

# Why are conspiracy theories popular? There's more to it than paranoia.

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*Conspiracy theories have long played a part in political debates. Following the recent meeting of the Bilderberg group in Watford, [Joseph E. Uscinski](#) assesses why the popularity of conspiracy theories has proven so resilient. He argues that some of the most common explanations, such as the notion that a belief in conspiracy theories reflects psychological defects like paranoia or mental illness, do not stand up to scrutiny. Rather conspiracy theories gain traction simply because many people are predisposed to viewing the world in conspiratorial terms.*



Recently the Bilderberg group met in Hertfordshire for their annual conference. They were greeted by [thousands](#) of protesters claiming that the group secretly controls world financial markets for nefarious purposes. Conspiratorial beliefs such as those impugning the Bilderbergers are nothing new and have flourished across time and space. Why do people believe in conspiracy theories?

Researchers from across disciplines (psychology, sociology, political science) have invested greatly in understanding why people hold the opinions they do. For decades, scientists have had a pretty good understanding of why people belong to political parties, have a political ideology, take certain issue positions, and support certain candidates. But until recently, researchers knew very little about conspiratorial beliefs. Why do [majorities of Americans](#) believe Kennedy was killed by a conspiracy? Why do many people continue to believe that Princess Diana was killed as part of a plot, or is [secretly still alive](#)?

Beliefs such as these seem silly to some, and oddly intriguing to others. But, if taken too far, conspiratorial beliefs can impede government policy, stymie cooperation, and even lead to violence. To name but a few examples, opposition to President Obama's health care proposals were hampered by a belief that sinister "death panels" lurked beneath the administration's plans. Anders Behring Breivik killed more than seventy as a response to supposed eco-Marxist and Islamofascist conspiracies. More recently, the Boston Marathon bombers frequently visited 9/11 conspiracy theory websites and were convinced the CIA pulled off the 2001 attacks.

Recent efforts by scholars have immeasurably improved our understanding of the illusive origins of conspiratorial beliefs. For such ubiquitous opinions, they have seemed to defy understanding, and popular accounts of conspiracy theorising provide as many explanations as there are conspiracy theories. We might say conspiracy theories have conspired to hide their causes. But, with increased effort, scholars have now been able to test many popular explanations of conspiracy theories, and we are at a point where many proposed explanations can be done away with (or at least recognised as having less explanatory power than has often been claimed). So, rather than focus on the factors that contribute to conspiratorial thinking, let me instead clear some brush from the dense forest of explanations.



Alex Jones (Credit: Tyler Merbler, CC-BY-SA-3.0)

To begin, let's take the often used psychopathological explanation, that those believing in conspiracy theories are crazy. Despite [Alex Jones'](#) recent efforts to convince BBC viewers otherwise, mental illness is neither an antecedent, nor the product of conspiracy theorising. Most people believe in at least one conspiracy theory; [many people believe in several](#). It would be difficult to label them all crazy. Some attribute conspiracy theorising to more benign afflictions such as paranoia, feelings of powerlessness, and alienation. These explanations don't get us very far either: first, the causal direction is not clear. People may believe powerful actors are out to get them because they are paranoid, but conversely, people may feel paranoid because they believe powerful actors are out to get them. Second, given the [numbers of people](#) that believe in conspiracy theories, we could not label all or most of society as paranoid.

Conspiracy theories are often seen as the result of cognitive quirks, that in a complex world, people seek to account for complicated events and messy circumstances with simple theories. However, this often cited explanation does not stand up to scrutiny. While each person can decide for him or herself how complicated an explanation is, conspiracy theories are generally far more complicated than the official stories they often attempt to refute. Which is more complicated, the suggestion that 19 terrorists boarded planes and crashed them on 9/11/2001, or that Bush, Cheney, the FBI, the CIA, Israel, all major news outlets, the NYPD, the 9/11 Commission, and Popular Mechanics magazine are all secretly conspiring together to hide airplanes, plant explosions, destroy evidence, and deceive the public? Put simply, conspiracy theories are usually never more parsimonious than the official explanations they rival.

Many have blamed the media, particularly the internet, for fostering conspiratorial beliefs. In fact, no discussion of conspiratorial beliefs seems complete without blaming the web. Just as for other modern maladies, the internet makes a great scapegoat. It is true that there are many conspiracy theories tucked away on webpages just waiting to be found. The only problem is most people are not looking for them. And conspiracy theories comprise only a tiny portion of what the web has to offer. Of [the top 200 websites](#) visited in the US, none are devoted to conspiracy theories. People go to the web to shop, get recipes, find dates, book vacations, and check the headlines, but finding the latest conspiracy theory is not one of the top reasons for web use. And research [Joseph Parent](#), [Matthew Atkinson](#), and I have been conducting for the last year suggests that the web is not as kind to conspiracy theories as is often thought: the majority of discussion of conspiracy theories on the net is not only anti-conspiracy theory, but derogatorily so. Finally, the web has only been in wide use for 15 years, but conspiracy theories have been with us for most of recorded history – and the [only measures of conspiracy theorising over time](#) suggest that there has been no increase accompanying the introduction of the net.

Political ideology is often accused of being a culprit, with those on the political Right often cast as being more conspiratorial than those on the Left. But, in the US at least, conspiratorial beliefs tend to be spread [evenly across party and ideological lines](#) – it's just that members of each party believe in different theories with different villains (the Left accuses the Right of conspiring while the Right accuses the Left of conspiring). And oddly, as partisans accuse each other of conspiring, they accuse each other of being prone to conspiracy theorising at the same time. For fear of bursting everyone's bubble, no side is more prone.

Finally, evidence of conspiracies is often cited as the reason for conspiratorial beliefs. This explanation is given most often by those citing irrefutable evidence in favour of their pet conspiracy theory. But, evidence is in the eye of the beholder. The same evidence that drives belief in a conspiracy theory for one person drives belief in the official story for another. In the end, conspiracy theories gain traction because many people are [simply predisposed](#) – to one degree or another – to view the world in conspiratorial terms. If you are a person who views the world as a product of collusion, then you are likely to see conspiracies everywhere. If you don't view the world in conspiratorial terms, then you are less likely to see plots lurking behind the corner.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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