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Covid-19-Related Conspiracy Myths, Beliefs, and Democracy-Endangering Consequences

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Abstract

Since late 2020, protests against government measures to contain the Covid-19 pandemic have swept across Germany. At the forefront of these protests was the Querdenker Movement, a heterogeneous alliance of ordinary citizens, hippies, esotericists, opponents of conventional medicine, Christian fundamentalists, and right-wing extremists bonded by their shared belief in conspiracy myths. This contribution draws upon the theoretical framework of the studies on the authoritarian personality to dissect the nature of this heterogeneous alliance and the democracy-endangering potential of conspiracy myths. We present three key insights based on an analysis of representative public opinion surveys conducted by the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study. First, we demonstrate that susceptibility to conspiracy myths in the public mood occurs in waves that coincide with times of crisis. In this regard, the Covid-19 pandemic is a catalyst of conspiracy myths as it has induced existential and epistemic insecurities amongst many citizens. Second, it is shown that there is an elective affinity between superstition, esotericism, and a conspiracy mentality, which can be cited as one explanation for the heterogeneous alliance during the protests. On the other hand, the nexus between religion and the conspiracy mentality depends on an individual's interpretation of religion. It is literalist fundamentalism that fosters susceptibility to conspiracy myths. Third, we highlight the democracy-endangering consequences of a conspiracy mentality. Its manifestations include resentment and hostility toward minorities, an alienation from democracy, an increased likelihood of voting for right-wing authoritarian parties, and an affinity for violence.

Keywords

affinity for violence; Alternative for Germany; anti-Muslim attitudes; antisemitism; authoritarianism; conspiracy theories; Covid-19; religiosity; religious fundamentalism; support for democracy

Issue

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1. Introduction

Starting in late 2020, a wave of protests against government measures to contain the Covid-19 pandemic swept across Germany. The so-called Querdenker Movement, a heterogeneous alliance of ordinary citizens, hippies, esotericists, opponents of conventional medicine, and right-wing extremists, was at the forefront of these

protests. Among its allies, there were also Christian fundamentalists (Goertz, 2022, pp. 22–23), while both the Protestant and Catholic churches warned against fake news and voiced support for the Covid-19 vaccination (“Europe: Churches call,” 2021).

In the course of these protests, insults and even incitements to murder politicians, virologists, physicians, and vaccination center staff were accompanied by

attacks on journalists, counter-demonstrators, and the police (Goertz, 2022, pp. 21, 37). The protests became a hotspot for popularizing the “Great Replacement” conspiracy myth rather than a venue for legitimate criticism of government action. Thus, there are many supporters of the Querdenker Movement who consider the Covid-19 pandemic to be a hoax. The government and its behind-the-scenes string-pullers (e.g., Bill Gates and George Soros) allegedly used their leverage over the media to incite panic to launch a worldwide compulsory vaccination program to decimate the world’s population. The measures to curb the “simulated epidemic” are just the first steps in establishing a global dictatorship and are allegedly designed to combat popular resistance (Butter, 2021, p. 4; Weiß, 2021, pp. 187–188). Furthermore, the conspiracy narratives often had an anti-Semitic and racist fervor. Even at the first rallies, the Covid-19 pandemic was referred to as a “biological weapon of Israel” or a devilish plot of the “Jewish world conspiracy” to enslave humanity (Salzborn, 2021, p. 41). In addition, there were calls for a strict ban on the immigration of asylum seekers and refugees, claiming that immigrants could bring “real pathogens” to Europe (Goertz, 2022, p. 16). In other words, there is much to suggest that the constellation of the Covid-19 pandemic was both fertile ground and a well-suited pretext for articulating conspiracy narratives (Salzborn, 2021, p. 41).

In light of this context, two questions come to mind: How to account for the bizarre line-up of actors participating in the Querdenker Movement, and how toxic is the glue of conspiracy myths that binds these groups? In our contribution, we draw on the theoretical framework of studies on the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950) because we believe it can shed light on these issues. To begin with, belief in sinister conspiracies, as well as superstition and esotericism, are theorized as components of authoritarian character dispositions. All of them are treated as projective modi of reasoning that provide ego-weakened individuals with a palliative for their anxieties and feelings of loss of control (Adorno et al., 1950, pp. 235–236, 239–240). Potentially, this psychological function is already one of the reasons why conspiracy myths experienced a renaissance in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, superstition, esotericism, and belief in conspiracies share another elective affinity: the belief that one’s destiny is in the hands of forces beyond one’s control (e.g., astrology, an ensouled nature, conspirators; see Adorno et al., 1950, p. 236). These are clues why seemingly apolitical esoteric and superstitious beliefs were linked to conspiracy narratives during the protests. In addition, there are insightful reflections on the relationship between religion and authoritarian character dispositions. Adorno (1976, p. 280) explicitly emphasized the ambivalence of religiosity. The Janus-faced character of religion results from the manifold and conflicting readings and interpretations to which its adherents subscribe. Once individuals embrace the imperative to

love thy neighbor, religion offers the possibility of thwarting the ethnocentrism and resentment that conspiracy myths boil down to. This does not apply, however, to religious bigotry and fanatical expressions of religion (Adorno, 1976, pp. 280–281). This, in turn, explains why it was primarily religious fundamentalists that participated in the Querdenker Movement (Goertz, 2022, pp. 22–23). The anti-democratic slogans and actions of the protesters also come as no surprise in light of this theoretical framework: Authoritarian character dispositions underpin hatred against minorities, aversion to democracy, a turn to right-wing authoritarian movements and parties, and an increased inclination to violence (Adorno, 1976, pp. 1–6). Belief in conspiracies takes center stage in the disposition towards violence because it reveals an individual’s aggressive intentions, which are justified by imagining sinister conspiracies (Adorno et al., 1950, p. 240).

These theoretical considerations inform the main points of our three research guiding hypotheses:

H1: Since the projective components of the authoritarian syndrome offer a coping mechanism for people’s feelings of powerlessness and loss of control, it is reasonable to assume that the Covid-19 pandemic and the anxieties it triggered had a catalytic effect leading to an increased susceptibility to conspiracy myths.

H2: As purely rational explanations fail to do justice to the irrational content of conspiracy myths (Salzborn, 2021, p. 43), we hypothesize that there is an elective affinity between superstition, esotericism, and a conspiracy mentality. On the other hand, the nexus between conspiracy myths and religiosity is ambivalent. We expect that it is primarily fundamentalist interpretations of religion that harmonize with a conspiracy mentality.

H3: Since the conspiracy mentality is one of the key components of authoritarian character dispositions, we expect significant effects on anti-Semitic resentment, hostility toward outgroups, the formation of anti-democratic orientations and behaviors (e.g., voting for the Alternative for Germany), and an increased affinity for violence.

We rely on data gathered by the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study (<https://www.boell.de/de/leipziger-autoritarismus-studie>). This representative population survey is part of long-term monitoring of anti-democratic attitudes whose most recent wave was conducted during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic (March to May 2020; see Decker & Brähler, 2020). It provides a robust database to subject our assumptions to empirical scrutiny.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. A Compass in the Jungle of Terminologies: Conspiracy, Conspiracy Theories, Conspiracy Myths, and Conspiracy Mentality

Broadly speaking, a conspiracy describes a clandestine collaboration of at least two actors seeking to realize their goals and self-interests (Weiß, 2021, p. 184). Conspiracies (e.g., the Watergate scandal) are not always a product of people's imagination, and once such suspicions are confirmed, they linger in memory as political scandals (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 5). Investigative journalists, however, do not spread conspiracy theories; they search for empirical patterns, a necessity for uncovering scandals. The peculiarity of the so-called conspiracy theorists is that they hunt for patterns everywhere, even in cases where there are none (Weiß, 2021, p. 184).

As a rule, conspiracy theories share at least four common lines of reasoning. First, these theories subscribe to the assumption that important events follow a pattern and that they never owe their existence to chance. Second, all conspiracy theories share the minimal consensus that these events result from intentional action by conspirators. Third, it is assumed that a powerful group of conspirators is pulling the strings behind the scenes. And fourth, the intentions of these groups are believed to involve an almost epic level of threat (van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018, p. 771).

Certainly, most conspiracy theorists leave no stone unturned to lend their stories a scientific patina (Butter, 2018, pp. 60–61). There are, however, a number of good reasons why their narratives do not deserve to be valorized with the term theory. So-called conspiracy theories are highly speculative and tend to overestimate the evil intentions and power capacities of groups in an irrational fashion. Moreover, anyone who tries to debunk the conspiracy theories is discredited as a henchman of the conspirators (Douglas et al., 2017, pp. 538–539). All of this translates into a disconnect from the tenets of democratic discourse (Lamberty & Rees, 2021, p. 299) and a worldview that is not open to reality checks (Salzborn, 2021, p. 42). We sympathize with this problematization and consider terminologies such as conspiracy myths or conspiracy narratives more appropriate.

The structural similarities of the argumentation patterns of conspiracy narratives also account for a well-established finding: Most people do not consider only one particular conspiracy myth plausible but trust several conspiracy narratives at once (Lamberty & Rees, 2021, p. 285). This overlap between different conspiracy myths points to a common underlying orientation, which can be referred to as a conspiracy mentality. The term describes the willingness of individuals to suspect conspiratorial actions by small, powerful groups and their alleged puppets in politics behind important social and political events (Schließler et al., 2020, p. 287).

2.2. The Conspiracy Mentality: Psychological Functions, Societal and Political Drivers, and Elective Affinities to Paranormal and Supernatural Beliefs

As mentioned in the introduction, people cling to conspiracy myths because they serve psychological functions. It is existential, social, and epistemic motivations that are repeatedly cited as the likely origins of its demand (Douglas et al., 2017, 2019). Regarding existential motivations, it is argued that the conspiracy mentality arises from a quest for control and security. Anxious individuals and groups that perceive themselves as economically and politically deprived are therefore considered to be particularly susceptible to conspiracy myths (Douglas et al., 2017, pp. 539–541). This is where social motivations come into the picture. Conspiracy narratives offer their adherents an excellent opportunity for a positive self-distinction (Douglas et al., 2017, p. 540). At this point, it is arguably even more appropriate to employ the terms of individual and collective narcissism: Anyone who spots, pinpoints, and fights the ultimate evil is necessarily a beacon of virtue according to their self-perception (Weiß, 2021, p. 190). Beyond this, the conspiracy mentality explains why the highly idealized self-image of individuals and groups elicits limited external validation. The lack of social esteem is allegedly the result of sabotage by the conspirators and their reckless collaborators (Douglas et al., 2017, p. 540). Conspiracy myths are, therefore, also a vehicle for their followers to claim social dominance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) or to safeguard their privileges within the existing hierarchy of the social fabric (Douglas et al., 2019, pp. 14, 17). Last but not least, there are epistemic motivations for conspiracy mentalities, as they reflect the quest for subjective certainty (Douglas et al., 2017, pp. 538–539).

Alongside these psychological functions, political and societal dynamics also increase susceptibility to conspiracy myths. For example, it is a relatively undisputed fact that speculation about conspiracies is fueled by opaque forms of governance (Weiß, 2021, p. 185). Citizens are not entirely wrong when they conclude that governance frequently happens within informal networks (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 17). National parliaments became weaker in the course of globalization and Europeanization, whereas the dominance of the executive powers has swelled. But there is also a parallel trend. In times of crisis, governments are compelled to share some of their decision-making power with technocratic bodies of experts. These processes are one of the reasons why trust in political institutions has declined over the past decade (Schäfer & Zürn, 2021). One further political factor that deserves mention is the mobilization successes of populist or right-wing authoritarian parties, both of which occupy a key role in spreading conspiracy myths (Pirro & Taggart, 2022). The spin doctors of these parties face an ideal playing field, as the digital communication structure of social media enables the rapid circulation of propaganda and fake news (Weiß, 2021, p. 186).

The result is a fragmented public sphere in which many people no longer trust the public media (Butter, 2021, p. 10). In addition, there is the Covid-19 pandemic in itself. Diseases have always been fertile ground for the diffusion of conspiracy myths and hatred against minorities. In the 14th century, for example, responsibility for the plague epidemic was blamed on Jews (Weiß, 2021, p. 186). For most, a virus's invisible and abstract threat is difficult to grasp and fosters feelings of powerlessness and loss of control. And in addition to existential fears about one's own health (or that of friends and family), the Covid-19 pandemic brought significant income losses to less privileged households (Lamberty & Rees, 2021, p. 287).

Still, there is room for debate as to whether conspiracy myths can truly fulfill each of the psychological functions discussed above. The reality frequently demonstrates that conspiracy myths do not provide epistemic security and, above all, do not help people to cope with crisis experiences rationally. Rather, they harbor a self-defeating momentum (Douglas et al., 2017, p. 514). That people susceptible to Covid-19-related conspiracy narratives risked their health by refusing a vaccination (Ruiz & Bell, 2021) is just one example that makes this point. Since conspiracy myths entail a blatant irrationality, there is also no point in analyzing them exclusively based on rational categories (Salzborn, 2021, p. 43).

On account of this, the ongoing debate about elective affinities between superstition, esotericism, religion, and belief in conspiracy myths strikes us as promising (Metzenthin, 2019; Schließler et al., 2020). The shared denominator of superstition and esotericism is its belief in paranormal phenomena. While superstition manifests itself in the belief in horoscopes, miracle doctors, fortune tellers, or lucky charms, esotericism is hallmarked by a metaphysical worldview. Its gist is the assumption of an ensouled nature with a subject-like character (Schließler et al., 2020, p. 287). As mentioned earlier, the elective affinity of superstition, esotericism, and belief in conspiracy myths arises for a simple reason: Individuals with such inclinations come to believe that their destinies are in the hands of paranormal or mischievous forces that are beyond their control (Adorno, 1976, p. 56). Arguably, superstition and esotericism also encounter a demand simply because capitalism and its signature of instrumental reason turn many aspirations of the Enlightenment (e.g., autonomy gains) into empty promises (Adorno, 1976, p. 56). That being said, a warning must be issued against trivializing the authoritarian temptations of superstition and esotericism. The belief in such paranormal phenomena is not only a repudiation of the rationalist consensus of modernity. Primarily, they always harbor the perils of looking for personified culprits to blame for crisis experiences. It is precisely at this point that the likelihood of a liaison with the conspiracy mentality escalates (Schließler et al., 2020, p. 294).

The debates about an elective affinity between religion and conspiracy myths start from a slightly different

angle. The starting point is the observation that some of the most important motivations underpinning the conspiracy mentality, such as the pursuit of certainty and knowledge (epistemic function), complexity reduction (existential function), as well as a positive self-distinction and formation of collective identity (social function), can be seen as important functions of religion (Metzenthin, 2019, p. 14). This, in turn, begs the interesting question as to whether the overlap of functions translates into a competitive relationship or whether religion and conspiracy myths happen to be kissing cousins. The verdict depends primarily on whether the focus is more on the pro-social norms promoted by religiosity (Saroglou et al., 2005) or on the tension between religious belief and knowledge (Evans & Evans, 2008). Most empirical findings align with Adorno's conclusion that it is the individuals' interpretations of religion that matter most (Adorno, 1976, pp. 280–281). Many allegations that are rashly and abstractly blamed on religiosity apply first and foremost to fundamentalism. Thus, it is overwhelmingly religious fundamentalists who portray diseases as God's punishment and who hope for a remedy from adherence to religious doctrines (Lowicki et al., 2022, p. 2). Another eye-catching analogy to conspiracy myths is that religious fundamentalists tend to project liability for (real and imagined) societal problems on personified culprits (Riesebrodt, 2000, pp. 86–88). For this reason, it is not religiosity per se but rather religious fundamentalism that propels susceptibility to anti-Semitism, hostility toward outgroups, anti-democratic orientations, and affinity for violence (Koopmans et al., 2021; Pickel, 2019; Schneider et al., 2021).

2.3. The Democracy-Threatening Potential of the Conspiracy Mentality: The Early Warnings of the Studies on the Authoritarian Personality

Most of the regressive dynamics of the conspiracy mentality touched upon in the previous chapter were already anticipated by the studies on the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950). The studies' lucid warnings do not come as a surprise if one considers the historical context (e. g, the Weimar Republic, the totalitarian rule of the Nazis, the Second World War, and the civilizational rupture of the Holocaust) in which the project emerged. In addition, it is important to keep in mind that the Holocaust was preceded by a state-sponsored campaign dedicated to the propagation of anti-Semitic conspiracy myths (Weiß, 2021, p. 185).

The gloomy conclusion of Adorno et al. (1950) was that the Nazis simply would not have come to power had their ideology not been supported by the masses. In this case, their propaganda would have also been doomed to failure. The exact opposite, however, was observed. Hitler, the Nazis, and the horrors of the Holocaust were enabled by the active cooperation of a majority of the German population. Hence, their conclusion reads as follows: Resentment against Jews and ethnocentric

prejudices breathes an aversion towards democracy and renders people susceptible to the hateful propaganda of right-wing authoritarian movements and parties. In turn, people’s authoritarian character dispositions underpin these anti-democratic dynamics (Adorno et al., 1950, pp. 9–10). Several components organize these authoritarian character dispositions. For one thing, it includes sadomasochism, which is authoritarian submissiveness, rigid adherence to conventionalism, and authoritarian aggression, eliciting a hatred of anything that deviates or differs. But the authoritarian character dispositions also contain projective components, and these incorporate, among other things, superstition and the conspiracy mentality (Schließler et al., 2020, p. 284). The conspiracy mentality captivates the bulk of the violence inherent to authoritarian character dispositions. When people claim that evil forces are up to something, even though no evidence can be found to support these accusations, there is good reason to believe that these people themselves harbor aggressive intentions. The projective imagination of sinister conspiracies is a vehicle to justify the latter (Adorno, 1976, p. 60).

A myriad of evidence points out that these hypotheses are not out of touch with contemporary realities. The conspiracy mentality is tied to anti-Semitism (Kiehl et al., 2020), anti-Muslim attitudes (Obaidi et al., 2021), diminished legitimacy toward democracy (Pickel et al., 2020), and affinity for violence (Vegetti & Littvay, 2022). It goes without saying that individual and collective pathways to violence remain complex. However, conspiracy narratives are considered “radicalization multipliers” that increase the willingness of groups and individuals to engage in violence. Illustrative evidence includes the right-wing terrorists of Christchurch, Halle, and Hanau. They all turned out to be frenetic adherents of conspiracy myths (Lamberty & Rees, 2021, p. 299).

3. Empirical Results

3.1. The Covid-19 Pandemic as a Catalyst for the Increased Prevalence of a Conspiracy Mentality?

Questionnaires to track the conspiracy mentality are included in the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study of 2012, 2016, 2018, and 2020. Three items were thereby utilized to tap into this mentality: (a) “politicians and other leaders are only puppets in the hands of the powers behind them,” (b) “there are secret organizations that exert tremendous influence on political decisions,” and (c) “most people fail to realize the degree to which our lives are determined by conspiracies that are masterminded behind the scenes” (Imhoff & Decker, 2013).

Figure 1 shows the average percentage of citizens that agree with the three statements. Over the survey period, support for the conspiracy mentality peaked in 2012 (44.8%) and 2016 (42.2%). In the 2018 survey (30.8%), support declined, while in 2020—which marked the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic—there was again a bump in conspiracy mentalities (38.4%). Three striking empirical patterns stand out. First, support for conspiracy myths is not a marginal phenomenon in Germany. The share of citizens inclined to agree with the three items oscillated from about 30% to 45% between 2012 and 2020. Second, it is eye-catching that the intensity of the conspiracy mentality is greater in East Germany than in West Germany at all time points. Third, the upward and downward trends suggest that support for the conspiracy mentality is subject to cycles in the public mood. We believe that these cycles coincide with social, economic, and political crises. In 2012, the results of the global banking and financial crisis was an ongoing topic in Germany and Europe, as it was accompanied by an economic recession and the euro crisis. Between 2015 and 2016, we saw the political conflicts surrounding

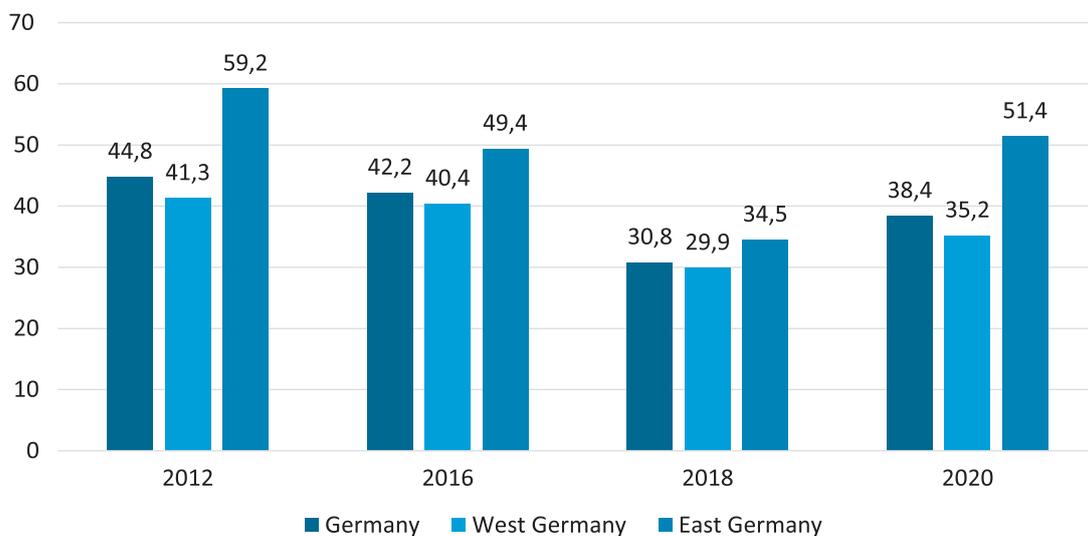


Figure 1. The prevalence of conspiracy mentality in 2012, 2016, 2018, and 2020. Source: Based on Decker et al. (2020, p. 202).

the so-called refugee crisis, while from 2020 onward, it was the Covid-19 pandemic that dominated headlines. The 8-percentage point increase in the prevalence of conspiracy mentality between 2018 and 2020 is in line with our first hypothesis. The Covid pandemic turned out to be a catalyst for increased susceptibility to conspiracy myths.

In Figure 2, we show the support for each item of the conspiracy-mentality-scale as a percentage. The same applies to each of the two items used to measure Covid-19-related conspiracy myths and Covid-19-related anxieties. Figure 2, on its own, hints that there is an overlap between Covid-19-related conspiracy myths and the more general conspiracy mentality.

The percentage of citizens who believe that the Covid-19 pandemic was blown out of proportion so that a few people could profit from it is akin to the percentage of citizens believing that politicians are just puppets of sinister forces. The highest support, however, is given to the position that the “real origins” of the Covid-19 pandemic will never be disclosed to the public. One might be inclined to conclude that this is a rational evaluation of the current state of affairs, but the results of a principal component analysis in Table 1 contravene such a benevolent interpretation. Underlying these items, we find two principal components with an eigenvalue exceeding 1.0. The items that capture the general conspiracy mentality and those about Covid-19-related conspiracy myths all load on the first component (the loadings vary between .895 and .779). This suggests that most citizens do not consider any need to uncover the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic as its alleged masterminds will have managed

to cover their tracks. The second component is mirrored by items that measure Covid-19-related anxieties (the loadings vary between .842 and .826).

Due to the dimensionality of the items, we decided to construct two scales, one reflecting a Covid-19-related conspiracy mentality; the other, Covid-19-related anxieties. There is a weak but significant correlation between the two ($r = .169, p = .0001$). In other words, the majority of citizens do not seek shelter in conspiracy myths due to their anxieties. And yet there is a tendency for crisis-induced anxieties to make many people more susceptible to conspiracy myths. But most of all, these Covid-19-related conspiracy myths operate as a byproduct of a deep-seated conspiracy mentality.

3.2. Covid-19-Related Conspiracy Mentality and Its Elective Affinities to Superstition, Esotericism, and Religion

Before turning to its democracy-endangering consequences, we analyze the enabling factors of the Covid-19-related conspiracy mentality. In this context, we focus on the elective affinities between superstition, esotericism, religion, and conspiracy mentality.

So how widespread are these phenomena and are they in any way tied to conspiracy myths? To start with, Figure 3 reveals that paranormal phenomena are far more popular than religion. About one-quarter of the population subscribes to superstitious beliefs. Esotericism is even more widespread. Almost one-half of the population in Germany believes that the current crisis is a sign from nature, urging a return to a (fictional)

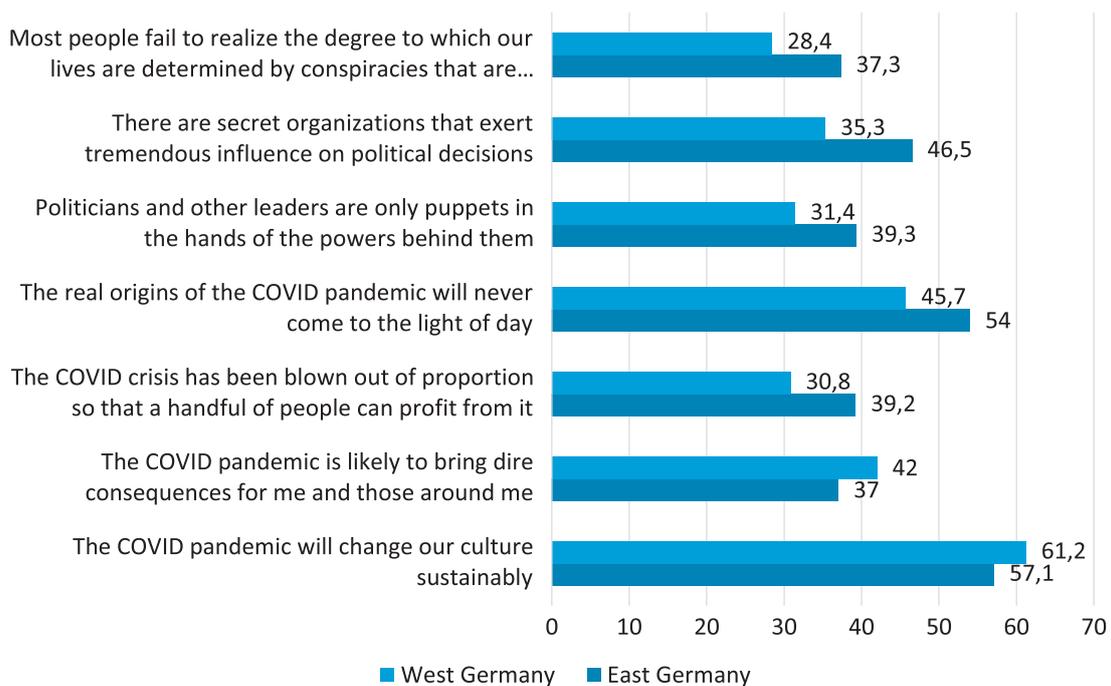


Figure 2. The prevalence of the general conspiracy mentality as well as Covid-19-related conspiracy myths and anxieties. Source: Based on Decker and Brähler (2020).

Table 1. Results of a principal component analysis.

Component	1	2
Ascribed meaning		
	Covid-related conspiracy mentality	Covid-related anxieties
There are secret organizations that exert tremendous influence on political decisions	.895	-.013
Politicians and other leaders are only puppets in the hands of the powers behind them	.879	.007
Most people fail to realize the degree to which our lives are determined by conspiracies that are masterminded behind the scenes	.865	-.007
The Covid crisis has been blown out of proportion so that a handful of people can profit from it	.820	.008
The real origins of the Covid pandemic will never come to the light of day	.779	.006
The Covid pandemic is likely to bring dire consequences for me and those around me	-.025	.842
The Covid pandemic will change our culture sustainably	.027	.826
Explained variance	52.35	18.98

Notes: Given that a correlation between Covid-19-related anxiety and susceptibility to a conspiracy mentality can be assumed, we utilized the oblique Promax rotation method; the table displays the corresponding Muster matrix. Source: Based on Decker and Brähler (2020).

state of nature or indicating the dawn of a new era. Religion no longer enjoys such appeal among German citizens due to the ongoing process of secularization (Pickel, 2017). While three out of ten citizens continue to believe in God or something divine, only a small minority participates in religious ceremonies or activities regularly. Accordingly, we find that attitudes we interpret as literal fundamentalism (e.g., assertions such as: “The rules of my religion are more important for me than German laws”) are also a rather fringe phenomenon. On the other hand, such statistical averages always entail the risk of glossing over differences between different religious denominations. Literalist fundamentalism has almost no support among Protestants (3.7%) and Catholics (4.3%), but this is less true for the other Christian communities (17.5%) and the non-Christian religious communities (38.6%). As Muslims make up the lion’s share (approx. 86%) within the group of non-Christian religious communities, these empirical patterns are aligned with the findings of other studies (Koopmans, 2015; Öztürk & Pickel, 2022).

Needless to say, the prevalence of these phenomena does not entail any information about its nexus to the Covid-19-related conspiracy mentality. Another question that arises is how superstitions, esotericism, and religiosity perform when compared to the alternative explanatory factors.

Before delving into these findings, we need to underline that we can only draw conclusions on how members of religious communities relate to literalist funda-

mentalism. These questions were not administered to nondenominational individuals, which somewhat strait-jackets the scope of our analysis. In line with our second hypothesis, we find a bivariate correlation between literalist fundamentalism and Covid-19-related conspiracy mentality ($r = .212$, $p = .0001$). This impact of fundamentalism is observed among all religious groups under study (all Pearson’s r correlations are significant and vary between .120 and .362). At this juncture, we nevertheless would like to reiterate the pronounced differences in support for literalist fundamentalism across religious communities. If the analysis hereafter points to attitudinal differences among members of different religious denominations, then disparities in support for literalist fundamentalism most likely yield one of the best explanations.

The regression results in Figure 4 first reveal that existential, social, and epistemic functions impact the Covid-19-related conspiracy mentality. The attenuation effects of social trust and a positive evaluation of Germany’s economic situation, as well as the amplification of the conspiracy mentality due to feelings of relative deprivation, can be quoted as evidence for existential motivations. Social motivations also loom large. The intense nexus between social dominance orientations and the Covid-19-related conspiracy mentality shows in all lucidity that conspiracy myths serve as a vehicle to secure privilege or change the social fabric hierarchy to one’s own advantage. Furthermore, it can be considered an indication of epistemic motivations that

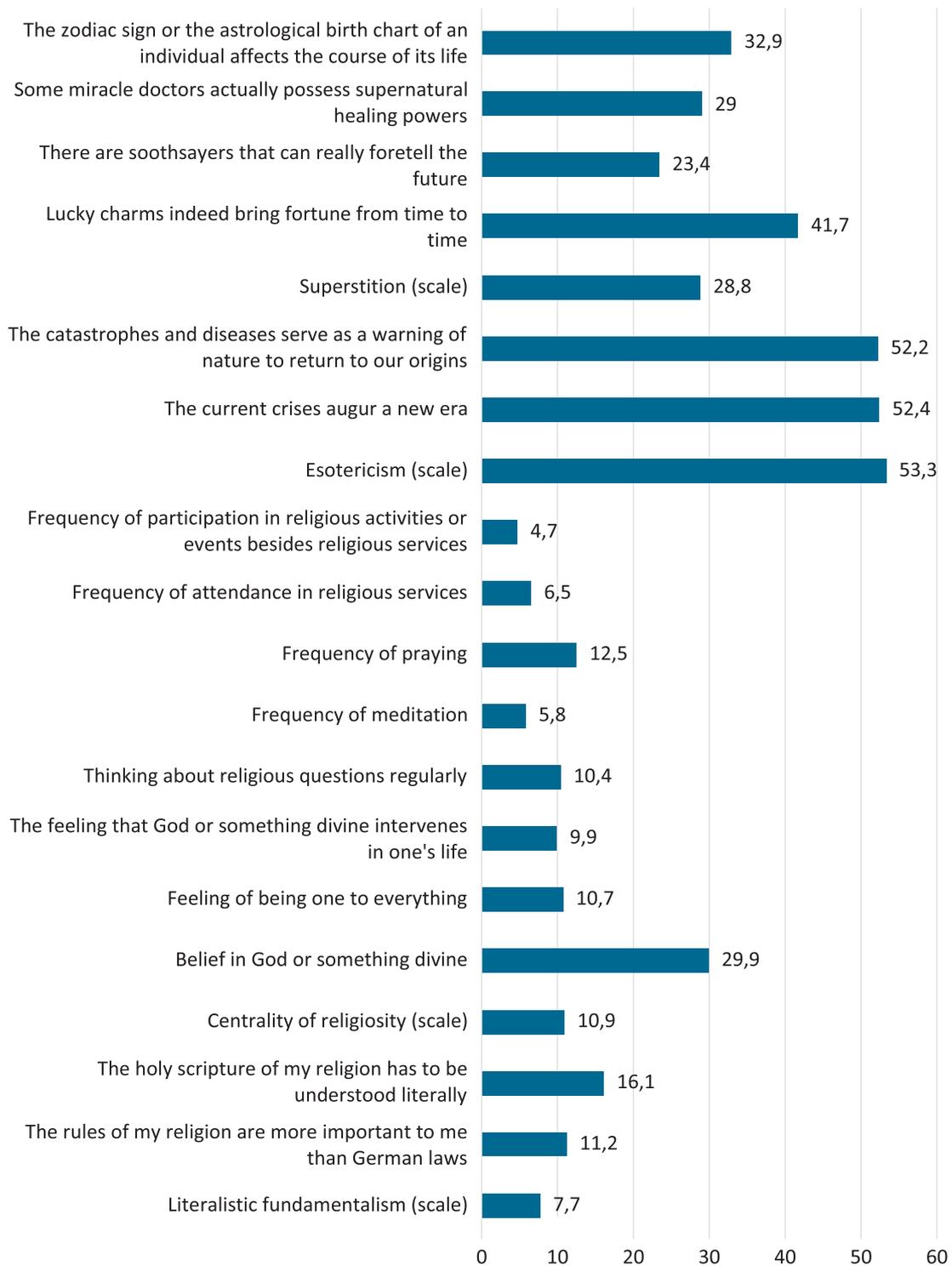


Figure 3. The prevalence of superstition, esotericism, religiosity, and literalistic fundamentalism. Source: Based on Decker and Brähler (2020).

citizens with higher educational attainment are less susceptible to Covid-19-related conspiracy myths.

Societal and political factors, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic, figure likewise prominently in the equation. As underlined in the previous section, Covid-related anxieties tend to fuel conspiracy myths. From an overall perspective, alienation from the political system yields

the strongest effect. The loss of trust in the political institutions of democracy provides extremely fertile ground for Covid-19-related conspiracy myths to flourish. The accompanying polarization is exacerbated by a fragmented public sphere. In any case, distrust of the public media tends to play into the hands of a Covid-19-related conspiracy mentality.

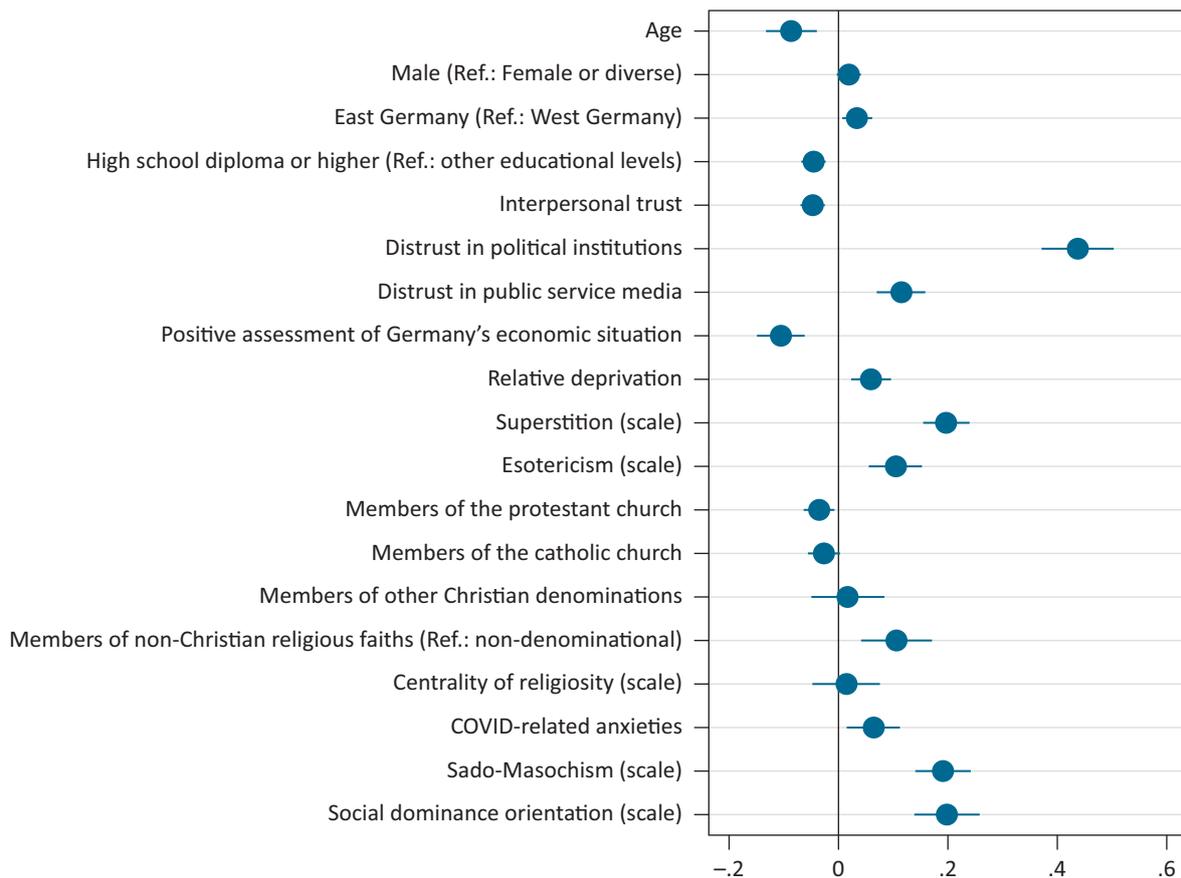


Figure 4. Enabling factors of Covid-19-related conspiracy mentality. Notes: The figure displays the results of an OLS regression; the coefficient plot was generated using the STATA `coefplot` command (Jann, 2014). Source: Based on Decker and Brähler (2020).

Our second hypothesis, however, remains robust even when controlling for these factors. As already indicated, religiosity ($\beta = .013$, $p = .668$) per se is certainly not the crux when it comes to conspiracy myths. And yet there are differences between members of religious communities and people that do not identify with them. Members of the Protestant church ($\beta = -.036$, $p = .010$) are least likely to subscribe to conspiracy myths. The highest support for Covid-19-related conspiracy myths, on the other hand, was observed among the group of non-Christian religious communities ($\beta = .106$, $p = .001$). Hence, the fact that these groups were hardly present at the Querdenker protests does not mean there is no support for conspiracy myths among them. In addition to the higher proportion of fundamentalist believers within their ranks, racism and degradation resulting from prejudice need to be considered a major reason why ethnic and religious minorities might fall prey to conspiracy myths (Douglas et al., 2017, p. 540). These factors do not operate in isolation: experiences of discrimination and the willingness to associate with fundamentalist groups tend to reciprocate, which is indicative of co-radicalization processes within society (Schneider et al., 2020). In addition, the regression results corroborate that both superstition ($\beta = .196$, $p = .0001$)

and esotericism ($\beta = .104$, $p = .0001$) feed support for Covid-19-related conspiracy myths.

The same applies to sado-masochism ($\beta = .190$, $p = .0001$), which, however, is no surprise given the theoretical framework of the studies on the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950). We, therefore, do not interpret this significant relationship, nor the elective affinities, as a strict instance of a cause-and-effect relationship. However, our analysis suggests that there are mutually reinforcing feedback loops between the components of authoritarian character dispositions.

3.3. Democracy-Endangering Orientations and Behavioral Intentions as Consequences of Covid-19-Related Conspiracy Mentality?

The Leipzig Authoritarianism Study offers a number of scales and items to examine its anti-democratic consequences. To begin with, there is a nuanced coverage of anti-Semitic attitudes (Kiess et al., 2020). We thereby differentiate between traditional, secondary, and Israel-related anti-Semitism. Traditional anti-Semitism includes classic stereotypes, such as the idea of an overshoot of Jewish power. Secondary anti-Semitism encompasses guilt-denying articulations of anti-Semitism. Its signature

is the trivialization of Nazism and perpetrator–victim reversals. The measurement of Israel-related anti-Semitism is a reaction to the trend that so-called criticism of Israel has become a fig leaf for the collective defamation of Jews (e.g., assertions such as: “Israeli policies make me dislike Jews more and more”). Blatant anti-Semitic articulations, as expressed in traditional anti-Semitism, enjoy little support (9.8%) in Germany. Anti-Semitism is, however, no fringe phenomenon. Almost a quarter of the population (23.2%) is susceptible to Israel-related anti-Semitism, while secondary anti-Semitism is enshrined in the mainstream of society (58%; Kiess et al., 2020). The scale that measures hostility toward Muslims captures derogatory attitudes, stereotypical perceptions, othering processes, and intentions of discrimination (e.g., assertions such as: “Muslims should not have the same rights as everyone else in Germany”). Three out of ten citizens (35.8%) tend to agree with these statements.

The perception of legitimacy toward democracy is another multi-item index. It includes both supportive attitudes toward democracy and negative attitudes toward authoritarian systems (e.g., assertions such as: “We should have a strong leader who governs Germany with a strong hand for the good of all”). A clear majority of German citizens favor democracy (71.1%). Nevertheless, there is considerable room for illiberalism and support for right-wing authoritarian systems alongside the pro-democratic mainstream. Last but not least, we count votes for the Alternative for Germany (6.9%) as well as the acceptance of violence (16.8%) and the willingness to use violence (10%) as anti-democratic actions or intentions to act (Figure 5).

The results of a whole set of regression analyses, shown in Figure 6, reveal nuanced empirical patterns. Out of these, we will only highlight the most striking ones at this point. One eye-catching finding, for example, is that both the acceptance of violence and the willingness to use violence decline with age. Furthermore, it is primarily men who display a stronger affinity for violence.

There are also overt economic motives underlying tendencies that undermine democracy. Thus, perceptions of relative deprivation fuel anti-Semitic resentment, hostile attitudes toward Muslims, a higher acceptance of violence, and a greater willingness to use it. The fact that sadomasochistic inclinations coincide with anti-Semitic resentments, hostility toward Muslims, or flirtations with authoritarian alternatives to democracy fits the theoretical expectations (Adorno et al., 1950). This also applies to the very similar effects of social dominance orientations, which also promote the acceptance of violence and a willingness to use it. The toxic consequences of alienation from the political system surface in the explanatory factors underlying the likelihood of voting for the Alternative for Germany. Germany’s most popular right-wing authoritarian party managed to capitalize on the distrust towards political institutions and the public media. Its appeal among people with social dominance orientations and sadomasochistic character dispositions is one reason why the Alternative for Germany is linking its elite-bashing with nativist rants against minorities and Muslims. (Öztürk & Pickel, 2019).

Without intending to downplay the importance of these alternative explanations, one needs to acknowledge that belief in paranormal and supernatural

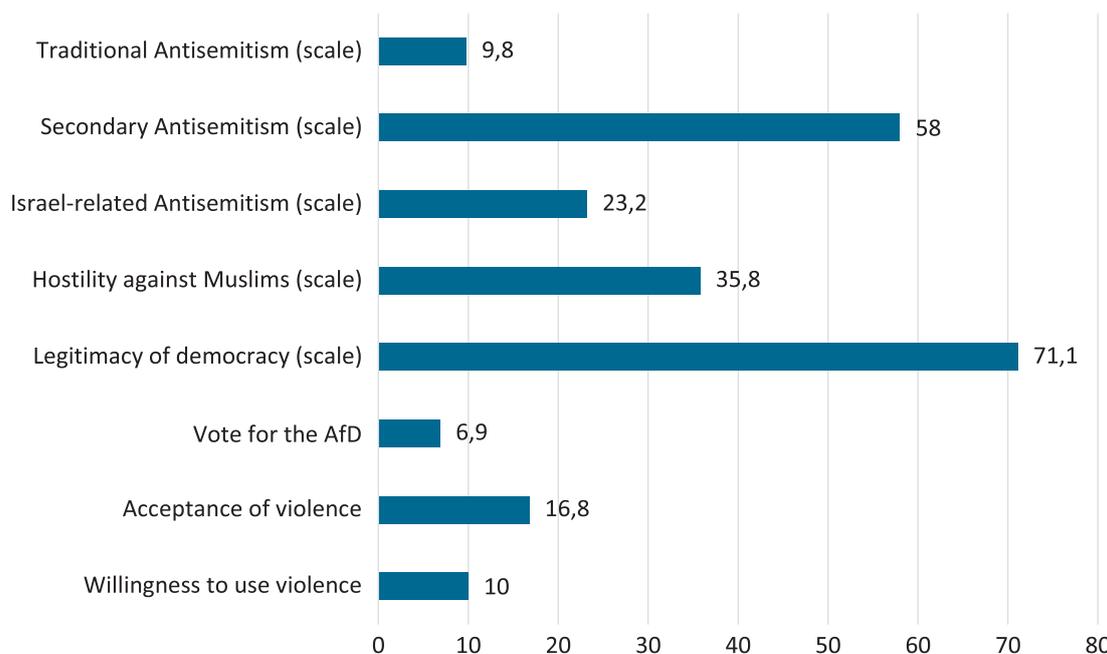


Figure 5. The prevalence of anti-Semitic resentment, hostility toward Muslims, perceptions of legitimacy toward democracy, support for the Alternative for Germany, acceptance of violence, and willingness to use violence. Source: Based on Decker and Brähler (2020).

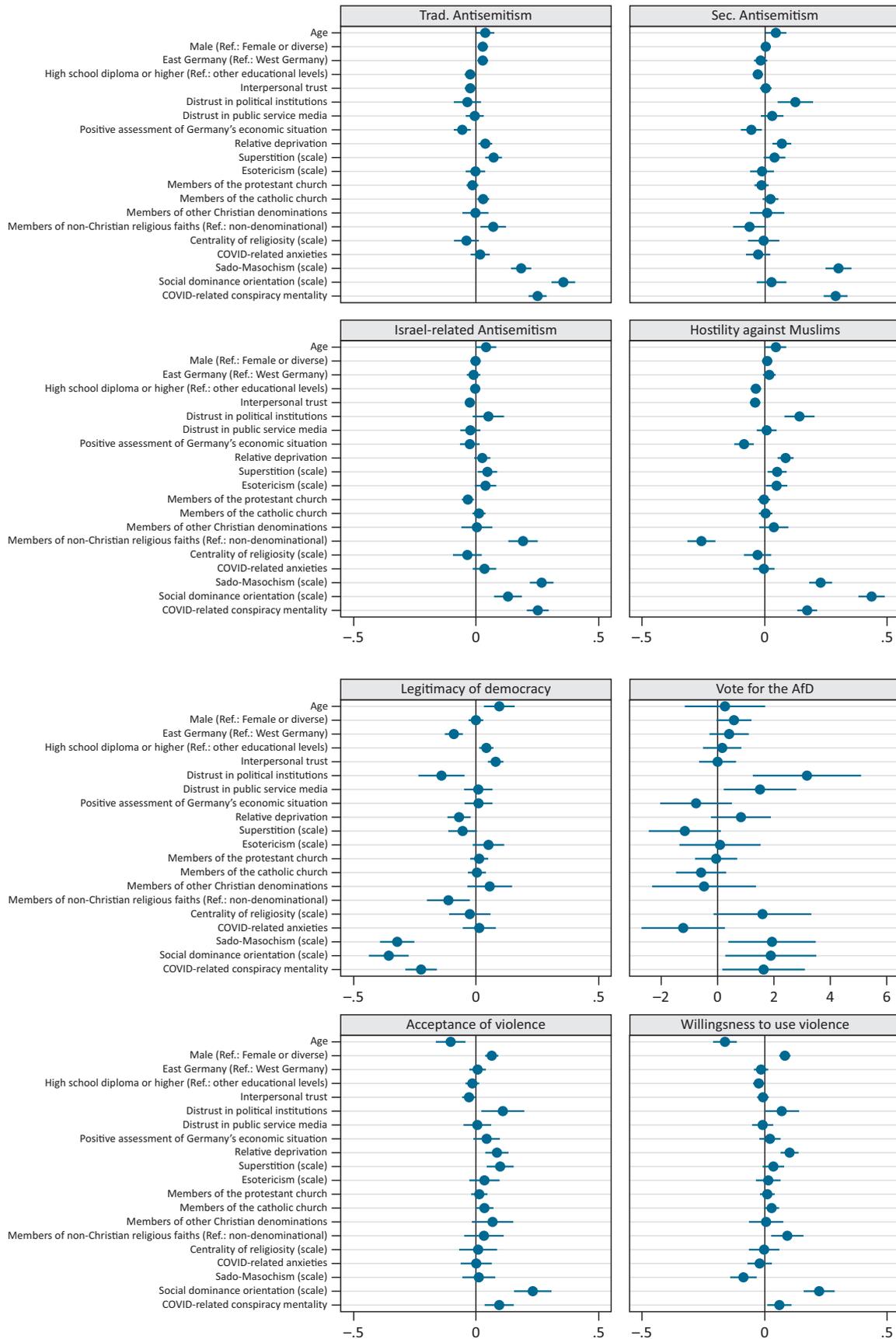


Figure 6. Facilitating factors of democracy-endangering orientations and behavioral intentions. Note: The figure displays the results of OLS regressions and a logistic regression (vote for the Alternative for Germany) based on a coefficient plot (Jann, 2014). Source: Based on Decker and Brähler (2020).

phenomena does have an impact on orientations and intentions that jeopardize democracy. This is where the co-radicalization processes discussed earlier come to the fore. A sub-milieu within the non-Christian religious communities reacts to their experience of discrimination in regressive ways. Hence, this group displays a higher susceptibility to traditional and Israel-related anti-Semitism as well as a more pronounced inclination towards violence. This observation is matched by studies showing accentuated support for anti-Semitism among Muslims, as well as by the observation that Jews cite extremists among Muslims as significant perpetrators of hostility and harassment (Koopmans, 2015; Öztürk & Pickel, 2022). Moreover, it turns out that members of non-Christian religious communities display a lower sense of legitimacy vis-à-vis democracy. Still, it needs to be emphasized that support for authoritarian systems, anti-Semitic resentment, and a willingness to resort to violence is not the rule but the exception within this group. When it comes to belief in paranormal phenomena, superstition stands out. Individuals with superstitious leanings obtain higher scores on the scales of traditional and Israel-related anti-Semitism. In addition, they display a stronger aversion against Muslims and an increased acceptance of violence—which also explains why this milieu did not shy away from sharing a common cause with right-wing extremists during the Querdenker protests.

The most important finding, however, relates to the democracy-endangering effects of the Covid-19-related conspiracy mentality. In line with our third hypothesis, a conspiracy mentality promotes all manifestations of anti-Semitism (β -coefficients vary between .250 and .290), hostile attitudes toward Muslims ($\beta = .173$, $p = .0001$), lower allegiance towards democracy ($\beta = -.224$, $p = .0001$), an increased likelihood of voting for the Alternative for Germany (AME = .075, $p = .030$), and an elevated acceptance of violence ($\beta = .093$, $p = .002$) and willingness to use violence ($\beta = .058$, $p = .024$).

4. Conclusion

Our analyses yield a good deal of evidence that the theoretical framework of studies on the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950) adds to a richer understanding of the regressive potential and the heterogeneous constellation of actors within the Querdenker Movement, whose unifying glue is shared conspiracy myths. Such projective modes of reasoning reflect subjective feelings of powerlessness and a loss of control. In the public mood, conspiracy mentalities, therefore, occur in cycles that coincide with societal crises. The Covid-19 pandemic acts as a catalyst for conspiracy myths because it induces anxieties and existential and epistemic uncertainties. And thus, it is shown that there has been an upward trend in the susceptibility to conspiracy myths in Germany since 2020 (H1).

For democracy, this increasing popularity of conspiracy myths is bad news (H3): The conspiracy mentality

is a virus of mistrust and exacerbates resentment and hostility towards minorities. Its prevailing patterns of argumentation alone amount to an attack on the rules of democratic discourse, with the result that the conspiracy mentality breeds alienation from democracy and support for right-wing authoritarian parties, as well as an increased propensity for violence. It goes without saying that the Querdenker Movement pitched itself as “pro-democratic,” but the question remains why much harsher interventions by authoritarian regimes (e.g., China) were never an issue during the protests, while expressions of sympathy for Victor Orbán and Vladimir Putin were in no way a rarity (Weiß, 2021, pp. 187–188).

At the end of the day, the appeal of democracy-endangering conspiracy myths has manifold underpinnings. Besides the psychological functions they seem to serve for people, there are elective affinities between the conspiracy mentality, superstition, and esotericism because they all share a unifying denominator: people with such inclinations believe that their fortunes reside in the hands of external forces over which they have no control. Our analyses reveal that superstition is linked to hostility toward minorities and an acceptance of violence. It is not entirely surprising, then, that this milieu is not shy about marching alongside violence-prone neo-Nazis. On the other hand, the nexus between religion and the conspiracy mentality is more complex and ambivalent. Or, to put it more pointedly, religiosity does not make people more susceptible to conspiracy myths, but neither does it immunize people against the conspiracy mentality. Religion, however, can also become an ally of the conspiracy mentality if people tend toward religious bigotry or a literalist interpretation of their religion (H2). These disturbing trends can be observed within all religious communities, albeit at different levels. If religious communities seek to resist authoritarian temptations, they are well advised to discourage notions of a punitive God. The claim that the Covid-19 pandemic is a divine penalty is pure cynicism—and prayers alone will certainly not protect people without access to vaccinations.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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