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**Conspiracy theories and the conspiracy mindset: Implications
for political ideology**

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Highlights

- Conspiracy beliefs have a range of important political correlates and consequences, several of which undermine trust and participation in the processes of conventional liberal democracy
- They are not the preserve of the ideological left or right, and are more common at ideological extremes, though may be strongest at the extreme right
- There are reliable individual differences in a generalized predisposition to believe in conspiracy theories
- This predisposition has been characterized as a conspiracy mindset, and more specifically a generalized political attitude
- Problems with this characterization are identified and alternative ways of understanding the ideological significance of conspiracy theories are discussed

Abstract

We consider the significance of belief in conspiracy theories for political ideologies. Although there is no marked ideological asymmetry in conspiracy belief, research indicates that conspiracy theories may play a powerful role in ideological processes. In particular, they are associated with ideological extremism, distrust of rival ideological camps, populist distrust of mainstream politics, and ideological grievances. The “conspiracy mindset” characterizes the ideological significance of conspiracy belief, and is associated with measuring conspiracy belief by means of abstract propositions associated with aversion and distrust of powerful groups. We suggest that this approach does not pay sufficient attention to the nonrational character of specific conspiracy beliefs and thus runs the risk of mischaracterizing them, and mischaracterizing their ideological implications.

Conspiracy theories and the conspiracy mindset: Implications for political ideology

More and more, conspiracy theories seem to permeate politics. It is fitting, therefore, that researchers in the behavioral sciences are paying more and more attention to them. Despite an explosion of research into conspiracy theories in recent years, and the appearance of several review articles [1, 2, 3], no review has yet focused on their ideological significance. In this article, we review recent research and theorizing to address important questions concerning the interplay between conspiracy theories and ideology. We address, for example, where on the liberal-conservative ideological spectrum conspiracy believers are most likely to be found, and how conspiracy theories shape ideological conflict, competition, and compromise. We also address how the ideological significance of conspiracy beliefs is being theorized. Like many episodes of rapid explanation, the growth of research on conspiracy theories has witnessed enormous creativity and industry, with less emphasis on deliberate reflection. The profusion of constructs, measures, hypotheses, and theoretical perspectives has outpaced efforts to prune or critique them. Thus, we offer some critical observations about arguably the most directly relevant theoretical perspective on the ideological character of conspiracy belief—namely the view that beliefs in conspiracy theories comprise (or arise from) a conspiracy mindset.

Conspiracy belief, politics, and ideology

Conspiracy beliefs are to be found on both sides of the ideological spectrum. Leaders from Chavez [4] to Trump and Bolsonaro have made use of them. Specific conspiracy theories have clearly had distinct political implications, and have resonated with distinct political ideologies. They appear to have been part and parcel, for example, of Americans' distrust of government throughout the 20th and 21st centuries [5]. Antisemitic [6], and more recently Islamophobic conspiracy theories [7], have been important in right-wing and

nationalistic thinking, and may have helped animate political events such as Brexit. Conspiracy theories appear on both sides of the ideological divide surrounding climate change—free-market conservatives in the US perceive an alarmist hoax cooked up by governments and scientists, while environmentalists perceive a motivated effort to discredit the science, cooked up by the oil industry and its stooges [8].

Though different conspiracy theories clearly appeal to different audiences and may have different effects [9], they share underlying properties. In general, conspiracy theories are defined as “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors” [2, p.4]. One of the earliest and most robust findings to emerge from research on the psychology of conspiracy theories is that people who believe one conspiracy theory are likely to believe others [10]. This finding is so robust that researchers often measure conspiracy beliefs by presenting participants with conspiracy theories spanning topics as diverse as alien cover-ups, the deaths of John F. Kennedy and Princess Diana, and HIV/AIDS [11]. Endorsements of these disparate conspiracy theories are so strongly correlated that they turn out to comprise scales with very good internal consistency (typically, Cronbach’s $\alpha > .80$; [11]). The correlation between conspiracy beliefs is so powerful that it may survive even when conspiracy theories are mutually contradictory [12] (but see [13]).

This robust correlation is very important. It shows that the causes and consequences of belief in one conspiracy theory are likely to generalize to others. This means that social scientists can theorize about conspiracy theories in general [14], and study questions like, “what leads people to believe in conspiracy theories?” [1], “what are their consequences?” [15, 16, 17] and “what is the ideological significance of belief in conspiracy theories?”.

One way to address the last of these questions is to examine whether there is any ideological asymmetry in the generalized tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. Few

studies have been devoted to this question, and more research is needed. Thus far, studies suggest that there is little difference between liberals and conservatives. Instead, evidence from surveys [18] and observational studies [19, 20] suggests that general belief in conspiracy theories is strongest at either extreme of the political spectrum, though it may be stronger at the right-hand extreme [18]. In other words, conspiracy beliefs appear to be associated with ideological polarization, rather than with liberalism or conservatism in particular. In turn, this suggests that they affect ideological intergroup dynamics, rather than reinforcing any ideology in particular.

This conclusion is reinforced by research into the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories in a selective or partisan fashion. In the US for example, conservatives are more likely to believe that Barack Obama was not born in their country while liberals are more likely to believe that the Bush administration intentionally lied about Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction [21]. As we might expect from research on motivated political reasoning [22], people on each side of the ideological spectrum tend to believe in conspiracy theories that discredit and impugn the motives of the other. This clearly has the potential to problematize relations between rival ideological camps.

In this case, there is also some evidence of ideological asymmetry—conservatives' belief in specific conspiracy theories may be more partisan than liberals'. In other words, they are more likely to favor conspiracy theories that accuse their ideological opponents of wrongdoing, and reject conspiracy theories that implicate their own side [21]. This finding is remarkably consistent with evidence that compared to liberals, US conservatives have historically been more partisan in their trust and distrust of incumbent governments (as a function of whether they are Republican or Democrat [23]), and may be ascribed to ideological differences in the ability or willingness to think in nuanced ways [24, 25].

The association between conspiracy belief and ideological extremity and distrust makes sense when we look at the content of conspiracy theories. They imply that small, elite groups are malign, powerful, and unaccountable, and are responsible for shaping world events and political systems [26, 27]. They imply that institutions meant to provide democratic checks and balances, such as the civil service and media, are either complicit or ineffective [28], and will be unlikely to respond to the people's demands for change [29]. Since civic and political institutions cannot be relied upon, it makes sense to withdraw from mainstream civic and political processes [30], or to take alternative, non-normative forms of collective action [31]. In particular, conspiracy beliefs appear to resonate not only with ideological extremity but with populism, which casts 'people' as the homogenous, benign victims of malign political forces, and which resists location on a unidimensional liberal-conservative spectrum [32]. Importantly, conspiracy theories may make it more difficult for the losing side in any political process to accept their loss [20].

In sum, conspiracy theories do not seem to resonate specifically with either liberalism or conservatism. However, they appear highly relevant to the political contest between these ideologies, moving it away from the regulated processes of normative political activities and the seeking of moderation, compromise, and consensus. Their net effect is likely to be political polarization, prejudice, and grievance. Thus, although conspiracy theories often involve the open and exuberant critique of powerful interests, their unchallenged dissemination and uncritical consumption may represent a threat to democracy [29]. With this in mind, we now turn to a critique of the most relevant account of the political and ideological character of conspiracy belief so far—that of the conspiracy mindset.

Theorizing the ideological relevance of conspiracy beliefs

Imhoff and Bruder [26] postulate that there is a "conspiracy mindset... associated with disliking powerful societal groups and perceiving them as responsible for political and

economic events with negative implications” (p. 26). They argue that this mindset is a “generalised political attitude” (p. 39), related to but distinct from other generalized political attitudes such as right-wing authoritarianism. Indeed, they found evidence for this argument, and also found that conspiracy mindset predicted specific political attitudes, such as anti-American and anti-capitalist attitudes. In describing conspiracy belief as comprising (or arising from) a mindset, this approach follows scholars across disciplines [10, 20, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37]. However, the mindset construct is importantly ambiguous in both lay meaning and psychological theory. It can refer (among other things) to a set of cognitive processes, or to a set of beliefs. Making the ambiguity worse, authors seldom explicate what they mean by these general terms, nor do they discuss their origins in psychological theory [38]. How, then, should we see a conspiracy mindset? Is it a set of cognitive processes, or a set of beliefs?

One of the most influential theories of a conspiracy mindset captures both meanings. Goertzel [10] argued that each conspiracy belief adopted by an individual reinforces other conspiracy beliefs, and makes the individual more receptive to conspiracy theories that they may encounter later. Goertzel argued that people with this self-reinforcing “monological” belief system prefer explanations of an event according to their consistency with conspiracy theories about other events, rather than available evidence relating to the event itself. For example, one does not need to know all the facts to decide whether 9/11 was an inside job; one only needs to “know” that the moon landings were faked, and that the CIA was complicit in the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Unfortunately, this account has several problems [14, 39], not least evidence that conspiracy believers may be more, rather than less, open to experience [40], and more, rather than less, concerned with the specific facts of controversial cases such as the 9/11 attacks [41].

In contrast, other scholars have proposed that a conspiracy mindset comprises a set of specific beliefs held together by a general, “nuclear idea” [12, p.771]. In this vein, Popper

[27] argued that conspiracy beliefs are sustained by a “conspiracy theory of history”—namely, the belief that the course of history is determined by the will of a few powerful individuals and groups. Thus, the Nazi regime believed that the defeat and humiliation of Germany had been orchestrated by Jews and Bolsheviks. In turn they believed that by following the will of their leader, they could not only reverse their fortunes but install a new and enduring utopia—effectively countering one grand conspiracy with their own. The characterization of conspiracy beliefs as a political attitude [26] seems to be an example of this kind of mindset. When researchers set out to measure it, they generally construct scales that are relatively abstract and generic (e.g., “A lot of important information is deliberately concealed from the public out of self-interest” [34], see also 26, 42]), distinct from other more specific measures of conspiracy belief (e.g., “The Apollo moon landings never happened and were staged in a Hollywood film studio” [11]).

Another important ambiguity confronts this type of conspiracy mindset. Sometimes, researchers attempt to explain why people believe in specific conspiracy theories. For example, conspiracy belief has been described as being “un[der]pinned by a relatively small number of generic assumptions about the typicality of conspiratorial activity” [34, p.1]. Elsewhere it has been argued that “the endorsement of specific conspiracy theories depends to a large extent on individual differences in the general tendency to adopt such beliefs” [43, p.1]. Further, a measure of “conspiracy mentality” has been tested as a predictor of belief in a set of specific conspiracy theories [42]. At other times, the conspiracy mindset may be intended merely as a way of characterizing a predisposition to believe in conspiracy theories [26]. In this instance, the latent variable underlying measures of conspiracy mindset and those underlying belief in multiple, specific conspiracy theories may well be one and the same, and it would be circular to hypothesize that a conspiracy mindset causes conspiracy beliefs.

Resolving this theoretical ambiguity is difficult. To date, there is no evidence that a conspiracy mindset is psychometrically distinct from, or causative of, conspiracy beliefs. Therefore, the hypothesis that it underpins conspiracy beliefs is viable in principle, but has yet to be supported. On the other hand, if the conspiracy mindset is meant to be a characterization rather than a causal account of conspiracy belief, its conceptual contribution to the literature on conspiracy belief is arguably heuristic or didactic, insofar as no new variable or process is being introduced. Similarly, its empirical contribution is essentially psychometric insofar as it introduces a new more abstract measure of conspiracy belief. Thus far, the evidence does not show that measures of conspiracy mindset capture conspiracy belief better than other measures [11]. Nonetheless, they have the advantage of applicability across time and contexts.

A more serious problem may be that the conspiracy mindset runs the risk of *mischaracterizing* belief in conspiracy theories. Specific conspiracy theories tend to have a number of features that, all else equal, make them less reliable than other explanations. For example, they often stem from unreliable and unaccountable sources, and require that a number of alleged conspirators executed their roles competently and have since held their silence [44]. The normative disadvantages of conspiracy theories help explain why indices of irrational or nonrational thinking, and reduced willingness or ability to process, are associated with belief in them [1, 4, 45, 46]. Therefore, while the conspiracy mindset is defined as a political *attitude*, it could also be defined as comprising a general *susceptibility* to implausible beliefs [47]. This susceptibility may be lost in more abstract measures.

This is important for two reasons. First, defining and measuring the conspiracy mindset only as a political attitude, and not also as a susceptibility, alters its psychological character, and likely causes it to deviate conceptually and empirically from belief in specific conspiracy theories. Indeed, one recent study found that a measure of conspiracy mindset, but

not an aggregate measure of conspiracy beliefs, was negatively related to education and rational thinking [48]. Second, it also alters the ideological character of the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories, since lower education, cognitive ability, and reduced willingness to think critically have been associated with both conservatism and extremism [24, 25, 49, 50] and since conspiracy theories may form part of an ideologically relevant contemporary epistemic lassitude incorporating misinformation and “fake news” [50]. The predisposition to believe in specific conspiracy theories may therefore turn out to interact with ideology quite differently from measures of conspiracy mindset.

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories are of undoubted political and ideological significance. Although they are found across the ideological spectrum, they are more prevalent at its extremes, and likely contribute to ideological polarization, prejudice, and grievance. The notion that conspiracy beliefs comprise a political attitude or mindset represents a much needed effort to build theory and has already generated important insights and discoveries. However, it has some important limitations, including ambiguity about whether it attempts to explain or merely describe belief in conspiracy theories. Further, belief in conspiracy theories clearly represents not only an attitudinal disposition but a tendency to subscribe to normatively weak beliefs, and is the outcome, like ideological orientations, of cognitive styles and cognitive limitations. It is important that theorizing about the political and ideological character of conspiracy theories does not ignore this, even as it builds on the insight that conspiracy theories tend to be characterized by attitudinal aversion to (allegedly) powerful groups.

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