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Partisan Attachment and Conspiracist Predispositions: An Investigation into the Causes of Conspiracist Thinking

Abstract

Conspiracy theories have increasing relevance in American politics. In the age of the internet, where rumors and their associated conspiracy theories are transmitted and received at much higher frequencies than was previously capable, people can be led to believe in ideas that erode their trust in government and its decision makers. This undermines America's capacity for self-governance. In this proposal, I articulate a model that fully explains conspiracist thinking in the context of American politics. I suggest that two domains—partisan attachment and underlying conspiracist predispositions—determine whether an individual will accept or reject a conspiracy theory. To measure the effects of these two domains on opinion formation, I propose a cross-sectional analysis that incorporates two separate survey instruments. However, due to time limitations, the scope of this paper is confined to a research proposal; I do not collect any data to support my hypotheses.

Keywords: conspiracism, partisan bias, American politics, social identity theory, public opinion

Introduction

Recent studies (Darwin et al., 2011; Coles and Swami, 2010) show that conspiracism is no longer a fringe phenomenon, but a growing part of the mainstream public opinion. New social media forums like Facebook and Twitter have exacerbated this trend by allowing users to transmit and receive conspiracy theories and associated falsehoods at much higher frequencies than was previously capable (Barkun, 2013; Prior, 2013). This has profound implications for American politics. For instance, conspiracist thinking correlates with lower levels of faith in public officials and institutions (Einstein and Glick, 2015; Sunstein, 2009), lower rates of vaccination among children (Douglas and Jolley, 2014a), rejection of climate science (Gignac et al., 2013), decreased voter turnout (Douglas and Jolley, 2014b), and lower levels of civic engagement (Parent and Uscinski, 2014). Because social media usage is unlikely to decrease in the future, it is important to understand the underlying mechanisms that motivate conspiracist thinking, especially in the context of American politics.

Researchers have long sought to understand the root causes of conspiracism. Some find that conspiracist thinking stems from feelings of powerlessness, anomie, and economic and personal insecurity (Crocker et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994); from paranoia and paranormal ideation (Darwin et al., 2011; Hofstadter, 1964); and from a

need to reduce the psychological tension caused by unexplained phenomena (Jacques and McCauley, 1979; Shermer, 2011). Thus far, the scholarship on conspiracism has largely focused on reactions to specific theories (Hargrove et al., 2007; McHoskey, 1995), reactions from specific communities (Waters, 1997; Goertzel, 1994), and the origins of conspiracy theories within the mass public (Davis, 1971; Keeley, 1999; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). However, these studies limit themselves to the psychological and social factors that predispose people to conspiracist thinking in general. They do not consider the factors to cause people to accept some theories but reject others. Oliver and Wood (2014) and Coles et al. (2011) do shed light on this question by suggesting that two domains are activated when individuals interact with conspiracy theories: (1) pre-existing partisan attachment and (2) underlying conspiracist predispositions.

In this paper, I construct a model of conspiracist thinking which holds that partisan attachment and conspiracist predispositions (Oliver and Wood, 2014; Coles et al., 2011) condition responses to and interpretations of conspiracy theories. I argue that (1) innate conspiracist tendencies determine whether an individual is likely to believe in conspiracy theories at all and (2) partisan attachment determines whether these theories will be accepted or rejected. I expect partisan attachment to be a more effective predictor of conspiracy theory acceptance when the partisan in question is already predisposed to conspiracist thinking. While there are other variables that play a similarly influential role in determining individual acceptance or rejection of conspiracy theories, I focus on partisan attachment alone because it exerts the single most powerful influence on political opinion formation (Campbell et al., 1960). For my research design, I propose a cross-sectional study in which I measure the conspiracist and partisan predispositions of the respondents by judging their reactions to different conspiracy theory stimuli. This method allows me to separate the respondents into two classes (conspiracists and nonconspiracists) and thus isolate the effects of partisan attachment on conspiracy theory selection. However, due to limitations of time and resources, the scope of this paper is restricted to a research proposal: I do not collect any data to support my hypotheses. I merely delineate the contours of a study that I would implement should I eventually be able to collect data.

This proposal is valuable to the study of conspiracy theories for two reasons. First, it introduces a new method for gauging conspiracist tendencies. Previous studies focusing on the role of partisanship in conspiracy theory selection neglected to separate partisan attachment from conspiracist predispositions. I solve this issue by creating two separate survey instruments, one which measures the strength of the respondent's underlying conspiracist tendencies and one which measures the strength of the respondent's partisan attachment. Second, this study emphasizes partisan

attachment as an influential variable in conspiracy theory selection insofar as it is coupled with pre-existing conspiracist predispositions; otherwise, its effects should be largely negligible (Oliver and Wood, 2014; Coles et al., 2011). Both of these innovations contribute to a more robust understanding of conspiracism and help to guide future scholars working in the field.

Literature Review

Research on conspiracism (Coles et al., 2011; Goertzel, 1994; Oliver and Wood, 2014) suggests that partisan attachment plays an important role in determining individual acceptance as well as formation of conspiracy theories. I synthesize the literatures on partisanship and conspiracism to show that conspiracy theories trigger two domains within individuals: (1) their partisan affiliation and (2) their conspiracist predispositions. In section 1, I list key terms that appear throughout this article and give them each a specific meaning; in section 2, I review the literature on partisan identification and outline a theory of partisan bias; and in section 3, I discuss the central characteristics that comprise a conspiracist predisposition.

I. Definitions

First, I define *conspiracy* as a secret plan made by two or more people to do something that is illegal or harmful to the public (Shermer, 2011). Second, I define *conspiracy theory* as an attempt to explain a particular event or action as being the product of a conspiracy (Douglas and Jolley, 2014b). The distinguishing features of a conspiracy theory are that the explanation of the incident is (1) different from the official account and (2) unsupported by evidence (Sunstein, 2009). According to these definitions, the 9/11 attacks *were* a conspiracy, insofar as they were organized in secret by a confederation of terrorists who acted illegally to perpetrate a violent act. In contrast, the “9/11 Truth” movement, which maintains that select members of the United States government, among others, are responsible for the attacks, is a *conspiracy theory*. Third, I define conspiracism as a tendency to engage in conspiracist thinking and accept conspiratorial explanations for extraordinary events. This tendency is largely motivated by innate psychological attributions, not external factors (Oliver and Wood, 2014; Shermer, 1997).

II. Partisan Attachment

Initial studies of voting behavior identified partisan attachment as the most important influence on opinion formation (Berelson et al., 1954; Campbell et al., 1960), and current scholarship (Krosnick et al., 2015; Parent and Uscinski, 2014) suggests that there is a similar connection between partisanship and conspiracism. I assume that

this is because citizens have a personal relationship with their parties (Mason, 2015) and filter information through the screen of partisan identification (Bolsen et al., 2014; Campbell et al., 1960). Recent research on partisan identification (Greene, 2004; Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015) finds that partisanship functions similarly to other forms of group affiliation in that individual awareness of group status activates positive sentiments toward ingroup members and negative sentiments toward the outgroup (Tajfel, 1974). These attitudes manifest themselves in both political and nonpolitical contexts¹. Partisans on average do not view their party more favorably today than they did previously, but they do view outparty members much more negatively (Abramowitz and Webster, 2015). This suggests that partisans are more likely to accept conspiracy theories that implicate outparty members than they are to reject theories implicating inparty members.

Furthermore, conventional models of public opinion posit that individuals interpret information in relation to their prior convictions (Zaller, 1992). They adopt new beliefs if those beliefs fit in with or complement what they believe or already know; they disregard them if they do not (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). I expect partisan biases to govern the interaction between partisans and conspiracy theories in a similar manner. For instance, if an individual accepts that Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs were designed to keep minorities forever indebted to the Democratic Party, it is likely because this new belief fits in with their pre-existing conceptions of Lyndon B. Johnson and the Democratic Party (Sunstein, 2009). However, this type of response is contingent on partisan "activation," because if partisans are to respond to party cues, they must first be made aware of them (Kuo and Malhotra, 2008). Conspiracy theories that contain a partisan element should therefore produce the most noticeable reaction.

Although partisan attachment helps to explain why certain partisans might accept one conspiracy theory and reject another, it does not constitute a sufficient or comprehensive explanation of conspiracism, because not all Democrats subscribe to conspiracy theories that are largely endorsed by Democrats (like the Iraq-oil conspiracy theory) nor do all Republicans subscribe to conspiracy theories largely endorsed by Republicans (like the Vincent Foster assassination theory)². Furthermore, Independents endorse conspiracy theories implicating Democrats and

¹ Nonpolitical activities like dating (see: Bartle and Bellucci, 2009) and applicant selection in college admissions processes (see: Iyengar and Westwood, 2015) reveal traces of inparty over outparty favoritism.

² The Iraq-oil conspiracy theory holds that the United States used the Iraq War as a pretext to capture their oil reserves; the Vincent Foster assassination theory holds that Foster was murdered as part of a political cover-up.

Republicans *as frequently as* Democrats and Republicans (Hargrove et al., 2007), and their endorsement would not be motivated by partisan bias.³ It would, however, be motivated by underlying psychological attributions that incline individuals to believe in conspiracy theories. I discuss these attributions in the following section.

III. Conspiracist Predispositions

Building on Goertzel's (1994) and Coles et al.'s (2011) studies, Oliver and Wood (2014) suggest that conspiracism is predicated on two inbuilt psychological characteristics. The first of these, known as *apophenia* (Fyfe et al., 2008), is a tendency to attribute the source of unexplained phenomena to hidden forces by linking together unrelated but temporally proximate coincidences. Human beings are wont to find "meaningful patterns in both meaningful and meaningless noise" (Shermer, 2011,60) and ascribe meaning and agency to those patterns. For example, imagine yourself home alone, late at night. Suddenly, you hear the front door creak open downstairs, followed by a thump somewhere within the house. It could be that the wind blew open the door, which you in fact neglected to close all the way, followed by your cat jumping from the couch to investigate the noise, or it could be a dangerous intruder. Individuals predisposed to conspiracist thinking would instinctively assume that the noise originated from the latter source.

The second characteristic is an interest in simplified narratives as explanations of extraordinary events (Oliver and Wood, 2014). Our reality is an uncertain one, where presidents can be assassinated by lone gunmen, buildings can be toppled by airplane hijackers, and entire economies can collapse overnight without warning. Narratives are appealing because they reduce this uncertainty by providing us with ballast in an unpredictable social world (Knight, 2002). Conspiracy theories exhibit both of these characteristics, insofar as they infer causation from correlation and posit subversive, "unseen" agents as the forces behind important phenomena, thereby simplifying the sequence of events. A person predisposed to believe in conspiracy theories, therefore, should have a natural aversion to uncertainty and a natural attraction to narratives that give them some semblance of control (Oliver and Wood, 2014).

³ In a CNN opinion poll, nearly 30% of Independent and 41% of Republican respondents expressed doubts about President Obama's birth certificate; in an American Enterprise opinion poll, 12% of Independent and 14% of Democratic respondents agreed that the United States government knowingly let the 9/11 attacks happen.

Theory

The first premise of this analysis is that some individuals possess certain psychological characteristics that incline them to accept conspiratorial explanations of extraordinary or disconcerting phenomena (Oliver and Wood, 2014). Accordingly, I argue that (1) individuals with conspiracist predispositions are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than those without conspiracist predispositions and (2) the more conspiratorially minded the individual, the greater the number of conspiracy theories they will accept. The second premise of this analysis is that partisans respond positively to inparty members and negatively to outparty members when the relevant partisan information is made known to them (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). I expect for partisans to behave similarly when judging conspiracy theories. I argue that (3) partisans rely on party cues when determining whether or not to endorse a conspiracy theory, and (4) partisans should be less likely to endorse a conspiracy theory if there are no cues present. Consequently, my hypotheses are as follows:

- *H1: Partisans will endorse a conspiracy theory more often if it implicates outparty members than if it does not.*

As Mason (2015) suggests, partisan identification is similar to other forms of group affiliation in that awareness of group status activates positive sentiments toward ingroup members and negative sentiments toward outgroup members. I expect for this attitude to manifest itself during encounters with conspiracy theories as well, both among partisans with conspiracist predispositions and among partisans without. The literature indicates that partisan affiliation should be a more powerful force among conspiracist partisans. As a result, a great proportion of them should accept conspiracy theories that implicate outparty members.

- *H2: “Strong” partisans will be more likely than “weak” partisans to endorse a conspiracy theory that contains a partisan element.*

Naturally, the relationship between partisans and party is dynamic (Campbell et al., 1960). Partisan attachment exists on a continuum, upon which individuals can be placed according to the strength or weakness of their convictions. Accordingly, I predict that “strong” partisans will endorse conspiracy theories implicating outparty members more often than “weak” partisans. This hypothesis applies to both conspiracist and nonconspiracist partisans, although I expect a greater number of endorsements in the former category.

- *H3: Conspiracist partisans will be more likely than nonconspiracist partisans to endorse a conspiracy theory that contains no partisan element.*

The extant literature (Oliver and Wood, 2014; Coles et al., 2011) suggests that conspiracist predispositions are at least as influential as partisan predispositions in determining whether an individual accepts or rejects a conspiracy theory as credible. Furthermore, as I am primarily concerned with the role of partisan attachment in conspiracy theory selection, the answer to this hypothesis should support the contention that, when a conspiracy theory does not contain a partisan element, partisans should rely on conspiracist tendencies to decide whether or not to accept the theory. If partisans are not predisposed to believe in conspiracy theories, they should be less likely to endorse them than those who are predisposed.

- *H4: Conspiracist nonpartisans will be less likely than conspiracist partisans to endorse conspiracy theories on a strictly partisan bias.*

Campbell et al. (1960) posits that Independents are really just partisans in disguise, but recent studies on conspiracism (Hargrove et al., 2007) find that Independents often subscribe to theories implicating both parties. I predict that Independents with conspiracist tendencies will be less discriminatory in their endorsements of conspiracy theories (i.e., they should accept theories that implicate Democrat and Republican officials) than conspiracist partisans, who should endorse along party lines. Confirmation of this hypothesis would provide further evidence of partisan bias in conspiracy theory selection.

Data and Methods

I propose a cross-sectional study wherein participants are chosen from a Survey Sampling International (SSI) panel and asked to complete a survey that features two separate components. The ideal study sample is a balanced mixture of Democratic, Republican, and Independent identifiers, with varying degrees of partisan loyalty among the Democratic and Republican respondents. The first survey component [see Figure 1] is designed to gauge the respondent's propensity for holding and accepting conspiracist beliefs. Previous empirical research on conspiracism (Goertzel, 1994; Hargrove et al., 2007; Oliver and Wood, 2014) employed survey instruments that questioned respondents about their opinions on specific conspiracy theories, but did not test for conspiracist tendencies. Consequently, it is difficult to know whether the respondents endorsed on the basis of conspiracist predispositions, partisan attachment, or both. This preliminary survey attempts to disentangle the two so that accurate judgments can be made.

FIGURE 1. Sample of preliminary survey component

1. “We think and are often told that we have free will, but we are much less free to do what we want than we are led to believe.”

How much do you agree with the preceding statement?

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. No opinion
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

4. “There are important things that the United States government is currently lying to us about.”

How much do you agree with the preceding statement?

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. No opinion
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

The second survey component [see Figure 2] measures partisan attachment. In the opening portion of the survey, I ask the respondent to identify their partisan affiliation and indicate the strength of their attachment on a 1-7 point scale, with 1 being “very weak” and 7 being “very strong.” For the remainder of the survey, I present various conspiracy theories and ask the respondent to indicate whether they have previously heard of the theory as well as how they much they believe it. I administer two versions of the survey: one where each conspiratorial stimulus includes a partisan element, which will be administered to the treatment group, and one where each is missing a partisan element, which will be administered to the control group. The conspiracy theories featured in the survey are all factual, insofar as they are currently in circulation. I have not “invented” any theories for the purposes of this study; however, I do modify certain theories by adding or subtracting partisan elements from them. For instance, in the *Cancer* stimulus (“Cures for cancer exist but are being actively suppressed by the Trump administration to sustain the cancer-prevention industry”) I introduce a Republican element (“the Trump administration”) when in reality the theory, or at least the version accepted by the mainstream, does not implicate the Trump administration as a conspirator. I also ask respondents whether they have previously heard the conspiracy theory to see if a lack of awareness regarding the theory gives them pause before evaluating it. On questions that feature a partisan element, I suspect that strong partisans will indicate that they previously heard the theory when it implicates an outparty member, even if the current conception of the theory is partisan-neutral, meaning that it implicates no particular political party.

FIGURE 2. Sample of partisan attachment survey

2. Cures for cancer exist but are being actively suppressed by the government to sustain the cancer prevention industry.	2. Cures for cancer exist but are being actively suppressed by the Trump administration to sustain the cancer prevention industry.
Have you heard of the preceding statement before?	Have you heard of the preceding statement before?
a. Yes	a. Yes
b. No	b. No
How much do you believe the preceding statement?	How much do you believe the preceding statement?
a. Strongly agree	a. Strongly agree
b. Agree	b. Agree
c. No opinion	c. No opinion
d. Disagree	d. Disagree
e. Strongly disagree	e. Strongly disagree

Once I have collected the results of the survey, I will separate the respondents into two groups: (1) those who qualify as having a conspiracist predisposition and (2) those who do not. I arrive at these classifications by assigning values to each type of answer choice in the preliminary survey and aggregating and averaging each respondent's responses. Separating those who have conspiracist tendencies from those who do not will allow me to isolate the effects of partisan affiliation and accurately evaluate the role that it plays in conspiracy theory selection.

Discussion

Zaller's (1992) model of opinion formation conceives of public opinion as being largely a product of elite discourse. Because conspiracy theories begin at the mass-public level and typically grow out of a distrust of elites, conspiracist thinking represents a curious inversion of this model (Oliver and Wood 2014). Although conspiracy theories are as old as human history (Davis 1971), with the help of the internet and other modern information technologies, they are increasingly ubiquitous. People are in real danger of interacting with, accepting, and holding onto ideas that make them cynical about and distrustful of government. Various opinion polls, for instance, show that a majority of Americans believe that the Bush administration lied about the 9/11 attacks in some form or another; a small but still substantial portion of the population believes that the administration was actually *complicit* in the attacks. If these beliefs are sincere, and some scholars suggest that they are (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009), then it raises serious concerns about the future of American democracy. A more comprehensive understanding of conspiracism would help to arm the public against potentially harmful ideas.

Were this study to be implemented, I would expect for partisan bias to be strongest among conspiracist partisans, given that (1) individuals with conspiracist predispositions are more likely to subscribe to conspiratorial beliefs than others (Oliver and Wood 2014) and (2) partisans are more likely than nonpartisans to accept or reject conspiracy theories on the basis of partisan identification alone. In narrower terms, I suspect that respondents whose responses code as “strong” on the partisan and conspiracist scales would endorse (a) a larger number of conspiracy theories (b) along party lines than other respondents. Furthermore, I expect that the evidence would show that partisans—both conspiracist and nonconspiracist—are less likely to endorse a conspiracy theory when there is no partisan element present, rather than when there is. Considering the extremely partisan nature of American politics today (Abramowitz and Webster, 2015; Mason, 2015), and the fact that modern conspiracy theories are often framed in partisan language (Knight, 2002), concerns about the state of American democracy are not without merit.

I expect that my findings will prompt scholars to reevaluate the importance of partisan attachment as it relates to conspiracist thinking. Recent literature on political misinformation (Einstein and Hochschild, 2015; Meirick, 2013) identifies partisan attachment as one of the central motivating forces behind conspiracism. While it is certainly true that partisan attitudes affect the interaction between individuals and conspiracy theories, they do not per se cause individuals to accept or reject conspiracy theories. Instead, as I have argued, and as I expect for my findings to show, partisan attachment depends on underlying conspiracist predispositions in order to matter in the accept-reject calculus. Therefore, it would be prudent for future research to focus on the factors that cause or influence these predispositions, rather than on factors such as partisanship that merely modify them.

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