

Caught in the Middle: Response Dynamics of  
Political Partisan Conspiracy Theories and Independent Responders

by

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## ABSTRACT

Political party identification has an immense influence on shaping individual attitudes and processes of reasoning to the point where otherwise knowledgeable people endorse political conspiracies that support one's political in-group and simultaneously disparage an out-group. Although recent research has explored this tendency among partisans, less is known about how Independents respond in comparison. Previous research fails to identify the Independent as a unique type of voter, but rather categorizes this group as ostensibly partisan, not a separate phenomenon to investigate. However, most Independents purport neutrality and, by recent polls, are becoming a substantial body worthy of concerted focus. Many questions arise about who Independents really are. For example, do all who identify as Independent behave in a similar manner? Are Independents ideologically different than what is represented by a partisan label? Is the Independent category a broad term for something entirely misunderstood? A thorough investigation into the greater dynamics of the political environment in the United States is an enormous undertaking, requiring a robust interdisciplinary approach beyond the focus and intent of this study. Therefore, this study begins the journey toward understanding these phenomena; do Independents, as a whole, uniformly respond to statements about political conspiracy theories? To explore these possibilities, explicit responses are bypassed to evaluate the implicit appeal of political conspiracy theories. An action dynamics (mouse-tracking) approach, a data rich method that records the response process, demonstrates Independents are not in fact a homogenous group, but rather seem to fall into two groups: non-partisan leaning and partisan leaning. The analysis exposes

that relative to the baseline and control stimuli: (1) Non-leaning Independents reveal an increased susceptibility to implicitly endorse bi-partisan directed conspiracy theories when compared to leaners. (2) Republican-leaners demonstrate a stronger susceptibility to endorse right-wing aligned conspiracy theories (against Barack Obama), similar to Republican partisans. (3) Democrat-leaners, unlike Democrat partisans, do not demonstrate any particular susceptibility to implicitly endorse either right/left-wing aligned conspiracy theories (against Barack Obama or George W. Bush). Drawing from major theories from social, political, and cognitive psychology will contribute to an understanding of these phenomena. Concluding remarks include study limitations and future directions.

## DEDICATION

To the cowboy and the rainbow.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Partisanship, the political party to which one is oriented, both influences and is influenced by individual attitudes, beliefs, needs and motivations. People identify with a political party because the party values align with their individual ideology. In this context, Denzau and North (1994) elucidate *ideology* as the shared framework of mental models used to interpret the environment, which acts as a guide for appropriately structuring the environment. Additionally, Converse (1964/2006) refers to ideology as ideas and attitudes held together by salient interdependence. Furthermore, ideology both echoes and strengthens a person's interpersonal, informational and existential needs (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). In essence, a person's ideology reflects the worldview through which all else is interpreted. Partisanship, then, is an extension of this ideology because party identification provides the basis for understanding political information, and consequently, impacts political decision-making and behavior (Twenge, Honeycutt, Prislun, & Sherman, 2016). For example, the Republican Party is generally thought to represent a conservative ideology while the Democrat Party is aligned with a liberal ideology. Partisanship is the reflection of an ideological self-categorization (liberal vs. conservative) and membership in a social group comprises an important part of an individual's self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In *The American Voter*, Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) described political identity as being fairly stable over an individual's lifetime, and asserted Independents behaved like partisans and subsequently, were not really interesting as a

separate group. In *The Myth of the Independent Voter*, Keith (1992), identified *pure* Independents (i.e. non-partisan leaning) as being different than partisan leaning Independents (i.e. Republican-leaning, Democrat-leaning), but mostly failed to make a strong case for why this would be true (Kamieniecki, 1993). However, Brewer (2001) described social identity, such a partisanship, as more fluid and dynamic. A 2015 poll conducted by Jones indicated 43% of Americans claim to be Independent, up from 36% in 1988. With the numbers rising each year, are Independent voters any different now than they were 55 years ago? Has the two-party system finally reached its peak of salient meaning? Is an adjustment necessary to more accurately reflect a diversified ideology? Or is something else at play? Knowing the answers to these questions might help us to better understand voting behavior, improve election predictions and by extension, help to shape the future landscape of American sociopolitical environment (Twenge et al., 2016). It is this curiosity that led to the current quest to delve deeper into the minds of modern-day Independents.

## Chapter 2

### **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

To understand the rationale and design of the current study, it is helpful to elaborate on some of the important theories from social, political, and cognitive psychology that contribute to this research.

#### **Conspiracy Ideation: Belief in Conspiracy Theories**

Despite the advancements in science and education, conspiracy theorists continue to successfully spin their stories to a modern-day audience. This is because, as Zuckerman (2005) found, endorsement provides psychological and emotional benefits even when outright endorsement is perceived as less socially desirable. Proponents of conspiracy theories then, appear to experience a paradox between what they want to believe, and what they feel is socially appropriate to believe. Perhaps this is why some secretly (implicitly) support ideologically aligned partisan conspiracy theories, while shying away from outwardly (explicitly) doing so. It is this competition between the implicit and explicit political opinions that this study intends to understand. To get at these hidden cognitive processes, the dynamic research method (computer mouse tracking) provides valuable insight.

Before delving into discussion on the paradox of conspiracy theory endorsement, it is important to clarify and differentiate the use of terms in this study related to the word *conspiracy*. The following are understood and defined as:

*Conspiracy theory*: stories or explanations based upon unsubstantiated evidence

*Conspiracy ideation*: belief in conspiracy theory/theories

*True Conspiracy*: stories or explanations based upon substantiated evidence (i.e. the Watergate scandal).

As conspiracy theories are based upon unsubstantiated evidence, conspiracy ideation may be viewed as socially undesirable. However, Bost (2015) discussed conspiracy ideation as not relegated to clinical psychopathology, but rather as a part of normal thinking that all humans do. When people are exposed to environmental events that trigger feelings of vulnerability, the innate human strategies that promote survival are activated. One such strategy is suspicion about the motives of another's actions. As such, suspicion is an adaptive trait intended to ensure even-handed social transactions. Without a healthy dose of suspicion, a person may become a vulnerable target for predatory offenders. Therefore, as a protective mechanism, responding to feelings of heightened levels of powerlessness, alienation, and diminishing trust in institutions, the cognitive processes employed to deal with uncertain risk may be viewed as a rational, defensive stance. As motivated reasoning theory supports, feelings of anxiety, when one is uncertain about the exact source of the perceived threat, stimulate information seeking behavior (i.e. heightened sensitive to informational sources), and results in enhanced pattern-seeking. Likewise, Shermer (2012) found that people prefer patterns that include false alarms to the possibility of missing an actual threat. This behavior is enhanced when people feel vulnerable and their sense of control over life events is threatened (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Swami (2012) found that belief in politically related conspiracy theories, however, are not predictive of a worldview that is generalized by conspiracy ideation. This is to say that one may not typically believe in most conspiracy theories, but

may be prone to consider them in a specific context. For example, feelings of vulnerability increase when the political ideology or group to which one ascribes is not represented by the currently elected political elites (i.e. President of the United States) (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999). This experience facilitates the allure to endorse politically directed conspiracy theories as a means to bring clarity to, and make sense of, current events in a manner that is also psychologically beneficial. To elucidate the manner in which the sense of personal identity is coupled with one's social environment, this discussion now looks to several major theories from social psychology.

### **The Power of Identity and Group Processes**

One of the core tenants in social psychology is the functional interdependence of people and their social environment. In order to study the nature of cognitive processes, the mind must not be uncoupled from the world (Turner and Oakes, 1994). According to Jost, et al. (2009), ideology reflects and reinforces a person's interpersonal, informational and existential needs. Group membership is based upon shared ideology. People move into groups that reflect similar attitudes and ideas, and out of groups that do not (Hornsey, 2008). Group membership is a reflection of an ideological self-categorization that provides a framework for understanding and orienting to the social environment while contributing to individual self-concept (Tajfel & Turner 1979). Furthermore, political polarization creates a readily identifiable party that makes group identification easier. This is because groups become more distinctive when within-group similarities are enhanced and between-group differences are exaggerated (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, & Reicher, 1987). Although Campbell et al. (1960) described political identity as stable

over an individual's lifetime, Brewer (1991) opined that identification with a group can be somewhat dynamic in response to situational factors. When it comes to the immense influence of political party identification, two theories from social psychology are critical in understanding the importance of self-identity, group processes and intergroup relations: (1) social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and (2) self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987).

**Social Identity Theory.** To adequately discuss social identity theory, it is important to begin upon the foundation of personal identity as the basis from which social identity theory was first described by Tajfel and Turner (1979). Social identity theory (SIT) maintains the primacy of the group above that of the individual as responsible for social conflict and change. People are able to manage their sense of self via group memberships and are generally concerned with creating a positive image in doing so. This requires a comparative association be made between the group to which one belongs, and those groups that are different. Conferring a superior social identity to one's own group (in-group) is enhanced by regarding the comparative group (out-group) as inferior, negative, or unsatisfactory (Sindic & Condor, 2014). Likewise, people form positive opinions about groups that uphold their personal ideological beliefs (Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, & Wetherell, 2014). Social identity is an extension of personal identity and an essential aspect of partisanship. Group members are motivated and expected to support the groups with which they identify (Conover, 1988; Greene 2004). Partisanship, consequently, influences one's interpretation of political information (Bolsen, Druckman & Cook, 2013). SIT maintains that people will move into groups that

are more satisfactory as much as they believe it is possible for them to do so. Moreover, when people are engaged in identity management, they are likely to adopt strategies to cope with the perception of an inferior status, which can lead to collective action (Sindic & Condor, 2014). Though the lens of SIT, the motivation of group membership is the cornerstone on which a democratic society depends.

**Social Categorization Theory.** Social categorization theory extends SIT by refining the personal and social identities as dynamic and existing along a continuum between interpersonal and intergroup self-categorization (Turner & Reynolds, 2012). According to self-categorization theory (SCT), the self is defined not only by personal and social identities, but also includes aspects of a collective identity that reflects group membership (Turner et al., 1987; Turner & Onorato, 1999). To clarify, SCT argues that the categories to which one belongs, both as an individual and as a group member, are variable and oriented in the social environment in a dynamic and reciprocal process (Turner & Reynolds, 2012). This is because one's personal identity is tied to and reflects the characteristics (e.g. emotions and attitudes) of the group, which in turn contributes to and defines self-concept. Therefore, emotionally and cognitively, humans are not merely individuals, but are the sum of their environment. For this reason, people have affective reactions to social groups, particularly when they believe their position on important issues is correct. Because political opinions are also governed by moral judgment, heightened emotions (i.e., fear, anger, hatred) often influence reasoning and decision-making (Brandt, et al., 2014; Haidt, 2001; Liu & Ditto, 2012).

**Partisanship and Group Identity.** As social identity theory and self-categorization theory suggest, people are likely to follow those who they believe to be dependable, trustworthy, and who are perceived to be similar to themselves (Zuckerman, 2005). People demonstrate more intolerance toward dissimilar groups than to those they perceive to share similar attributes. In the case of politics, should negative views about one's own party develop, people compensate by acquiring even more negative views of the competing party (Groenendyk, 2013). In this way, people seek to strengthen the perception of ideological superiority and group commitment. At times, the intent to legitimize one's own political ideology leads to the incorporation of information based upon questionable criteria. A behavioral example of this phenomenon is the endorsement of political conspiracy theories. In agreement with the tenants of social identity processes, conspiracy theories denigrate opposing groups and/or powerful people, and serve as a reference with which to compare one's own. Conspiracy theories are alluring because, even though unfounded, they serve to clarify confusing events, reframe complex and ambiguous events, and create a greater sense of control, thereby reducing anxiety related to uncertainty (Miller, Saunders, & Farhart, 2015). But certainly, rationality must contribute to the decision-making process as well. After all, many people pride themselves on being informed citizens who are not easily fooled into believing untruths. In order to unpack the ways in which reasoning is motivated by emotion, this discussion turns to the intersection of emotion and cognition.



## **Motivated Reasoning: Emotion + Cognition**

For most, the conscious experience of decision-making seems deliberative, explicit, and unfettered by emotional arousal. Yet, below the threshold of awareness, the activation of underlying emotion influences thinking in ways that most people may not realize. In fact, contrary to the idea that people use logical thinking to make decisions, current research argues that emotional pretense motivates all reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006). A priori emotions guide the perception of an event as it is compared with existing beliefs. Often, when an individual's existing worldview is challenged by incongruent or opposing information, the new information is not easily integrated. Similarly, to social identity, proponents of motivated reasoning hold that new information, whether supportive or opposing, serves to deepen the current belief structure. Information that challenges one's worldview has an unexpected bolstering effect on existing belief. This is because people more easily accept supporting evidence and quickly dismiss evidence that challenges prior beliefs and attitudes, regardless of the strength of the argument (Taber & Lodge, 2006). In other words, emotions often guide the thinking employed to support existing personal belief structures. However, research by MacKuen, Wolak, Keele, and Marcus (2010) demonstrates the type of emotion one experiences may lead to differing outcomes. For example, aversion leads to a deepened ideological stance, while anxiety may actually facilitate a sort of cognitive pause for thought. While a full discussion on the complexity of human emotion is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to

review some of the research from political psychology concerning the predominant emotions that contribute to information seeking behavior, and thus, partisanship.

### **Political Emotions: Aversion, Uncertainty and Information Seeking Behavior**

Humans are equipped with emotion and cognition that guide behavior in order to navigate complex social environments. The type of emotion experienced in everyday life is generally context specific, influences one's perception of current events, and guides information seeking behavior. Traditionally, the public glean daily updates on current events through mass media. News outlets were assumed to provide reliable and accurate information. But now, in the age of ubiquitous computing the nightly newscast or morning newspapers are increasingly overshadowed by a plethora of online, unchecked, and instantaneous feeds (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014). Social media and Internet browsers are geared to maximize industry profits and gain competitive advantage by exploiting massive amounts of user data (Provost and Fawcett, 2013). This sets the worldwide stage for rapid proliferation of any sort of information. When entertainment and current events come in presentation, people may be primed to readily accept half-baked stories as factual. Some of these seem harmless enough, but others may become the foundation for conspiracy theories.

When emotion and politics are concerned, two types of negative emotions, aversion and anxiety, seem to produce different types of information seeking and related political behavior. MacKuen, et al. (2010) found that aversion contributes to stronger

partisanship, while anxiety tends to suspend motivated reasoning in favor of a more deliberative type of thinking.

**Aversion.** The emotional reaction to a known threat is distinguished as aversion (i.e. anger, disgust, contempt, and hatred). The cognitive strategy to deal with the threatening situation relies upon related experience stored in memory, which then, depending upon habit, dictates aggression toward or distancing away from the threat. In a political environment, an aversive emotional response signals threat, which directs attention to information that supports existing views, while directing attention away from information that challenges these views. As the strength of partisanship increases, which includes the prior commitments one has made to a particular cause, aversion to opposing views also increases.

**Anxiety.** Conversely, anxiety, which signals risk (an unknown threat), is accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and temporarily suspends current beliefs as insufficient until efforts can be made to find the correct or safest course of action. For example, surveying from a broader environment, including challenging sources; one has a greater chance of locating an appropriate response. Gathering information from new sources to cope with a novel situation is an innate human strategy that promotes survival (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). In unfamiliar and uncertain situations, an anxious emotional response evokes cognitive strategies aimed at information seeking in the effort to identify and appropriately respond to the risk. The search for information creates a sort of cognitive pause before action, as the best strategy to deal with the threat is yet unclear.

In either case, when one experiences aversion or uncertainty, reasoning becomes

motivated toward reducing vulnerability and thus, self-protective strategies may reinforce or, on the other hand, expand the existing worldview. This study seeks to understand how partisanship influences belief in conspiracy theories, particularly for Independents.

Therefore, it is important to understand how the socio-political environment contributes to group membership and the resultant political decision-making processes of the American voter.

### **The Independent Identity**

In 1960, Campbell, et al. described political identity as being fairly stable over an individual's lifetime, and asserted Independents behaved like partisans and subsequently, were not really interesting as a separate group. However, as previously stated, social identity, which includes partisanship, is fluid and dynamic (Brewer, 2001). This is reflected in the 2015 poll conducted by Jones indicated 43% of Americans claim to be Independent, up from 36% in 1988. However, what *being* Independent actually means is varied. Keith (1992) loosely defined Independents in terms of two separate groups: (1) non-partisan leaning, and partisan leaning (i.e. Republican-leaning, Democrat-leaning). This view is also reflected in recent research that indicates some Independents are ideologically spread across the political spectrum and may be therefore classified as non-leaning (i.e., "My views don't fit one party"). While others may be very one-sided in their judgments, yet for social reasons, be reluctant to be labeled as such, and may therefore be described as partisan leaning (i.e., "I'm really a Republican, but I don't want anyone to know"). Curiously, these partisan leaning Independents may also share the explicit desire for bipartisan compromise, but secretly (implicitly) want to fight for their

particular issue (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). This study intends to further investigate these phenomena to better understand the effects of partisanship on political conspiracy endorsement, which may be useful to future endeavors pertaining to voter behavior.

As evidenced in the recent elections of 2016, many people believed partisanship to be rife with negative traits and voiced a distaste for being labeled and feeling forced to choose between the two political parties with which they did not whole-heartedly agree (MacKuen, et al., 2010). As social identity theories suggest, personal identity is coupled with one's social environment, therefore, identifying as an Independent may offer psychological and social benefits not available in the established partisan group membership. Redlawsk, Civettini, & Emmerson (2010) suggest that when overwhelmed by contrary information (i.e. the rise in negative campaigning strategies) (Mattes & Redlawsk, 2015) to the point that internal anxiety about maintaining one's current view is too much; the new information must be integrated into existing beliefs. In this case, an individual may be less motivated to maintain their existing belief structure (Redlawsk, et al., 2010). Furthermore, when one does not feel the ideas and values of group membership are represented in existing group policy and behavior, the conflict results in membership abandonment (Brewer, 1991).

As growing intolerance toward dissimilar attitudes, values and ideas represented by the available political elites reached a tipping point, voters looked for another group to join. The Independent label is not officially recognized as an organized political party, and for this reason, is less defined and therefore more tolerant about membership ambiguity. People choose to be Independent because the category is perceived to be

associated with more positive, superior traits (i.e. more rational, impartial) than that of the partisan label.

## Chapter 3

### THE PRESENT STUDY

#### Research Questions

Intentionally leaving out independent partisans, research on motivated reasoning and political decision-making traditionally considers only conservative or liberal partisans. Perhaps this is related to what some believe about Independents; they are really *partisans in hiding* and not truly different (Campbell et al., 1960; Keith, 1992). However, as the political center widens for those who appear to be ambivalent, these partisans who are ‘in the middle’ or who identify as ‘independent’ present an important subgroup to investigate. Because choosing the Independent identity avoids the negative association with partisan labels, Independents would seem to be explicitly less susceptible to endorse conspiracy theories, when compared to partisans. However, are they truly neutral, employing less emotionally influenced rationality, as they would prefer to be seen? Or, are they implicitly just as susceptible to conspiracy theory endorsement as partisans? In other words, while Independents explicitly distance themselves from partisanship, do they implicitly endorse ideology from either conservative or liberal camps? In contrast, could Independents behave similarly to strong partisans who stand on one side of the fence? Yet still, perhaps Independents are not necessarily more biased as such, but rather are biased in a manner that does not reflect the stereotypical, strict adherence to any specific party. Employing mouse tracking methodology, this study sought to answer the following research questions: (1) Are Independents different than partisans and if so, in

what way? (2) Do all Independents respond in a similar manner when responding to political conspiracy theories?

### Testing Hypotheses via Response Competition and Trial Types

This study uses an experimental approach to evaluate the appeal of political conspiracy theories by measuring the response process, as recorded by computer mouse movement and included three trial types. In each trial, participants view a statement, which they must decide is true or false. Figure 1 illustrates each trial and statement type with an example of the target and competitor response options.

Trial Type	Control	Baseline	Party-Aligned
Statement Type	General political knowledge statements	General conspiratorial statements	Politically directed conspiracy statements (right-wing, left-wing aligned)
Statement Example	There are two years in one full term of office for U.S. Senators.	Area 51 in Nevada is a secretive military base that contains hidden alien spacecraft and/or alien bodies.	Barack Obama was born in Kenya.
Target Response	FALSE	FALSE	FALSE
Competitor Response	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE



*Figure 1. Trial, Statement, and Response Types. Three statement types are designed to measure response competition. In each trial, participants select either the target response 'FALSE', or the competitor response 'TRUE.'*

The degree to which mouse movement deviates toward the opposite response than what was ultimately chosen, is understood to reflect the strength that this option 'competes' with the final answer. It is this competition between the explicit response and the implicit process involved in decision that is understood to represent underlying bias (Duran, Nicholson, & Dale, manuscript in preparation).

### **Hypotheses**

We focus here on participants who identified as Independents: Non-leaning, Republican-leaning, and Democrat-leaning. By "leaning" Independents, we mean those who, when asked about their political affiliation, initially reported to be Independent, but when prompted in a follow-up question whether they tended to lean towards a political party, reported either Republican or Democrat. We also focus on only those responses where participants explicitly rejected the truthfulness of political conspiracy theories. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed, with the desire to sift through the curious identity and corresponding behavior of the Independent voter.

**H1:** Together, these hypotheses predict that non-leaning Independents, who claim to be genuinely untethered to either party, will actually show ideological alignment with various aspects of both parties. Thus, they seem to be ideologically spread across the conservative-liberal spectrum. Relative to Partisan-leaning Independents, *both* right-wing and left-wing aligned political conspiracies will hold implicit appeal. For *non-leaning*

*Independents*, while ultimately rejecting right-wing or left-wing political conspiratorial statements, I hypothesize:

**H1-A:** Right-wing *and* left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold similar appeal when compared to each other (non-significant difference).

**H1-B:** Right-wing and left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold greater appeal when compared to general conspiratorial (baseline) statements.

**H1-C:** Right-wing and left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold greater appeal when compared to general knowledge (control) statements.

**H1-D:** Right-wing and left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold less appeal when compared to all Independent ‘leaners,’ (Democrat-leaners and Republican-leaners).

Figure 2 contains a summary table of the expected findings and H-1 hypotheses.

<b>Non-leaning Independents</b>					
	<b>Trial Type</b>	<b>Control</b>	<b>Baseline</b>	<b>Right-Wing</b>	<b>Left-Wing</b>
<b>H1 - A</b>	Statement Type	General political information statements	General conspiratorial statements	Political conspiratorial statements against Obama	Political conspiratorial statements against Bush
	Expected Behavior (response competition)			≈ <b>to left-wing</b>	≈ <b>to right-wing</b>
<b>H1- B</b>	Statement Type	General political knowledge statements	General conspiratorial statements	Political conspiratorial statements against Obama	Political conspiratorial statements against Bush
	Expected Behavior (response competition)		-	+	+
<b>H1 - C</b>	Statement Type	General political knowledge statements	General conspiratorial statements	Political conspiratorial statements against Obama	Political conspiratorial statements against Bush
	Expected Behavior (response competition)	-		+	+
<b>H1 - D</b>	Statement Type	General political knowledge statements	General conspiratorial statements	Political conspiratorial statements against Obama	Political conspiratorial statements against Bush
	Expected Behavior (response competition)			- Compared to Independent 'leaners'	- Compared to Independent 'leaners'

*Figure 2. Summary Table of Expected Findings and H-1 Hypotheses. In each trial/statement type, + symbols represent increased values, – symbols represent decreased values, and ≈ symbols represent non-significant difference between statement types.*

**H2:** These hypotheses predict that Democrat-leaning Independents will be very partisan in their judgments, despite their lack of an explicit Democratic group identity. Democrat-leaning Independents will respond less like non-leaning Independents and more like Democrats. Specifically, Democrat-leaning Independents will demonstrate equally biased response behavior similar to Democrats for right and left-wing aligned political conspiracy theories relative to general knowledge and general conspiracy theory items. For *Democrat-leaning Independents*, while ultimately rejecting right-wing or left-wing political conspiratorial statements, compared to non-leaning Independents:

**H2-A:** Left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold a greater appeal when compared to general conspiratorial (baseline) statements.

**H2-B:** Right-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold a less appeal when compared to general conspiratorial (baseline) statements.

**H2-C:** Left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold greater appeal when compared to general political knowledge (control) statements.

**H2-D:** Right-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold less appeal when compared to general political knowledge (control) statements.

**H2-E:** Left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold greater appeal when compared to right-wing political conspiratorial statements.

Figure 3 contains a summary table of the expected findings and H-2 hypotheses.

<b>Democrat-leaning Independents</b>					
	<b>Trial Type</b>	<b>Control</b>	<b>Baseline</b>	<b>Right-Wing</b>	<b>Left-Wing</b>
<b>H2 - A</b>	Statement Type	General political knowledge statements	General conspiratorial statements	Political conspiratorial statements against Obama	Political conspiratorial statements against Bush
	Expected Behavior (strength of response competition)		-		+
<b>H2- B</b>	Statement Type	General political knowledge statements	General conspiratorial statements	Political conspiratorial statements against Obama	Political conspiratorial statements against Bush
	Expected Behavior (strength of response competition)		+	-	
<b>H2 - C</b>	Statement Type	General political knowledge statements	General conspiratorial statements	Political conspiratorial statements against Obama	Political conspiratorial statements against Bush
	Expected Behavior (strength of response competition)	-			+
<b>H2 - D</b>	Statement Type	General political knowledge statements	General conspiratorial statements	Political conspiratorial statements against Obama	Political conspiratorial statements against Bush
	Expected Behavior (strength of response competition)	+		-	
<b>H2 - E</b>	Statement Type	General political knowledge statements	General conspiratorial statements	Political conspiratorial statements against Obama	Political conspiratorial statements against Bush
	Expected Behavior (strength of response competition)			-	+

*Figure 3. Summary Table of Expected Findings and H-2 Hypotheses. In each trial/statement type, + symbols represent increased values, – symbols represent*

decreased values, and  $\approx$  symbols represent non-significant difference between statement types.

**H3:** These hypotheses predict that Republican-leaning Independents will be very partisan in their judgments, despite their lack of an explicit Republican group identity.

Republican-leaning Independents will respond less like Non-leaning Independents and more like Republicans. Specifically, Republican-leaning Independents will demonstrate equally biased response behavior similar to Republican for right and left-wing aligned political conspiratorial theories relative to general knowledge and general conspiratorial theory items.

For *Republican-leaning Independents*, while ultimately rejecting right-wing or left-wing political conspiratorial statements, compared to non-leaning Independents:

**H3-A:** Right-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold a greater appeal when compared to general conspiratorial (baseline) statements.

**H3-B:** Left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold a less appeal when compared to general conspiratorial (baseline) statements.

**H3-C:** Right-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold greater appeal when compared to general political knowledge (control) statements.

**H3-D:** Left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold less appeal when compared to general political knowledge (control) statements.

**H3-E:** Right-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold greater appeal when compared to left-wing political conspiratorial statements.

Figure 4 contains a summary table of the expected findings and H-3 hypotheses.

<b>Republican-leaning Independents</b>					
	Trial Type	Control	Baseline	Right-Wing	Left-Wing
<b>H3 - A</b>	Statement Type	General political knowledge statements	General conspiratorial statements	Political conspiratorial statements against Obama	Political conspiratorial statements against Bush
	Expected Behavior (strength of response competition)		-	+	
<b>H3- B</b>	Statement Type	General political knowledge statements	General conspiratorial statements	Political conspiratorial statements against Obama	Political conspiratorial statements against Bush
	Expected Behavior (strength of response competition)		+		-
<b>H3 - C</b>	Statement Type	General political knowledge statements	General conspiratorial statements	Political conspiratorial statements against Obama	Political conspiratorial statements against Bush
	Expected Behavior (strength of response competition)	-		+	
<b>H3 - D</b>	Statement Type	General political knowledge statements	General conspiratorial statements	Political conspiratorial statements against Obama	Political conspiratorial statements against Bush
	Expected Behavior (strength of response competition)	+			-
<b>H3 - E</b>	Statement Type	General political knowledge statements	General conspiratorial statements	Political conspiratorial statements against Obama	Political conspiratorial statements against Bush
	Expected Behavior (strength of response competition)			+	-

Figure 4. Summary Table of Expected Findings and H-3 Hypotheses. In each trial/statement type, + symbols represent increased values, – symbols represent

*decreased values, and  $\approx$  symbols represent non-significant difference between statement types.*

In the attempt to understand how partisanship influences attitudes and reasoning when it comes to endorsing political conspiracy theories, analyzing the implicit processes that occur over time during decision-making is the focus of this study. The next section presents a general overview of the theoretical background of action dynamics methodology, which is necessary to understand how the notion of a greater or lesser appeal to political conspiracy theory endorsement is measured and quantified. This will be followed by an in-depth discussion of this study's methods, followed by the results.



## Chapter 4

### **METHOD**

#### **Mouse-Tracking: Exploring Mental Activity in Body Movement**

Computer mouse tracking is a technique that captures the temporal dynamics of conscious processing, such as occurs during deliberation, as well as the hidden, automatic processes that influence decision-making. These data can be used to describe the strength of hidden (implicit) bias, not otherwise captured with traditional survey methods.

Therefore, in pursuit of a dynamic view of cognition, mouse-tracking methods record mental activity as it is expressed in body movement (Dale, Kehoe, & Spivey, 2007) . The motion trajectories of the mouse are believed to reflect the multiple, parallel cognitive processes that ultimately converge into a final, integrated response (Hehman, Stolier, & Freeman, 2014; Wojnowicz, Ferguson, Dale, & Spivey, 2009). In this way, it is possible to observe the mental activity of political decision-making and analyze the competition between explicit and implicit responding through survey participants' arm motor movements as they respond to a series of politically related statements (Duran, Nicholson, & Dale, 2015). Mouse tracking provides real-time processing of the temporal dynamics in the survey data, beginning with participant activation and continuing through each trial to response. Capturing this entire event provides a window into the dynamic and complex events of decision-making.

#### **Study Design**

Duran, Nicholson, and Dale (manuscript in preparation) were the principal investigators in the primary study, from which the focus of this study is drawn. Their

work highlighted the response attraction and resistance to political conspiracy theories for Republican and Democrat partisans. This study investigates Independents as a distinct group from that of traditional partisans in Duran et al. (manuscript in preparation). To do so, three sub-types of Independent political identity were extracted from the primary data. These groups represent the hypothesized types of Independent voter (1) non-leaning Independents, (2) Republican-leaning Independents, and (3) Democrat-leaning Independents.

The mouse-tracking methodology captures the response process as participants either endorsed (responded ‘*True*’) or rejected (responded ‘*False*’) statements related to 1) general political knowledge, 2) general conspiracy theories, 3) Republican, party-aligned (right-wing) conspiracy theories (against Barack Obama), and 4) Democrat, party-aligned (left-wing) conspiracy theories (against George W. Bush).

Stimuli Statements. The general political knowledge stimuli included statements about general political information (i.e. “There are two years in one full term of office for U.S. Senators.”), and general knowledge statements about Barack Obama and George W. Bush (i.e. “Barack Obama has two sons.” and “George W. Bush is married to Michelle Bush.”). The general conspiratorial stimuli included statements about general conspiracy theories (i.e. “Area 51 in Nevada is a secretive military base that contains hidden alien spacecraft and/or alien bodies.”). The party-aligned political conspiracy theory stimuli included statements about Barack Obama and George Bush (i.e. right-wing: “Barack Obama was born in Kenya.” and left-wing “George W. Bush knew that 9/11 was going to happen.”). See Appendix D for the complete list of stimuli statements used in this study.

**Mouse Tracking: Movement Trajectories and Critical Measures.** In this study, from the onset of movement through final response selection, mouse tracking recorded the continuous movement of the computer mouse as participants responded to true/false survey questions. As previously described, this movement, or trajectory, illustrates the corresponding mental and motor processes involved in response selection (Freeman, Dale, & Farmer, 2011). To demonstrate this methodology, an example of a trial in this study is appropriate. In each trial, following presentation of the stimuli statement, the participant responds by moving the mouse toward one of the two target words (i.e. ‘True’ is located on the left side of the screen, ‘False’ is located on the right side of the screen). From each trial, two important mouse-tracking measurements are captured. These are (1) the initial time it takes for each participant to move the mouse, and (2) the mouse movement toward a response option. In action dynamic terms, the time recorded in the initial mouse movement is (1) *latency of response initiation (latency)* and (2) the non-linear movement around the screen prior to the clicked response is measured and averaged as *deviation toward competitor (average deviation)*.

### **Procedure**

The survey ran from January 2014 to October 2014 and consisted of 38 true-false statements (general political knowledge, general conspiracy theories, left-wing aligned political conspiracy theories, and right-wing aligned political conspiracy theories). After each statement, participants rated their level of confidence in rejecting or endorsing the item. Following the true-false portion, participants explicitly identified political party affiliation by responding to standard questions (AEI, 2013; Miller et al., 2015) and

provided demographic information. Participants were compensated \$1.50 for participation.

Each statement was presented two words at a time. Participants clicked to advance until the statement was completed on the final screen. Participants then had 6 seconds to respond (either true or false) or the trial was skipped and participants were warned they would not receive payment if they continued to delay their responses. The True/False response locations were counterbalanced during responding. Figure 5 provides a visualization of the computer screen progression in a mouse-tracking trial.

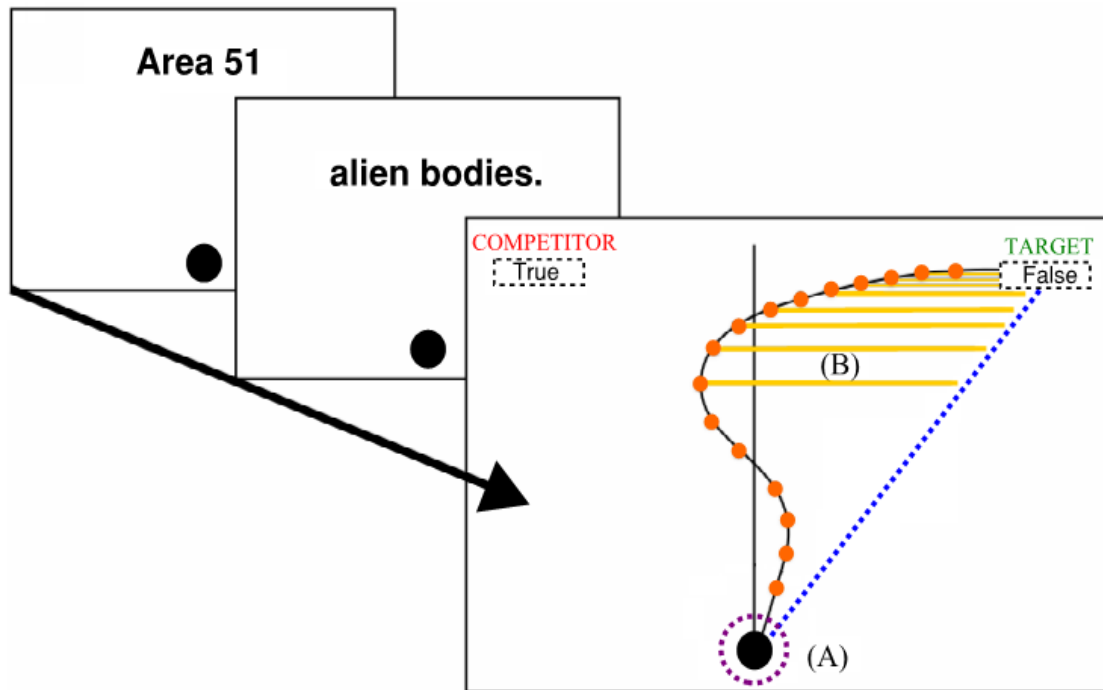


Figure 5. Visualization of the Computer Screen in a Mouse-Tracking Trial. Participants click to advance through stimuli statement, presented 2 words at a time to the response screen. The black dot (center bottom – origin point) represents the mouse starting position. The dotted blue line represents the ideal mouse trajectory toward the response

*location (target – ‘False’). The red dotted lines represent possible trajectories deviating toward the competitor response location (competitor – ‘True’). Adapted from “Simultaneous Attraction and Resistance to Political Conspiracies in a Real-Time Decision-Tracking Task,” by N. D. Duran, S. P. Nicholson, and R. Dale, 2017, Manuscript in preparation.*

## **Participants**

To draw participants from a global network, participants were recruited using Amazon mTurk, an online crowdsourcing platform, which requires users to have an established account and meet the qualifications for the survey, including an informed consent. This research was conducted with the approval of the Institutional Review Board at Arizona State University. Prior to beginning the survey, participants were informed that proceeding to the next screen indicated consent. Prior to analyzing the data, participant personal identity information was removed.

In total, (after removing participants who did not complete the survey, those who were left-handed, those who violated the time constraint to answer each survey question, individuals who attempted to complete the survey more than once, and those who lived outside of the U.S.) data from 852 participants were recorded with the mean age of 35.19 years. There were 335 females. Participants self-identified as Democrat, Republican, or Independent. Those who self-identified as Independent were further parsed according to their explicitly stated tendency to endorse ideology considered to be 1) more liberal (Democrat), 2) more conservative ideology (Republican) or 3) neither. These participants were then categorized as 1) Democrat-leaning Independent, 2), Republican-leaning

Independent or 3) Non-leaning Independent, respectively. Of the total 852 participants, Democrat responders (mean age 33.76 years) accounted for 59.22% (504 participants), and Republican responders (mean age 36.63 years) totaled 22.68% (193). Of the 358 participants who identified as Independent, 154 (18.08%) self-identified as Non-leaning Independents, 130 (15.26%) as Democrat-leaning Independents, and 74 (8.68%) as Republican-leaning Independents.

### **Analysis Approach and Data Preparation**

To reduce management complexity and consequent analysis, only the data related to the three Independent sub-groups were retained. Much of the robust data collected during the primary study phase were removed, as they were extraneous and unrelated to the main topic of this study. (See Duran, Nicholson & Dale, manuscript in preparation). The data preparation included the following steps. (1) Participants who identified as Republican or Democrat were removed. (2) The stimuli correctly answered as ‘true,’ and those indirect and positively valenced statements were not included in this study. (3) Additionally, trials where participants endorsed conspiracy theories (“believers”) were removed. (4) Finally, statements originally classified as “high” or “low” knowledge were collapsed into a *general political knowledge* category. For analysis, the locations of individual responses (procedurally counterbalanced) were transformed so that the target response (false – reject) would always be in the top-right corner (positive coordinate region) and the competitor response (true – endorse) would always be in the top-left corner (negative coordinate region).

**Coded predictors and planned contrasts.** The two dependent variables were modeled as a function of the deviation coded predictors: Non-leaning Independents = 0.5, Republican-leaning Independents -0.5; Non-leaning Independents = 0.5, Democrat-leaning Independents -0.5; Non-leaning Independents = 0.5, All-leaning Independents -0.5. In addition, the planned contrasts (i.e. Non-leaning Independents relative to Republican-leaning Independents) for right-wing and left-wing political conspiratorial statements were contrasted with control and baseline statements: right-wing compared to general political knowledge (0.5, -0.5); left-wing compared to general political knowledge (0.5, -0.5); right-wing compared to left-wing (0.5, -0.5); right-wing compared to general political conspiracy (0.5, -0.5); left-wing compared to general political conspiracy (0.5, -0.5).

### **Variables Defined**

There are two independent variables and two dependent variables in this study. The first independent variable, *political identity*, contains the three sub-types of Independent political identity: (1) non-leaning Independents, (2) Republican-leaning Independents, and (3) Democrat-leaning Independents, which were extracted from the primary data and represent the hypothesized types of Independent voter. The second independent variable, *response type*, contains the four stimuli statement types described above: (1) general political knowledge, (2) general conspiracy theories, (3) left-wing aligned political conspiracies, and (4) right-wing aligned political conspiracies. The two dependent variables represent the mouse-tracking measures mentioned above: (1) *latency of response initiation (latency)* and (2) *deviation toward competitor (average deviation)*

(Spivey & Dale, 2004). The following provides additional context for how each category and variable were defined.

**Independent Variables.**

*Political identity.* (1) Non-leaning Independent: participants who explicitly reported not identifying with more liberal or more conservative ideology (2) Democrat-leaning Independent: participants who explicitly reported to endorse a more liberal political ideology, (3) Republican-leaning Independent: participants who explicitly reported to endorse a more conservative political ideology.

*Response type.* (1) General political knowledge (2) General conspiracy theories (3) Left-wing aligned political conspiracies and (4) Right-wing aligned political conspiracies.

**Dependent Variables.** Two dynamic measures along an X and Y-axis were generated. These include (1) latency of response initiation, and (2) average deviation toward the competing response option.

*Latency of Response Initiation (Latency):* The time it takes to move 100 pixels from the point of origin to the response location within each trial. Initially, an increase in latency time suggests a hesitation to commit to the target response due to the competition of the alternative response (i.e. the competitor is a reasonable choice). See Figure 5.

*Deviation toward Competitor (Average Deviation).* The deviation of the mouse trajectory at each coordinate position, computed from a hypothetical straight line drawn from the origin point to the target response. The degree of deviation is assumed to be an



index of response competition strength. The average deviation indicates the implicit bias to endorse the option not explicitly selected. See Figure 5.

### **Statistical Model**

In order to analyze *between group* differences in the three subtypes of Independent identity, and in the same manner as was conducted in the primary study by Duran, et al., (manuscript in preparation), a linear mixed-effect model analysis was conducted using R version 3.3.1 and the lme4 package version 1.1-7 (Bates, Maechler, & Bolker, 2011). Duran, et al., (manuscript in preparation), provide complete details, including the code and specification of planned contrasts, for the R Markdown tutorial.

**Analysis justification.** This study design included two independent variables (political identity, response type) and two dependent variables (latency and average deviation). Linear mixed-effects models are designed to handle data when observations are not independent, such as the clustered data in this study (Woltman, Feldstain, MacKay, & Rocchi, 2012). This method of analysis is appropriate to use in a repeated measures study when the assumption of independent of observations is violated (e.g. data entered in nested format, person-period vs. person-level) with a separate line for each observation for each subject. In a repeated measures study, these data are collected at different times under different conditions and are nested within each study participant (Woltman, Feldstain, MacKay, & Rocchi, 2012).

This model uses variables at levels to adjust the regression of the base-level dependent variables on the base-level independent variables. Multilevel, in this case, is better at revealing the difference in variance among the units of analysis in different

groups comprising each level. This results in an improved estimate of the individual and cross-level effects (Mickelson, 2016). Furthermore, the traditional approach that relies upon aggregation is inappropriate for this analysis because in each “super level,” each question/response is averaged (e.g. general knowledge, general conspiracy, right-wing and left-wing conspiracy). This creates problems because the fewer units of analysis replace the many units at the base level, resulting in a loss of statistical power. Ecological fallacy then becomes a concern because the necessary correspondence between individual-level and group-level variable relationships does not exist (e.g. political identity correlates little with each stimulus question/response, but correlates well at averaged response type). A linear mixed-effect analysis includes the fixed effects of predictors, and random effects (intercepts) for each subject and item, thus characterizing the idiosyncratic variations due to individual differences (Winter, 2012).

## RESULTS

### Analysis

Separate linear mixed-effect analyses produced the fixed effects of predictors and random effects (intercepts) for each subject and item on average deviation and latency. Interactions were probed with planned contrasts between statement types (i.e. right-wing vs. left-wing, right-wing vs. general political knowledge). The following results include the coefficients of each predictor, standard error,  $p$ -value (approximated from the  $t$ -value for each factor in the model), as well as the captured variance of the overall model reported as Conditional  $R^2$  ( $R^2$ ), which represents the variance that is explained by the fixed and random factors together. See Duran, et al., (manuscript in preparation), for the MuMIn R statistical package, version 1.15.6, used to compute  $R^2$ .

**H1 Hypothesis and Results.** Non-leaning Independents, while ultimately *rejecting* right-wing or left-wing political conspiratorial statements:

**H1-A:** Political conspiratorial statements will hold similar appeal when compared to each other.

Non-leaners demonstrated a non-significant difference between right-wing *and* left-wing political conspiratorial statements on each index of response competition (average deviation)  $b = 1.66$ ,  $SE = 9.69$ ,  $t(0.17)$ ,  $p < 0.86$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$ ; and (latency)  $b = 24.73$ ,  $SE = 46.86$ ,  $t(0.52)$ ,  $p < 0.59$ ,  $R^2 = 0.31$ . In other words, non-leaners were not more attracted to endorsing either type of political conspiracy theory.

**H1-B:** Right-wing and left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold greater appeal when compared to general conspiratorial (baseline) statements. Non-leaning Independents demonstrated a significant difference between right-wing political conspiratorial statements and general political conspiratorial statements on average deviation,  $b = 28.19$ ,  $SE = 10.92$ ,  $t(2.58)$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$ , but not latency  $b = 17.87$ ,  $SE = 54.32$ ,  $t(0.32)$ ,  $p < 0.74$ ,  $R^2 = 0.31$ . Non-leaning Independents demonstrated a significant difference between left-wing political conspiratorial statements and general political conspiratorial statements on average deviation  $b = 26.53$ ,  $SE = 10.85$ ,  $t(2.44)$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$ , but not latency  $b = -6.85$ ,  $SE = 54.11$ ,  $t(-0.12)$ ,  $p < 0.89$ ,  $R^2 = 0.31$ . In other words, on average, before ultimately rejecting (response: ‘False’), non-leaning Independents deviated more toward accepting (response: ‘True’) the party-aligned political conspiratorial statements than the general conspiratorial statements, but the time spent to do so was not different between the statement types.

**H1-C:** Right-wing and left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold greater appeal when compared to general knowledge (control) statements.

Non-leaning Independents demonstrated a marginally significant difference between right-wing political conspiratorial statements and general political knowledge statements on average deviation,  $b = 11.05$ ,  $SE = 5.91$ ,  $t(1.86)$ ,  $p < 0.06$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$ , but not latency  $b = 18.73$ ,  $SE = 28.77$ ,  $t(0.65)$ ,  $p < 0.51$ ,  $R^2 = 0.31$ . In other words, on average, before ultimately rejecting (response: ‘False’), non-leaning Independents marginally deviated more toward accepting (response: ‘True’) the right-wing political conspiratorial

statements than the general political knowledge statements, but the time spent to do so was not different between the statement types.

Non-leaning Independents demonstrated a non-significant difference between left-wing political conspiratorial statements and general political knowledge statements on average deviation,  $b = 9.39$ ,  $SE = 5.85$ ,  $t(1.60)$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$ , as well as latency,  $b = -5.99$ ,  $SE = 28.58$ ,  $t(-0.20)$ ,  $p < 0.83$ ,  $R^2 = 0.31$ .

**H1-D:** Right-wing and left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold less appeal when compared to all Independent ‘leaners.’

When compared to all Republican-leaning and Democrat-leaning Independents, non-leaning Independents demonstrated two significant differences on average deviation only: (1) a greater competition towards endorsement of left-wing political conspiratorial statements as compared to general knowledge items  $b = -9.54$ ,  $SE = 4.52$ ,  $t(-2.10)$ ,  $p < 0.03$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$ , (non-significant latency  $b = 3.86$ ,  $SE = 20.83$ ,  $t(0.18)$ ,  $p < 0.85$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ ) and (2) a greater competition towards endorsement of left-wing political conspiratorial statements as compared to general conspiratorial statements  $b = -17.42$ ,  $SE = 7.65$ ,  $t(-2.27)$ ,  $p < 0.02$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$ , (non-significant latency  $b = 8.04$ ,  $SE = 35.22$ ,  $t(0.22)$ ,  $p < 0.81$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ ).

All other comparisons were non-significant on average deviation and latency as follows: (1) Right-wing political conspiratorial statements to General political knowledge statements, average deviation  $b = -2.83$ ,  $SE = 4.60$ ,  $t(-0.61)$ ,  $p < 0.53$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$  and, latency  $b = 25.17$ ,  $SE = 21.20$ ,  $t(1.18)$ ,  $p < 0.23$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$  (2) Right-wing political conspiratorial statements to General conspiratorial statements, average deviation  $b = -$

10.71,  $SE = 7.75$ ,  $t(-1.38)$ ,  $p < 0.16$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$ , and latency  $b = 29.36$ ,  $SE = 35.67$ ,  $t(0.82)$ ,  $p < 0.41$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$  (3) Right-wing political conspiratorial statements to Left-wing political conspiratorial statements, average deviation  $b = 6.71$ ,  $SE = 7.71$ ,  $t(0.86)$ ,  $p < 0.38$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$ , and latency  $b = 21.31$ ,  $SE = 35.50$ ,  $t(0.60)$ ,  $p < 0.54$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ .

**H2 Hypothesis and Results.** For *Democrat-leaning Independents*, while ultimately rejecting right-wing or left-wing political conspiratorial statements, **compared to non-leaning Independents**:

**H2-A:** Left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold a greater appeal when compared to general conspiratorial (baseline) statements.

Democrat-leaning Independents demonstrated a non-significant difference on average deviation  $b = -1.74$ ,  $SE = 10.62$ ,  $t(-0.16)$ ,  $p < 0.86$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ , or on latency  $b = 50.05$ ,  $SE = 48.89$ ,  $t(1.02)$ ,  $p < 0.30$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ . In other words, on average Democrat-leaning Independents did not deviate significantly towards endorsement of left-wing political conspiratorial statements compared to general conspiratorial (baseline) statements, nor did they differ in the time to initiate mouse movement.

**H2-B:** Right-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold a less appeal when compared to general conspiratorial (baseline) statements.

Democrat-leaning Independents demonstrated a significant difference on average deviation  $b = -22.57$ ,  $SE = 10.49$ ,  $t(-2.15)$ ,  $p < 0.03$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ , but not on latency  $b = 13.32$ ,  $SE = 48.30$ ,  $t(0.27)$ ,  $p < 0.30$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ . In other words, on average Democrat-leaning Independents show less competition towards endorsement of right-wing political

conspiratorial statements as compared to general conspiratorial statements, but they did not differ in the time to initiate mouse movement.

**H2-C:** Left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold greater appeal when compared to general political knowledge (control) statements.

Democrat-leaning Independents demonstrated a non-significant difference on average deviation  $b = 4.98$ ,  $SE = 6.27$ ,  $t(0.79)$ ,  $p < 0.42$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ , and latency  $b = 32.30$ ,  $SE = 28.86$ ,  $t(1.11)$ ,  $p < 0.26$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ . In other words, on average Democrat-leaning Independents did not deviate significantly towards endorsement of left-wing political conspiratorial statements compared to general political knowledge (control) statements, nor did they differ in the time to initiate mouse movement.

**H2-D:** Right-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold less appeal when compared to general political knowledge (control) statements.

Democrat-leaning Independents demonstrated a significant difference on average deviation  $b = -15.84$ ,  $SE = 6.15$ ,  $t(-2.57)$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ , but not latency  $b = -4.42$ ,  $SE = 28.34$ ,  $t(-0.15)$ ,  $p < 0.87$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ . In other words, Democrat-leaning Independents show less competition towards endorsement of right-wing political conspiratorial statements as compared to general political knowledge statements, but they did not differ in the time to initiate mouse movement.

**H2-E:** Left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold greater appeal when compared to right-wing political conspiratorial statements.

Democrat-leaning Independents demonstrated a significant difference on average deviation  $b = -20.83$ ,  $SE = 10.47$ ,  $t(-1.98)$ ,  $p < 0.04$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ , but not on latency  $b = -$

36.72,  $SE = 48.17$ ,  $t(-0.76)$ ,  $p < 0.44$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ . In other words, Democrat-leaning Independents show less competition towards endorsement of right-wing political conspiratorial statements as compared to left-wing items, but they did not differ in the time to initiate mouse movement.

**H3 Hypothesis and Results.** For *Republican-leaning Independents*, while ultimately rejecting right-wing or left-wing political conspiratorial statements, compared to **non-leaning Independents**:

**H3-A:** Right-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold a greater appeal when compared to general conspiratorial (baseline) statements.

Republican-leaning Independents demonstrated a significant difference on average deviation  $b = 13.15$ ,  $SE = 12.49$ ,  $t(1.05)$ ,  $p < 0.29$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$ , but not on latency  $b = 30.41$ ,  $SE = 57.50$ ,  $t(0.52)$ ,  $p < 0.59$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ . In others words, on average Republican-leaning Independents deviated more towards endorsement (response: ‘True’) of right-wing political conspiratorial statements as compared to general political knowledge statements, but they did not differ in the time to initiate mouse movement.

**H3-B:** Left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold a less appeal when compared to general conspiratorial (baseline) statements.

Republican-leaning Independents demonstrated a significant difference on average deviation  $b = -22.56$ ,  $SE = 11.78$ ,  $t(-1.91.)$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$ , but not on latency  $b = -45.22$ ,  $SE = 54.21$ ,  $t(-0.83)$ ,  $p < 0.40$ ,  $R^2 = 0.30$ . In others words, on average Republican-leaning Independents deviated less towards endorsement of left-wing political



conspiratorial statements as compared to general political knowledge statements, but they did not differ in the time to initiate mouse movement.

**H3-C:** Right-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold greater appeal when compared to general political knowledge (control) statements.

Republican-leaning Independents demonstrated a marginally significant difference on average deviation  $b = 15.98$ ,  $SE = 7.54$ ,  $t(2.11)$ ,  $p < 0.03$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$ , but not on latency  $b = 43.83$ ,  $SE = 34.73$ ,  $t(1.26)$ ,  $p < 0.20$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ . In others words, on average Republican-leaning Independents deviated marginally more towards endorsement of left-wing political conspiratorial statements as compared to general conspiratorial statements, but they did not differ in the time to initiate mouse movement.

**H3-D:** Left-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold less appeal when compared to general political knowledge (control) statements.

Republican-leaning Independents demonstrated non-significant difference on average deviation  $b = -19.74$ ,  $SE = 6.94$ ,  $t(-2.84)$ ,  $p < 0.004$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$ , but not on latency  $b = -31.81$ ,  $SE = 31.94$ ,  $t(-0.99)$ ,  $p < 0.31$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ . In others words, on average Republican-leaning Independents did not deviate significantly towards endorsement of left-wing political conspiratorial statements as compared to general conspiratorial statements, but they did not differ in the time to initiate mouse movement.

**H3-E:** Right-wing political conspiratorial statements will hold greater appeal when compared to left-wing political conspiratorial statements.

Republican-leaning Independents demonstrated a significant difference on average deviation  $b = 35.72$ ,  $SE = 12.25$ ,  $t(2.91)$ ,  $p < 0.003$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$ , but not on latency  $b =$

75.64,  $SE = 56.42$ ,  $t(1.43)$ ,  $p < 0.18$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ . In other words, on average Republican-leaning Independents deviated more towards endorsement of right-wing political conspiratorial statements as compared to left-wing political conspiratorial statements, but they did not differ in the time to initiate mouse movement.

## Chapter 6

### **DISCUSSION**

Employing a mouse-tracking method, this study sought to elucidate the three sub-types of Independent participant as they responded to political conspiratorial statements. The results confirmed general expectations related to Non-leaning Independents. They indeed appear to behave quite differently than their partisan-leaning counterparts (Republican-leaning and Democrat-leaning). A summary of the findings, accompanied by an explanatory visualization of the average divergence over time will further elucidate these findings.

#### **Non-leaning Independents**

Non-leaning Independents, as they ultimately rejected political conspiratorial statements were (1) not more attracted to endorsing either type of political conspiracy theory, (2) deviated more toward accepting (response: 'True') the party-aligned political conspiratorial statements than the general conspiratorial statements, and (3) deviated marginally more toward accepting (response: 'True') the right-wing political conspiratorial statements than the general political knowledge statements. Furthermore, when compared to all Independent 'leaners,' (Republican-leaning and Democrat-leaning) non-leaning Independents demonstrated two significant differences, (1) stronger deviation towards accepting left-wing political conspiratorial statements as compared to general knowledge items, and (2) stronger deviation towards accepting left-wing political conspiratorial statements as compared to general conspiratorial statements. Figure 6(a) provides a visualization of the Non-leaning Independents average divergence of party-

aligned (right-wing, left-wing) political conspiratorial and general conspiratorial (baseline) statement types relative to general political knowledge (control) statements.

It appears then, that non-leaning Independents do not favor either right-wing or left-wing political conspiracies, necessarily, but deviate more towards accepting *all* party-aligned conspiratorial statements more than general conspiratorial statements. This behavior perhaps reflects a context specific conspiratorial endorsement, indicative of environmental events that trigger feelings of vulnerability when the political ideology to which one ascribes is not represented by the political elites (Abalakina-Paap, et al., 1999), and are not predictive of a worldview that is generalized by conspiracy ideation (Swami, 2012). In addition, non-leaning Independents when compared to all Independent ‘leaners,’ were more attracted toward left-wing political conspiratorial statements. This behavior indicates that conspiracies that placed George W. Bush in a poor light were more attractive than all other conspiratorial statements, which suggests non-leaning Independents, compared to all ‘leaners’ combined, may actually hold a more liberal ideology. Outside of being strictly related to partisanship, however, another consideration to explain the behavior is that non-leaning Independents held beliefs pertaining to the specific individual (George W. Bush) highlighted in the conspiratorial statements that motivated the stronger attraction to endorse left-wing political conspiracies. Personal characteristics, such as perceived competence and ability, may be more salient and therefore more influential in decision-making (Kalish & Luria, 2016).

## **Democrat-leaning Independents vs. Non-leaning Independents**

Democrat-leaning Independents relative to Non-leaning Independents show less competition towards endorsement of right-wing political conspiracy theories compared to left-wing, general knowledge, and general conspiracy items. Figure 6(c) provides a visualization of the Democrat-leaning Independents average divergence of party-aligned (right-wing, left-wing) political conspiratorial and general conspiratorial (baseline) statement types relative to general political knowledge (control) statements.

Interestingly, the Democrat-leaning Independents in this study, while not behaving like the Non-Independents, did not respond in a manner similar to their Democrat partisan counterparts. The fluidity of social identity in relation to partisanship (Brewer, 2001) helps to explain this behavior. Democrat-leaning Independents, while holding a more liberal ideology than their non-leaning or Republican-leaning counterparts, may not whole-heartedly agree with the Democrat identity and feel less motivated to maintain group membership. Perhaps this is because they do not believe the ideas and values of group membership are represented in the existing group policy and behavior (Mattes & Redlawsk, 2015). The conflict between what they believe it means to be a Democrat and the perception of group political elites causes Democrat-leaners to seek shelter under the Independent label. Another possibility for the unexpected behavior is that the political conspiratorial statements were not equally salient. Finally, Miller et al., (2015), state that the psychological benefits that conspiracy theory endorsement provides are greater when the party to which one is a member is not in control. Therefore,

because the survey was conducted in the political environment in which a Democrat held the presidency, perhaps left-wing party aligned conspiracies were less alluring.

### **Republican-leaning Independents vs. Non-leaning Independents**

Republican-leaning Independents relative to Non-leaning Independents show (1) more competition towards endorsement of right-wing political conspiracies as compared to general knowledge items and left-wing items, (2) show less competition towards endorsement of left-wing political conspiracy theories as compared to general knowledge items. The competition towards endorsement of left-wing political conspiracy theories as compared to general conspiracy items approached significance. Republican-leaning Independents appear to behave in a manner expected of their Republican partisan counterparts, and thus akin to previous research claiming their ostensible nature. Therefore, Republican-leaning Independents appear to seek the perceived social benefits of the Independent identity (i.e. more rational, impartial) rather than truly holding incongruent ideology that would prevent them from identifying as Republican. Figure 6(b) provides a visualization of the Republican-leaning Independents average divergence of party-aligned (right-wing, left-wing) political conspiratorial and general conspiratorial (baseline) statement types relative to general political knowledge (control) statements.

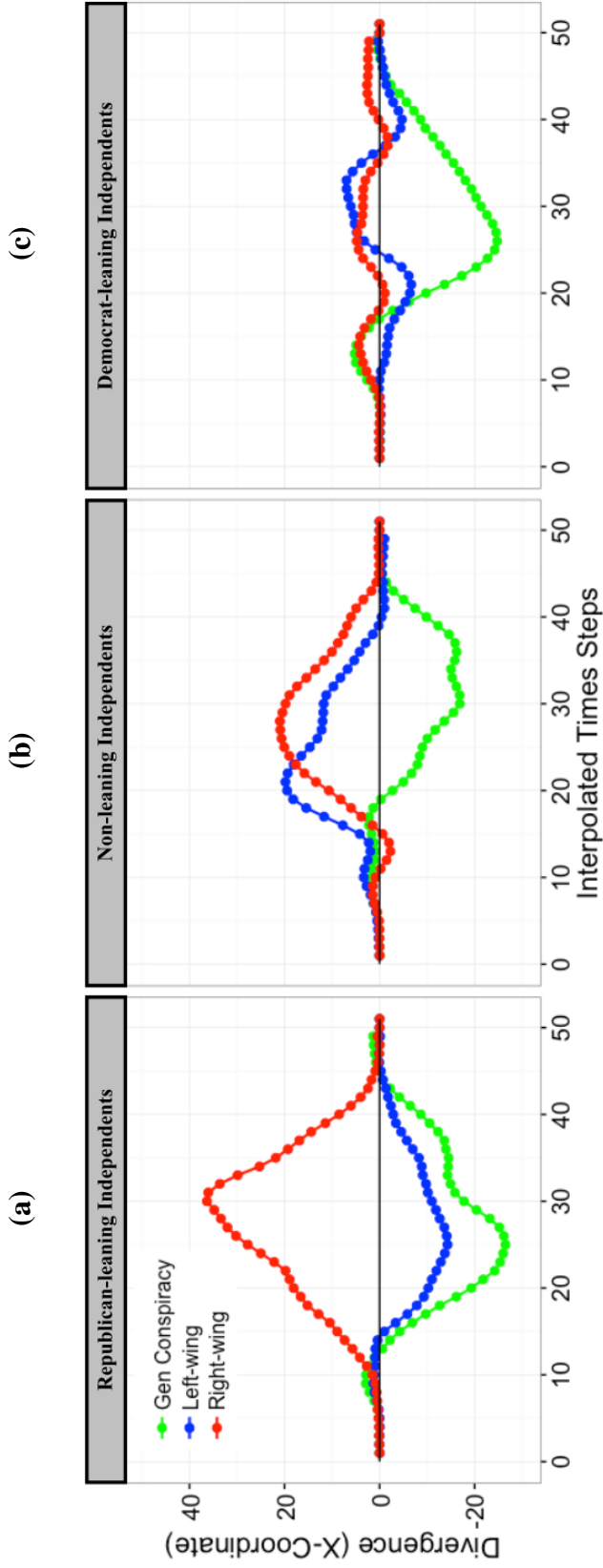


Figure 6. Average Divergence. X-Coordinate Relative to Control Statements: Results are presented here as average divergence of each type of conspiratorial statement type (X-Coordinate) relative to general political knowledge (control) statements (grey line) over time. (a) Republican-leaning Independents, (b) Non-leaning Independents, and (c) Democrat-leaning Independents. Right-wing (red line) political conspiratorial statement responses, Left-wing aligned (blue line) political conspiratorial statement responses, General conspiratorial (baseline) statement responses (green line).

Social identity theories describe group membership as dynamic; when membership becomes incongruent with personal ideology, identification with that group no longer meets the underlying needs and motives of those who subscribe to the group, which can lead to movement out of that group and into another (Brewer 2001; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, Sulloway, 2003). Social identity is an essential aspect of partisanship as party membership influences an individual's interpretation of political information (Bolsen, et al., 2013). Self-categorization theory describes the importance of the collective identity that reflects group membership in the definition of self (Turner & Onorato, 1999). Affective reactions to social groups and important issues, governed by moral judgment, often influence reasoning and decision-making (Brandt, et al., 2014; Haidt, 2001; Liu & Ditto, 2012). Consequently, a research method such as mouse tracking provides rich cognitive data generated in response to emotionally charged stimuli.

Gaining insight into the political decision-making process of modern-day Independents may help to elucidate voting behavior, improve election predictions and outcomes, and thereby enlighten the future landscape of American sociopolitical environment. The explosion of social media over the past few decades has promoted the rapid and broad dissemination of information, regardless of the source and without confirmation of credibility. The filters and settings available for social media and even internet browsers allows the public to effectively create what some have referred to as a *filter bubble* (Pariser, 2012); news and information that caters only to the desires of the user, effectively removing any opposing or unfavorable view (An, Quercia, Cha, Gummadi, & Crowcroft, 2014). Thus, an effort to highlight the importance of critical



thinking when evaluating an argument requires a degree of skepticism, in which one seeks information from multiple sources (Hutchens, Hmielowski, Pinkleton, & Beam, 2016). But too much creates cynicism spurring disengagement, and ultimately inactivity (Desliver, 2016). However, in today's political environment, apathy seems not an option because the health of a democracy requires the dedicated commitment of its citizens (Lavine, Johnston, & Steenbergen (2012).

### **Study Limitations and Future Directions**

The number of participants in two of the sub-groups (Republican-leaning and Democrat-leaning) was lower than the target of 150 to ensure adequate statistical power comparable to key mouse-tracking studies (Duran, et al., manuscript in preparation; McKinstry, Dale & Spivey, 2008). It is possible that the lower number of participants could lead to spurious results. Consequently, the proposed direction for future investigation would include new data collection and include the contemporary political conspiracy theories and candidates surrounding the 2016 presidential campaign. The salience of these conspiracy theories, combined with the unusual political environment leading up to and following the 2017 presidential inauguration may provide fruitful insights into the sociopolitical climate of the current two-party system.

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APPENDIX A  
PARTY IDENTIFICATION SURVEY



 Q1 This question will record the recipient's browser information. It will not be displayed to the user.



- Browser Type
- Browser Version
- Operating System
- Screen Resolution
- Flash Version
- Java Support
- User Agent

 Q2 **POLITICAL OPINION QUESTIONS**




There are six to ten questions in this section (depending on your answers to certain questions). Please provide your initial reaction.

 Q3 Do you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling his job as president?



- Approve
- Dissapprove



 Q4 We hear a lot of talk these days about liberal and conservatives. Here is a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative.



Where would you place YOURSELF on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

- Extremely liberal
- Liberal
- Slightly liberal
- Moderate or middle of the road
- Slightly conservative
- Conservative
- Extremely conservative
- Haven't thought much about this



**Display This Question:**

If We hear a lot of talk these days about liberal and conservatives. Here is a seven-point scale on... Moderate or middle of the road Is Selected



■ Q5

If you had to choose, would you consider yourself a liberal or a conservative?



Liberal

Conservative

■ Q6

Where would you place the Democratic Party on this scale?



Extremely liberal

Liberal



Slightly liberal

Moderate or middle of the road

Slightly conservative

Conservative

Extremely conservative

Haven't thought much about this

■ Q7 Where would you place the Republican Party on this scale?

- Extremely liberal
- Liberal
- Slightly liberal
- Moderate or middle of the road
- Slightly conservative
- Conservative
- Extremely conservative
- Haven't thought much about this

■ Q8 Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?


- Republican
- Democrat
- Independent
- Other/No preference

↳ **Display This Question:**


If Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent... Republican Is Selected

■ Q9 Would you call yourself a strong Republican or a not very strong Republican?

- Strong
- Not very strong


**Display This Question:**  
 If Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent... Democrat Is Selected

---


 Q10  
 Would you call yourself a strong Democrat or a not very strong Democrat?  

 Strong  
 Not very strong




---


**Display This Question:**  
 If Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent... Independent Is Selected  
 Or Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent... Other/No preference Is Selected


---

 Q11  
 Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic party?  

 Closer to Republican  
 Neither  



 Closer to Democratic


 Q12  
 Do you support, oppose, or neither support nor oppose the Tea Party movement?  

 Support  
 Oppose  

 Neither support or oppose

---


**Display This Question:**  
 If Do you support, oppose, or neither support nor oppose the Tea Party movement? Support Is Selected


---

 Q13  
 Would you say your support is strong or not very strong?  

 Strong  
 Not very strong

 **Display This Question:** ▼


If Do you support, oppose, or neither support nor oppose the Tea Party movement?  
Oppose Is Selected

**Q14**

 Would you say your opposition is strong or not very strong?


Strong

Not very strong

 **Display This Question:** ▼

If Do you support, oppose, or neither support nor oppose the Tea Party movement?  
Neither support or oppose Is Selected

**Q15**

 Do you lean toward supporting, lean toward opposing, or do you not lean either way?

Lean toward supporting

Lean toward opposing

Do not lean either way

APPENDIX B  
GENERAL POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE SURVEY



Q16

## POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE QUESTIONS



There are four questions in this section. Each will be presented one at a time.

Page Break



Q17

This question lets you record and manage how long a participant spends on this page. This question will not be displayed to the participant.



Q18

For how many years is a United States Senator elected—that is, how many years are there in one full term for a U.S. Senator?



Q19

This question lets you record and manage how long a participant spends on this page. This question will not be displayed to the participant.



Q20

What is Medicare?



- A program run the U.S. federal government to pay for old people's health care
- A program run by state governments to provide health care to poor people
- A private insurance plan sold to individuals in all 50 states
- A private, non-profit organization that runs free health clinics

 Q21

This question lets you record and manage how long a participant spends on this page. This question will not be displayed to the participant.



 Q22

On which of the following does the U.S. federal government currently spend the least?



- Foreign aid
- Medicare
- National defense
- Social Security

 Q23

This question lets you record and manage how long a participant spends on this page. This question will not be displayed to the participant.



 Q24

Do you happen to know which party currently has the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington?



- Democrats
- Republicans



APPENDIX C  
DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY



Q25

## GENERAL DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS



There are nine questions in this section that get at basic facts about yourself.



Q26

What is your age?



Q27

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?



- No schooling completed
- 8th grade or less
- Some high school, no diploma
- High school graduate, diploma or equivalent (e.g., GED)
- Some college credit, no degree
- Trade/technical/vocational (2 year)
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Professional degree (MD, JD, etc.)
- Doctorate degree

■ How would you classify yourself?

Q28



- Arab
- Caucasian/White
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- Native American or American Indian
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Multiracial
- Other

■ What is your marital status?

Q29



- Single, never married
- Married or domestic partnership
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated

■ What is your religious preference?

Q30



- Mormon
- Seventh-Day Adventist
- Protestant
- Muslim
- Jewish
- an Orthodox church such as the Greek or Russian Orthodox Church
- Roman Catholic
- Christian Scientist
- Something else (please specify)
- None

 What is your gender?

Q31

Male



Female



 Which of the following best describes the area you live?

Q32

Urban



Suburban



Rural

 What is your current household income in U.S. dollars?

Q33

Under \$10,000



\$10,000-\$19,000



\$20,000-\$29,999

\$30,000-\$39,000

\$40,000-\$49,000

\$50,000-\$74,999

\$75,000-\$99,999

\$100,000-\$150,000

Over \$150,000

 Which of the following categories best describes your primary area of employment?

Q34

Homemaker



Retired



Student

Unemployed

Part-time (20 or fewer hours a week)

Part-time (21 to 30 hours a week)

Full time (40 hours a week or more)

■  
Q35

Just two more basic questions and we'll give you your mTurk number so you can receive payment.



■  
Q36

Are you right- or left-handed?

Right



Left



■  
Q37

Which type of device are you using to make cursor movements?

A computer mouse that you drag across a desktop



A computer mouse that is stationary and is operated via a trackball



A trackpad on my keyboard or laptop



Something else (please specify)

APPENDIX D  
CONSPIRATORIAL STIMLUI SET

**Republican Party-Aligned, Right-Wing Conspiratorial Statements  
(Against Barack Obama)**

Barack Obama believes in socialism.

Barack Obama wants to take away Americans' right to own guns.

Barack Obama is a Muslim.

Barack Obama disregarded information to prevent the attack on the American consulate in Benghazi.

Barack Obama was born in Kenya.

Barack Obama wants government-led medical panels to make end-of-life decisions for people.

**Democrat Party-Aligned, Left-Wing Conspiratorial Statements  
(Against George W. Bush)**

George W. Bush was behind a government plan to deliberately break the levees protecting black people during Hurricane Katrina.

George W. Bush knew that 9/11 was going to happen.

George W. Bush deliberately lied to get the US to invade Iraq.

George W. Bush acted as a dictator during his presidency.

George W. Bush helped plot the 9/11 terrorist attacks as a means to going to war in Iraq.

George W. Bush used fraud to win the 2000 election.

**General Knowledge Statements  
(About George W. Bush)**

George W. Bush is married to Michelle Bush.

George W. Bush has twin boys.

George W. Bush belongs to the Democratic party.

George W. Bush once was the governor of Oregon.

George W. Bush served in the British Royal Army.

George W. Bush is the grandfather of the current US President.

**General Knowledge Statements  
(About Barack Obama)**

Barack Obama is married to Laura Obama.

Barack Obama has two sons.

Barack Obama belongs to the Republican party.

Barack Obama once had a job as a medical doctor.

Barack Obama is of Asian and European descent.

Barack Obama once was a Montana United States Senator.

**General Knowledge Statements  
(About politics)**

Medicare is a private health insurance plan sold to individuals in all 50 states.

There are two years in one full term of office for U.S. Senators.

The current vice-president of the United States is Dick Cheney.

The Democratic Party currently has the most seats in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The Democratic Party is more conservative than the Republican Party.

The current Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court is Sonia Sotomayor.

**General Conspiratorial Statements**

The Apollo moon landings never happened and were staged in a Hollywood film studio.

In 1947, the U.S. military recovered the wreckage of an alien spacecraft from Roswell, NM, and covered up the fact.

U.S. agencies intentionally created the AIDS epidemic and administered it to Black and gay men in the 1970s.

The assassination of John F. Kennedy was not committed solely by Lee Harvey Oswald but was rather an organized conspiracy.

Area 51 in Nevada is a secretive military base that contains hidden alien spacecraft and/or alien bodies.

The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. was the result of an organized conspiracy by U.S. government agencies.