image of God as angry is associated with lower levels of generalized trust (Hinze, 2008; Mencken et al., 2009). For Putnam and Campbell (2010), religious fundamentalists have lower levels of social trust. In their study of God-image and volunteering, Mencken and Fitz (2013) found that although a judgmental image of God lowered community volunteering, they also noted that even when controlling for generalized social trust, religious social bonding (embeddedness)—or what may be particularized trust—predicted an increase in community volunteering. We might have expected particularized trust to reduce the odds of reaching outside of one’s group, but this shows the relationship between social trust and religious embeddedness is complex. Henderson et al. (2017) demonstrate that the religious who have a judgmental view of God and lack close friends in their moral community also have lower social trust. Their judgmental God variable was constructed from survey items asking if ‘severe,’ ‘wrathful,’ ‘critical,’ and ‘punishing’ describe God. In short, their study revealed that embeddedness (bonding) within a moral community moderated the effect of having a judgmental view of God on generalized trust. However, this study was restricted to the highly religious, and suggests further study is warranted to compare the effects of believing in a judgmental God across all levels of religiosity. Their

highly religious variable required no doubts in God's existence and belonging to a congregation, so several more-than-average religious individuals without a congregation and doubts in God's existence would be missing from their analysis. I suspect that belief in a judgmental God will predict lower generalized trust. Given that the extrinsic, nominal type of religiosity is "the predominant aspect of religion" in society (Batson et al., 1993:374) where embeddedness in the moral community and adherence to its tenants is unlikely to attenuate the effects of a judgmental God-image, I expect the interaction of *average* religiosity and the belief that God is judgmental will be associated with a decrease in generalized trust. The first set of hypotheses test these relationships pertaining to bonding activities and social trust.

H1a: Increasing religiosity will predict an increase in generalized social trust.

H1b: Belief in a judgmental God will predict a decrease in generalized social trust.

H1c: The interaction of average religiosity with believing in a judgmental God will predict a decrease in generalized social trust.

Moral attitudes and religiosity are cultivated through the experience of bonding with a moral community (Graham & Haidt, 2010; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Those with a biblical moral authority have been shown to oppose abortion, same-sex marriage, divorce, and premarital sex (Uecker & Froese, 2019)—what Allport (1979) might consider a lack of humanitarianism. But I also believe that moral authority may help control for intrinsic versus extrinsic motivations among the religious. When given a choice between doing what would make them feel happy or help them get ahead, as opposed to doing what God or Scripture says, a person is likely to choose their primary motivation. A theistic source of moral authority correlates strongly with generalized

social trust (Putnam & Campbell, 2010), so in comparison, those with an egocentric locus of moral authority should have significantly lower generalized trust. Hunter (1991) and Bellah (2008) describe moral individualists as those people who locate within themselves the standard of right and wrong, and are sole arbiters of any appropriate action that follows. Moral individualists are often influenced by the cultural trend toward radical individual choice over against traditional forms of authority. In our case, this suggests their unlikelihood to trust anyone but themselves. This generates a fourth hypothesis related to bonding.

H1d: Moral individualism will be associated with a decrease in generalized social trust.

But there are also bridging social activities that shape levels of generalized trust—two of which will be explored in this study. The highly religious are likely to donate and volunteer more than the moderately or non-religious (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Civic engagement that includes donating to local organizations and neighbors is associated with generalized trust, and bridges people with different backgrounds (Uslaner, 2008). Particularized trusters are unlikely to cultivate relationships with people outside of their own moral community. Giving to one's own church reinforces bonding rather than bridging behavior, but religious givers may also be bridging with various other kinds of donations. Giving to neighbors or other local institutions results in an expanding network. McClure (2017) has found that Internet usage predicts decreased religious exclusivism. It may be that the highly religious will opt out or reduce Internet usage to avoid its pluralizing effects. The ego-tribal trust distribution in this case is realized in the way Internet users will curtail or control their usage—possibly remaining faithful to a religious ideology or perhaps curating content that only satisfies their viewpoint or that of

their tribe (Hardin, 1993; Uslaner, 2008). As Scheitle and Adamczyk (2009) maintain in their study of group theology, theological exclusivity is a contributor to bonding social capital. Alternatively, an increase in Internet usage ought to be positively associated with generalized trust on account of their exposure to social bridging. Two hypotheses test bridging and social trust.

H2a: Donating to local organizations or neighbors will predict an increase in generalized social trust.

H2b: Increased Internet usage will predict an increase in generalized social trust.

### *Measures and Method*

Data for this study come from the 2017 Baylor Religion Survey (BRS). Administered by Gallup, this mail survey is its fifth wave of randomly sampled American adults. A total of 11,000 were distributed, and 1,501 were returned for a response rate of 13.6%.

#### *Dependent Variable*

The dependent variable is generalized trust. It comes from the question, “How much would you say that you trust people in general?” Response options are: *A lot* = 4, *Some* = 3, *Only a little* = 2, *Not at all* = 1.

#### *Independent Variables*

The independent variables are image of God as judgmental, religiosity, moral authority, donating, and Internet usage. The variable for judgmental image of God comes from individual responses to five items. “Based on your personal understanding of God, please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: “God is angered by my personal sins,” and “God is angered by human sins,” to which one

could respond, *Strongly Disagree* = 1, *Disagree* = 2, *Agree* = 3, and *Strongly Agree* = 4; and, “In your opinion, how well do each of the following words describe God?” “Critical,” “Punishing,” and “Wrathful.” Response options are *Very well* = 4, *Somewhat well* = 3, *Not very well* = 2, and *Not at all* = 1. Cronbach’s alpha was .89. See Froese and Bader (2015, 2007) for a similarly constructed scale. Atheists were not asked questions about the image of God, resulting in missing data (n = 120). In order to count as atheists in the analysis, respondents had to answer “I do not believe in God” in response to two questions: 1) “What is the primary way you know how God wants you to live?” and, 2) “Which one statement comes closest to your personal beliefs about God?” For the judgmental God scale, atheists were coded as zero because their worldview and therefore levels of trust in others would not be affected by a belief in God as angry, critical, wrathful, or punishing.

Religiosity was generated as an index using the following standardized variables: religious salience, attendance, prayer, and reading sacred text. Religious salience comes from, “How religious do you consider yourself to be?” Answers included in the range are *Not religious* = 1, *Slightly religious* = 2, *Moderately religious* = 3, and *Very religious* = 4. Attendance is measured with the question, “How often do you attend religious services at a place of worship?” Possible responses include, *Less than once a year* = 1, *Once or twice a year* = 2, *Several times a year* = 3, *Once a month* = 4, *2-3 times a month* = 5, *About once a week* = 6, and *Several times a week* = 7. Personal prayer comes from the question, “About how often do you spend time alone praying outside of religious services?” Possible answers are *Never* = 0, *Only on certain occasions* = 1, *Once a week or less* = 2, *A few times a week* = 3, *Once a day* = 4, and *Several times a day* = 5.



Respondents were also asked, “Outside of attending religious services, about how often do you spend time alone reading the Bible, Koran, Torah, or other sacred book? Answers were *Never* = 0, *Less than once a year* = 1, *Once or twice a year* = 2, *Several times a year* = 3, *Once a month* = 4, *2-3 times a month* = 5, *About once a week* = 6, *Several times a week* = 7, and *Several times a week or more often* = 8. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.89.

To test Hypothesis 1c on the interaction of average religiosity with believing in a judgmental God, the standardized religiosity scale was then split into terciles—lower, middle, and upper—where the middle tercile is comprised of individuals well within one standard deviation above and below the mean of religiosity. The standard deviation for religiosity was .86, and the middle tercile ranges from -.48 to .55. Then the judgmental God-image scale and the religiosity terciles were multiplied together, with highly religious as the reference category, resulting in the ability to view significant non-linear effects.

Source of moral authority is measured with the question, “If you were unsure of what was right or wrong in a particular situation, which of the following best describes how would you decide what to do? Would you: *Do what would make you feel happy* = 1; *Do what would help you to get ahead* = 2; *Follow the advice of an authority, such as a parent, relative, or person you respect* = 3; *Do what you think God or scripture tells you is right* = 4. These variables are recoded into a dummy variable to capture moral individualists versus those who consult communal, relational, or theistic sources of moral authority. *Doing what would make you feel happy or what would help you get ahead* = 1, and *following advice or God/scripture* = 0. Uecker and Froese (2019) use the same survey item further separating those with a theistic moral authority into religious

individualists and religious institutionalists. I rely on the broader category of moral individualists in keeping with my hypothesis and to ensure adequate sample size of comparison groups. The donating variable is derived from the question, “Have you personally done any of the following in the last 12 months? Donated to help a local organization or neighbor.” Response options are *Yes* = 1, and *No* = 0. For Internet usage, the question is, “On average, how many hours per day do you spend: Using the Internet for any reason?” Response options are *Zero/None* = 0, *1 hour or less* = 1, *1 to 3 hours* = 2, *3 to 6 hours* = 3, *6 to 9 hours* = 4, *9 to 12 hours* = 5, and *More than 12 hours* = 6.

### *Control Variables*

Controls are engaged God-image, race, gender, age, education, and income. Image of God as engaged is a composite scale of six variables, four with the possible answers: *Strongly Disagree* = 1, *Disagree* = 2, *Agree* = 3, and *Strongly Agree* = 4; and they are: “God is concerned with the well-being of the world,” “God is directly involved in world affairs,” “God is concerned with my personal well-being,” and “God is directly involved in my affairs.” The two other variables in the scale come from the question above asking about words that describe God, and they are “Ever-present” and “Distant” (reverse coded). Again, atheists were coded as zero on this scale in order to minimize missing data. Cronbach’s alpha was .911. The engaged God-image scale, like that of judgmental God, is based on the research of Froese and Bader (2007). Race comes from the variable, “Which of the following describes your race?” Answers are *White* = 1, *Black or African American* = 2, *Asian* = 3, *American Indian or Alaskan Native* = 4, and *Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander* = 5. Ethnicity is gathered from, “Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or other Spanish

origin?” Together these questions were recoded into four dummy variables: White non-Hispanic, Black non-Hispanic, Other race non-Hispanic, and Hispanic. In response to, “What is your gender?” respondents could choose *Male* = 1, *Female* = 2, or *Other (please specify)* = 3. I recoded this to a binary variable with *Female* = 1, *Male* = 0, and *Other* = 0. Age is calculated from the question, “What is the date of your birth?” (MM, DD, YYYY). For education, respondents could choose, *8<sup>th</sup> grade or less* = 1; *9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade* = 2; *High school graduate* = 3; *Technical, trade, vocational, or business school or program after high school* = 4; *Some college* = 5; *Two year associate degree* = 6; *Four year bachelor's degree* = 7; *Some postgraduate or professional schooling after graduating college* = 8; and, *Postgraduate or professional degree, including master's, doctorate, medical, or law degree* = 9. Income comes from the question, “By your best estimate, what was your total household income last year, before taxes? Answers range from *\$10,000 or less* = 1; *\$10,001 - \$20,000* = 2; *\$20,001 - \$35,000* = 3; *\$35,001 - \$50,000* = 4; *\$50,001 - \$100,000* = 5; *\$100,001 - \$150,000* = 6; *\$150,001 or more* = 7.

### *Method*

Ordinal logistic regression is used to test hypotheses since the outcome variable has increasing levels of trust from “not at all” to “a lot.” By using odds ratios, we can tell the percent odds that the presence or increase of a covariate is associated with being in the next level of trust. The Brant test of the proportional odds (parallel regression) assumption was not significant, affirming that the assumption was not violated and ordinal logistic regression was appropriate (Long & Freese, 2014).

There were nearly 30% missing values for a total of 1057 of 1501 cases in this study using the BRS. Several missing cases were attributable to atheists who were not

asked questions about the image of God (n = 120). These were coded as zero along with those who *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* God is judgmental. To recover missing values, multiple imputation with chained equations was used in Stata and regression analysis was not conducted for those missing on the dependent variable, leaving 1463 total cases in the models (Royston, 2005; von Hippel, 2007). The imputed data sets were compared to the non-imputed results with similar outcomes, but the imputed data will be presented in this analysis.

### *Findings*

Table 2.1 has the descriptive statistics of the sample. Notable observations include the mean of generalized trust at 2.91 which is just short of “some.” Nearly 23% of respondents are moral individualists. Sixty-six percent have donated to a local organization or neighbor. Internet usage is 2.44, or just over 1 to 3 hours per day. The average age is 53 years old, 56.5% are female, 74.6% are White Non-Hispanic, 8.8% are Black Non-Hispanic, 5.7% are Other Race Non-Hispanic, and 11% are Hispanic. Average education is slightly more than a two-year associates degree. Average household income is \$35,000-\$50,000 per year.

Table 2.1 Descriptive Statistics ( $N = 1057$ )

Variable	Mean/%	SD	Range
Generalized Trust	2.91	.743	1-4
Judgmental God <sup>a</sup>	1.871	.937	0-4
Religiosity <sup>a</sup>	2.869	1.811	.25-5.75
Moral individualism	22.8		0-1
Donated to help local organization or neighbor	66.0		0-1
Internet usage	2.44	1.408	0-6
Engaged God <sup>a</sup>	2.603	1.048	0-4
White Non-Hispanic	74.6		0-1
Black Non-Hispanic	8.8		0-1
Other Race Non-Hispanic	5.7		0-1
Hispanic	11.0		0-1
Female	56.5		0-1
Age	52.86	16.673	17-98
Education	6.205	2.144	1-9
Income	4.613	1.663	1-7

<sup>a</sup>Unstandardized items listed; Standardized items used in models

Pairwise correlations are available in Table 2.2. A judgmental image of God is significantly and negatively correlated with generalized trust, as is moral individualism. Whites are positively correlated with generalized trust compared with other races, while Blacks are negatively correlated with generalized trust. Donating, age, education, and income had significant positive correlations with generalized trust.

### *Bonding Hypotheses*

Table 2.3 shows the ordered logistic regression models used to test the hypotheses. Model 1 shows that increasing religiosity is not statistically significant. In addition, Model 2 compares the effects of low and average religiosity versus high religiosity on generalized trust and we find that they are not significantly different. Hypothesis 1a is therefore unsupported.

In Models 1 and 2, belief in a judgmental God has a statistically significant, negative relationship with generalized trust. Hypothesis 1b is supported. Model 3

includes the interaction of religiosity (in terciles—low, average, and high) with a judgmental God-image, and results indicate that the effect of a judgmental God-image is a 54% decrease in the odds of the next level of trust for the average religious versus highly religious. This significant result lends support for Hypothesis 1c. Figures 2.1-2.3 show that moderate (average) religiosity predicts a decreased probability of the categories “A lot” and “Some,” and an increase in “only a little” and “not at all” compared to the highly religious. Finally, moral individualism has 42% lower odds of an increase in generalized trust compared with communal or theistic sources of moral authority. This finding supports Hypothesis 1d.

Table 2.2. Pairwise Correlations ( $N = 1057$ )

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) Generalized Trust	1.000						
(2) Judgmental God	-0.089*	1.000					
(3) Engaged God	0.020	0.748*	1.000				
(4) Religiosity	0.056	0.507*	0.700*	1.000			
(5) Moral individualism	-0.120*	-0.255*	-0.350*	-0.406*	1.000		
(6) Donated	0.196*	0.065*	0.079*	0.158*	-0.167*	1.000	
(7) Internet Usage	0.054	-0.141*	-0.160*	-0.190*	0.122*	-0.068*	1.000
(8) White	0.196*	-0.102*	-0.102*	-0.085*	-0.055	0.099*	0.016
(9) Black	-0.111*	0.166*	0.145*	0.186*	-0.089*	-0.038	-0.040
(10) Other Race	-0.058	-0.029	-0.012	-0.033	0.110*	-0.014	0.008
(11) Hispanic	-0.129*	0.013	0.019	-0.026	0.076*	-0.093*	0.009
(12) Female	-0.045	0.021	0.139*	0.107*	-0.051	-0.021	0.017
(13) Age	0.202*	0.045	0.109*	0.198*	-0.218*	0.215*	-0.439*
(14) Education	0.204*	-0.156*	-0.125*	-0.044	-0.022	0.107*	0.229*
(15) Income	0.219*	-0.144*	-0.123*	-0.088*	-0.027	0.209*	0.241*

Variables	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)
(8) White	1.000							
(9) Black	-0.532*	1.000						
(10) Other Race	-0.420*	-0.076*	1.000					
(11) Hispanic	-0.601*	-0.109*	-0.086*	1.000				
(12) Female	-0.048	0.050	0.001	0.021	1.000			
(13) Age	0.103*	-0.021	-0.021	-0.109*	-0.057	1.000		
(14) Education	0.102*	-0.009	0.026	-0.152*	-0.082*	-0.076*	1.000	
(15) Income	0.144*	-0.123*	-0.012	-0.080*	-0.133*	-0.033	0.410*	1.000

\* shows significance at the .05 level

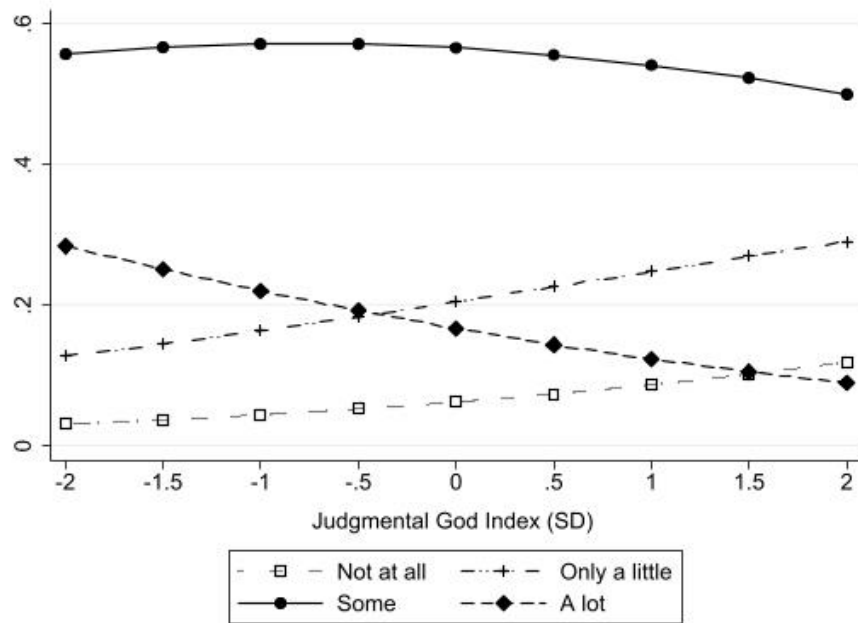
Table 2.3. Ordered Logit Models Predicting Generalized Trust

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Judgmental God	0.640** (0.087)	0.641** (0.088)	0.798 (0.153)
Religiosity Index (standardized)	0.999 (0.117)		
<i>Religiosity Index in Terciles<sup>a</sup></i>			
Low Religiosity (bottom tercile)		1.242 (0.293)	1.374 (0.341)
Average Religiosity (middle tercile)		0.874 (0.156)	1.041 (0.201)
<i>Interaction Effects<sup>b</sup></i>			
Judgmental God * Low Religiosity (bottom tercile)			0.851 (0.229)
Judgmental God * Average Religiosity (middle tercile)			0.577* (0.156)
Moral individualism		0.579** (0.104)	0.583** (0.104)
Donated to help a local organization or neighbor	1.579** (0.255)	1.521** (0.246)	1.526** (0.246)
Internet usage (hours per day)	1.149* (0.072)	1.139* (0.071)	1.134* (0.071)
Engaged God	1.616** (0.248)	1.625** (0.244)	1.606** (0.290)
<i>Race<sup>d</sup></i>			
Hispanic	0.575* (0.140)	0.613* (0.149)	0.613* (0.150)
Black Non-Hispanic	0.404*** (0.098)	0.389*** (0.094)	0.384*** (0.091)
Other race	0.678 (0.165)	0.704 (0.171)	0.722 (0.174)
Female	1.003 (0.141)	1.014 (0.142)	1.001 (0.140)
Age	1.029*** (0.005)	1.027*** (0.005)	1.027*** (0.005)
Education	1.179*** (0.042)	1.176*** (0.041)	1.174*** (0.041)
Income	1.072 (0.054)	1.055 (0.053)	1.056 (0.054)
Observations	1,463	1,463	1,463

\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05; Odds Ratios; Multiple Imputation Data; *Reference Categories:* <sup>a</sup>High Religiosity; <sup>b</sup>Judgmental God\*High Religiosity; <sup>d</sup>White Non-Hispanic; Weighted

*Bridging Hypotheses*

Net of covariates, donating to help a local organization or neighbor and increasing Internet usage are significant and remain so across all models; therefore, Hypothesis 2a and 2b are supported. In the full model, donating to help a local organization or neighbor predicts 52.6% higher odds of moving up a level of trust, and for every unit increase in Internet usage, odds go up 13.4%.



*Figure 2.1.* Among the least religious, predicted probability of how much respondent trusts people in general.



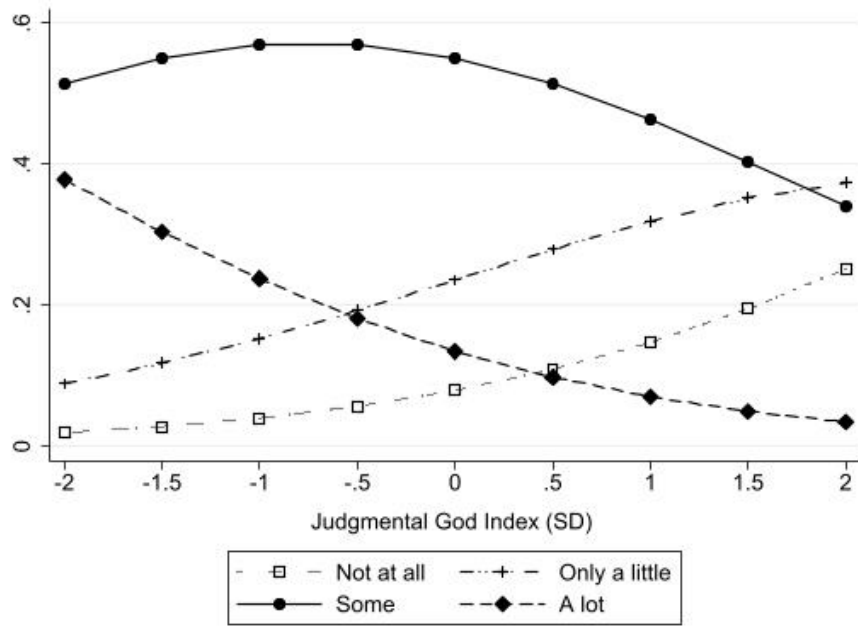


Figure 2.2. Among those with average religiosity, predicted probability of how much respondent trusts people in general.

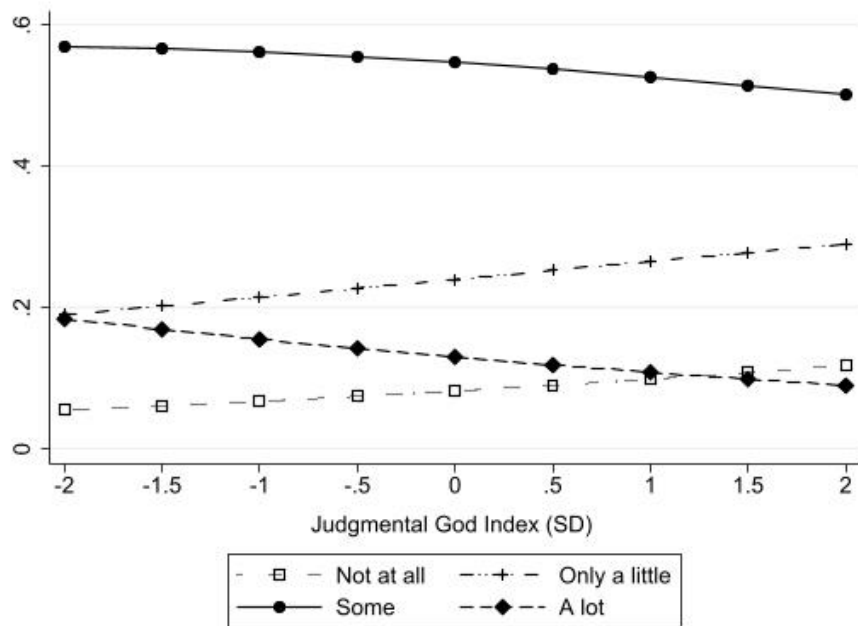


Figure 2.3. Among the most religious, predicted probability of how much respondent trusts people in general.

Having an image of God as engaged is significant across all models. Each unit increase in education results in 17.4% higher odds of an increased level of trust. In the final model, Blacks have 62% lower odds and Hispanics 39% lower odds of the next level of trust compared to Whites. Income and gender are not significant across all models.

### *Discussion and Conclusion*

These findings call into question some previous literature on the relationships among religiosity, image of God, and generalized trust. Although Putnam and Campbell (2010) and Uslaner (2008) highlight the ways that the religious are often civically-minded and contribute to social good, it appears that among the religious, certain beliefs and behaviors may complicate that assumption. In this analysis, increasing religiosity does not predict an increase in generalized trust suggesting that the religious and the secular may have more or less the same levels of social trust, controlling for the content of beliefs (i.e. images of God). This appears to be in contrast to the findings of Putnam and Campbell, who argue that, “religious people themselves are more trusting of just about everybody than are secular people” (2010:461). As I will outline below, I believe this claim is somewhat overstated, and may speak to an issue of measurement. They used attendance as a singular measure of religiosity, and found that net of controls, high attenders were more likely to believe “most people can be trusted” versus “you can’t be too careful” in multiple data sets using the measure (e.g., General Social Survey, Faith Matters, and Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey).

Perhaps attendance on its own is a weaker measure of religiosity than one that includes salience, prayer, and reading of sacred text. Some may argue that there is a

“public” versus “private” religion effect, where attendance predicts most people can be trusted because it is more extrinsic, or social, compared to the private beliefs and behaviors that might encourage less generalized trust and more particularized trust. This may be the case for attenders who are low on other religious commitments. However this study shows that the average, or moderately, religious are predicted to be less trusting than the highly religious when moderated by the belief God is judgmental. Batson et al. (1993) may be right to argue that the nominally religious are both the predominate type of religiosity in society and contribute the least amount of social capital. So why are the highly religious not expected to be less trusting than the moderately religious considering their tighter-knit moral communities? It may be that as Henderson et al. (2017) assert, the increasing religiosity may also be increasing embeddedness and the impact of positive religious messaging about the neighbor. That embeddedness may be why the average religious are more greatly impacted by a judgmental God-image in comparison.

A locus of moral authority that centers on the self is highly predictive of low social trust. Moral individualism was based on variables measuring what the respondent would do when faced with a moral quandary—do what would make them happy or to get ahead. The former may be egocentric, but the latter suggests a proactive motivation to beat out competition. Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) point out that emphasizing common goals and shared fate increases social cohesion, but a focus on difference and separating oneself from others leads to lower levels of trust. These respondents had the option to choose communal advice or theistic mandate; instead they chose egocentric goals.

Bridging activities such as donating to help a local organization or neighbor and increasing Internet usage predict higher levels of generalized trust net of religiosity, God-

image, and controls. Although we cannot say anything causal here, these activities say something positive about the respondent's exposure to outsiders and their engagement with a wider society.

The ego-tribal trust distribution suggests that individuals are always in tension with the forces of self-interest and tribal allegiance. Add to this the nature of intrinsic versus extrinsic religiosity, and there are likely to be different outcomes on generalized trust. In other words, a person with a highly religious tribal identity may have deeply intrinsic ends to their religious motivations that result in (at the very least) a deeper confession in line with the tenants of their faith that results in greater civic engagement. Yet, a nominally religious person whose concerns are more extrinsic, who is more intent on pleasing themselves, may be more likely to distrust others whom they feel are in competition with, or stand in opposition to them.

A primary limitation of this study is the lack of singular measures of particularized and generalized trust in the BRS that could be used as key independent variables, controls, or alternative outcome measures. For instance, the World Values Survey has measures of particularized trust in family, personal acquaintances, and neighbors; it also has measures of generalized trust in persons met for the first time, those from other nations, and those representing other religions. Unfortunately, the WVS lacks measures of religiosity other than the importance of God, religious salience, and attendance. Future research in this area would benefit from broader measures of social trust with a more comprehensive measure of religiosity and religious embeddedness as predictors. Further studies might also consider looking at different types of online activity. However, the present study has successfully shown that religiosity has a much

more nuanced and less definitive relationship with generalized trust than has been theorized and suggests more research in this area is needed. Finally, I believe focus groups and interviews might better uncover motivations behind trust distribution among the religious, especially as it concerns the moderately religious and the influence of the judgmental God-image.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Political Identity, Online Activism, and Outgroup Party Threat

#### *Introduction*

With the growing fractures between liberals and conservatives in America, some are stoking fears that on the Right, Christian nationalism threatens to enact theocratic policies tied to Republican interests (Phillips, 2006; Rudin, 2006; Whitehead & Perry, 2020a); others are worried the Left is using media to corrupt American minds, slanting news to fit their political goals (McCarty, 2012; Shapiro, 2021). Those fractures are likely exacerbated because people at political extremes are more likely to protect party values under perceived party threat (Morrison & Ybarra, 2009). It has been understood for some time that there is a U-shaped curve of political activism in the United States since those at the ideological extremes are more likely to vote and contribute financially to a political group or candidate compared to those with moderate political views (Mitchell et al., 2014). It appears unlikely the political gulf between conservatives and liberals will narrow any time soon.

Studies have shown that trust in government and media has plummeted (Botsman, 2017; *Edelman Trust Barometer: Global Report, 2021*; Rainie et al., 2019), and this is evident in distrust toward political outgroups. As the rift between conservatives and liberals continues to widen, it is getting played out on social media, especially among youth (Auxier, 2020; Twenge, 2017). Although conservatives are more politically active than most Americans (Desilver, 2015), liberal Democrats are more likely to be politically

active on social media (Anderson & Jiang, 2018)—perhaps in response to perceived outgroup threat.

Researchers have touched on the nature of perceived political threat (Brandt et al., 2021; Haidt, 2013; Jost et al., 2017), issues surrounding social trust and civic engagement (Bellah et al., 2008; Giddens, 1997; Uslaner, 2008), and the impact of social media on social relations (Botsman, 2017; Postman, 2006; Twenge, 2017). To date no study has pulled these threads together. In this chapter, my research question is: What predicts the belief a political party is a threat to the unity of America? In this study I analyze generalized trust, social media usage, and online activism during the COVID-19 pandemic to predict the belief an opposing political party is a threat to American unity.

### *Literature Review*

#### *Social Trust and Perceived Party Threat*

The following is a review of literature on the nature of social trust in America with insights from social psychology and theories of trust more broadly. I put forth a theory of social trust distribution that harmonizes different perspectives. The effects of social media and online activism on perceived party threat are also reviewed, and testable hypotheses are presented.

Haidt (2013) believes conservatives and liberals have differing moral intuitions. For Haidt, moral intuitions are a combination of innateness and social learning. There are six basic moral foundations: care/harm, liberty/oppression, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation. Moral intuitions differ by culture, but they also differ within a culture, such as by political orientation. Liberals tend to focus on care/harm and liberty/oppression foundations, and conservatives endorse all

five more equally, which means liberals may not identify with conservative ideas of fairness or authority. According to Haidt, this difference in morality results in different political orientations that are increasingly at odds and significantly distrusting of each other. Perceptions of outgroup threat are related to distrust. Neither side of the political aisle trusts the other to have their best interests in mind. Right-wing political ideology tends to correlate with fear of illegal immigration, gun control, and governmental corruption; whereas, on the left, threats are often generated from climate change, overpopulation, health-care restrictions, pollution, and corporate misconduct (Brandt et al., 2021).

Outgroup hostility may be tied to ingroup favoritism only to the extent that there is a perceived competition over political power or resources (Brewer 1999). When faced with a threat, subordinate groups have a strong correlation between dominant outgroup prejudice and preference for ingroup identity (Duckitt & Mphuthing, 1998). One study looked at evidence from 16 countries ( $N = 369,000$ ) and supports the claim that reactions to threat give a political advantage for conservative policies, since the association of perceived threat is stronger with conservatism than liberalism (Jost et al., 2017). However, political liberals seem to increase in-group favoritism like conservatives after a “system-injustice threat” (Nail et al., 2009). Morrison and Ybarra (2009) conducted a study of 50 individuals recruited from a national website sponsored by a private West Coast university; the participants identified as Republican or Democrat. The study revealed that highly identifying Republicans in a treatment group receiving symbolic threat from Democrats responded with higher Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) scores than low-identifying Republicans. And highly identifying Democrats perceiving a



similar threat in Republicans, had much lower SDO scores compared with low-identifying Democrats. Yet, low-identifying Democrats and low-identifying Republicans had similar SDO scores, even if overall SDO scores among Republicans are higher than Democrats. Haidt (2013) believes that one of the six universal moral foundations—loyalty versus betrayal—is core to the human need for coalitions and it results in trust and reward when we sense loyalty, but ostracizing and violence toward those that betray us.

Social trust has been studied in various fields, but in sociology theorizing about trust has typically fallen into three basic arguments: (1) trust is a function of an individual's rational choice (e.g., Coleman (1990)); (2) epistemological and psychological factors influence the capacity of the truster (Giddens, 1997; Hardin, 1993); and (3) networks determine who is trusted (Botsman, 2017; Granovetter, 1985). I advance a theory of an ego-tribal trust distribution that reconciles and integrates these competing views of trust. Trusters are in tension between egocentric and tribal allegiances in their decision-making when deciding who to trust—indeed, in some cases individuals will opt to only trust themselves. Psychological anthropologist Richard Shweder (1984) theorizes that all societies attempt to answer simple questions about how to order themselves, and he argues that most societies have a sociocentric versus egocentric answer. Sociocentric societies put group needs above the individual, but individualistic societies make society the servant of the individual. I believe that in addition to *public* conversation and debate between ourselves and the wider society, there is a constant internal dialogue between self and *perception* of society, ego and *perception* of tribe. As the study of symbolic threat by Morrison and Ybarra (2009) warns, it is possible symbolic threat may be confounded by real perceived threat in outgroup party

leaders. It is difficult to know what respondents have in mind when they feel threatened. However, I expect a general lack of social trust to be associated with outgroup party threat.

In light of the above, I hypothesize the following:

H1: Regardless of political identity, an increase in social trust will predict a lower probability of perceived outgroup party threat.

### *Social Media and Perceived Party Threat*

With the success of Trump's 2016 election win, it may appear that conservatives are posting political content online more than liberals. Pew observed a trend in 2012 that liberals were only 5% more likely than conservatives to post political content online, which had slid from an 11% gap in 2008 (Katz, 2012). But, in 2018, 2019, and 2020 liberals dominated conservatives in social media activism (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Auxier, 2020; Hughes, 2019). Sixty-nine percent of the top 10% of tweeters on Twitter in 2020 were Democrat or leaned Democrat (Pew Research Center, 2020). It may be that liberals find an identity forming *habitus* in online media. There is a growing number of social media echo-chambers contributing to social and political discord. Song's (2009) content analysis of virtual online communities supports the view that the Internet breaks up social life into political, cultural, and religious in-groups that find little interaction with out-groups. With increasing opportunities to obtain in-group solidarity online, it is expected that an increase in social media usage will increase perceived outgroup party threat. This leads to Hypothesis 2:

H2: Regardless of political identity, an increase in social media usage will predict a higher probability of perceived outgroup party threat.

### *Online Activism and Perceived Party Threat*

In a study of Twitter posts during the debate surrounding NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick's decision to take a knee during the national anthem, Johnson et al. (2019) discovered that among posts with #BoycottNFL, individuals often had different aims—some centered on politics, others on civic issues, and others on changes in consumption (such as boycotting sponsors). Some posts used the hashtag to inspire collective action to support Kaepernick and Black Lives Matter. Others wanted to promote the boycott. Social impact theory was useful to frame the research because it describes how the strength of social media sources can influence individuals' beliefs and behaviors, but they found that over successive days there was an increased individualization, or differentiation, of intent in the posts that used the hashtag. In short, the more time passed, the more people expressed differing objectives in their posts even if they represented basically two different sides of the issue. In the present study I will not be able to differentiate types of activism or the reason for posting. But based on my theory, I believe the ego-tribal trust distribution can explain how online activism is a reflection of individual and tribal identity. Online activists may present as individuals, but they often represent a political tribe. Their unilateral posts are often motivated by a sense of political exigency. According to Vaisey (2009), the best model for understanding culture's role in influencing behaviors is based on a dual process (discursive and practical) that emphasizes the role of intuitive moral judgments *and* the articulation of cultural scripts. Vaisey found that although moral judgments may not be clearly articulated, they still predict future behavior in line with previous moral-cultural scripts. With this in mind, I believe individuals who participate in online activism are posting political content as

motivated by moral foundations as a manifestation of personal sentiment and political allegiance that is at odds with their party outgroup.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in late 2019, elevated political polarization. As seen in the tweets of Republican and Democratic lawmakers, Republicans focused on business needs and the threat of China, and Democrats tweeted more about public health and workers' needs (Green et al., 2020). Intense political debates surrounding health and safety measures, lockdowns, and mask mandates during COVID-19, are likely to have increased online activism and perceived threat from both sides of the political aisle. In addition, several politically divisive issues occurred during the first year of the pandemic: the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin (May 25, 2020) and the resulting Black Lives Matter protests; and, the presidential race between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, including an attack on the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. (January 6, 2021) by Trump supporters who believed the election was fraudulent. Mainstream media coverage of these events differed greatly, and Democrats and Republicans have never been more divided and distrusting of politically biased news (Jurkowitz et al., 2020), as Americans are challenged to sift through increasing claims of misinformation and disinformation. Zhong et al. (2022) studied voter likelihood in the 2020 presidential election based on hierarchical mediation models, and found that "need for cognition" led significantly to the power-use of information and communication technologies and consequently to the likelihood to vote. In other words, people with a personality-driven desire to sift through social media were more likely to vote. Yet, as Heltzel and Laurin (2020) point out, even though 10% of

Americans identify as extremely liberal or conservative, they are more likely to post online and control the political discourse. I hypothesize:

H3: Regardless of political identity, an increase in online activism during COVID-19 will predict a higher probability of perceived outgroup party threat.

We know there is little overlap in the news sources that conservatives and liberals trust, and we also know that left/left-leaning Cable TV news outlets outnumber conservative ones (Mitchell et al., 2014). Given that liberal online activism exceeds that of conservative online activism, I expect a similar trend during COVID-19. Online activism among liberals will have a greater effect on outgroup party threat than the same effect among conservatives. Based on the above, these are my final hypotheses:

H4a: The interaction of online activism with political liberalism should increase the predicted probability of perceived Republican threat.

H4b: The interaction of online activism with political conservatism should increase the predicted probability of perceived Democrat threat.

### *Measures and Method*

Data for Chapter Three come from the 2021 Baylor Religion Survey (BRS). In its sixth wave, the BRS was administered by Gallup from January to March 2021 and consists of a random sample of 1,248 American adults. Response rate was lower due to the COVID-19 pandemic, at around 11.3%. Data were weighted to coincide with national demographics.

### *Dependent Variables*

The dependent variable measures whether the Democratic or Republican parties are a threat to the unity of the United States. It comes from the question: “Please indicate whether you feel that people in the following groups threaten the unity of American

society.” Possible answers were *Not a threat* = 1, *Somewhat a threat* = 2, or *Very much a threat* = 3, and is recoded to stipulate that the party viewed as a threat is an outgroup of the respondent’s own party identity, such that a Republican or Independent that views Democrats as *Somewhat* or *Very much a threat* = 1; *Not a threat* = 0. A Democrat or Independent that views a Republican as *Somewhat* or *Very much a threat* = 1; *Not a threat* = 0.

### *Independent Variables*

Generalized trust comes from the question, “How much would you say that you trust people in general? *A lot* = 4, *Some* = 3, *Only a little* = 2, or *Not at all* = 1.” An independent variable measures social media usage: “How often do you spend time doing the following: Using social media applications/sites (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.). Answers range from *Never* = 1, *About once a month or less* = 2, *About once a week* = 3, *About once a day* = 4, *Several times a day* = 5, to *Almost Constantly* = 6. A question asked, “How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your use of the following online activities? Online activism (posting political content).” Possible responses were *Decreased greatly* = 1, *Decreased slightly* = 2, *Did not change* = 3, *Increased slightly* = 4, or *Increased greatly* = 5. For the purposes of this study, the variable was coded as a binary predictor where any increase = 1, and no change or decrease = 0. This enables me to capture any increased motivation for posting content. The interaction term is created by multiplying political identity by online activism during COVID-19 to measure non-linear conditional effects on whether a political outgroup is perceived as a threat to American unity. In other words, this interaction will show if, and to what extent, the effect of political identity is moderated by online activism.

## *Controls*

Controls are age, race, sex, education, income, and political identity. Age comes from the question, “What is your age?” and responses ranged from 18-98. Race and ethnicity come from the following questions: “Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or other Spanish origin?” Possible answers were: *Yes = 1, No = 2, I don’t know = 0*; and, “Which of the following describes your race? Please mark all that apply.” Answers were: *White, Black or African American, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander*. These were recoded as four dummy variables: White Non-Hispanic, Black Non-Hispanic, Hispanic, and Other Race Non-Hispanic. Answers for “What is your gender?” were *Male = 1, Female = 2, and Other (please specify) = 3*. This was recoded as a binary variable where *Female = 1, Not Female = 0*. Education comes from, “What is the highest level of school you have completed?” Answers were *8th grade or less = 1; 9th to 12th grade = 2; High school graduate = 3; Technical, trade, vocational, or business school or program after high school = 4; Some college = 5; Two-year associate degree = 6; Four-year bachelor’s degree = 7; Some postgraduate or professional schooling after graduating college = 8; and, Postgraduate or professional degree, including master’s, doctorate, medical, or law degree = 9*. Income comes from the question, “By your best estimate, what was your total household income last year, before taxes? Answers range from *\$10,000 or less = 1; \$10,001 - \$20,000 = 2; \$20,001 - \$35,000 = 3; \$35,001 - \$50,000 = 4; \$50,001 - \$100,000 = 5; \$100,001 - \$150,000 = 6; \$150,001 or more = 7*. The control variable for political identity is derived from the question, “How would you describe yourself politically?” Respondents could choose *Extremely conservative = 1,*

*Conservative* = 2, *Leaning conservative* = 3, *Moderate* = 4, *Leaning liberal* = 5, *Liberal* = 6, and *Extremely liberal* = 7. To test Hypothesis 4b, the political identity scale is reverse scored from *Extremely liberal* = 1 to *Extremely conservative* = 7 to measure political conservatism.

### *Method*

Outcomes were predicted using binary logistic regression models. The sample size from listwise deletion resulted in 1,039 cases of 1,248 possible—around 16.7% missing. To recover missing values, multiple imputation was used in Stata and regression analysis employed the *mi estimate* command (Rubin, 1987). Imputed and non-imputed results were similar, but results from imputed data will be presented.

### *Findings*

Table 3.1 provides the descriptive statistics of the study, revealing a staggering 67.5% of Americans believe their party outgroup threatens the unity of the United States, with 51.8% of the sample stating Republicans specifically. The mean of generalized trust is slightly less than “some.” There were 23.8% who increased online activism during COVID-19, and the sample is politically moderate on average.

Correlations of interest in Table 3.2 include a significant relationship between online activism and outgroup party threat; political liberalism is also positively and significantly correlated with outgroup party threat. Generalized social trust is negatively correlated with outgroup party threat, and with believing Democrats threaten the unity of America. Social media use is not significantly correlated with outgroup threat. Online activism is significantly correlated with political liberalism. Online activism is not significantly correlated with believing Democrats threaten American unity, nor is social



media usage. Being Hispanic is *not* significantly correlated with believing Republicans are a threat but *is* negatively and significantly correlated with Democratic threat, as is being female, increasing education, and increasing trust. Being Black is positively and significantly correlated with believing Republicans are a threat. Being White is correlated with believing the Democrats are a threat, and increasing age is negatively and significantly correlated with believing Republicans are a threat.

Table 3.1. Descriptive Statistics ( $N = 1039$ )

Variable	Mean or %	SD	Range
Party Outgroup Threatens Unity of American Society	67.5		0-1
Democrats Threaten Unity of American Society	34.2		0-1
Republicans Threaten Unity of American Society	51.8		0-1
Political Liberalism	4.069	1.644	1-7
Social Media Usage	3.759	1.653	1-6
Generalized Trust	1.808	.752	0-3
Online Activism	23.8		0-1
White Non-Hispanic	66.7		0-1
Black Non-Hispanic	9.9		0-1
Hispanic	14.9		0-1
Other Race Non-Hispanic	8.5		0-1
Female	52.9		0-1
Age	53.804	16.91	18-98
Education	6.346	2.074	1-9
Income	4.706	1.659	1-7

Models used to test hypotheses are displayed in Tables 3.3 and 3.4. Hypothesis 1 is supported by findings in Table 3.3 that reveal ~31% lower odds of perception that a party outgroup is a threat for every one-unit increase in generalized social trust. However, an increase in social media usage is not significantly related to perceived threat at the .05

level. Hypothesis 2 is therefore not supported. Model 4 shows that an increase in online activism during COVID-19 predicts 155% higher odds of believing a party outgroup is a threat, even when controlling for political liberalism. This lends support for Hypothesis 3.

In Figure 3.1, we see that an extremely conservative respondent that did not increase online activism has nearly a 60% probability of perceiving their outgroup party as a threat compared with almost an 85% probability for an extreme liberal who increased activism online. Of the control variables, Hispanic is significant across all models in Table 3.3, even when controlling for political liberalism in Model 4.

Table 3.4 provides logistic regression models predicting Republican and Democrat threat respectively. Hypothesis 4a finds support since the effects of online activism and political liberalism on perceived Republican threat significantly vary by one another. Although the effect of online activism in Model 1 is 53% higher odds net of political liberalism, the moderating effect is shown in Model 2. The conditional effect of being politically moderate among those that increased online activism during COVID-19 results in a 60% predicted probability of perceived Republican threat, and that increases to a 93% probability for extreme liberals. Figure 3.2 shows the curvilinear, moderating effect of online activism on political liberalism.

There is no significant moderating effect of online activism on political conservatism. Hypothesis 4b is not supported. Besides age in Model 1 of Table 3.4, the only significant control variable is race. In Models 3 and 4, we see that being Black and Hispanic negatively predict Democrat threat.

Table 3.2. Pairwise Correlations ( $N = 1039$ )

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) Outgroup Party Threat	1.000						
(2) Democrats are Threat	0.500*	1.000					
(3) Republicans are Threat	0.699*	0.013	1.000				
(4) Political Liberalism	0.094*	-0.418*	0.451*	1.000			
(5) Social Media Usage	0.037	0.057	0.008	0.008	1.000		
(6) Generalized Trust	-0.084*	-0.108*	-0.051	0.036	-0.017	1.000	
(7) Online Activism	0.175*	0.008	0.163*	0.137*	-0.042	-0.035	1.000
(8) White	0.037	0.087*	-0.057	-0.027	0.019	0.154*	-0.042
(9) Black	-0.003	-0.083*	0.101*	0.043	0.015	-0.190*	0.019
(10) Hispanic	-0.049	-0.074*	-0.012	0.007	-0.057	-0.037	0.020
(11) Other	0.005	0.036	0.003	-0.009	0.023	-0.010	0.025
(12) Female	-0.029	-0.101*	0.032	0.124*	-0.092*	-0.040	0.037
(13) Age	-0.033	-0.010	-0.145*	-0.175*	0.077*	0.180*	-0.076*
(14) Education	0.004	-0.119*	0.113*	0.218*	-0.065*	0.209*	0.065*
(15) Income	-0.003	-0.011	-0.028	-0.022	-0.063*	0.177*	0.017

\* shows significance at the .05 level

(Continued)

Variables	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)
(8) White	1.000							
(9) Black	-0.469*	1.000						
(10) Hispanic	-0.593*	-0.139*	1.000					
(11) Other Race	-0.431*	-0.101*	-0.127*	1.000				
(12) Female	-0.106*	0.100*	0.070*	-0.018	1.000			
(13) Age	0.159*	-0.002	-0.131*	-0.099*	-0.109*	1.000		
(14) Education	0.099*	-0.083*	-0.089*	0.036	-0.032	-0.059	1.000	
(15) Income	0.119*	-0.135*	-0.069*	0.033	-0.108*	-0.068*	0.428*	1.000

\* shows significance at the .05 level

Table 3.3. Logistic Regression Predicting Political Outgroup Party Threat

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Generalized Social Trust	0.675*** (0.078)	0.678*** (0.079)	0.690** (0.082)	0.686** (0.082)
Social Media Usage		1.079 (0.054)	1.092† (0.055)	1.090† (0.056)
Online Activism Increased During COVID			2.600*** (0.596)	2.549*** (0.589)
Political Liberalism				1.071 (0.058)
<i>Race<sup>a</sup></i>				
Black Non-Hispanic	0.681 (0.193)	0.678 (0.193)	0.639 (0.191)	0.626 (0.190)
Hispanic	0.586* (0.138)	0.598* (0.142)	0.579* (0.137)	0.574* (0.137)
Other Non-Hispanic	0.636 (0.184)	0.625 (0.179)	0.632 (0.184)	0.633 (0.186)
Female	0.785 (0.134)	0.806 (0.138)	0.788 (0.134)	0.779 (0.135)
Age	1.003 (0.005)	1.002 (0.005)	1.004 (0.005)	1.005 (0.005)
Education	1.046 (0.049)	1.048 (0.049)	1.032 (0.050)	1.020 (0.051)
Income	1.005 (0.061)	1.012 (0.062)	1.023 (0.063)	1.032 (0.064)
Constant	4.290*** (1.443)	3.023** (1.255)	2.453* (1.033)	1.997 (0.874)
Observations	1,248	1,248	1,248	1,248

\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05; † p<0.10; Odds Ratios; Ref: <sup>a</sup>White; Multiple Imputation Data; Weighted

### *Discussion and Conclusion*

The purpose of this study is to fill a gap in current literature on the predictors of outgroup party threat. Research has investigated issues of social trust more broadly, including the divisive role of mass media, but little has been done to research the combined effect of political ideology and online activism on outgroup party threat.

This study confirms that social trust has a negative impact on perceived party outgroup threat in general. Surprisingly, increasing social trust does not predict Republican threat net of controls, but it significantly predicts a decrease in perceived

Table 3.4. Logistic Regression Predicting the Democratic and Republican Parties are a Threat

VARIABLES	<u>Republican Threat</u>		<u>Democrat Threat</u>	
	Main Effects (1)	Interaction (2)	Main Effects (3)	Interaction (4)
Social Media Usage	1.054 (0.058)	1.051 (0.058)	1.115* (0.061)	1.114* (0.061)
Generalized Social Trust	0.794 (0.105)	0.780 (0.102)	0.631*** (0.077)	0.628*** (0.076)
Online Activism Increased During COVID	1.529* (0.312)	0.457 (0.292)	1.856** (0.414)	2.380 (1.477)
Political Liberalism	1.667*** (0.108)	1.543*** (0.113)		
Political Conservatism			1.849*** (0.125)	1.886*** (0.155)
<i>Interaction Effects</i>				
Online Activism * Political Conservatism				0.940 (0.132)
Online Activism * Political Liberalism		1.360* (0.196)		
<i>Race<sup>b</sup></i>				
Black Non-Hispanic	1.734 (0.625)	1.759 (0.620)	0.374** (0.138)	0.375** (0.138)
Hispanic	0.771 (0.180)	0.776 (0.181)	0.532* (0.145)	0.534* (0.146)
Other Non-Hispanic	0.939 (0.298)	0.940 (0.298)	0.759 (0.208)	0.758 (0.207)
Female	0.772 (0.146)	0.780 (0.147)	0.762 (0.137)	0.765 (0.138)
Age	0.989* (0.006)	0.989 (0.005)	0.991 (0.005)	0.991 (0.005)
Education	1.051 (0.053)	1.051 (0.053)	0.966 (0.044)	0.966 (0.044)
Income	0.972 (0.062)	0.977 (0.062)	1.014 (0.060)	1.014 (0.060)
Constant	0.143*** (0.071)	0.195** (0.098)	0.094*** (0.054)	0.087*** (0.053)
Observations	1,248	1,248	1,248	1,248

\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05; Odds Ratios; Ref: <sup>b</sup>White Non-Hispanic; Multiple Imputation Data; Weighted.

Democrat threat. This may be the result of party ideology. The Democratic Party tends to support causes that benefit social welfare programs and fewer restrictions on immigration. Increasing generalized social trust might contribute to a more favorable view of Democratic Party pursuits.

Interestingly, in Models 3 and 4 of Table 3.4, social media usage significantly predicts a perceived threat in Democrats, net of other controls. This inspired exploratory analysis to test the interaction between social media usage and political conservatism, but it was not significant. In essence, in this study, online activity does not significantly moderate political conservatism's impact on perceived Democratic Party threat. Since social media usage is predictive, it may be that exposure to online activism on social media is causing anti-Democrat sentiment. The ego-tribal trust distribution predicts a tension between egocentric and tribal identities, which also anticipates differences in political activism across parties. Online activism moderates political liberalism's effect on believing Republicans are a threat to American unity, but we do not see the same moderating effect on political conservatism predicting a Democratic Party threat.

Some control variables also had notable effects. As compared to White non-Hispanics, being Hispanic predicts outgroup party threat, net of other factors such as trust, social media usage, online activism, and political identity. This ethnic identity, targeted as it was during President Trump's time in office, may have impacted this outcome. In contrast to Whites, being Black or Hispanic also saw a significant lower level of threat in Democrats. Notably, other than age predicting a decrease in Republican threat in Model 1 of Table 3.4, the effects of sex, age, education, and income were not

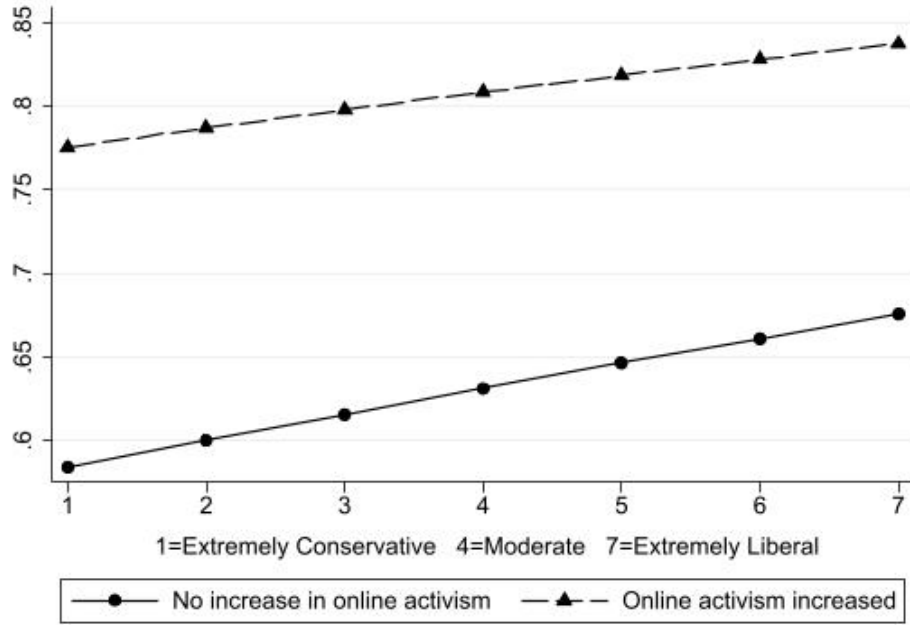


Figure 3.1. Predicted probability party outgroup is perceived as a threat to American unity by political identity and online activism during COVID-19.

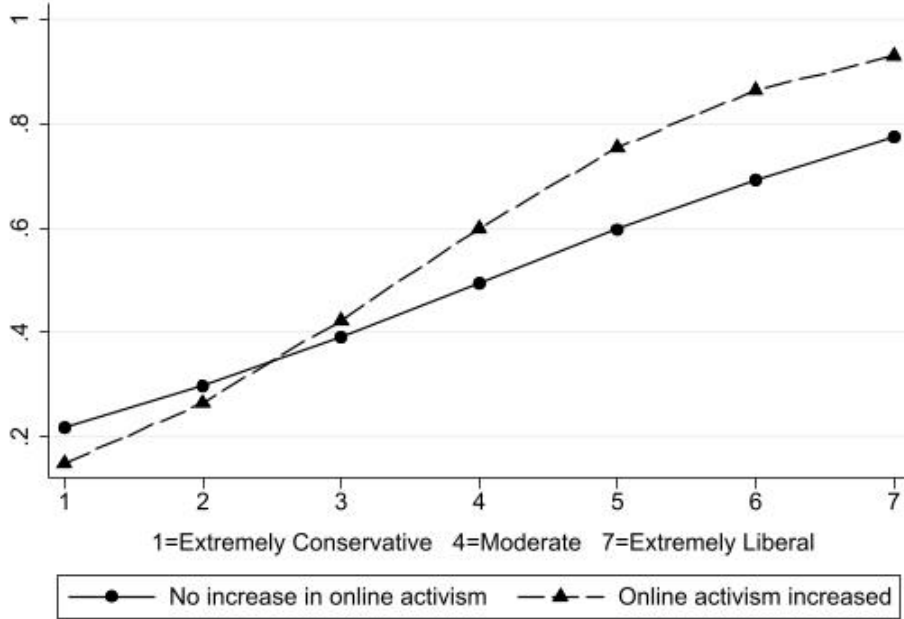


Figure 3.2. Predicted probability Republican party is a threat to American unity in conditional effects model.

significant in all other models. This finding suggests that social trust, online activity, and political identity are more powerful predictors of outgroup party threat.

One limitation of this study is that “activism” may not be a word that conservatives typically use to describe their political involvement and may be more associated with political liberalism. For instance, Pierson and Skocpol (2007) attribute the rise in American conservatism to the rise in liberal “activist” government. In the present study, it is the case that Democratic threat is predicted by online activism, but that effect washes out with the interaction of political conservatism. Another limitation is the nature of “online activism.” As aforementioned, this study cannot say with any certainty what online activism means to the respondent or what exactly the respondent posted online. Similarly, there is no way of knowing what respondents meant by outgroup party threat. Since data used in this analysis were restricted to a single cross-sectional survey, further studies should consider adding follow-up survey questions or interviews to gather this information. Lastly, it may be that the measure of outgroup party threat is exaggerated by a period effect—essentially as a result of heightened political tensions surrounding the Trump presidency, COVID-19, and race relations.

Nevertheless, this study advances much-needed research in the area of social trust, online activity, political identity, and party threat. The effect of online activism among political liberals is especially of note, since it clearly increases perceived outgroup party threat and highlights its potentially negative social effects on political discourse. As noted by Ojala et al., (2021), growing anger with platform governance at Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram has led to major efforts to shift to new platforms such as Parler, which was instrumental in the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol Building. Elon



Musk has made a bid to buy Twitter on account of his dissatisfaction with what he believes are restrictions on free speech, politically liberal bias, and poor handling of bots and misinformation. The Internet has proven to be an exceptional tool for promoting social movements (Kidd & McIntosh, 2016), but social media activism can also fall into a type of “slacktivism” known as “clicktivism” (Cabrera et al., 2017). According to Cabrera et al. (2017), slacktivism is described as political activity that feels good to participants but fails to materialize in formal organization or social change; and “clicktivism” is an online form that is basically a public display of morality with no real-world participation. Future studies on this topic might consider observing whether participants are involved in political activity outside of posting online.

Finally, roughly half of people who report being harassed online say it was because of their political views (Vogels, 2021). Victims come from both sides of the political aisle, and equal shares of Democrats and Republicans find it stressful to discuss politics with people who disagree (Green, 2021). The above findings may have salient considerations for social media companies interested in curtailing misinformation and increasing cross-party dialogue.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Trust, Media, and the COVID-19 Vaccine

#### *Introduction*

Political polarization in America is a hot topic in the social sciences. Although some suggest that political polarization in America is a myth (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008), data from the American National Election Studies and national exit polls show that ideological polarization has dramatically increased among the public, and it stimulates political participation (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008). Indeed, political polarization is reaching all-time highs, and it may be self-perpetuating as Americans overperceive polarization then react by distancing themselves from their party outgroup (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020).

Mass media play an important role in political polarization in the United States. This was especially apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research shows that political partisanship drives perception of mass media messaging surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, with Democrats more likely to favor and trust CNN and MSNBC, and Republicans more likely to favor Fox's coverage and distrust CNN and MSNBC (Jurkowitz et al., 2020). There is now a stark contrast in news sources that Americans trust; what was especially noticeable leading up to the 2020 presidential election year, has now been compounded by partisan differences in response to COVID-19 (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020; Ojala et al., 2021). Populism, doubt in the seriousness of COVID-19, and lack of trust in government have an impact on whether someone is likely to get vaccinated against COVID-19 (Edwards et al., 2021). Although the number of Americans

at the extreme ends of the political spectrum is less than 10%, their views are more likely to be presented in the news (Graber & Dunaway, 2018) which further distorts the reporting of actual facts (McCarty, 2012). Graber and Dunaway (2018) point to two major consequences of media bias: general dissatisfaction with, and decreasing trust in, journalism and mass media.

In this chapter, I analyze the polarizing ideological position of distrust in the COVID-19 vaccine (being “antivax”). I build on what is learned from Chapters Two and Three about the relationships among politics, religion, and media usage and their effects on social trust. The research questions driving this study are: What effect do conservative media have on distrust of the COVID-19 vaccine? Do generalized social trust, education, and age play a role? No study has explored these relationships to date. In what follows I will review literature on politics surrounding responses to COVID-19, the role of mass media, and the effects of age and education on attitudes toward the COVID-19 vaccine. A theoretical framework for understanding the role of trust is put forth, and a number of hypotheses are presented and tested with national survey data.

### *Literature Review*

#### *The Politics of COVID-19*

The global pandemic of COVID-19 proved a crisis for public health, global economies, and for politics. COVID-19 spread around the world after the first case was reported in Wuhan, China in December 2019. It prompted immediate national quarantines, travel restrictions, and a race to find a vaccine. As of late 2022, there were more than one-half billion cases and over six million deaths worldwide, but the rapid response from pharmaceutical companies and mass vaccination campaigns led to nearly

12 billion vaccine doses being administered (*Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, 2022*).

Despite three-quarters of Americans getting vaccinated (Gramlich, 2022), herd immunity has come at the cost of increasing political divisiveness around the handling of the pandemic (J. Green et al., 2020). Studies have shown that Republicans and independents are less trusting of the scientists working to understand COVID-19 than Democrats (Evans & Hargittai, 2020), and the partisan divide in vaccine hesitancy has increased with time (Cowan et al., 2021). Scholars have noted conservative religious individuals are consistently less likely to trust the scientific community (Gauchat, 2012). Recent research revealed that 61% of religious individuals trust clergy, which is a greater percentage than trust the Center for Disease Control, elected officials, or the news media (Nortey & Lipka, 2021). Race is also influential on vaccine attitudes, as African Americans are less trusting of health and science communities compared with whites (Batelaan, 2022).

Although political identity/party, race, and religion are predictive of sentiment toward scientific authorities, when asked why they would or would not get vaccinated against COVID-19, most Americans say they trust health professionals, but are very distrusting of media. Between August 2020 and February 2021, Steelfisher et al. (2021) examined 39 nationally representative randomized polls to better understand public willingness or unwillingness to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Among those who said they would “definitely” or “probably” get vaccinated, 83% wanted to protect their families and themselves, and among those who would “probably not” or “definitely not” get vaccinated, 71% cited concerns about side effects from the vaccine. Whereas 58% of

the sample trust health professionals “a great deal” or “quite a bit” as a source of information about coronavirus vaccines, a meager 16% said they trust news media—the same percent as trust Donald Trump. In other words, there is little public faith in news media to report with unbiased objectivity about the coronavirus.

### *Mass Media and the COVID-19 Vaccine*

Mass media contributed to political polarization surrounding responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the vaccine. Mainstream media are known for being politically partisan due to business interests, where marketing toward and generating revenue from a particular viewership determines distorted content (Graber & Dunaway, 2018). Politically biased media affects social behavior as misinformation grows (Groseclose, 2012; Mitchell & Walker, 2021).

A study of major cable TV outlets showed Americans perceive the COVID-19 outbreak differently based on their main news source (Jurkowitz & Mitchell, 2020). Around half of political conservatives in the United States are also theologically conservative protestants (Gross, 2013). Politically conservative media tend to be more sympathetic to Judeo-Christian views as evidenced by Fox News (Ridgely, 2020). Evidence of ideological selectivity bias in media use was also highlighted by Iyengar and Hahn (2009), who used an online experiment to investigate who preferred Fox News. Republicans and conservatives avoided CNN and NPR and focused on Fox; Democrats and liberals embraced CNN and NPR equally and avoided Fox News. Mainstream media also curates content it obtains from political elites, and there is evidence of stark contrasts in elite messaging during the pandemic. Green et al., (2020) revealed that members of the U.S. House and Senate greatly differed in their responses to COVID-19 based on an

analysis of their official Twitter accounts. Democrats' responses included concerns for public health and American workers, whereas Republicans focused more on China and businesses. In addition to political bias in media, the overall level of "outrage" adds to the intensity of the media messaging, which Sobieraj and Berry (2011) found comes more from conservative than liberal media. Conservative media were more likely to endorse views of Donald Trump, who was President of the United States during the first year of the pandemic, and who often disagreed with leading scientists on the nature of the disease and possible treatments (Evans & Hargittai, 2020; Ojala et al., 2021). In light of the above, I hypothesize the following:

H1: Consumption of politically conservative media will predict distrust of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Mass media bias has affected public responses to the COVID-19 vaccine. Research by Jurkowitz and Mitchell (2020) at Pew showed that 79% of Fox News consumers believe mainstream media have exaggerated the risks of COVID-19, compared with 54% of CNN viewers and 35% of MSNBC viewers. Ananyev et al., (2021) documented the causal effects of Fox News on physical distancing during the national emergency declaration in the United States by analyzing zip-code-level mobility using Facebook location data and GPS pings from 15-17 million smartphones (Ananyev et al., 2021). They unveiled surprising differences in distance traveled during the pandemic based on locations that included Fox News in the neighborhood cable selection. Fox News exposure led to greater distance traveled and a decrease in the probability of staying home during emergency lockdowns. I suspect that those who were less likely to quarantine and practice physical distance were influenced by the belief media exaggerated the risks of COVID-19. This leads to Hypothesis 2a:

H2a: Believing the dangers of COVID-19 are exaggerated by media will predict distrust of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Attitudes toward vaccines in general and the COVID-19 vaccine also vary by education, with lower levels of education associated with distrust in vaccines (Hefferon & Funk, 2020; Piltch-Loeb et al., 2021). Increasing education also attenuates the effect of an engaged God-image on mistrusting the COVID-19 vaccine, suggesting that increasing education exposes individuals to scientific knowledge and critical thinking skills that may challenge religious responses to things like COVID-19 (Upenieks et al., 2022). But, interestingly, in another study the effect of increasing education washed out with the inclusion of variables such as having populist sentiments, lack of confidence in government, and believing “too much fuss” is being made about COVID-19 (Edwards et al., 2021). For this reason, I expect that believing the dangers of COVID-19 are exaggerated by media will moderate the effect of increasing education on distrust in the COVID-19 vaccine. I hypothesize:

H2b: Believing the dangers of COVID-19 are exaggerated by media will moderate the effect of education on distrust of the COVID-19 vaccine.

### *Age and the COVID-19 Vaccine*

Even before a vaccine was released, some scholars estimated strategies for optimal vaccine allocation given a variety of metrics. Priority was given to persons over 60 years of age and those with comorbidities (Bubar et al., 2021). Some argued that to minimize deaths, older adults should get the vaccine in cases where vaccine effectiveness was low, but the young if effectiveness was high (Matrajt et al., 2021). When emergency authorization was issued for the use of Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines in December 2020, preference was given to health care personnel and long-term

care facility residents (Gee, 2021), but then the formal recommendation from the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention was to prioritize persons older than 65, essential workers, and those under 65 with high-risk medical conditions (Dooling, 2021). From the outset, then, older adults were getting vaccinated at higher rates than younger adults. Younger adults were less likely to experience severe health conditions as a result of contracting the disease (Barek et al., 2020). Perhaps this is why older individuals were less likely to resist or become hesitant of COVID-19 vaccination (Edwards et al., 2021), and younger individuals were more likely to refuse the vaccine compared to those over 65 (Piltch-Loeb et al., 2021). Increasing age is associated with significantly less mistrust of the COVID-19 vaccine net of religious beliefs, political party identification, and other controls (Upenieks et al., 2022).

The effect of age on COVID-19 vaccine sentiment may also be intertwined with political party and ideology. Less than one-third of young Republicans versus two-thirds of young Democrats have said they would get vaccinated (Cox & Goldstein, 2021). This signals that the combination of youth and messaging is contributing to antivax sentiment of young conservatives while their older conservative counterparts are open to getting vaccinated at similar rates to Democrats. Perhaps young conservatives are weary of supposed risks from the vaccine that could affect them later in life, especially when their odds of severe illness from contracting COVID-19 are much less than older people. Young people who get their news from social media are aware of the bias and fragmentation, and as a result their self-image as contributing citizen is degraded (Malin, 2015). This in turn may contribute to less conformity to civic expectations and a



resistance to vaccination. Consequently, significant conditional effects between conservative media and age are expected. Young Americans that view conservative media may have internalized the partisanship but lack the health risk factor that older conservatives experience when contracting COVID-19. Younger consumers of conservative media, then, are expected to have significantly higher levels of distrust in the vaccine (versus non-conservative media viewers) compared to their older counterparts. I expect the following:

H3a: Increasing age will attenuate the effect of consumption of politically conservative media on distrust of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Generalized social trust is also a factor I expect will contribute to an individual's willingness to trust the COVID-19 vaccine, since distrust in media is a current issue (Jurkowitz & Mitchell, 2020), and distrust in government and science are known predictors of vaccine distrust (Edwards et al., 2021; Evans & Hargittai, 2020). Scholars differentiate between generalized and particularized trust, where particularized trust refers to in-group preference, and generalized trust is correlated with openness to outgroups and more civic engagement (Uslaner, 2008). This study tests the effect of media consumption on adults' distrust of the COVID-19 vaccine given their age and levels of generalized trust.

Some scholars believe social trust is often the result of our social networks (Botsman, 2017). Others believe that social trust is primarily based on rational choice (Coleman, 1990; Luhmann, 1979). Still others contend that trust is related to epistemological or psychological capacity (Hardin, 1993). I put forth a theory of ego-tribal trust distribution that suggests manifestations of trust are the result of egocentric and tribal forces—that despite tribal identification, an individual is often ego-centric—

and on this continuum the tension results in various and sometimes unpredictable outcomes. Shweder (1984) argued that societies around the world differ in their perceptions of self because of the way they answer cultural questions about the ordering of society. Western societies tend to subordinate society to the individual (egocentric), and Eastern societies—including most of the ancient world—have chosen to preference the larger group over against the needs of individuals (sociocentric). Older adults are more likely to suffer severe health problems from COVID-19 than younger people, inciting a strong self-interest to trust the vaccine. So, although increasing age is known to be a predictor of being pro-vaccine (Upenieks et al., 2022), I believe trust will mediate this relationship because of the combination of personal risk and willingness to extend trust outside of one’s tribe. For older Americans, those with a higher level of generalized trust—that is, those who are more likely to believe people in general can be trusted—will be less likely to distrust the COVID-19 vaccine. I hypothesize the following:

H3b: Generalized trust will mediate the effect of age on distrust of the COVID-19 vaccine.

### *Measures and Method*

Data for this study also come from the 2021 Baylor Religion Survey, Wave 6 (BRS), administered by Gallup. Participants were randomly selected from all 50 states, including the District of Columbia. Mail surveys were administered in English and Spanish. Out of 11,000 households contacted, a total of 1,248 people responded for a response rate of 11.3%. The low response rate could be the result of collection during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Dependent Variables*

The dependent variable is based on a question about the COVID-19 vaccine: “Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: A vaccine for COVID-19 should not be trusted.” Response options were *Strongly disagree* = 1; *Disagree* = 2; *Neither agree nor disagree* = 3; *Agree* = 4; *Strongly agree* = 5. To capture those who unequivocally distrusted the vaccine, *Strongly agree* and *Agree* were set to 1; *Strongly disagree*, *Disagree*, and *Neither agree nor disagree* were coded 0. The Brant test of ordered logistic regression in Stata 16.1 signaled that the proportional odds assumption was violated, supporting my use of a dummy variable instead of an ordinal structure.

### *Independent Variables*

The first independent variable measures the source of political news for respondents. “In the past week, did you get your political news from any of the following sources: Fox News,” *Yes* = 1 or *No* = 0. The possibilities for media viewership in the BRS 2020 are ABC/CBS/NBC (American Broadcasting Company/Columbia Broadcasting System/National Broadcasting Company), Breitbart, CNN (Cable News Network), Daily Caller, Fox News, Huffington, New York Times, PBS/NPR (Public Broadcasting Service/National Public Radio), Politico, Rush Limbaugh Show (radio), Sean Hannity Show (radio), Vox, and the Washington Post. Fox News was chosen as a measure of conservative media in this analysis because of its politically conservative content (Groseclose, 2012; Groseclose & Milyo, 2005; Kavanagh et al., 2019) and its popularity with politically conservative consumers (Graber & Dunaway, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2014). A factor analysis of Fox News with more far-right-leaning media (Breitbart,

Daily Caller, Rush Limbaugh Show (radio), & Sean Hannity Show (radio) did not reveal adequate internal consistency, and case counts for these media in the BRS were low in comparison to Fox News.

The second independent variable is perceived media bias. It is based on the question: “Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: The dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic are exaggerated by mainstream media.” Response options were *Strongly disagree* = 1; *Disagree* = 2; *Neither agree nor disagree* = 3; *Agree* = 4; *Strongly agree* = 5. This variable was recoded as dichotomous to analyze those who clearly harbor negative views of media coverage surrounding the pandemic, with *Strongly disagree, Disagree, and Neither agree nor disagree* = 0; and *Agree and Strongly agree* = 1. Education was measured with the question, “What is the highest level of school you have completed?” Answers were *8th grade or less* = 1; *9th to 12th grade* = 2; *High school graduate* = 3; *Technical, trade, vocational, or business school or program after high school* = 4; *Some college* = 5; *Two-year associate degree* = 6; *Four-year bachelor's degree* = 7; *Some postgraduate or professional schooling after graduating college* = 8; and, *Postgraduate or professional degree, including master's, doctorate, medical, or law degree* = 9. To test for the attenuating effect of believing that dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic are exaggerated by media on education, an interaction term is constructed by multiplying conservative media\*education.

Age comes from, “What is your age?” Recorded responses ranged from 18-98. Another interaction term tests the attenuating effects of age and consuming news from Fox. A nonlinear relationship is expected, where age decreases the effect of Fox News on believing the COVID-19 vaccine cannot be trusted. Generalized trust comes from the

question, “How much would you say that you trust people in general? *A lot* = 4, *Some* = 3, *Only a little* = 2, or *Not at all* = 1.”

### *Controls*

Controls include whether the respondent contracted COVID-19 or experienced the death of a close relative or friend due to COVID-19 because personal experiences may influence attitudes about the vaccine (Upenieks et al., 2022). Respondents were asked, “As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you... Been infected by COVID-19?” Answers were *Yes* = 1 and *No* = 0. They were also asked, “As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you...(Lost a close relative or friend to COVID-19)? (*Yes* = 1; *No* = 0).

Other controls include liberal media consumption, political conservatism, religiosity, race, gender, and income. Three types of liberal media are controlled for to examine if consumption of politically conservative media has a different effect on COVID-19 attitudes than consumption of politically liberal media. Liberal media are measured using the media consumption question above and include the following most-consumed media in the BRS recoded as dummy variables: ABC/CBS/NBC (*Yes* = 1; *No* = 0); CNN (*Yes* = 1, *No* = 0); PBS/NPR (*Yes* = 1, *No* = 0). ABC/CBS/NBC are broadcast media outlets that have trended liberal but have historically been less provocative in content compared with cable TV such as CNN (Kavanagh et al., 2019), and PBS/NPR are not-for-profit, government funded, but still lean liberal (Graber & Dunaway, 2018). The control variable for political identity is measured with the question, “How would you describe yourself politically?” Respondents could choose *Extremely conservative* = 1,

*Conservative* = 2, *Leaning conservative* = 3, *Moderate* = 4, *Leaning liberal* = 5, *Liberal* = 6, and *Extremely liberal* = 7. This was reversed coded to measure conservatism.

Religiosity is used as a control because increasing religiosity has been shown to factor into unwillingness to trust the COVID-19 vaccine (Upenieks et al., 2022), and predicts anti-vaccine attitudes (Whitehead & Perry, 2020b). The religiosity variable is a composite of salience, attendance, prayer, and reading sacred text. Religious salience is measured with the question, “How religious do you consider yourself to be?” Answers included in the range are *Not religious* = 1, *Slightly religious* = 2, *Moderately religious* = 3, and *Very religious* = 4. Attendance is measured with the question, “How often do you attend religious services at a place of worship?” Possible responses include, *Less than once a year* = 1, *Once or twice a year* = 2, *Several times a year* = 3, *Once a month* = 4, *2-3 times a month* = 5, *About once a week* = 6, and *Several times a week* = 7. Personal prayer is queried by asking, “About how often do you spend time alone praying outside of religious services?” Possible answers are *Never* = 0, *Only on certain occasions* = 1, *Once a week or less* = 2, *A few times a week* = 3, *Once a day* = 4, and *Several times a day* = 5. Respondents were also asked, “Outside of attending religious services, about how often do you spend time alone reading the Bible, Koran, Torah, or other sacred book? Answers were *Never* = 0, *Less than once a year* = 1, *Once or twice a year* = 2, *Several times a year* = 3, *Once a month* = 4, *2-3 times a month* = 5, *About once a week* = 6, *Several times a week* = 7, and *Daily* = 8. Cronbach’s alpha for the index of religiosity is 0.80. See Baker et al., (2016) for a similar index.

Race and ethnicity come from the following questions: “Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or other Spanish

origin?” Possible answers were: *Yes* = 1, *No* = 2, *I don't know* = 0; and, “Which of the following describes your race? Please mark all that apply.” Answers were: *White, Black or African American, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander*. These were recoded into dummy variables of White Non-Hispanic, Black Non-Hispanic, Hispanic, and Other Race Non-Hispanic. Answers for “What is your gender?” were *Male* = 1, *Female* = 2, and *Other (please specify)* = 3. This was recoded as a binary variable where *Female* = 1, *Not Female* = 0.

Income comes from the question, “By your best estimate, what was your total household income last year, before taxes? Answers range from *\$10,000 or less* = 1; *\$10,001 - \$20,000* = 2; *\$20,001 - \$35,000* = 3; *\$35,001 - \$50,000* = 4; *\$50,001 - \$100,000* = 5; *\$100,001 - \$150,000* = 6; *\$150,001 or more* = 7.

### *Method*

Three logistic regression models were employed to test the hypotheses with distrust of the COVID-19 vaccine as an outcome. In Model 1, I test for direct effects and mediating effects of trust on age. Model 2 tests the conditional effects of education and believing the dangers of COVID-19 have been exaggerated by media. Model 3 tests the interaction of Fox News consumption and age. To test mediation, I employ the KHB method in Stata that has proven appropriate for logistic regression and otherwise nonlinear models (Breen et al., 2013).

The sample size in the present study is 928, with nearly 26% of cases missing on one or more variables. Missing values were primarily related to religiosity. To mitigate missing data, multiple imputation by chained equations was implemented and any missing on the dependent variable were dropped (Royston, 2005; von Hippel, 2007).

Results were similar in both unimputed and imputed datasets but estimates in this analysis are based on imputed values.

### *Findings*

Table 4.1 displays the descriptive statistics for the sample. There are 29.5% of respondents who *strongly agree* or *agree* that the COVID-19 vaccine should not be trusted. Close to 40% of respondents consumed Fox News in the last week. Around one-third believe the dangers of COVID-19 has been exaggerated by media. Average education is just over a two-year associate degree. Average age is 53 years old. Generalized trust is on average a little less than *Some*. About 16% have contracted COVID-19, and 23.4% have lost a close relative or friend to the disease. There are 63.3% who consumed their political news from ABC/CBS/NBC in the past week, 50% viewed CNN, and 41% viewed PBS/NPR. The mean political identity is moderate. Whites are 67.6% of the sample, Blacks 8.7%, Hispanics 15.1%, and Other races 8.6%. Females make up 53.6% of the sample, and the average household income is \$35,001 - \$50,000.

Table 4.2 presents logistic regression models predicting a vaccine for COVID-19 should not be trusted. In Model 1, politically conservative media significantly predict distrust of the COVID-19 vaccine. Hypothesis 1 is therefore supported. Consuming Fox News predicts 62% higher odds of believing the vaccine for COVID-19 should not be trusted. Model 1 also shows that believing the dangers of COVID-19 are exaggerated by media predicts 137% higher odds of vaccine distrust. This affirms Hypothesis 2a.

Model 2 reveals that among those with an MA or PhD, those who do not believe the dangers of COVID-19 have been exaggerated by media have a 15% predicted probability of distrusting the vaccine. However, the conditional effect of believing media



have exaggerated the dangers of COVID-19 among those with an MA or PhD results in a 45% predicted probability of vaccine distrust. The interaction is significant and supports Hypothesis 2b. Figure 4.1 is a visualization of the effects with predicted probabilities.

Table 4.1. Descriptive Statistics ( $N = 916$ )

Variable	Mean or %	SD	Range
COVID-19 vaccine should not be trusted	29.48		0-1
Got news from FOX in past week	38.5		0-1
Danger of Covid-19 exaggerated by media	32.8		0-1
Education	6.397	2.061	1-9
Age	53.25	16.946	18-98
Generalized trust	1.809	.736	0-3
Respondent had Covid-19	15.9		0-1
Respondent lost close relative or friend to COVID-19	23.4		0-1
Got news from ABC/CBS/NBC in past week	63.3		0-1
Got news from CNN in past week	48.0		0-1
Got news from PBS/NPR in past week	40.9		0-1
Political conservatism	3.959	1.654	1-7
Religiosity (standardized index)	-.062	.79	-1.26-1.543
White Non-Hispanic	67.6		0-1
Black Non-Hispanic	8.7		0-1
Hispanic	15.1		0-1
Other Race Non-Hispanic	8.6		0-1
Female	53.6		0-1
Income	4.769	1.635	1-7

Age significantly attenuates the effect of politically conservative media on antivax sentiment in Model 3, affirming Hypothesis 3a. The conditional effect of a one-year increase in age among those who watched Fox News in the past week is a 3.5% decrease in the odds of distrusting the vaccine. Figure 4.2 displays the curvilinear effect of age, as it moderates the effect of watching Fox News. Finally, the mediating effect of trust on age is tested in Model 1, with significant results. With the inclusion of control variables, the KHB mediation analysis reveals 13.91% of the effect of increasing age on distrust in

the COVID-19 vaccine can be explained by generalized trust ( $p < .000$ ) (Breen et al., 2013). This partial mediation supports Hypothesis 3b.

In all models, significant controls are contracting COVID-19, viewing PBS/NPR, and race. Contracting COVID-19 predicts distrust of the vaccine. Viewing PBS/NPR is negatively associated with distrust. Being Black predicts distrust toward the vaccine relative to Whites. Somewhat surprisingly, political conservatism, religiosity, sex, and income are not significant.

### *Discussion and Conclusion*

The COVID-19 pandemic that spread around the world in early 2020 caused widespread lockdowns and polarized opinions about who was to blame and how to treat the disease. Studies have researched political polarization in the United States in the form of ideological selectivity in choosing news media (Graber & Dunaway, 2018). This political selectivity has extended to preferred coronavirus reporting, where one news outlet is trusted over another (Jurkowitz & Mitchell, 2020). Although we know that age and education affect willingness to get vaccinated (Edwards et al., 2021), and that Democrats are less likely to distrust the COVID-19 vaccine compared to Republicans (Upenieks et al., 2022), we had yet to understand the relationship between politically slanted media and distrust in the vaccine by generalized trust, education, and age. In this study I have attempted to fill this gap. The findings help illustrate the nature of political polarization in the United States through the examination of a politically hot-button issue such as COVID-19 vaccination.

Table 4.2. Logistic Regression Predicting a Vaccine for COVID-19 should not be Trusted

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Got news from FOX in past week	1.620* (0.359)	1.697* (0.379)	1.502 (0.340)
Danger of Covid-19 exaggerated by media	2.367*** (0.556)	0.775 (0.446)	2.279*** (0.542)
Education	0.830*** (0.043)	0.750*** (0.049)	0.832*** (0.044)
Age	0.981** (0.006)	0.981** (0.006)	0.993 (0.008)
<i>Interaction Terms</i>			
Danger of Covid-19 exaggerated by media * Education		1.260* (0.116)	
Age * Got news from FOX in past week			0.972* (0.012)
Generalized Trust	0.687** (0.087)	0.700** (0.090)	0.680** (0.088)
<i>Controls</i>			
Respondent had Covid-19	1.749* (0.437)	1.698* (0.421)	1.719* (0.435)
Respondent lost close relative or friend to COVID-19	1.158 (0.273)	1.137 (0.267)	1.137 (0.267)
Got news from ABC/CBS/NBC in past week	0.675 (0.161)	0.656 (0.159)	0.640 (0.155)
Got news from CNN in past week	0.847 (0.203)	0.842 (0.206)	0.760 (0.184)
Got news from PBS/NPR in past week	0.512** (0.127)	0.523** (0.131)	0.505** (0.128)
Political Conservatism	1.177 (0.104)	1.158 (0.100)	1.163 (0.103)
Religiosity	1.064 (0.155)	1.060 (0.155)	1.070 (0.157)
Race (ref: White Non-Hispanic)			
Black Non-Hispanic	2.812** (1.021)	2.896** (1.062)	2.747** (0.984)
Hispanic	1.306 (0.357)	1.299 (0.358)	1.260 (0.347)
Other Non-Hispanic	1.152 (0.384)	1.146 (0.381)	1.122 (0.375)
Female	1.295 (0.261)	1.310 (0.263)	1.295 (0.263)
Income	0.885 (0.059)	0.882 (0.058)	0.886 (0.059)
Constant	1.445 (0.879)	2.471 (1.567)	1.827 (1.134)
Observations	1,225	1,225	1,225

\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05; Odds Ratios; Multiple Imputation Data; Weighted

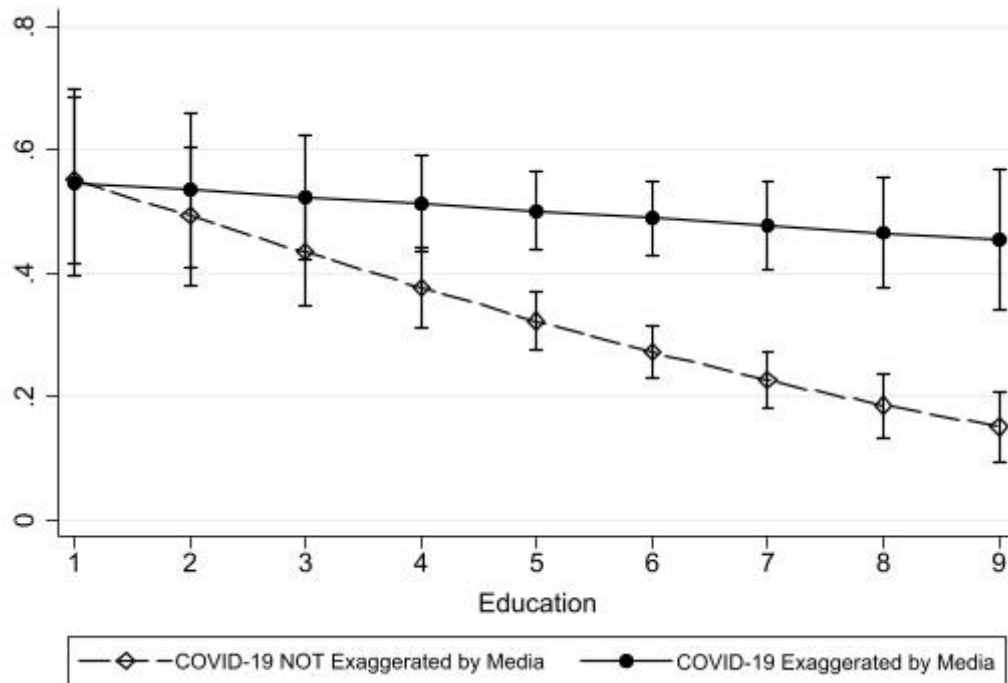


Figure 4.1. Predicted probability respondent believes the COVID-19 vaccine cannot be trusted by education and believing media have exaggerated dangers of COVID-19.

Research on media and political polarization in the United States has largely confirmed the steady widening between Republicans' and Democrats' perceptions of their outgroup's beliefs (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020). There is also a decrease in the number of individuals willing to trust media with perceived political bias (Jurkowitz et al., 2020). The cleavage between Democrats and Republicans, and between liberal media and Fox News, has also affected perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic (Jurkowitz & Mitchell, 2020). My findings show that net of other factors, watching Fox News predicts distrust in the COVID-19 vaccine. Conservative media are more predictive of distrust than liberal media. Politically liberal forms of broadcast news (ABC/CBS/NBC) and cable network news (CNN) are not statistically significant. Consuming the politically liberal

government-funded PBS/NPR is predictive of a significant negative association with distrust in the COVID-19 vaccine.

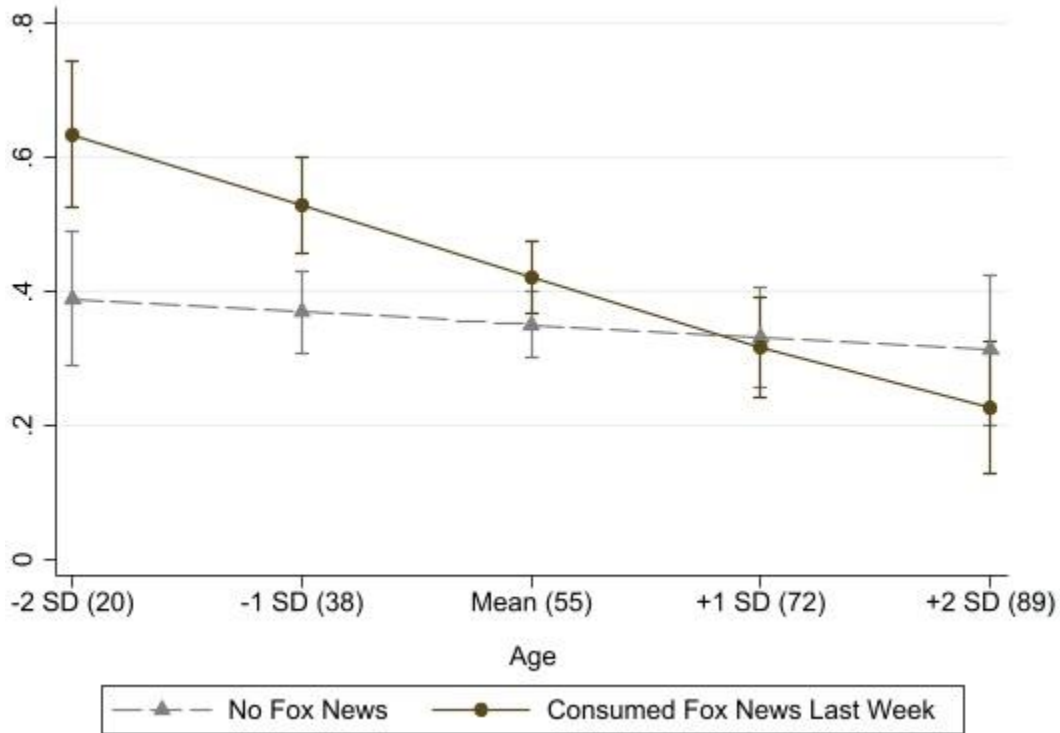


Figure 4.2. Predicted probability respondent believes the COVID-19 vaccine cannot be trusted by age and consuming Fox News.

Believing media have exaggerated the dangers of COVID-19 also predicts distrust in the vaccine. It also significantly attenuates the effect of education: for those with an educational attainment of at least some trade school, the conditional effect is significant. To understand manifestations of trust from an ego-tribal perspective is to grapple with tensions associated with personal risks and desires in dialogue with tribal allegiances. Although an individual may feel warranted to distrust the vaccine on account of believing media have exaggerated the dangers of COVID-19, there is a significant positive effect on distrust in the COVID-19 vaccine from conservative media when controlling for it. This points to a potential tribal influence coming from politically motivated journalism.

In addition, the interaction of age and the consumption of politically conservative media is significant. The theoretical framing of ego-tribal trust distribution suggests that although the tribal influence of conservative media among young Fox viewers is evidenced by a significantly higher predicted probability of distrusting the vaccine, the egocentric needs of older individuals are a strong counteracting force. The personal risks associated with contracting COVID-19 at an older age far outweigh the conservative media messaging. The shift from trusting tribe to trusting the vaccine is motivated by egocentric needs.

Trust partially and significantly mediates the effect of age on distrusting the COVID-19 vaccine. Increasing age may alert individuals to their own increased likelihood of severe health problems if they contract the disease, but generalized trust in others appears to matter too. Increasing age may instill an egocentric response in lower odds of COVID-19 distrust but extending beyond tribal influence and trusting in a more sociocentric fashion significantly explains some of the effect of age. Also, because increasing age attenuates the effect of Fox News on distrusting the vaccine, and trust mediates the effect of age, there may be further research warranted on the nature of generalized trust on willingness to get vaccinated.

In sum, willingness to trust the COVID-19 vaccine varies significantly by type of media consumption, beliefs about media, generalized trust, age, education, and race. Net of controls, political conservatism was not significant, suggesting the impact of media consumption may have more explanatory power than political ideology alone. Political polarization over responses to COVID-19 were played out in mainstream media, offering us a glimpse into consumers' differences in willingness to trust the vaccine.

One limitation of this study is that we do not know why the respondents believe the COVID-19 vaccine can or cannot be trusted. Follow-up studies might consider including more questions about whether trust and distrust are directed at the government, the pharmaceutical companies, or the science behind the vaccine. We also are not sure if the respondent is generally antivax. Perhaps controlling for antivax sentiment in general may yield different results. Additional variables could be added to better understand respondents' vaccine attitudes, such as measures of trust in vaccines themselves, but also feelings toward the health industry, preference for home remedies, or participation in other unconventional health care practices. Another consideration is the timing of the survey. The survey was administered roughly a month after the vaccine's release, so some respondents may have been hesitant to trust the vaccine. Distrust in the vaccine may have decreased over time, even for consumers of conservative media. This study contributes to a growing body of literature by examining the effects of media and trust on a politically divisive issue. The relationships of media, trust, and politics warrant further investigation, and this project has contributed to filling the gap.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

This project offers three studies on generalized social trust, but they are small pieces in a much larger puzzle. Indeed, social trust is a complex topic researched in different ways by multiple disciplines—economics, health, sociology, psychology, etc.—and theories as to its motivations are multifarious (Botsman, 2017; Erikson, 1993; Fukuyama, 1995; Glaeser et al., 1999; Luhmann, 1979; Putnam, 2014). In sociology, trust has been studied because it is considered a glue that holds a functioning society together; it predicts social engagement, and inclusion toward outsiders (Putnam, 2014). Sociologists typically separate social trust into “particularized” and “generalized,” where particularized trust refers to trust toward in-groups and social bonding (family, friends, neighbors), and generalized trust is toward out-groups, or social bridging (Uslaner, 2008). In this project, I have focused on how much a person feels they can trust people in general—in other words, how much they are willing to manifest or distribute trust toward others. Especially given the social upheaval over the COVID-19 pandemic, I was curious how much the American public would extend trust toward people and particularly toward the vaccine, as trust in the vaccine is an extension of trust in health officials, the government, and pharmaceutical companies. There was also social tension around President Trump and his 2020 campaign, so it was timely to include a study on trust and political party threat. Furthermore, there are large gaps in the literature regarding the effects of religiosity, political identity, Internet usage, and moral authority on generalized



trust. These predictors are important considerations when researching the origins of social trust in the contemporary era. No studies have predicted perceptions of political threat based on online activism, social media usage, political identity, and generalized trust. In addition, no study to date has explored trust in the COVID-19 vaccine given the combination of media preferences, age, education, and generalized trust.

This dissertation has attempted to fill these gaps in current literature by presenting a new theory of trust distribution with greater explanatory power than theories that over-emphasize rational choice, epistemological/psychological, or network frameworks. The theory of ego-tribal trust distribution suggests there is tension among the above frameworks. Instead of jumping to a new theory when one fails to account for observed reality, ego-tribalism points to the dialectical relation between the self, tribe, and society. Individual rationality, including psychological capacity, personal epistemologies, and social networks all impact levels of trust. But manifestations of trust—including where, how, and who to trust—are largely dependent on an internal dialogue. Self-interest, tribal allegiance, and societal pressures all play a role. With the three studies in this dissertation, several hypotheses drawn from this theoretical framing were tested.

In Chapter Two, I find that bonding characteristics that depend on particularized trust, such as judgmental God-image and moral individualism, negatively predict generalized social trust. Increasing religiosity is not significant, net of God-image and controls, challenging previous research that expects religiosity to be associated with increases in generalized trust. Moderate religiosity significantly amplifies the effects of a judgmental God-image relative to high religiosity. Bridging behaviors such as donating and Internet usage predict generalized trust. The theory of ego-tribal trust distribution

illustrates how individual religiosity and moral authority relate to generalized trust as they depend on levels of self-interest vis-à-vis tribal bonding over certain beliefs and behaviors. Generalized social trust largely follows from an individual's level of commitment to tribal belief structures.

In Chapter Three, results from binary logistic regression models predicting outgroup party threat show that, regardless of political identity, an increase in social trust predicts a lower probability of outgroup party threat. An increase in social media usage does not predict outgroup threat but increases in online activism during COVID-19 does. Strikingly, online activism amplifies the effect of political liberalism on perceived Republican threat, pointing to what I argue is a tribal consequence. There may be something about the politically liberal *habitus* that is manifest in online activism and stirs the pot of outgroup threat. The Internet is an exceptional tool for promoting social movements (Kidd & McIntosh, 2016), but to counter “slacktivism” and “clicktivism” (Cabrera et al., 2017), strong supporters of social movements online may be more aggressive in their online campaigning against their perceived outgroup.

In Chapter Four, findings reveal that consuming Fox News predicts distrust of the COVID-19 vaccine. Believing the dangers of COVID-19 are exaggerated by mainstream media predicts the COVID-19 vaccine should not be trusted. Surprisingly, this belief significantly attenuates the negative effect of increasing education on distrusting the COVID-19 vaccine. Younger adults are more likely than older adults to distrust the vaccine, but increasing age attenuates the effect of conservative media; furthermore, social trust partially mediates the effect of age. In sum, older conservatives are in tension with the tribal narrative that predicts distrust in the COVID-19 vaccine and their own

self-interest to protect their health. That is, older adults that consume conservative media are more trusting of the vaccine than their younger counterparts on account of self-preservation.

### *An Improved Theory of Trust*

Theories of trust have lacked the robustness needed to explain the simultaneous ego-centric and tribal motivations underlying its distribution. The theory of ego-tribal trust distribution harmonizes and improves on previous theories on trust. Rational choice, psychological/epistemological, and network/distribution approaches to trust distribution fail to satisfactorily account for the unpredictabilities and irrationalities of self and tribal interests, including the oft-ignored nature of indifference and blind trust. These existing theories of trust are overly focused on the knowledge of the truster and do not account for the intuitive motivations of self and tribe in distributions of trust. Crucially with this study, using something as lifesaving as the COVID-19 vaccine as an outcome variable, we are able to predict the impacts of tribal identities associated with media consumption and political identity in concert with the effects of age and generalized trust. This allows us to theorize how self-preservation, or egocentrism, redistributes trust toward a vaccine when the tribal identity should predict distrust.

Perhaps a rational choice argument could explain why an older conservative would want to take the vaccine, but it fails to explain why the younger Fox News consumer is significantly more likely to distrust the vaccine. The network/distributive trust theorist would have to jump in to explain that it has to do with conservative social connections. But this fails to account for the differences in age cohorts. By placing trust on a continuum between egocentrism and tribalism, which is also in conversation with

the wider society, we can account for these differences. The theory of network/distributive trust may satisfactorily explain why activism among liberals predicts an increase in the belief Republicans are a threat to American unity because the liberal identity as activist may be based on social connections. But, the network theory of trust fails to explain how a respondent's personal feelings of generalized trust predict outgroup party threat—which is a psychological/epistemological component. Instead of having to jump from network theory to psychological theory, the ego-tribal perspective allows for this tension between tribal identity and personality. The ego-tribal theory of trust preserves individual agency and the influence of social networks and structures.

Shweder and Bourne (1984) argued that the concept of the person varies cross-culturally. Their anthropological study observed differences between two groups: 17 Americans from Chicago, IL and 17 Indian informants (Oriyas) from Bhubaneswar, Orissa. The participants were tasked with describing a close acquaintance's personality; i.e., character, nature, and behavior. The Oriyas described people in practical rather than abstract ways compared with the Americans. Oriyas narrated context-based actions that affected the community rather than abstract context-free terms. Americans would say a person is principled, but Oriyas would say "she does not disclose secrets." The American would tend to say, "he is aggressive," but the Oriyas would say "he shouts at his neighbors." From these examples and others, the researchers theorized cultures with a sociocentric culture subordinate the individual to the society, whereas egocentric cultures imagine society serves the interests of an "idealized autonomous, abstract individual existing free of society yet living in society" (Shweder et al., 1984:190).

Shweder and Bourne's (1984) theory is enlightening and resonates with the kind of individualism characteristic of American society that Bellah (2008) describes as expressive or utilitarian. Tribal identities may no longer be drawn from the small tight-knit communal groups that used to characterize mid-19<sup>th</sup> century America (Putnam, 2014). However, there are tribal identities that remain a salient part of the American ethos; albeit, political in nature, divided, and entrenched in a culture war (Hunter, 1991). Political ideologies also tap into different moral intuitions that tend to reflect our favored political party (Haidt, 2013). American society is individualistic but may not be as "autonomous" as suggested by Shweder and Bourne (1984), on account of group identities including political allegiances. Vaisey (2009) argued for a model of understanding culture that takes into account an individual's intuitive moral judgments and borrowed cultural scripts. Even if poorly articulated, an individual's post-hoc sense-making is predictive of later behavior. If we combine what we have learned from Shweder and Bourne (1984) with Vaisey's dual process model of culture, we are left with something like the ego-tribalism theory that I have put forth. The moral *habitus* for many Americans is derived from of political allegiance and personal sentiment and/or behavior. As Chapter Three has shown above, political identity (liberal) combined with individual behavior (posting activist content online) is predictive of believing the Republican party is a threat to American unity. Posting content online is a unilateral disclosure where egocentric motivations are at play, but it is often tied to a tribal identity. Many social media influencers and activists are monetized to post content, which is an archetypal example of egocentric motivation.

### *Directions for Future Research*

In my studies, I worked with a single measure of generalized trust from the Baylor Religion Surveys (BRS): “How much would you say that you trust people in general?” The General Social Survey (GSS) and the World Values Survey (WVS) measure generalized trust differently; they ask if “most people can be trusted” or “you can’t be too careful.” This dichotomous variable is slightly different than the one used in the BRS. The BRS’ question is a self-assessment of the respondent’s capacity to trust. The question in the GSS and WVS is an assessment of “most people’s” trustworthiness. I suggest future studies consider the respondent’s individual capacity versus their assessment of others. The WVS also includes extra measures of generalized trust such as trust in a person met for the first time, those from other nations, and those from other religions. These measures could be included in studies researching the locus of moral authority, religiosity, political identity, perceived party threat, Internet usage, online activism, COVID-19 vaccine sentiment, and other highly charged social issues.

The WVS includes measures of particularized trust that ask how much the respondent trusts family, personal acquaintances, and neighbors. In ancillary analysis, I found these measures to significantly predict “most people can be trusted” net of controls. Perhaps this is related to personality, or it could be a result of strong social bonds within an in-group that actually allow an individual to feel comfortable trusting outsiders. Other studies might consider looking at the effects of particularized trust on generalized trust as measured by whether the respondent feels *they* trust people in general. But most importantly, I believe studies using measures of particularized trust could extend research into online behavior, political identity, and social attitudes.

Future studies might also try to measure egocentrism, which could, among other things, be related to perceptions of moral superiority, economic self-interest, or perhaps a reaction to personal offense or fear. These factors might also translate to reduced generalized trust (or increased particularized trust). A qualitative component may be the best way to capture this, but additional survey questions may also help.

Focus groups, individual interviews, participant observation, and experiments could uncover the nuances of generalized trust, perceived outgroup threat, and distrust in the COVID-19 vaccine. Although survey data can reveal significant predictors, there are certainly more intricate motivations at work when dealing with issues related to social trust.

This project comes at a time of global uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic when social trust is under intense pressure. Social trust was on the decline long before the pandemic began (Fukuyama, 1995), even if information and communications technology (ICT) seems to bring society closer together (Botsman, 2017). On the contrary, the Internet may be creating more echo-chambers of like-minded individuals (Mitchell et al., 2014). Future research on the topic of social trust might look deeper at the effects of social media influencers by social movement and political ideology. Perhaps there are significant associations between certain movements and outcomes such as likelihood to vote, to participate in a rally, or to volunteer. There may be other outcomes of interest such as social attitudes about race, immigration, and abortion. Further studies might also evaluate the effects of social trust on workplace relationships and job satisfaction.

In sum, I believe that when researching social trust, measures that capture ego-tribalism will help researchers grapple with the tensions at play instead of having to jump from one theory to another. Rational choice and psychological/epistemological approaches capture much of the egocentrism I have described, and network/distribution theories around trust elucidate some of the tribal components, but it is more fruitful to view trust distribution on a continuum between self and tribe in dialogue with the wider society.



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