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Who are the Conspiracy Theorists?

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3.1
WHO ARE THE CONSPIRACY THEORISTS?

Demographics and conspiracy theories

Steven M. Smallpage, Hugo Drochon, Joseph E. Uscinski and Casey Klofstad

Introduction

Who are the conspiracy theorists? What do they look like and where do they live? Are they young or old, rich or poor, male or female, educated or not? What country are they from?

Unfortunately, the extent literature offers only hazy answers to these questions due to a lack of proper conceptualisation and measurement. For example, there is no clear definition of conspiracy theorist or any clear way to properly measure membership in that group. For now, the best way to address these questions is by defining important concepts. We first turn to the American context because of easy access to nationally-representative data; this case demonstrates how conspiracy theorising varies across within-context groups. In the next section, we broaden our scope to address conspiracy theorising across cultural contexts. We provide the only cross-nationally-representative data focusing on conspiracy theories currently available (Drochon 2018). We use this to show how cultural context conditions conspiracy theorising and as a consequence may frustrate attempts to study conspiracy theories cross-culturally. We conclude by offering both a summary and prospective avenues for further research.

Definitions

Much analysis depends upon how concepts such as conspiracy theory, conspiracy belief and conspiracy thinking are defined. These definitions jointly determine how a particularly elusive term, conspiracy theorist, is defined. While this task might seem straightforward, these terms have long been items of contention (Walker 2018).

Conspiracy theory for our purposes is a proposed explanation of events or circumstances (past, present or future) which cites as the primary cause a conspiracy. Conspiracy theories could be either true or false, and, in most instances, contradict the proclamations of epistemological authorities (Levy 2007). This is a barebones definition, but even more detailed versions leave room to include or exclude theories arbitrarily. Importantly, there are an infinite number of conspiracy theories that researchers could study, meaning that the research will always be incomplete.

Conspiracy beliefs are individuals’ acceptance of specific conspiracy theories as likely true. While beliefs are hard to measure directly, polling the public is the most practical way to
measure beliefs and believers’ demographic characteristics. Of course, polling leaves room for interpretation. First, how a survey item is worded can affect if the idea being asked about is a conspiracy theory or not. Note the difference between survey items that ask respondents to express agreement with: ‘Vaccines cause autism’ or with ‘Pharmaceutical companies and governments are actively working to hide the dangerous effects of vaccines from the public’. The latter expresses a conspiracy theory, the former does not (Walker 2018). Second, what level of certainty qualifies as a belief? Consider a question asking respondents about the ‘Chem-trail’ conspiracy theory. One version of this question asked respondents to agree or disagree with the theory; 5 per cent agreed (Jenson 2013). Another version asked respondents to answer on a Likert scale from ‘completely false’ to ‘completely true’. Researchers then asked ‘unsure’ respondents to make a best guess (Tingley, Wagner 2017). The result was that 40 per cent of the total sample indicated the theory was ‘completely’ or ‘somewhat true’. The different ways of operationalising belief lead to estimates that varied by a factor of eight (Jenson 2013, Tingley, Wagner 2017). The 5 per cent and 40 per cent groups will likely vary greatly in terms of their demographic characteristics, and it is not clear which group is the ‘right’ one to consider as the conspiracy theorists. Third, it is important to note that people selectively believe in conspiracy theories. There are an infinite number of conspiracy theories, but surveys can only ask about one or a few. This means that some people who are certainly ‘conspiracy theorists’ (under some definition) will show no evidence of such on some surveys, and vice-versa.

The concept of conspiracy thinking provides equal trouble for researchers seeking to identify conspiracy theorists. Sometimes referred to as ‘conspiracist ideation’, conspiracy thinking is a stable predisposition that drives individuals to view events and circumstances as the product of conspiracies (Brotherton et al. 2013; Imhoff, Bruder 2013). All else equal, when a person with high levels of conspiracy thinking is presented with a conspiracy theory, they are more likely to believe it than a person with lower levels (Uscinski et al. 2016). Focusing on conspiracy thinking moves the inquiry away from the characteristics of specific conspiracy theories, to the characteristics of individuals that make them susceptible to conspiracy beliefs. We note that researchers use several different scales to measure this latent concept (Swami et al. 2017), and currently it is not clear how well these scales (or even the concept itself) travels across cultural contexts (Atari et al. 2019).

So, who, then, is a conspiracy theorist? It is with this term that definitions vary the most. Conspiracy theorist could refer to anyone who believes in any conspiracy theory. Presumably, most people are not conspiracy theorists. Yet, polls suggest that basically all Americans hold conspiracy beliefs. A poll by Fairleigh Dickenson University asked about belief in four conspiracy theories; 63 per cent believed at least one (Cassino, Jenkins 2013). Oliver and Wood (2014a) asked about belief in seven conspiracy theories, finding that 55 per cent believed at least one. A 2018 poll of Florida asked about belief in nine conspiracy theories, finding that 80 per cent believed at least one (Uscinski, Klofstad 2018). A poll of New Jersey residents asking about ten conspiracy theories found that 94 per cent believed in at least one (Goertzel 1994). The general trend is that, as more conspiracy theories are asked about, the number of people who believe one increases to approach 100 per cent. Therefore, using conspiracy theorist to refer to anyone who believes in any conspiracy theory is meaningless. If we use the term to refer to belief in a specific conspiracy theory, then the term has some limited meaning in that context: People who believe a particular conspiracy theory believe in that particular conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy theorist could refer to people who believe in several conspiracy theories, but it is not clear how many ‘several’ should be. If the number is set too low, then the term again becomes meaningless (everyone is a conspiracy theorist). If it refers to a person who believes in
a certain number of conspiracy theories out of a finite set of conspiracy theories, then the term takes a more definitive shape, but it is still arbitrary.

We run into similar problems when we exchange conspiracy beliefs for conspiracy thinking. Because conspiracy thinking is a latent trait measured along a scale, there is no absolute high or low, and the median between surveys could refer to different absolute levels. Uscinski and Parent (2014) referred to the upper-third of respondents on their conspiracy thinking scale as conspiracy theorists, but the choice was due more to convenience than anything theoretically driven.

Conspiracy theorist could refer to people who invent, investigate or propagate conspiracy theories. This definition would cut the population of conspiracy theorists down significantly, making the belonging to that group dependent on action rather than beliefs. It would be cut down even further if we used the term to only refer to people who take part in such activities professionally (e.g. Alex Jones). Such a definition would again be useless, because it would refer to too few people.

We cannot here choose among these varying definitions. But our point is that scholars need to pay attention to the problem caused by settling on definitions: It leads to not being able to pinpoint who the conspiracy theorists are – even within contexts – that goes beyond any given study. This problem is further exacerbated when looking across cultural contexts. Before offering up a list of demographic characteristics and explaining how those might correlate with conspiracy beliefs and thinking in various studies, let us briefly address some of the important questions that scholars should address before considering relationships between demographics and conspiracy theories.

Do we measure at all and what do we measure?

Many researchers skip the step of systematically measuring conspiracy beliefs or thinking, and instead rely on impressions. Take for example the New York Times, which in addition to suggesting that Americans are particularly prone to conspiracy theorising, has mentioned Mexicans, Arabs, Afghans, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Iraqis, Africans, Egyptians, Russians, Bulgarians, Italians, Yemenis and the gay community as also being particularly prone (Orr, Husting 2018). Assertions like these have yet to be supported with systematic evidence. We suggest that, if one wants to make empirical claims about who engages in conspiracy theorising, they should begin by buttressing those claims with systematic comparisons.

Once a decision is made to measure some form of conspiracy theorising (conspiracy thinking or beliefs) to see if it is correlated to demographic measures, the question then becomes what exactly should be measured. Conspiracy thinking leads to specific conspiracy beliefs, but conspiracy thinking and conspiracy beliefs will be correlated with different demographics (Klofstad et al. 2019). The reason for this is that conspiracy beliefs are often determined by a combination of conspiracy thinking and one or a set of other predispositions that are themselves likely correlated with demographic characteristics (Enders et al. 2018). Conspiracy thinking is not spread perfectly even across demographic groups in the U.S.A., but it appears fairly random (with the exception of levels of education and income).

Conspiracy beliefs are partially dependent on demographic characteristics and group memberships because they cast one’s own group as a victim of other groups. Conspiracy beliefs therefore vary widely across race, region, social class, age, gender, religion and party identification (Miller et al. 2016). Christians and Muslims are more likely than Jews to believe in Jewish conspiracy theories (Bilewicz, Krzeminski 2010; Nyhan, Zeitzoff 2018); people with New Age beliefs are more likely than Catholics to believe in DaVinci Code theories (Newheiser et al.
and partisans are more likely to believe the opposing party, rather than their own, is conspiring against them. For example, polls show that 45 per cent of Democrats believed that President Bush was behind the 9/11 attacks but only 15 per cent of Republicans believed as much; about 40 per cent of Republicans believed that President Obama was born outside of the U.S.A. but only 15 per cent of Democrats believed as much (Nyhan 2009).

A final question addresses cross-cultural comparisons. Conspiracy theories, thinking and beliefs may translate well across similar regions – for example, it might not be too hard to make comparisons between the U.S.A. and U.K. But, comparing countries that have vastly different political cultures can present problems (Atari et al. 2019). As such, measurements of conspiracy thinking that have validity in Western democracies may not translate. Further, just because a conspiracy belief is popular in one country, does not mean that it would be popular in another. Cultural factors will drive the belief of specific conspiracy theories (Knight 2002).

Demographics

In this section, we refer to a range of literature and surveys to demonstrate that demographic characteristics are established predictors of conspiracy thinking and others are more predictive of conspiracy beliefs across studies and operationalisations within countries. We follow this by looking cross-culturally as a starting point for future research.

One highly consistent finding across studies (and operationalisations) is that income and education are negatively correlated with conspiracy thinking in the U.S.A., meaning that those who make more money or have attained more education have lower levels of conspiracy thinking (Uscinski, Parent 2014). The connection between education and conspiracy thinking is a difficult puzzle to solve. On the one hand, most of the measurements used are simple ‘level of education’ ordinal variables ranging from ‘less than high school’ to ‘postgraduate degree’. Given the general rise of education levels within the U.S.A. and other democracies, this is a necessarily clustered variable that makes inferences difficult. And, the relationship between education and conspiracy thinking is a function of the type of statistical analyses applied as well. Oliver and Wood (2014a), for example, find that education is negatively related to supernatural, paranormal, Manichean and end-times thinking, as well as with the belief that a secret cabal controls world events. However, in a more sophisticated statistical analysis, they find that education has only mixed effects. There is also the problem of understanding why education is negatively correlated with conspiracy thinking. Recent work (van Prooijen 2017; Dyer, Hall 2019) suggests that education makes individuals more analytical. However, it could be that institutions of higher education eschew conspiracy theorists (Smallpage 2018).

If conspiracy thinking is related to feelings of marginalisation, anomia and helplessness, then higher income levels should negatively predict belief in conspiracy theories. But, just like the case with education, the causal story is blurry: Having a low income could make one prone to conspiracy thinking, or institutions that offer lucrative salaries may not want to entrust the commensurate responsibilities to people who espouse conspiracy theories (Uscinski 2018).

While income and education appear to be significant negative predictors of conspiracy theorising across studies, they do not always predict specific conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Klofstad et al. 2019) and may have different effects across different groups (Miller et al. 2016). This highlights two issues, one particular to the American samples and one applicable regardless of context: First, conspiracy thinking in the U.S.A. is usually intertwined with partisanship and ideology – variables that capture an individual’s worldview; second, more generally, there is a difference between believing specific conspiracy theories versus having higher levels of conspiracy thinking. The former is a product of demographic factors whereas the latter is less so (excepting education and income).
Beliefs in many prominent conspiracy theories in the U.S.A. can be attributed to partisan motivated reasoning (Enders et al. 2018). This does not mean that partisans will believe all conspiracy theories, or even that partisans are more likely to believe conspiracy theories than non-partisans (Smallpage et al. 2017). But, if we want to understand the engine behind American conspiracy theorising, we must begin with partisanship.

U.S. polling shows that conspiracy thinking is even between the two major parties and across political ideologies; independents and third parties tend to show higher levels of conspiracy thinking (Uscinski, Parent 2014). Particular conspiracy beliefs, however, vary greatly by party, with party identifiers tending to accuse opposing parties and their coalitions of conspiring (Miller, Saunders 2016). With this said, there is evidence that political extremists are more prone to conspiracy theorising than moderates (van Prooijen et al. 2015, Krouwel et al. 2017). As we outlined earlier, conceptual and measurement differences are likely driving some studies to find a U-shaped curve (van Prooijen et al. 2015) and others to find an upside-down U-shaped curve (Uscinski, Parent 2014).

Religion and its role in conspiracy theorising is beginning to be explored by scholars (Rob- ertson, Dyrendal 2018). People’s religious affiliation tends to drive their specific conspiracy beliefs, so that more devout members tend to think that other groups along with supernatural forces are conspiring (Oliver, Wood 2014a). But it is not clear yet if different religions foster higher levels of conspiracy thinking. It is well documented, however, that the style of thinking that allows for supernatural beliefs is closely related to conspiracy thinking (van Prooijen et al. 2018).

The typical caricature of an American conspiracy theorist is that of a white, middle-aged male. But, conspiracy thinking tends to be even between the sexes and races, and relatively flat across age groups (Uscinski, Parent 2014). With this said, more polling should be done on this matter because many polls lack sufficient samples for teasing out significant differences among subgroups. In terms of conspiracy beliefs, minorities often entertain conspiracy theories in which they are targeted by majorities (Farrakhan, Gates 1996); such beliefs are often the result of past mistreatment (Thomas, Quinn 1991). Older people appear more susceptible to conspiracy theories on the Internet, perhaps due to a lack of Internet literacy (Guess et al. 2019); but other studies suggest that young people are more susceptible to some conspiracy beliefs (Klofstad et al. 2019).

Perhaps the best demonstration of the staying power of conspiracy thinking in the U.S.A. is seen in the longitudinal public opinion polling data. Just the polling on the one belief—that Lee Harvey Oswald did not work alone in assassinating President Kennedy—shows that about 50 to 60 per cent of the American public believe at least one conspiracy theory (Enders, Smallpage 2018). Given that nearly 50 per cent of the U.S.A. believes in this one conspiracy theory, it would be difficult to find any systematic sociodemographic factors that would explain conspiracy thinking.

Conspiracy theories across contexts

Now we turn to international data to make higher-order cross-cultural claims about conspiracy theories and demographics. While there has been a considerable amount of research on conspiracy thinking, much of it relies on U.S. samples. This makes generalisability into the global context difficult. However, in 2016, Drochon (2018) gathered representative survey data from seven countries (Argentina, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Sweden) through the polling house YouGov (for further details on data collection, see Drochon 2018). A number of questions were asked about respondents’ commitments to democracy, their
attitudes toward their government, as well as questions pertaining to their conspiracy thinking and their specific conspiracy beliefs. Drawing on these data, we now examine conspiracy theorising in a cross-cultural context.

One of the objections to conspiracy theory research is the claim that conspiracy theorising is often culturally dependent. Who counts as a conspiracy theorist in one country might not count as one in another. We suggest that there are large cultural and sociological factors that set the floor and ceiling for the number of ‘conspiracy theorists’ in a given country and that, even in mature democracies like Great Britain, nearly two-thirds of the population believe at least one of the conspiracy theories asked about in the short survey we presented.

One of the earliest explanations for conspiracy thinking was a ‘macro’ or sociological theory of political extremism and disengagement in which conspiracy thinking is a function of low self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness and low political efficacy and trust (Hofstadter 1964). Therefore, looking at a set of countries, we would expect that conspiracy thinking should be more prevalent where the citizens do not believe the country is truly democratic and, perhaps even stronger, where they believe the ‘system is broken’.

Table 3.1.1 shows the extent to which individuals in various countries rated how democratic they thought their country was from 0 (completely undemocratic) to 10 (completely democratic). The top row of Table 3.1.1 shows the percentage of citizens that rated their country at or above 6 on that scale, which we take to show a more than minimal agreement that the country is democratic. The results confirm what many other scholars of comparative political culture have shown (Levitsky, Ziblatt 2018): Low levels of satisfaction in a country’s commitment to democracy. Indeed, and perhaps most surprising, more ‘mature’ democracies like Sweden and Germany are barely above 50 per cent in agreement. This means that, if we take the larger sociological view of the origins of conspiracy thinking, we have good reason to think that the potential pool of ‘conspiracy theorists’ is quite high: Nearly half of a country’s citizens may, through their dissatisfaction with the democracy in place, be prone to conspiracy theorising in some form, regardless of other factors.

To further focus on attitudinal explanations for conspiracy thinking, the second item of Table 3.1.1 shows the extent to which respondents agreed with the statement: ‘The system is broken and it would take a total change of system to put things right.’ The lowest level of agreement is Germany at 24 per cent, the average is 36 per cent and the highest is from Italy at 59 per cent. In short, if the belief that radical political interventions are needed is a component of conspiracy theorising, then a little over a third of the population are susceptible.

While the sociological factors help us frame our understanding, we should not overemphasise them. Dissatisfaction with the government may be linked to conspiracy theorising and, what we have investigated here shows us with the broadest brush, is that we have reason to think that the ceiling of conspiracy theorising – or the percentage of potential conspiracy theorists in a given country – is on average one-third, but varies across countries.

Moving down Table 3.1.1, respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with statements that would indicate conspiracy thinking (items 3–5). Much like the broader sociological questions we analysed earlier, sometimes conspiracy theorising is less about any particular conspiracy theory and more about a general predisposition. These statements attempt to measure the latent trait that help conspiracy theorists ‘connect the dots’.

The first (item 3) asks individuals the extent to which they agree that, ‘Even though we live in what’s called a democracy, a few people will always run things in this country anyway.’ This matches with one of the more common, yet important, conspiracy psychology building blocks: A sense of powerlessness, alienation, that things are not what they seem and that there is an inevitable consolidation of political power, regardless of what is done or said. The notion of
Table 3.1.1 Agreement with conspiratorial statements, by country.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Argentina (%)</th>
<th>Germany (%)</th>
<th>Great Britain (%)</th>
<th>Italy (%)</th>
<th>Poland (%)</th>
<th>Portugal (%)</th>
<th>Sweden (%)</th>
<th>Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anti-democratic beliefs</td>
<td>Democratic country</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Major changes needed</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General conspiracy statements</td>
<td>Elite control</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Global elites</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Secret plots</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific conspiracy theories</td>
<td>U.F.O. contact</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A.I.D.S. created</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Global warming hoax</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hiding immigrants</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Holocaust denial</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
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</table>
elites coopting the democratic system is a hallmark of most conspiracy theories. There is generally overwhelming agreement, with the exception of Sweden (at only 33 per cent). Most countries have at least half of their population in agreement, which puts the ceiling of potential conspiracy theorists much higher than what we saw earlier. It also tempers the sociological findings somewhat, since belief that you are not in a democracy is different than a belief that democracy is itself a necessary sham.

Respondents were then asked if they agreed that, 'Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments and other organizations, there is a single group of people who secretly control events and rule the world together.' This question pushes their general conspiracy beliefs farther: Not only is democracy a sham, but perhaps even the idea of individual governments of any kind is too. Responses across countries are significantly varied, and range from ten to nearly 50 per cent. Like in many other instances, this belief may itself be a function of political and historical context that researchers have yet to capture (Atari et al. 2019). For example, perhaps some citizens of countries in the E.U. feel that this question matches their sentiment toward the E.U. quite well. Or, perhaps, the power dynamics in South America explain Argentina’s agreement levels. Regardless, these levels of agreement represent the building blocks for many particular conspiracy beliefs.

Now we arrive at perhaps the most explicit question about general conspiracy thinking: ‘Secret plots that harm the nation are more common in this country than in other countries.’ While it does not ask about any particular conspiracy theory, it does solicit a general feeling for how frequently conspiracies and other secret plots happen in their country, relative to others. Again, we find wide variation across countries. On the high end are Poland and Portugal; at the low end are Germany, Great Britain and Sweden. It may be that more mature and better functioning democracies provide citizens with lower expectations of a conspiracy being perpetrated on them from within. However, more research is needed to tease apart these cultural differences.

Moving onto specific conspiracy beliefs (items 6–10), we preface by saying that there are a number of issues with surveying conspiracy beliefs across contexts, chief among these is selection, i.e. which conspiracy theories to measure or not. Conspiracy theories vary in popularity across contexts, so measuring the ‘right’ or representative ones (if such things exist) becomes very difficult. Nonetheless, we report levels of belief in five specific conspiracy theories. The first is that humans have made contact with aliens and that this is being hidden from the public. While this conspiracy theory is ubiquitous in popular culture, it is not popular in most of the countries surveyed. Nearly 25 per cent of Argentinians believe this, compared to around 9 per cent in the other counties. For comparison, surveys in the U.S.A. show that around 20 per cent of Americans believe this (Jensen 2013). In the U.S.A., alien-government conspiracy theories have been a trope in popular culture since the 1940s, but cultural research is needed to explain why they are popular in Argentina.

Next, respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed that ‘the AIDS virus was created and spread around the world on purpose by a secret group or organization’. The rate of belief across countries is mostly low, again with the exception of Argentina, where one-in-five believe that there is a secret organisation that spread the A.I.D.S. virus. Coupled with their belief in alien cover-ups, there may be something about Argentina’s political culture that drives them to believe these theories. In the U.S.A., 32 per cent have heard of, and 12 per cent agree with, a more specific theory that ‘the CIA deliberately infected large numbers of African Americans with HIV under the guise of a hepatitis inoculation program’ (Oliver, Wood 2014b). In South Africa, where elites have suggested that the A.I.D.S. epidemic is a hoax and that H.I.V. can be cured with vitamins and massage (Nattrass 2012), researchers asked adolescents to identify
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the origins of the H.I.V. virus; nearly one-third believed a conspiracy theory about the origins of H.I.V. (Hogg et al. 2017). This suggests, again, that cultural factors drive specific conspiracy beliefs.

As mentioned, one issue with using specific conspiracy theories to denote who the conspiracy theorists are is that those beliefs may be driven by a range of factors. In the American context, partisan motivated reasoning may drive people to believe conspiracy theories that they might not otherwise accept. One of these, which has been championed by the Republican Party and carbon-emitting industries, is that global warming is a hoax (Uscinski et al. 2017). While studies show that belief in climate change conspiracy theories is influenced by conspiracy thinking (Lewandowsky 2018), partisanship appears to be a much larger influence on these beliefs (Marietta, Barker 2018). As Table 3.1.1 shows, we find low levels of belief that, ‘the idea of man-made global warming is a hoax that was invented to deceive people’ with the exception of Poland. Climate change conspiracy theories have been much more prominent in the U.S.A., where partisan elites have used climate change as a wedge issue (Merkley, Stecula 2018).

Let us now turn to fears of government malfeasance in the area of immigration. Such conspiracy theories are timely and common in many of these countries (Gaston, Uscinski 2018), and also driven by conspiracy theories about outgroups and by partisan elites. Respondents were asked to agree with the statement that, ‘The government is deliberately hiding the truth about how many immigrants live in this country.’ The question, for example, was a primary contention of Brexit voters in the 2016 E.U. referendum (Swami et al. 2018). Indeed, even scepticism of water fluoridation has often been linked to an underlying euroscepticism (Griffin et al. 2008).

The immigration conspiracy theory garners higher levels of agreement. Indeed, in some countries – particularly those with considerable immigration or talks about immigration, like Germany and Great Britain – belief in this conspiracy theory rises to 40 per cent. Even 30 per cent of Swedes believe this. This provides evidence that, when even minimally mixed with a salient political issue, the ceiling for conspiracy belief is relatively high. When Americans are asked as similar question, if they believe that the government is hiding the true cost of immigration from taxpayers, 55 per cent agree (Gaston, Uscinski 2018).

Finally, unlike the other conspiracy theories discussed here, Holocaust denial theories are both politically charged and have a strong negative valence. Therefore, they are a conservative estimate of conspiracy theorising. The question (not asked in Germany) asks if respondents agree that ‘The official account of the Nazi Holocaust is a lie and the number of Jews killed by the Nazis during World War II has been exaggerated on purpose.’ There are considerably lower levels of agreement than with the other conspiracy theories – not a single country reaches double digits. However, there are two things to point out. On the one hand, that Poland is by far the most likely to believe in this conspiracy, there are bound to be some systematic, though omitted, variable. On the other hand, given that there is some level of agreement, albeit low, across all countries, we should like to think of this question as the floor of conspiracy thinking. Previously, we have discussed specific conspiracy theory beliefs as the ceiling of belief: Presumably, conspiracy theorists cannot outnumber those that actually believe conspiracy theories. However, given the presumed social desirability bias that pushes down response rates to this question about the Holocaust, we assume that this is the lower limit.

We should also note that specific conspiracy theories that reference Jews either explicitly or implicitly capture an aspect of conspiracy thinking directly related to antisemitism. For example, in places like Turkey and Poland, conspiracy beliefs are high when specific conspiracy theories
referencing Jews are included (Bilewicz et al. 2013, Nefes 2013). Holocaust denialism is a prime example of the cultural differences between countries explaining conspiracy beliefs. Argentina’s particular form of democratisation may play a role in its conspiracy theorising, and perhaps Poland’s experience with Germany has produced a culture where Holocaust denial is more acceptable. And, less abstractly, the current debates about immigration happening across the world certainly influences the level of conspiracy beliefs at a given time.

**Conspiracy theories and ideology**

One of the most important political predispositions is ideology in many Western countries. Here, we provide the ideological breakdown of those who agreed that there are secret plots. The correlation between ideology and this conspiratorial view is important to showing how left-right ideologies mediate the effect of historical and political contexts on conspiracy theorising. What is the relationship between left- and right-wing ideologies and general conspiracy thinking across countries?

For each country in Figure 3.1.1, there are three bars: the average agreement for ‘left wing’ and ‘left of center’ (Left), ‘centre’ (Centre) and the average agreement for ‘right wing’ and ‘right of centre’ (Right). There is mixed evidence for the relationship between ideology and belief in secret plots. Poland, Portugal, Argentina and Italy show a U-shape consistent with some studies (van Prooijen et al. 2015), Great Britain shows a flat distribution consistent with some studies (Uscinski, Parent 2014), and Sweden and Germany show that the right-wingers are more conspiracy-minded consistent with other studies (Berlet 2012). Nonetheless, these distributions raise further questions about political dynamics within countries.

Figure 3.1.2 shows the distribution of affirmative responses to the general and specific conspiracy statements (items 3-10). The way to read it is at least one statement is true, at least three statements are true, and at least seven statements are true. For example, in Argentina, nearly 93 per cent of the sample agreed with at least one statement, about 54 per cent with at least three statements and about 5 per cent with at least seven (out of eight) statements. The data tell an overwhelming story. Regardless if it is a specific conspiracy theory or a general one, and with exception of Sweden, nearly 80 to 90 per cent of each of our countries believe at least one statement to be true.

![Figure 3.1.1 Proportion of respondents who believe in secret plots by their self-identified ideology, by country. (Left = average of ‘left wing’ and ‘left of centre’; Centre = ‘centre’; Right = average of ‘right of centre’ and ‘right wing’.)](image-url)
Who are the conspiracy theorists?

In short, if we want to define a ‘conspiracy theorist’ as someone who believes at least one of the eight conspiratorial statements (three general conspiratorial statements, five specific conspiracy theories), then anywhere from 60 to 90 per cent of each country is a conspiracy theorist, depending on the country!

Conspiracy theories outside of W.E.I.R.D. countries

So-called ‘WEIRD’ countries are those that are wealthy, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic (Henrich et al. 2010), and most people in the world are not ‘WEIRD’. So, this may cast some doubt on the generalisability of our discussion above on who is or is not a conspiracy theorist. Reliable survey data is difficult to obtain outside of these countries. However, there are some studies that have obtained valuable data. For example, one study that focused on Chile, Uruguay, El Salvador, Mexico, South Africa, Spain and Portugal, the decline in trust – particularly in the legitimacy of the political system, a major component to general conspiracy ideation – is prevalent (Carlin, Love 2018). In Venezuela, researchers found nearly 54 per cent of the country believed in at least one conspiracy narrative (Carey 2017). But, we should note, that while there is mounting evidence globally that conspiracy thinking is prevalent, there may be some measurement biases for instruments that are developed largely in W.E.I.R.D. countries and applied elsewhere. In a study on a Turkish population, Atari et al. (2019) found that the three big general conspiracy thinking measures were only weakly related to the conspiracy beliefs in Turkey. This is not to say that they did not find a ‘conspiracy dimension’ – they did – it was just different from the scales validated by samples from W.E.I.R.D. countries. More research is needed to investigate the possibility of a global conspiracy dimension, so we can see who the conspiracy theorists are, accounting for cultural differences.

Conclusion

Studying conspiracy theories is important for understanding contemporary political life. Much of the theorising of who counts as a conspiracy theorist has taken place in the U.S.A. and other English-speaking areas. This is not to diminish that research, but in fact to expand it to a global
context. From what we have outlined above, we can cautiously answer the question who is a 'conspiracy theorist'. Conspiracy theorising is prevalent – most people believe at least one conspiracy theory, even in surveys that ask only about a few. Conspiracy thinking is more apparent in the marginalised – or those who think of themselves that way – populations. We do see a general correlation between conspiracy thinking and people who distrust their government. Conspiracy thinking is a worldview that often escapes any single socio-demographic categorisation, largely because it is so common even across cultural contexts.

One potential avenue of research would be to explain domestic conspiracy culture in light of international political dynamics. This is an avenue not readily available to American audiences, but absolutely integral for understanding conspiracy thinking in much more integrated, international areas – like the E.U. and South America. Additionally, how does (de)democratisation influence the conspiracy culture of a country? Is there an absolute level at which conspiracy thinking becomes so saturated that the larger political culture collapses? The mature democracies like Germany and Britain, which are constantly worried about the rise of populist, right-wing authoritarianism, have far lower levels of conspiracy thinking – even in the right-wing – than the moderates in other countries. Is the problem the relative difference between domestic partisans? Unlike in the U.S.A. where national surveys and polls that contain conspiracy questions are more frequent, outside of the U.S.A. there is no reliable longitudinal data to help us assess any potential increases or decreases in the level of conspiracy thinking. Future research should fill this gap by having repeated surveys with identical questions administered across many countries over a significant period of time.

A second potential area of research is to examine the peculiarities of Sweden a bit closer. For many, ‘correcting’ conspiracy beliefs is normatively important. And, considering that unlike all the other countries in our sample, Sweden’s rate of disbelieving all of the conspiratorial statements in our sample is nearly 40 per cent of their public. Considering the next best is Great Britain at 20 per cent, we could look at the larger political culture and context to understand why conspiracy theories do not seemingly take root in Sweden. A further study of additional countries could tell us if Sweden is indeed an outlier.

Regardless of the precise next steps, the comparative analysis of conspiracy beliefs – which we hope to have contributed to with this paper – is itself the next leap for conspiracy theory research. But, before we can make that leap, we need to constantly remind ourselves that our definitions and operationalisations – even the key ones of ‘conspiracy theory’ and ‘conspiracy theorist’ – must be scrutinised. We should not focus too heavily on large sociological factors, like the simple dissatisfaction in democracy; nor should we go too far in the other direction and define conspiracy theories so narrowly that they are not helpful and almost trivial, nor should we define a conspiracy theorist as simply those that believe these overly-narrow conspiracy theories. Instead, as we have tried to show, as conspiracy research moves into unfamiliar terrain, we should be vigilant that we are adapting to our surroundings without losing sight of the larger global and scientific enterprise.

References
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