3.4

CONSPIRACY THEORIES, POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR

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Introduction

It has been said that conspiracy theories are for outsiders (Uscinski, Parent 2014), referring to those who feel distant from authorities and other power holders. In this chapter, we explore the link between conspiracy theories, political beliefs and political engagement in order to answer the question of whether conspiracy theories can be viewed as a vehicle for the outsider to articulate their doubts about governments and ruling powers. In this context, we specifically examine whether belief in conspiracy theories is linked with a discernible profile of political engagement and participation. Do we see evidence for engagement or disengagement with conventional politics and actors, or does the conspiratorial mindset drive citizens towards anti-establishment and fringe political parties? What about non-conventional political participation?

After defining and clarifying our terms, we will start out by examining political attitudes and orientations in order to assess whether beliefs in conspiracy theories are more prevalent on the left or on the right, whether they are mostly found at the fringes of mainstream attitudes or if they are primarily a function of ideological content. After that, we will turn to research on conventional political participation like voting in elections. We demonstrate the strong relationship across Europe that conspiracy belief is linked with voting for a right-wing populist party. We also examine more generally if the likelihood of voting for an opposition party increases with belief in conspiracy theories. While evidence is scarcer than on voting behaviour, we then move on to political participation more widely, ranging from turnout at elections, political interest and other forms of civic engagement such as membership in civil society organisations.

In the chapter we distinguish between a conspiracy belief and conspiracy mentality. Conspiracy belief is when an individual assumes that a conspiracy theory provides an accurate explanation of particular events. Conspiracy mentality is a more general dispositional propensity to believe in conspiracies, which Imhoff and Bruder (2014) have argued functions as a generalised political attitude in itself.

Throughout the chapter, we will rely primarily on previously published studies but will supplement our coverage with recent data collected in 13 European countries – the European Voter Election Studies conducted by André Krouwel in 2019 – and data from a nationally representative survey conducted in Iceland.
Conspiracy theories and politics

Conspiracy theories can be a constructive force in politics for several reasons. They may lead to pressure on authorities to disclose information and they can even unearth dishonest behaviour (Clarke 2002). Conspiracy theories can serve as a psychological tool for the political outsider to regain a sense of control and increase predictability because they offer an explanation for events that the official account attributes to coincidences, natural forces or a series or random events (Sullivan et al. 2010). Importantly, they also hold out the promise of control and even agency by opening up a channel for the conspiracy believer to potentially expose the fraudulent authorities and thereby undermine and even topple them. More often, however, conspiracy theories have negative political and societal consequences such as refusal to vaccinate, harassment of political actors or even victims of mass shootings (Douglas et al. 2019; see also Chapter 2.7).

Douglas et al. (2017) outlined three main reasons why people believe in conspiracy theories. The first reason is epistemic, that is, conspiracy theories help people to make sense of the world around them and to understand events they are struggling to comprehend. Second, conspiracy theories can offer security and predictability in uncertain and anxiety-provoking situations. Third, they claim that conspiracy theories can serve as a way to ‘save-face’ for those on the losing end of a situation, such as elections. Although people undoubtedly adopt conspiracy theories due to a mix of all three reasons, the primary causes and consequences of adopting them may differ between people. A person with a tenuous understanding and limited knowledge of complicated political events may reach out to a conspiracy theory for meaning-making whereas the seasoned and involved political observer may find solace in a conspiracy theory after a stinging defeat.

Although not the focus of this chapter, we note that it is not only citizens who engage with conspiracy theories; governments have used conspiracy theories to preserve the status quo against those they perceive as subversive or threatening to the regime. Conspiracy theories can thus be spread in order to squash unwelcome political movements, as happened in the U.S.A. during the McCarthy era with communist sympathisers (Uscinski, Parent 2014).

Political trust and knowledge

Most research on the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and various indicators of people’s relationship with the political system have been cross-sectional, making any causal claims debatable. Several well-established findings have emerged from the research. It is clear that belief in conspiracy theories is related both to low interpersonal trust (Hollander 2018) and to low political trust (Swami et al. 2010; Uscinski, Parent 2014; Miller et al. 2016). This is also confirmed in an 11-country cross-cultural study (Mari et al. under review) in which political conspiracy beliefs were linked to generalised mistrust toward specific institutions (the government, the non-representative state bodies and security institutions), with few exceptions, across the different countries. There is also some experimental evidence showing that exposing people to conspiracy theories reduces trust in government. Kim and Cao (2016) showed that exposure to a film portraying the moon landing as a governmental conspiracy resulted in less trust in government officials both immediately after exposure and two weeks later. Einstein and Glick (2015) found the negative effect of conspiracy theories on trust, but only if the conspiracy theory was not explicitly labelled as such. In their study, explicitly naming it a conspiracy theory seemed to ‘inoculate’ people against it. Accordingly, Douglas and Sutton (2008: 217) have discussed the ‘hidden impact’ of conspiracy theories on attitudes. Their study showed that, after people had been exposed to a conspiracy theory about the death of Princess Diana, they exhibited increased
inclination to disbelieve official accounts. A study using data from the 2016 American National Election Study demonstrated that believing the government knew about 9/11 in advance was to a high degree related to scepticism that votes are counted fairly in elections (Norris et al. 2019).

The role of political knowledge is not as clear, although it seems to matter. Miller et al. (2016) found that political knowledge was positively related to belief in conspiracy theories, but only among those low on political trust. Oliver and Wood (2014) reported that lower political knowledge predicted support for ideologically consistent conspiracy theories (such as Republicans believing that Obama was not born in the U.S.A.), but that knowledge did not matter if the theories were further removed from party skirmishes. This goes against the idea that people with little knowledge are more likely to adopt conspiracy theories because they offer explanations for complicated events (Douglas et al. 2017). The findings by Oliver and Wood are in line with a study showing that greater factual knowledge about the news media predicted less belief in conspiracy theories (Craft et al. 2017), and that lack of interest in news and public affairs was much more prevalent among Americans categorised as high on conspiratorial disposition compared to other respondents (Uscinski, Parent 2014). This could be, as mentioned above, because different groups of people reach out for conspiracy theories under different circumstances. The less knowledgeable do so in order to understand complicated events, whereas the more involved and politically knowledgeable reach out to conspiracy theories in order to cope with defeat. Furthermore, it is well established that, across the board, belief in conspiracy theories is negatively related to education (van Prooijen 2017).

Political ideology

Anyone who contemplates the relationship between conspiracy theories and politics will soon wonder if and how they are related to ideological leanings, in particular whether they are more prominent on the left or on the right. With some disciplinary differences, the literature also refers to political ideology as political orientation or ideological self-positioning (Knight 2006). Ideology is conceived of as a belief structure that people use as a lens through which they perceive and understand the world: The individual processes and systematises all the information of social and political relevance – including conspiracy theories – to orient themselves in the political realm and to reduce its complexity (Morgan, Wisneski 2017). Thus, political ideology provides meaning and may shape related cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions (Hatemi, McDermott 2016).

Most commonly, ideology is conceived of as a unidimensional construct that encompasses the left to right continuum (or, in the U.S.A., liberal-conservative) in which the left (or liberal) reflects preference for advocating social change and rejecting social and economic inequality. The right (or conservative) position, on the other hand, stands for resistance to change and acceptance of inequality (e.g. Jost et al. 2009).

As reviewed by Jost et al. (2018), meta-analyses have shown that, compared to liberals, conservatives tend to be more dogmatic and averse to ambiguity, exhibit more cognitive rigidity and need for cognitive closure, and demonstrate a stronger desire for order and structure (e.g. Jost et al. 2003). Additionally, people on the right tend to perceive the social environment as more threatening compared to those on the left; more generally, the occurrence of threatening events (e.g. the news of a terrorist attack) leads to the so-called ‘conservative shift’ in public opinion (Thórisdóttir, Jost 2011; Jost et al. 2017). According to this perspective, conservatism is a form of motivated cognition, where ‘the rigidity of the right’ represents a motivated reaction to insecurity and threat, satisfying epistemic needs. The perception of threat is a crucial element,
also when considering why people embrace conspiracy theories. As reviewed by Douglas et al. (2017), conspiracy theories may be used for epistemic motives, as causal explanations to satisfy their need for safety and insecurity when feeling threatened. Conspiracy theories may restore a sense of control when this seems lost since conspiracy theories offer individuals the chance to reject the official – but threatening – explanation of the events by adopting an alternative – but reassuring – narrative (Goertzel 1994). Bost and Prunier (2013: 124) suggested that the conspiratorial beliefs are part of a ‘cheater detector’ mechanism, able to reveal dangerous situations and help to reduce or remove the perceived threat. The same idea was proposed by van Prooijen and van Vugt (2018) in an evolutionary explanation of conspiracy theories in which they describe them as a by-product of different psychological mechanisms, including threat management. Thus, in terms of motivation, conservatism and conspiracy theories seem to share the epistemic motive aimed at threat reduction. It is, therefore, reasonable to ask whether the left-right political continuum might be a determinant of conspiracy beliefs and whether there is a positive association between the right (conservatism) and endorsement of such beliefs.

The literature so far has found mixed results. On the one hand, some evidence supports this view: right-wing positions were found more predictive of political conspiracy beliefs (Galliford, Furnham 2017) measured with the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (Brotherton et al. 2013); similar results were also found in a representative sample from the 2012 American National Election Study (A.N.E.S.) dataset (Miller et al. 2016) and the Italian National Election Study dataset in Italy (Mancosu et al. 2017), in which specific conspiracy beliefs relevant to those countries were considered. On the other hand, some research did not find support for this relationship: Political ideology was not related to conspiratorial predispositions in an American sample (Uscinski, Parent 2014), nor did it determine support for specific anti-science conspiracy theories (Oliver, Wood 2014) or beliefs related to the economy in Greece and Italy (Mari et al. 2017).

The overall picture becomes even more complicated if we consider extremist ideological attitudes. People who adhere to extreme political ideologies manifest rigid self-convictions and rely on information about socio-political matters by other extremists, thus revealing a black-and-white style of processing (e.g. Fernbach et al. 2013). Such an epistemology leads to a pessimistic view about the functioning of society, independent of whether it is extremism on the right or on the left. Also, to cope with uncertainty and threat, extremists tend to construct a predictable understanding of the world. Evidence based on an Amazon Mechanical Turk U.S. sample and Dutch representative samples found that endorsement of conspiracy beliefs was stronger at the extremes of the political ideology continuum (van Prooijen et al. 2015). In particular, the authors revealed a ‘slanted’ U-shaped function: Individuals positioned at the far left and the far right of the continuum expressed stronger conspiracism compared to those in the middle, but conspiracy beliefs were even more prevalent among those on the far right. Moreover, these results were not attributable to general attitude extremity. Similar findings were described by Krouwel et al. (2017), who found support for the curvilinear relationship between the left/right continuum and conspiracism in Sweden. Interestingly, but conversely, the curve was steeper for participants on the left side of the continuum in Sweden, meaning that, in this case, leftists were more likely to subscribe to conspiracy beliefs.

Douglas et al. (2019), in their review, reflected on how to reconcile this variety of results on the political ideology-conspiracy theories link. A first explanation considers the dispositional factors: Even though people at both extremes of the continuum are likely to endorse various specific conspiracy beliefs, individuals positioned at the right side are even likelier because they are predisposed to do so. Indeed, their need to manage threat and uncertainty compels them to find explanations of the socio-political events (Jost et al. 2018), and conspiracy theories represent a way to manage the uncertainty. Such an explanation would not, however, account for Krouwel
et al.’s (2017) findings from Sweden. Another explanation attributes the inconsistent results to the different methods, contexts and timing of data collection. For instance, talking specifically about extremism, Bartlett and Miller (2010) analysed the literature, ideology and propaganda of over 50 extremist groups from Europe and the U.S.A. that had been active over the last 30 years. They found that conspiracy theories were highly prevalent among those groups, although the specific content differed depending on the ideology of the extremist group. The authors hypothesised that, although conspiracy theories are not enough to cause radicalisation, they can serve as a ‘radicalising multiplier’ by increasing ingroup vs. outgroup distinction and by delegitimising dissenting voices by declaring them a part of the conspiracy. It is worth noting that research on the relationship between political ideology and conspiracy theories has almost exclusively focused on specific theories. Those are often highly partisan, and who supports them is dependent on political and cultural context. Future research should look into the role of ideology and a more general tendency to embrace conspiracy theories (Imhoff, Bruder 2014) more closely. An ongoing cross-cultural study conducted in 21 countries (Imhoff et al. 2019) has revealed a U-shape pattern in the whole sample, but with stronger prevalence of general conspiratorial thinking on the far-right side of the ideology continuum, thus resembling previous results that considered specific beliefs (van Prooijen et al. 2015).

Morgan and Wisneski (2017) advocate paying more attention to multi-dimensional conceptions of political ideology, such as the dual-process model of ideology. According to this model, individuals do not rely on the left-right (liberal/conservative) continuum but adopt broader social beliefs and values to orient themselves in the world and those beliefs drive their attitudes. More precisely, Duckitt’s dual model includes right-wing authoritarianism (R.W.A.) and social dominance orientation (S.D.O.), dimensions that map onto social and economic attitudes, respectively. R.W.A. is a political attitude depicting an individual who tends to submit to the perceived established authorities and with a deeply rooted mentality following social conventions. S.D.O., in contrast, regards an individual’s preference for hierarchy within society and dominance over lower status groups who are perceived as threatening to the advantaged group (see Duckitt 2001 for discussion of R.W.A. and S.D.O.).

Conspiracy beliefs, along with R.W.A. and S.D.O., work to protect and maintain the socio-political status quo (Goertzel 1994). Imhoff and Bruder (2014) suggested that people with high R.W.A. attitudes tend to embrace conspiracies that involve deviant high-power groups (e.g. antisemitic theories), whereas people with high S.D.O. attitudes tend to endorse beliefs involving the deviance of low-status and minority groups (e.g. anti-immigrant theories). Research exploring the relationships between these dimensions of political ideology and conspiracy theories has found that R.W.A. is a positive predictor of conspiracy mentality (Bruder et al. 2013; Imhoff, Bruder 2014), and specific conspiracy beliefs about the American presidents (Richey 2017) or groups in society (Grzesiak-Feldman, Irzycka 2009). However, this link is not always consistent: Berinsky (2012) did not find a relationship between R.W.A. and conspiracy beliefs. Only a few studies have found a positive association between S.D.O. and conspiracy beliefs (Swami 2012; see also Chapters 2.4 and 2.6 in this volume). Overall, it is clear that further research is needed to better understand and theoretically integrate the findings concerning political ideology and conspiracy theories. Research is needed that clearly accounts for different cultural contexts and whether the relationship is with specific conspiracy theories or a more general conspiracy mindset. In the next section, we turn to a proxy of political ideology, party affiliation.
Party affiliation

To what extent is belief in conspiracies related to specific political parties and to which parties in particular? Some studies in the U.S.A. have found a relation between conspiracy thinking and political party affiliation, in particular with right-wing, conservative Republicans (Wright, Arbuthnot 1974) and preference for Trump during the 2016 presidential primaries (Oliver, Wood 2018). However, other work based on U.S. samples (Oliver, Wood 2014; Uscinski, Parent 2014) found no such link between political ideology or party affiliation and conspiracy belief. People are more likely to think that parties they did not vote for are involved in malevolent activities than representatives of the party they support (e.g. Claassen, Ensley 2016), yet this could also be attributed to dichotomous black and white thinking in systems in which two opposing parties dominate, the U.S. in particular. Another explanation for a lack of a clear pattern between party affiliation in the U.S. and belief in conspiracies could be attributed to the extremism effect discussed above (see also van Prooijen et al. 2015).

Yet, to what extent is conspiracy belief associated with party preference outside the U.S.A. in multi-party systems? One study (Krouwel et al. forthcoming) used the 2018 European Voter Election Survey (E.V.E.S.) dataset in which the relationship between vote propensities and conspiracy mentality in 13 European countries was analysed (Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Hungary, Denmark, Poland, Romania and France). In this study (N=88,488), there was a strong negative correlation with belief in conspiracy theories and intent to vote for all of the progressive left, libertarian and centrist parties. In contrast, a clear pattern emerged of a strong positive correlation between vote propensity for populist anti-immigrant parties and conspiracy mentality. Among voters of the right-wing populist parties (Swedish Democrats, the P.V.V. in the Netherlands, Brothers of Italy, the A.f.D in Germany, the Danish People’s Party in Denmark and Jobbik in Hungary), conspiracy mentalities were widespread. This suggests that extremist attitudes – in particular outgroup derogation (against immigrants) – is associated with conspiracy beliefs. This is in line with a previous finding showing that conspiracy beliefs were associated with support for populist politics (Castanho Silva et al. 2017).

Interestingly, the same positive relationship with conspiracy belief was also found for many radical left parties. In the Netherlands, for example, there is a strong correlation between a vote propensity for the Socialist Party (S.P.) and conspiracy belief, as is the case with Vänsterpartiet in Sweden, Alternativet and Enhedslisten in Denmark, and Die Linke in Germany. An explanation for this finding of conspiracy mentalities among voters at both ends of the political spectrum may be due to the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and anti-establishment attitudes, which are more widespread at the extremes (Schumacher, Rooduijn 2013; Mudde, Kaltwasser 2017).

In general, we find that likely voters for mainstream parties that often enter into governmental power are on the other end of the conspiracy-spectrum. In particular, voters for liberal, social democratic and Christian democratic parties are least prone to believe in conspiracies. This can be explained by the fact that political moderates have less need for epistemic clarity and are much more comfortable with the complexity of social problems and long-term policy commitments, rather than quick fixes by strong leaders (e.g. Hogg et al. 2010; van Prooijen, Krouwel 2019). Accordingly, Krouwel et al. (forthcoming) found that almost all establishment parties were immune to belief in conspiracies among their supporters. Exceptions from this overall pattern were found in Sweden, Portugal and, most prominently, in Austria. There, vote intention for the Freedom Party of Austria (a mainstream, conservative anti-immigrant party) was associated with conspiracy beliefs.
Political participation

There is limited research on the relationship between belief in political conspiracy theories and political participation. Related research exists on the behavioural correlates of believing in science or health-related conspiracy theories. Among African Americans, believing that contraceptives are a plot to exterminate them leads to negative attitudes and less use of contraceptive methods (e.g. Bogart, Thorburn 2006). More generally, people who believe medical conspiracy theories are less likely to seek the help of medical professionals, and more likely to consult alternative sources instead (Oliver, Wood 2014). Causal evidence is scarcer, but Jolley and Douglas (2014a, 2014b) have shown that participants exposed to conspiracy narratives regarding vaccinations and climate change subsequently report lower intentions to vaccinate or to engage in climate-friendly behaviours.

Jolley and Douglas (2014a) argue that the influence of exposure to conspiracy theories may be a contributing factor to reduced levels of political engagement because people see no reason to partake in the political process if governments decide most things in shady deals anyway. Their own experimental studies supported this view. In a pair of experiments, they showed (with small effect sizes) that participants who were exposed to a text insinuating non-specified secretive plots by the government (Study 1) or that climate change is a hoax (Study 2) reported less intention to participate in politics in general and, in Study 2, to engage in climate-friendly behaviour in particular.

However, political participation takes on more forms than the conventional one. Lamberty and Leiser (2019) reported on four studies using diverse, but self-selected online samples, in which they examined how political action relates to both the conspiracy mindset and belief in specific conspiracy theories. In three studies with participants from the U.S.A. and Germany, they found that the conspiracy mindset and belief in specific conspiracy theories were related to lower intentions to take part in normative political action (e.g. voting) and increased willingness to engage with non-normative (e.g. unauthorised strike) and even violent action, both political and general. Their results stopped short of showing a causal relationship between conspiracy beliefs and non-normative or violent political behaviour. Similarly, Uscinski and Parent (2014) showed that around 16 per cent of survey respondents they categorised as high on conspiratorial predispositions deemed violence as an acceptable mode of expressing disagreement with the government. This is compared to around 8 per cent agreement by those with low or medium predisposition for conspiratorial thinking. Moreover, Mari et al. (2017) found that embracing economic conspiracy beliefs led to potential involvement in illegal political action (e.g. occupying buildings).

Studies have not uniformly demonstrated a relationship between adherence to conspiracy theories and lower intention to participate in conventional politics. Imhoff and Bruder (2014) found that, although conspiracy mentality positively predicted attribution of the Fukushima nuclear disaster to intentional misconduct, it interestingly also predicted a modest correlation with a desire to engage in both normative and non-normative anti-nuclear protests. Galliford and Furnham (2017) found no relationship between adherence to either medical or political conspiracy theories and intention to vote.

All the studies described above dealt with intentions to participate in politics. Even less is known about actual participation in various aspects of the political process. A survey among Americans published in Uscinski and Parent (2014) gives some of the best information we have. They divided respondents into three categories depending on their conspiracy predispositions. They found that 68 per cent in the high and 91 per cent in the low conspiracy predispositions categories reported to have voted in the 2012 presidential election. They also found people in
the high category to be almost three times less likely to be registered voters compared to those in the low category. Their results also showed that people in the low conspiracy predisposition category were more likely than people in the other two groups to put up political signs, attend local meetings, work for a candidate, donate money or run for office. The difference in donations was stark, 37 per cent of those in the low categories had donated money but only 19 per cent and 16 per cent in the medium and high categories.

A more general view of the association between conspiracy beliefs and social engagement can be had from a study by Freeman and Bentall (2017). Using representative data from the U.S. population, they documented the correlation between endorsement of the item ‘I am convinced there is a conspiracy behind many things in the world’ and a plethora of factors tapping into physical, social and mental well-being. Their study demonstrated a remarkably robust relationship between endorsing the conspiracy item and virtually all measures of negative mental well-being, mental disorders, poor attachment and negative childhood family experiences, including the relative lack of friendships and closeness with their family. For the purposes of political engagement, the relative lack of friendship, closeness or engagement with relatives and families of those who endorsed the conspiracy item points to a lower societal and civic engagement overall.

Supporting data

One of the authors (Thórisdóttir) of this chapter conducted a survey in the late spring of 2017 among a nationally representative sample of Icelanders (N=651) to examine the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and several indicators of social and political engagement. Many of the questions touched upon the topics discussed in the chapter above. First, the survey measured conspiracy beliefs by asking both about belief in specific theories but also by assessing a more general conspiracy mentality. Second, respondents were asked about their ideology, perceptions of threat, social engagement and voting intentions. Data was collected by the Social Sciences Research Institute (S.S.R.I.) at the University of Iceland.

Belief in conspiracy theories was measured in two ways: 1) Conspiracy mentality questionnaire (C.M.Q.) (Bruder et al. 2013), which has five statements rated on a scale from zero to 100 per cent (certainly not true to certain). For example, ‘I think that many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about’. 2) Specific conspiracy theories: Six conspiracy theories, four local and two global. For example, ‘foreign creditors revealed damning information via the Panama papers in order to undermine the Icelandic Prime Minister at the time’ and ‘Islamists want to take over Europe and the USA and they have already sent infiltrators in order to make that happen’. Responses were from strongly disagree (one) to strongly agree (five). Statistical analysis showed that, despite some partisan differences, overall people were likely to either agree or disagree with all conspiracy theories, so they can be analysed together as one measure of specific conspiracy theories.

Other questions in the survey were the following: Political orientation: Measured as self-placement on the left-right scale from zero to ten (left – right). Perceptions of societal danger: Two questions on a scale from one to five: ‘Do you agree or disagree that Icelandic language is under threat?’ and ‘Do you find it likely or unlikely that a terrorist attack will happen in Iceland in the next five years?’. Civic efficacy: Six questions measuring people’s beliefs that ordinary citizens can influence society on a scale from one to five. For example, ‘I can impact decisions made the government (local and general) if I want’ and ‘volunteering in society really has an effect’. Close relationships: Five questions on the quality and frequency of communications with one’s family and friends, a question on the ability to approach them if needed and one question on loneliness. For example: ‘Communication with my friends is good’. Social engagement: Six questions asking
if people participate in the following: A political party, play sports with a club, are otherwise active with a sports club, other types of organised interest clubs, organised religion, boy scouts or similar, or other. *Intention to vote:* Three groups, a) those who stated a specific political party, b) those would not vote, or would turn in an invalid/blank vote, and c) those who did not know or declined to say.

Statistical analysis showed no relationship between political ideology and either the C.M.Q. or belief in specific conspiracy theories. Neither a linear nor a curvilinear relationship was found. Perceptions of impending terrorist attacks or that the Icelandic language is under threat were correlated with both measures of conspiracy beliefs, with a Pearson correlation coefficient ranging from about 0.10 to 0.40. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was also a medium to strong correlation (around 0.40) between both conspiracy belief measures and civic efficacy. The more people endorse the conspiracy mentality or the specific six theories asked about in this survey, the less likely they are to believe ordinary citizens can influence authorities. There was also a small but significant relationship between the endorsement of conspiracy theories and poorer relationships with friends and family.

Turning to more direct measures of civic and political participation, the mean score on the conspiracy mentality questionnaire among people who reported participation in at least one volunteer organisation (n = 425) was 0.37 points lower on the zero to ten scale than among those who did not participate in any organisation (n = 226). For the specific conspiracy theories, the same pattern emerged. The mean endorsement was a little lower among people who participate compared to those who do not. In both cases, the difference between the means was significant using conventional statistical testing. Thus, people who participate in at least one volunteer organisation are to a slight extent less likely to endorse conspiracy theories compared to those who do not participate.

Finally, Table 3.4.1 shows the mean conspiracy endorsement of three different groups based on how they answered the question of what party they would vote for if the election were held tomorrow. The mean score on both the C.M.Q. and for specific conspiracy theories was significantly lower among those who mentioned a particular party or said they did not know, compared to the relatively small group of people who outright stated they would not vote or would turn in a blank vote.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Conspiracy mentality (1–10)</th>
<th>Conspiracy theories (1–5)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party mentioned (n = 520)</td>
<td>6.86 (1.91)</td>
<td>2.76 (0.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know, will not tell (n = 82)</td>
<td>6.87 (1.92)</td>
<td>2.71 (0.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will not vote, turn in blank (n = 49)</td>
<td>7.62 (1.58)</td>
<td>3.19 (0.65)</td>
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To sum up, the data from the survey shows that the more people endorse conspiracy theories, the less they believe ordinary citizens are heard by or can influence authorities, the poorer their close interpersonal relationships, the stronger their perception of looming societal threat, the less likely they are to participate in volunteer organisations or to vote in elections. It is thus clear that all of the indicators available in the Icelandic data support the overall view that emerged from the literature review in the chapter so far: Belief in conspiracy theories is associated with less engagement, both interpersonally and politically, by those who endorse conspiracy theories compared to those who do not.
Conclusion

At the outset of this chapter, we posed the key question of whether conspiracy theories can legitimately be described as a vehicle for people to articulate their doubts about government and ruling powers. We further asked if belief in conspiracy theories is linked with a discernible profile of political engagement and participation, i.e. whether it promotes engagement or disengagement with politics, either conventional or non-conventional.

There is no doubt that conspiracy theories serve as a way to express distrust and discontent with authorities, and perhaps even distrust towards society more generally. As we reviewed above, several studies have demonstrated that conspiracy beliefs are linked with lack of political trust, especially when political knowledge is somewhat high. Conspiracy theories also seem to be linked with a discernible political profile, although this is much less clear for ideological leanings compared to political participation. Research on ideology has found mixed results for whether conspiracy beliefs are more pronounced on the left or on the right. It seems to depend on the national context, the way ideology is measured and whether conspiracy beliefs are measured as belief in specific conspiracy theories or as a general conspiracy mindset. The best generalisation we can make to date is that conspiracy beliefs are more common on the political extremes, and probably even more so on the right compared to the left. This was especially clear when we looked at new data from 13 European countries showing that, without exception, voters of right-wing populist parties scored relatively high on the conspiracy mindset. Voters of mainstream or extreme left-wing parties sometimes also scored relatively high, but this varied greatly between countries and probably depended on the current political climate within each country.

It is generally accepted that conspiracy theories form part of a monological belief system, that is, people tend to accept or reject most types of conspiracy theories and assimilate new information to fit under their current belief system. This makes conspiracy theories exceptionally difficult to repudiate (Goertzel 1994). The mechanism of motivated reasoning (e.g. Kunda 1990) may help illuminate what seems like contradictory results for the relationship between ideology and conspiracy beliefs. People who endorse different ideologies and worldviews may process the same information in different ways. They are motivated to interpret and adjust new information within their previous belief system. This is especially true when adopting conspiracy beliefs in line with party preference and political ideology (e.g. Uscinski, Parent 2014; Miller et al. 2016). For example, two individuals who are on the opposing ends of the political spectrum may share a general anti-establishment sentiment and thus both be high on the conspiracy mindset, but they may divide starkly along ideological lines when it comes to their endorsement of specific conspiracy theories.

The picture that emerges in the chapter from a review of the scant literature on political participation is fairly clear. The main theme is that belief in conspiracy theories is linked with less political and civic participation overall, with perhaps a slight uptick in proclivities for unconventional, even violent, participation. The literature also seems to support the idea that political outsiders use conspiracy theorising as a means to cope with threatening situations and environments. It has also been suggested that promotion of conspiracy theories may serve as a way to communicate with co-partisans and to promote collective action (Smallpage et al. 2017).

There are many potential avenues for future research on conspiracy theories and political functioning. Research on specific forms of participation is still scarce and, to date, the role of conspiracy beliefs or mindset in determining specific forms of civic engagement, such as membership in civil society organisations and unionisation, has received next to no attention. Likewise, it is unclear if, and when, conspiracy theories may promote political action. Relatedly, it
may also help us better understand the function of conspiracy beliefs in the political arena if we study separately people high and low on political knowledge and interest. It is reasonable to assume that the people who follow politics may see conspiracy theories as a tool to voice dissatisfaction and may use them to propel like-minded citizens into action. Among people low on political interest, conspiracy theories may further solidify their distaste, lack of trust and alienation from the political process. Finally, as also suggested by Jolley et al. (see Chapter 2.7), it is possible that some conspiracies may lead to action because they generate anger, whereas others may generate a sense of greater vulnerability and powerlessness.

On a final note, researchers have just begun to study and debate the role of the Internet and social media in the development and diffusion of conspiracy theories (see e.g. Douglas et al. 2019). What is clear, however, is that online communities play a crucial role in the spread of conspiracy theories, and those communities tend to be both ideologically homogeneous and very polarised (Del Vicario et al. 2016). Future research on the effects of conspiracy beliefs on political participation needs to pay careful attention to if, and how, active engagement with conspiracy theories online translates to political participation, whether on- or off-line.

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