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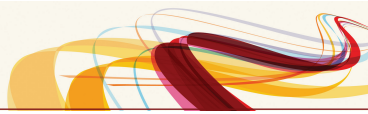


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The Social Determinants of Conspiratorial Ideation

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Abstract

Scholars have recently become increasingly interested in understanding the prevalence and persistence of conspiratorial beliefs among the public as recent research has shown such beliefs to be both widespread and to have deleterious effects on the political process. This article seeks to develop a sociological understanding of the structural conditions that are associated with conspiratorial belief. Using aggregate Google search data to measure public interest in two popular political conspiracy theories, the findings indicate that social conditions associated with threat and insecurity, including unemployment, changes in partisan control of government, and demographic changes, are associated with increased conspiratorial ideation.

Keywords

conspiracy theories, political beliefs

Scholars have been interested in the relevance of conspiratorial beliefs to the political process for many decades. Hofstadter (1964) provides, perhaps, the most definitive description of what he called “the paranoid style”—the tendency to see grand conspiracies against one’s culture or way of life as major motivating forces of history. Hofstadter traces the paranoid style from anti-Masonic and anti-Catholic movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth century through the anti-communist paranoia that gripped the nation in the mid-twentieth century. More recent research has offered similar definitions, such as Oliver and Wood (2014:952), who define conspiracy theories as “narratives about hidden, malevolent groups secretly perpetuating political plots and social calamities to further their own nefarious goals.” Uscinski and Parent (2014) add that conspiracy theories differ from conspiracies in that they are not endorsed by epistemic authorities. This research has shown that conspiracy theories are still widely believed by the American public across a broad variety of issues and that these beliefs are held by Americans of all political ideologies and education levels (Oliver and Wood 2014; Uscinski and Parent 2014). Additionally, other research has raised concerns that belief in some conspiracy theories can have potentially deleterious social and political consequences (Jolley and Douglas 2014; Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis 2010) such as decreased political efficacy and support for policies that are not supported by expert communities.

While there has been a considerable amount of research on belief in conspiracy theories and conspiratorial ideation, the majority of it has focused on the individual psychology and characteristics of those who believe in conspiracy theories as well as the social-psychological processes that account for the diffusion of such theories through social networks. While this work is important, it is also important to move beyond individual explanations of conspiratorial ideation and further develop an understanding of the social conditions that underlie conspiratorial belief that focuses on macro-level social conditions and structural change.

The analysis in this article attempts to advance the literature on conspiracy theories by using aggregate state-level data on Google search patterns to examine interest in two popular sets of conspiracy theories: those relating to the “Illuminati” and those relating to the citizenship of President Obama across U.S. states between the years 2007 and 2014. Conspiracy theories focusing on the Illuminati are included as these theories are employed by a diverse array of groups and cover a wide range of topics not specific to any one ideological or partisan group. Conspiracy theories surrounding

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Obama's citizenship, on the other hand, relate to a specific politician and are highly partisan in nature. By studying both highly generalized and highly specific conspiracy theories, a fuller understanding of how and why people endorse conspiratorial belief systems can be developed.

Drawing on previous literature that has found that individuals tend to engage in conspiratorial ideation when experiencing feelings of threat or insecurity, the analysis looks at potential social sources of insecurity or threat in the social and political environment that might motivate conspiratorial belief, including partisan changes in control of the presidency, immigration, and unemployment. The findings indicate that social threat is associated with conspiratorial belief at the state level, but the sources of threat vary between the two sets of theories with a very broad array of threatening conditions being associated with Illuminati conspiracy theories and partisan political threat being the primary predictor of conspiracy theories surrounding President Obama's citizenship.

Previous Literature

Much of the existing work on conspiracy theories focuses on the individual and social-psychological determinants of conspiratorial belief. Many studies have pointed to the existence of stable personality characteristics that make one more predisposed to seeing conspiracies behind political and social processes. Oliver and Wood (2014) show that conspiratorial beliefs are common among the American public and that these beliefs are associated with a tendency to believe in the power of unseen forces and Manichean narratives. The idea that there exist particular personality traits associated with conspiratorial belief is echoed by other scholars. Mirowsky and Ross (1983) find that paranoia, or "the belief that people are conspiring against you and deliberately trying to harm you," (p. 228) is driven in part by an external locus of control—a psychological tendency to see external forces as being responsible for one's successes or failures. Additionally, Goertzel (1994) and Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, and Furnham (2010) both find that individuals who believe in one conspiracy theory are more likely to believe in others. The implication is that these beliefs are motivated by some latent psychological propensity toward conspiratorial ideation. Furthermore, Douglas and Sutton (2011) have even found that those who are themselves more willing to participate in conspiracies are more likely to harbor conspiratorial beliefs, projecting their own willingness to engage in such behavior onto others. Finally, Miller, Saunders, and Farhart (2016) find that individuals who are lacking in trust and knowledgeable about politics are more likely to engage with conspiratorial belief systems. They find that this is particularly true for conservatives in the United States.

Researchers have also argued that misinformation and lack of information are associated with conspiratorial belief (Kull et al. 2010; Nyhan 2010; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009;

Warner and Neville-Shepard 2014). However, other work seems to undermine the notion that information environments alone can be responsible for conspiratorial belief. For example, Nyhan and Reifler (2010) have found that correcting false beliefs often reinforces rather than dispels these beliefs among those who hold them most strongly. Thus, while the conspiratorially minded may hold incorrect beliefs, there are clearly processes driving conspiratorial ideation besides simple lack of access to correct information.

While the existing work that has largely focused on stable personality characteristics and information environments is useful in understanding why some individuals might be more likely than others to believe in conspiracy theories, it does not explain variation in levels of conspiratorial ideation across social environments and across time. There is another line of individual-level research that provides some insight into the potential social causes of conspiratorial beliefs. Scholars in this line of research have looked at the role of individuals' perceptions and interpretations of their social environment in fomenting conspiratorial belief. Sullivan, Landau, and Rothschild (2010) argue that individuals who perceive their environment to be risky or hazardous will often project the myriad of complex hazards that exist in the world onto a single individual or group to whom they attribute immense power and sinister motives. The authors argue that this process allows individuals to maintain a sense of personal control over their environment or at least the sense of being able to understand the source of the threat. This tendency often leads to conspiratorial thinking. It follows from this that in environments perceived as threatening, uncertain, or hostile, conspiratorial belief should be more pronounced.

The notion that the experience of threat and uncertainty may be associated with conspiratorial belief has been empirically supported by other research and has been connected to the experience of threatening social conditions. Several potentially important social sources of such threat and anxiety have been discussed in previous research, including economic stress, social change, and partisan polarization. Goertzel (1994) finds that employment insecurity is positively correlated with conspiratorial ideation at the individual level. Similarly, Parsons et al. (1999) find that holding a subjective impression that the economy is getting worse is associated with higher rates of conspiratorial belief. However, Uscinski and Parent (2014) call this into question, finding no statistically significant effect for the unemployment rate, increasing inequality (as measured by the national GINI coefficient), or GDP on variation in conspiratorial ideation (as measured by *New York Times* letters to the editor) in the United States between 1890 and 2010.

Additionally, past research has pointed to social and demographic change as an important social cause of conspiratorial belief. Hofstadter (1964), in his historical discussion of paranoid and conspiratorial movements, finds that they often focus on threats perceived to be associated with recent immigrant groups. Additionally, research on other forms of

defensive politics, such as reactionary and populist social movements, has also found that the cultural threat posed by growing minority or immigrant populations is a key driver of support for such movements (Gusfield 1963; McVeigh 1999). However, more recent empirical findings supporting the idea that there is a direct connection between demographic social change and conspiratorial belief have been relatively rare. For example, while Uscinski and Parent (2014) did find racial differences in conspiratorial predispositions, with non-whites being more conspiratorial, they found no effect for their measures of social change on the national rate of conspiratorial belief.

Research has also highlighted the role of partisanship and the threat of being out of power as an important condition for the development of conspiratorial beliefs (Uscinski and Parent 2014). This research has demonstrated that conspiracy theorizing tends to be most common among partisan adherents and ideologues whose party is out of power and that more conspiracy theories tend to be directed toward the party currently in power. In the United States, control of the presidency has been shown to be the most important source of this partisan threat as it is the most visible and symbolically significant office in the U.S. government (Uscinski and Parent 2014).

Uscinski and Parent (2014) propose a theory that attempts to integrate the individual-level psychological findings with broader political environment. The authors argue that while innate disposition toward conspiratorial belief may be constant, different conspiracy theories will rise and fall in popularity according to changes in structural conditions. The authors essentially argue that conspiratorial belief is a defensive mechanism used by weak groups against potential threats. While the substance of specific theories may be false, these theories serve to strengthen in-group solidarity and increase vigilance against potential enemies. For this reason, conspiratorial belief should increase among groups experiencing losses, increased threat, or feelings of vulnerability.

While Uscinski and Parent's (2014) theoretical formulation represents a major step toward producing a social, as opposed to psychological, theory of conspiratorial belief, their ability to test their hypotheses is limited by the lack of available data measuring conspiratorial belief at levels of aggregation higher than that of the individual. This study will remedy that situation using a novel data source—data on Internet search volumes related to conspiracy theories—to study variation in conspiratorial ideation across U.S. states between the years 2007 and 2014. Using Internet search data from Google Trends, a service that provides aggregate search data from Google's search engine, to measure conspiratorial belief and interest provides a major advance over other data sources, such as published letters to the editor or survey data, in that it is possible to aggregate it to relatively high levels of geographic granularity, it is available over time, and the data consist of the directly reported interests of individuals in the privacy of their own homes. It is not mediated by the editorial

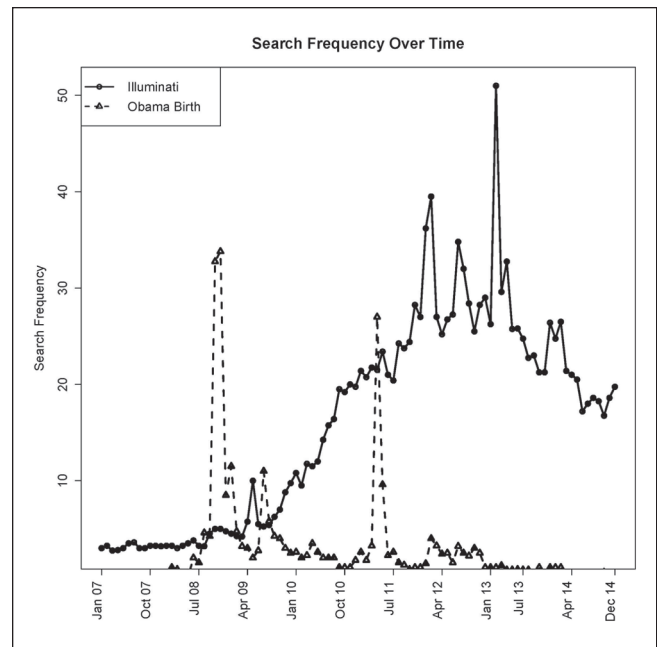


Figure 1. Search frequency for *Illuminati* and *Obama birth* over time.

policies of media outlets or by social desirability bias (for a discussion of the attributes of Internet search data, see DiGrazia 2015; Stephens-Davidowitz 2014).

This Study

Drawing on research that has found threat and insecurity to be motivating factors behind individual-level conspiratorial ideation, this research seeks to identify sources of threat in the social environment that are tied to macro-level variation in conspiratorial belief. Specifically, the social threats analyzed in this study include changes in partisan control of government, unemployment, and immigration. While threats relating to employment and partisan control of government have been identified in previous work on conspiracy theories as being associated with individual-level conspiratorial belief, immigration has also been identified as an important source of political threat in recent years by other researchers (Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

To test the effect of these sources of threat, a state-level longitudinal analysis is conducted using data on Google searches relating to two common sets of conspiracy theories: those relating to the *Illuminati*, believed by adherents of these theories to be a politically powerful and manipulative secret society, and those relating to President Obama's citizenship or the circumstances of his birth. Interest in these conspiracy theories has fluctuated over time in recent years and is shown plotted over time in Figure 1. Furthermore, there is substantial geographic variability in interest in these theories as shown in Figure 2.

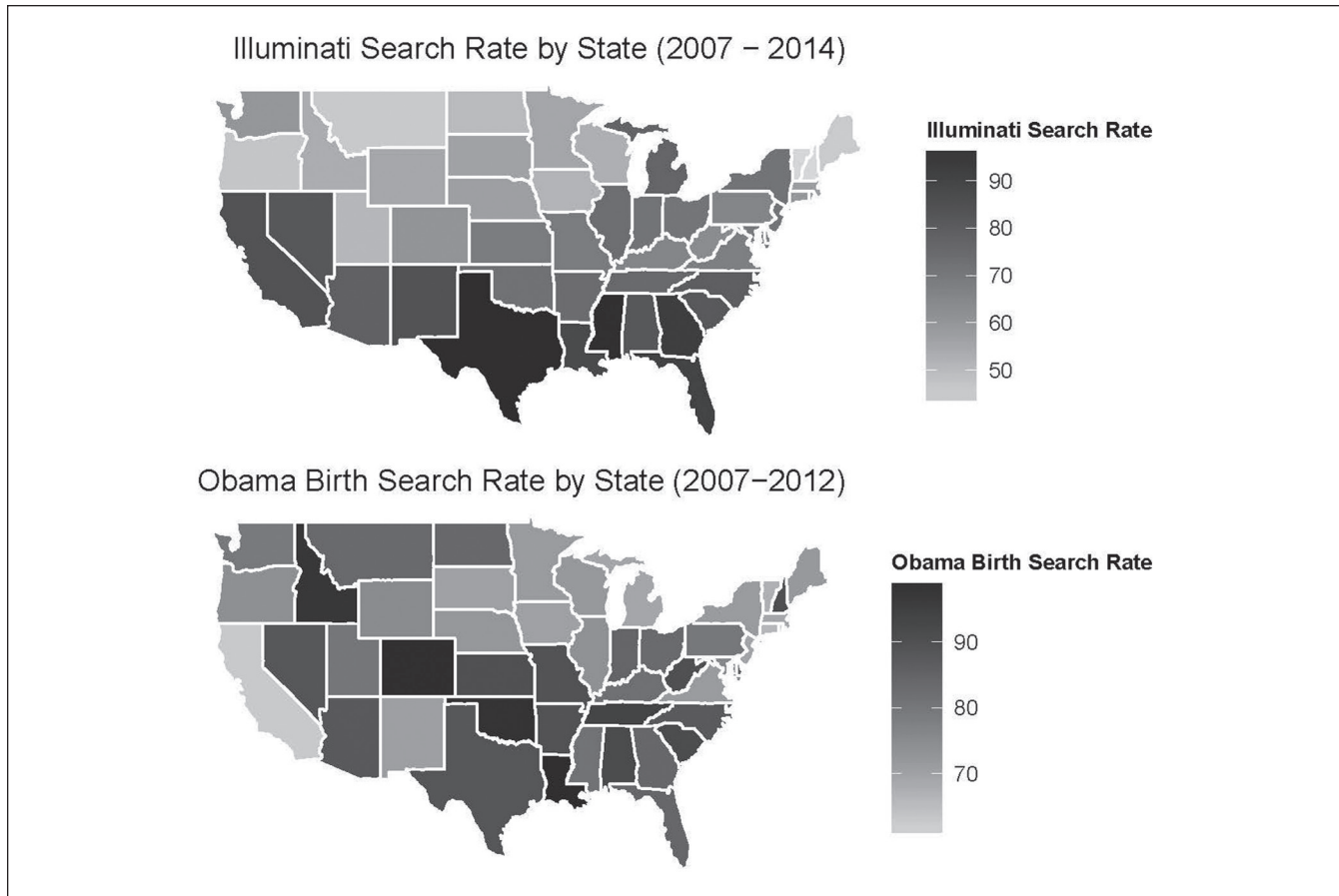


Figure 2. Map plots.

Conspiracy Theory Case Studies

The Illuminati

The Illuminati, a purported shadowy group that seeks to advance its nefarious interests by intervening in global affairs, is the subject of a wide variety of disparate conspiracy theories advanced by a large number of ideological groups. The historical flexibility of this family of conspiracy theories and the multiple meanings it has had for a broad variety of social groups throughout history make it a unique case for study. In many ways, it has served almost as a generic template for conspiratorial belief systems onto which nearly any fears or anxieties can be projected.

Modern conspiracy theories surrounding the Illuminati trace their origin to the existence of a short-lived eighteenth-century European secret society called the Bavarian Illuminati (Barkun 2013; Hofstadter 1964). Although the organization quickly folded under the scrutiny of European monarchies and the Catholic Church, it lived on in rumor and the imaginations of many citizens during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, being accused of involvement in a wide range of historical events (Barkun

2013; Hofstadter 1964). Throughout the twentieth century, the character of conspiracy theories focused on the Illuminati changed and proliferated radically, focusing on communism, religious stereotypes, and institutions of global governance like the United Nations (Barkun 2013). Finally, during the late twentieth century and twenty-first century, strands of conspiracy theories about the Illuminati involving UFOs, the administration of George H.W. Bush, the entertainment industry, the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, as well as the global financial crisis became popular among various subgroups (Barkun 2013; Yugas 2015).

The remarkable flexibility, longevity, and generality of conspiracy theories involving the Illuminati make it a uniquely valuable case study. Unlike explicitly partisan conspiracy theories involving specific actors or political parties (e.g., conspiracy theories about President Obama's citizenship or the complicity of the Bush administration in the 9/11 attacks), Illuminati conspiracy theories can serve as a generic template upon which virtually any conspiratorial anxieties can be projected. For these reasons, examining geographic variability in belief and interest in the conspiracy over time will provide a more complete view of variation in conspiratorial

ideation than any of the myriad of more specific conspiracy theories that come and go in the public discourse.

Conspiracy Theories about President Obama's Birth Certificate

Beginning during Barack Obama's first campaign for the presidency in 2008, conspiracy theories began to emerge about his citizenship and eligibility for the office (Howell 2012). These conspiracy theories, which came to be popularly known as "birther" conspiracy theories, came in several varieties, the most common of which holds that Barack Obama was actually secretly born in Kenya rather than the United States. According to many adherents of this conspiracy theory, evidence purporting to show Obama to have been born in Hawaii was fabricated by his parents shortly after his birth or later by his campaign or others in anticipation of his run for the presidency (Howell 2012). As such, they argue, he does not meet the constitutional requirement that the president be a "natural born citizen." This conspiracy theory reached a high level of popularity among the public during President Obama's first term in office. For example, according to a July 2010 CNN Opinion Research poll, 27 percent of all respondents and 41 percent of Republican respondents indicated that they believed the President was "probably" or "definitely" born in another country (CNN/Opinion Research Corporation 2010). Even after the President released his so-called "long-form" birth certificate in 2011, 13 percent of the public continued to believe that the president was probably or definitely born in another country, according to Gallup (Morales 2011).

Unlike *Illuminati* conspiracy theories, which are highly general and flexible, birther theories are specific to the presidency of Barack Obama and, according to existing research, are both highly partisan and highly racialized (Pasek et al. 2014). This research finds that adherents of birther conspiracy theories are overwhelmingly conservative and Republican in their partisan affiliations. Additionally, they find that birther conspiracy theorists tend to be more likely to hold anti-black attitudes than the general public.

Hypotheses. The following hypotheses can be derived from the extant literature on conspiracy theories.

Hypothesis 1: State-level economic stress will be associated with greater interest in conspiratorial belief systems.

Hypothesis 2: Higher rates of international immigration will correlate with increased interest in conspiracy theories.

Hypothesis 3: The election of President Obama will result in greater interest in conspiracy theories among political conservatives and partisan Republicans. This should result in a larger increase in conspiratorial ideation in conservative states compared to liberal states after Obama's election.

Hypothesis 4: There will be higher levels of interest in explicitly partisan conspiracy theories in states that are more hostile to the political party targeted by the conspiracy theory. In this case, more Republican states should have higher levels of interest in the conspiracy theory surrounding President Obama's citizenship.

Data and Methods

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable used in this analysis consists of state-level measurements based on aggregate Google search patterns associated with the search terms *Illuminati* and *Obama birth* (see Table A1 in the Appendix for a fuller explanation of this term). The data come from Google Trends, a service that provides aggregate data on Google search patterns broken down by geographical areas and time periods. The data used in this analysis are divided into four time periods covering 2007 through 2008, 2009 through 2010, 2011 through 2012, and 2013 through 2014. The data represent the relative frequency with which users of the Google search engine search for the terms *Illuminati* and *Obama birth* in each state. The final time period is excluded for the Obama birth measure as the frequency of use for that term became too low to produce viable estimates during that period.

Previous research has found that Internet search frequencies are a valid and reliable measure of public interest in a topic (see Brownstein, Freifield, and Madoff 2009; Carneiro and Mylonakis 2009; DiGrazia 2015; Stephens-Davidowitz 2014; Swearingen and Ripberger 2014; Vosen and Schmidt 2011). The research design used in this analysis makes no assumption that all searches for the terms *Illuminati* or *Obama birth* are performed by individuals who believe in the conspiracy; it does assume that the overall search frequency for these terms is correlated with both interest in each respective conspiracy and receptiveness to believe in each conspiracy theory. Previous research has found that while search data are not well suited toward estimating certain population parameters due to the unrepresentative nature of the sample, it is effective at measuring public interest in topics and is thus well suited to measuring public interest in conspiracy theories (DiGrazia 2015).

The data are arbitrarily normed as Google does not make absolute search volumes accessible to the public. While the norming is arbitrary, it has been adjusted to be consistent both across states and over time, making values between states and years directly comparable (for details on this method, see DiGrazia 2015).

Independent Variables

Time Variant Variables. Unemployment rate is measured as the average of the official unemployment rates for each state over each two-year time period. These data are obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

	T1: 2007–2008		T2: 2009–2010		T3: 2011–2012		T4: 2013–2014	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<i>Illuminati</i> search volume	11.35	1.99	26.94	7.27	70.876	18.771	67.275	13.685
<i>Obama birth</i> search volume	68.07	64.00	67.87	71.46	80.28	78.14	N/A	N/A
Percent white	81.74	11.89	81.74	11.89	81.736	11.891	81.736	11.891
Population	5,617.05	6,185.59	5,617.05	6,185.59	5,617.05	6,185.59	5,617.05	6,185.59
Percent Obama	50.48	9.45	50.48	9.448	50.484	9.448	50.484	9.448
Immigration	2.10	1.26	2.096	1.26	2.10	1.26	2.10	1.26
Unemployment	4.82	1.09	8.61	1.97	7.73	1.83	6.06	1.34

Time Invariant Variables. The *percent white* variable is the U.S. census 2009 estimate for the percentage of each state's population identifying as white. A time invariant measure of this item is used as it is unlikely to change radically over the timeframe of the study. The *percent Obama* variable is taken from the Federal Election Commission and is the percentage of votes received by Barack Obama in each state during the 2008 presidential election. This variable is intended to measure Democratic partisan affiliation and political liberalism in the state. The immigration variable is taken from the U.S. Census Bureau and is a measure of the number of foreign immigrants received by each state between 2000 and 2009. This item is intended to measure how much demographic change as a result of immigration each state underwent during the time period leading up to the study (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics of variables).

Analysis. This study uses longitudinal regression analysis employing generalized least squares (GLS) estimation to predict state-level Google search traffic for the terms *Illuminati* and *Obama birth* with time periods nested in states. An autoregressive disturbance term is used in the estimation to account for autocorrelation.

Results

The results of the longitudinal regression analyses for *Illuminati* conspiracy theories are shown in Table 2. Table 2 shows a base model (Model 1) predicting state-level conspiratorial ideation with state partisanship, immigration, unemployment, population, and percent white. There is a negative and statistically significant relationship between the share of the vote in 2008 captured by Barack Obama and *Illuminati*-related conspiratorial ideation. Each one unit increase in the percentage of the vote claimed by Obama is associated with a decrease in *Illuminati* search frequency equal to .422 ($p < .001$). Additionally, the state-level unemployment rate is positively and significantly associated with search frequency for terms related to the *Illuminati*. Each one unit increase in the unemployment rate is associated with a predicted increase in search frequency

Table 2. Regression Results for Independent Variables on Conspiratorial Ideation.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Percent Obama	-.422*** (-4.51)	-.642*** (-4.70)	-.419*** (-4.50)
Immigration	.794 (.93)	.783 (.94)	1.565 (1.11)
Unemployment	2.458*** (4.74)	2.496*** (4.88)	2.221*** (4.21)
Percent white	-.356*** (-5.17)	-.356*** (-5.29)	-.355*** (-5.19)
Population	.000482** (3.05)	.000482** (3.11)	.000493** (3.13)
Time 1	-53.13*** (-29.31)	-74.41*** (-8.02)	-49.05*** (-15.33)
Time 2	-46.96*** (-22.32)	-61.84*** (-6.87)	-41.19*** (-23.59)
Time 3	-.564 (-.34)	-9.052 (-1.16)	-4.48 (-1.69)
Percent Obama × Time 1		.422* (2.34)	
Percent Obama × Time 2		.293 (1.68)	
Percent Obama × Time 3		.167 (1.10)	
Immigration × Time 1			-2.087 (-1.59)
Immigration × Time 2			-2.462* (-1.98)
Immigration × Time 3			2.059 (1.92)
Constant	98.72*** (11.97)	109.7*** (11.46)	98.30*** (11.75)
N	200	200	200

Note: *t* statistics in parentheses.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

equal to 2.458 ($p < .001$). The state-level immigration rate does not have a significant effect on *Illuminati*-related search volume. Finally, the results show that, consistent with previous individual-level research, the percentage of each state's population that is white is significantly and negatively associated with Google search rates for terms relating to the *Illuminati*. Specifically, every 1 percent increase in the percentage of the state's population that is

white is associated with a decrease in search frequency equal to .356 ($p < .001$).

Model 2 includes the same predictors shown in Model 1 with the addition of interaction terms between the time period dummies and state-level partisanship. The main effects of all predictors are substantively similar to the effects shown in Model 1; however, there is a positive and statistically significant effect shown for the Time 1 and democratic vote interaction term equal to .422 ($p < .05$). This indicates that the main effect of partisanship is severely reduced in Time 1, the period before Barack Obama assumed office. In other words, conservative states became much more conspiratorial than liberal states only after Obama assumed office. This finding seems to support the notion that the perceived threat of Obama's election was a factor that motivated interest in the Illuminati conspiracy theory.

Model 3 includes the same predictors as the base model with the addition of interaction terms between the time period dummy variables and immigration. Here the main effect of immigration (the effect for Time 4) is positive though insignificant. The interaction effects for Times 1 and 2 are both negative, with only the interaction effect for Time 2 reaching statistical significance ($p < .05$) with a coefficient of -2.46 . The interaction effect for Time 3 is positive but narrowly falls short of statistical significance ($p = .054$). Taken together, these results are suggestive of a pattern in which the effect of immigration is stronger in later time periods than in earlier time periods; however, this effect is not clearly statistically significant. A study with greater statistical power might be able to more clearly discern such an effect.

Table 3 shows the results for the longitudinal regression analysis predicting conspiratorial ideation relating to conspiracy theories surrounding President Obama's citizenship. Only one explanatory variable is consistently significant across all three models: Obama's vote share in the 2008 presidential election. There is a negative and significant effect for Obama vote share across all three models, indicating that states in which Obama received more support experienced lower levels of interest in conspiracy theories surrounding the president's citizenship. The magnitude of this effect is similar across all three models, with coefficients ranging from -0.425 to -0.617 . Additionally, there seem to be no significant interaction effects between time and Obama vote share, indicating that the effect of partisanship or ideology does not detectably change over the course of the time period included in the analysis.

Conclusions

The findings of this study identify several sources of social threat that are associated with increased levels of conspiratorial ideation on the state level as measured by Google search patterns. Specifically, with respect to conspiracy theories regarding the Illuminati, the findings show that higher rates of unemployment are associated

Table 3. Regression Results for Independent Variables on Conspiratorial Ideation.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Percent Obama	-.617*** (-5.64)	-.425** (-2.68)	-.617*** (-5.60)
Immigration	-.0181 (-.02)	-.00635 (-.01)	.535 (.40)
Unemployment	.52 (.88)	.471 (.79)	.459 (.75)
Percent white	-.136 (-1.69)	-.137 (-1.69)	-.136 (-1.69)
Population	-.00014 (-.76)	-.00014 (-.74)	-.00014 (-.73)
Time 1	-2.896 (-1.14)	13.24 (1.28)	-1.207 (-.31)
Time 2	-13.56*** (-7.09)	-.456 (-.05)	-11.95** (-3.26)
Percent Obama × Time 1		-.322 (-1.61)	
Percent Obama × Time 2		-.259 (-1.32)	
Immigration × Time 1			-.889 (-.57)
Immigration × Time 2			-.739 (-.50)
Constant	111.6*** (11.24)	102.3*** (8.94)	110.9*** (10.98)
N	150	150	150

Note: *t* statistics in parentheses.
** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

with higher levels of conspiratorial ideation over the time-frame of the study. Additionally, the findings show an effect for state-level political affiliation. However, this effect is not constant over time and seems to indicate that conservative states became more conspiratorial, even with respect to non-explicitly partisan conspiracy theories, than liberal states after President Obama assumed office. This supports the hypothesis that partisans respond to political threat with increased interest in conspiracy theories. The effect of immigration seems ambiguous, with some evidence of a growing effect over time, though this effect is not clearly established in the data at conventional levels of statistical significance. There is also an effect for race, with states with larger white populations searching for Illuminati conspiracies at lower rates. Previous research suggests two possible interpretations for this finding: Non-whites may be searching for conspiracy theories at higher rates than whites or whites might be responding to racial threat from larger non-white populations. While it is not possible to disaggregate these using state-level data, the inconclusive results for immigration do not suggest a strong effect for racial threat. Finally, a much more limited set of predictors was identified for conspiracy theories surrounding President Obama's citizenship, with only partisanship having a significant effect.

Taken together, the results of this analysis support the hypothesis that macro-level social conditions and structural social changes can induce feelings of threat and insecurity that lead to higher levels of conspiratorial ideation. These findings also demonstrate that some sets of conspiracy theories are much more flexible than others, having a much broader set of predictors. In this sense, conspiracy theories like the Illuminati serve as genetic templates for conspiratorial belief upon which any group can project their anxieties or insecurities. As such, separate effects for partisanship, economic stress, and demographic change are identified in the model predicting belief and interest in the Illuminati. Other conspiracy theories, such as those surrounding the citizenship of President Obama, emerge as responses to specific events by particular groups and do not seem to be influenced by unrelated sources of threat.

This research builds on individual-level findings in prior research that have found an association between threat and conspiratorial belief and begins to forge an understanding of the social conditions that can lead to increases or decreases in the overall prevalence of conspiracy theories within society. Understanding the social origins of conspiratorial belief is increasingly important given the widespread belief many such theories enjoy among the public and the prominence of many such conspiracy theories in our political discourse. While many conspiracy theories are harmless, they can also obfuscate important political events, decrease political participation, and drive support for misguided and potentially dangerous policies.

Appendix

Table A1. The term *Obama birth* is used to measure interest in conspiracy theories surrounding Obama's birth and citizenship as it has a high overall search volume and, based on the related terms provided by Google Trends, seemed to be associated with the broadest set of related conspiratorial terms. Related terms are shown.

birth certificate	100
birth certificate obama	100
barack obama birth	20
barack obama	20
obama birth control	5
fake birth certificate	5
obama abortion	5
obama birth date	5
obama partial birth	5
obama birth kenya	5

Author's Note

The data and code used to produce the analysis will be made available on my personal website upon publication.

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