The Role of Religions and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes

cogitatio

Edited by Oliver Hidalgo and Alexander Yendell

Table of Contents

Editorial

The Role of Religions and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes

Oliver Fernando Hidalgo [1,]* and Alexander Yendell [2]

[1] Department of Politics, University of Münster, Germany
[2] Research Institute Social Cohesion, Leipzig University, Germany

* Corresponding author (hidalgoo@uni-muenster.de)

Abstract

This thematic issue asks about the role of religions and religious actors and conspiracy theories/theorists in democratic and authoritarian regimes in general. Special attention is given to the current Covid-19 pandemic, since the relevant state of emergency obviously endorses the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories and makes the comparison with religions necessary. In this respect, the challenges religious prejudices and conspiracy myths imply could even shed light on the problem of whether democracy or authoritarianism is the best regime to fight the Coronavirus successfully. The articles at hand answer these issues from interdisciplinary areas, particularly from political science, sociology, social psychology, and history.

Issue

This editorial is part of the issue "The Role of Religions and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes" edited by Oliver Hidalgo (University of Münster) and Alexander Yendell (Leipzig University).

1. Introduction

According to a famous thesis by Popper (1945/2011), modern conspiracy theories are primarily the result of secular processes and thus show a couple of structural analogies to religious superstition. In this vein, conspiracy theories can be seen both as (a) surrogate religions dealing with challenges similar to epistemic contingency, ambiguity (in)tolerance, or social insecurity, and (b) antagonists to rather differentiated religious beliefs and attitudes. Moreover, this kind of ambivalence suggests that religious faith and conspiracy theories are sometimes mutually exclusive but can also reinforce each other under certain conditions, particularly during political, social, or healthcare crises, when trust in representatives and elites is fundamentally shattered.

This raises questions about the meaning of both phenomena in contemporary democratic and authoritarian societies: Do religions and conspiracy theories share an ideological character which might function as a resource for complexity reduction, intellectual orientation, and therefore moral authority and normative legitimacy in any political system? Or do they tend either to a democratic or authoritarian logic of politics? How does each of them flourish and spread under the conditions of democracy, autocracy or of hybrids combining autocratic features with democratic ones? And what people and actors are supporting religious and conspiracy narratives for which strategic and political purposes? Are there certain democratic and authoritarian regimes based upon religious or conspiracy myths themselves? What is the relationship between certain forms of religiosity and the propensity for conspiracy theories? What is the connection between conspiracy narratives and the rejection of democratic principles such as religious freedom, anti-discrimination and freedom of expression? Finally,

how do democratic states deal with the contradiction of guaranteeing freedom of expression on the one hand and setting limits to the threat to democracy posed by conspiracy theories on the other?

This thematic issue of *Politics and Governance* asks about the role of religions/religious actors and conspiracy theories/theorists in democratic and authoritarian regimes in general. However, special attention is given to the current Covid-19 pandemic, since the relevant state of emergency obviously endorses the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories and makes the comparison with religions necessary. In this respect, the challenges religious prejudices and conspiracy myths imply could even shed light on the problem of whether democracy or authoritarianism is the best regime to fight the Coronavirus successfully.

2. Overview of Contributions

The articles at hand answer the questions we raised from interdisciplinary areas, particularly from political science, sociology, social psychology, and history.

In this vein, the article by Christoph (2022) focuses on the history of ideas as well as on intellectual history in order to discuss how conspiracism was able to incorporate different anti-modernistic ideas in the past and also to effectively delegitimize entire political systems in the present. Therefore, it is identified as a serious threat to democracy as such.

Hidalgo (2022) then theorizes and conceptualizes the ambivalent role of religions and conspiracy theories in modern democracies. Moreover, the author elaborates on the similar risks and functions of religions and conspiracy theories for the political community, without neglecting the fact that, under secular conditions, the spread of conspiracy narratives might outweigh that of religious messages in the long run.

Schlipphak et al. (2022) argue based on quantitative surveys that the communication of governmental actors exerts a strong moderating influence on the link leading from conspiracy theory beliefs to political attitudes. The authors suppose that the belief in conspiracy theories should make citizens more likely to distrust their government—and the political system in general—in contexts where these conspiracy theories are not shared or at least publicly represented by governmental actors.

In another quantitative article, Ladini and Vezzoni (2022) analyze the relationship between religiosity and vaccine hesitancy by highlighting the belief in the immanent presence of the divine in everyday life, which makes some people more prone to justify health conditions with a divine agency.

Against the concept of authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950), Pickel et al. (2022) discuss the Covid-19 pandemic as a situation leading to an increased susceptibility to conspiracy myths. Proceeding from a theory-based correlation between superstition, esotericism, and belief in conspiracy myths, they show that

a conspiracy mentality is one of the key components of authoritarian character dispositions, with significant effects on anti-semitic resentment, hostility toward out-groups, the formation of anti-democratic orientations, and an increased propensity to violence.

Czech (2022) focuses on conspiracy thinking and its links with attitudes toward religion and democracy in Poland. Based on Polish survey data the author finds out that conspiracy thinking does not necessarily lead to the support of anti-democratic attitudes.

Farkhari et al.(2022) are interested in indicators that influence conspiracy mentality. Based on survey data from Germany and Poland they find negative predictions by general interpersonal trust, positive predictions by right-wing authoritarianism, and non-significant findings regarding religiosity. The authors find cross-country differences and conclude that the political and religious culture may not only affect the general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories but also shape who is rather inclined to believe in conspiracy theories.

Galego (2022) reconstructs the controversy concerning the anti-homophobia bill in Brazil in the context of conspiracies and conflicts between the constitution and the bible. He concludes that policy and political discourses oscillate between the constitution and the bible creating constraints and opportunities to block the LGBTQ bill approval in the Brazilian congress.

Finally, in another quantitative article, Yendell and Herbert (2022) use data from an online UK survey and ask—once again against the concept of authoritarianism (Adorno et al., 1950)—to what extent belief in conspiracy theories is associated with xenophobic, racist, and anti-democratic attitudes, what aspects of religiosity in combination with other factors play a role in conspiracy beliefs, and which communicative and interpretative practices are associated with belief in conspiracy ideologies.

To sum up, the different theoretical and empirical approaches as well as the various case and country studies are not only able to reveal the complex and ambivalent role of conspiracy theories in democratic and authoritarian regimes, but also to confirm the remarkable similarities and analogies between conspiracy myths and religions. Without overestimating conspiracy mentality as a genuinely or exclusively religious phenomenon itself, our thematic issue proves that (a particular kind of) religiosity is indeed a very relevant factor that can massively favour belief in conspiracy theories under certain circumstances but can also prevent it under alternative conditions. Although Pickel et al. (2022) strictly refute the objection that adherents of conspiracy myths could be characterized as authentic democrats who are merely dissatisfied with the current state of democracy, Hidalgo's (2022) article suggests, at least theoretically, that such a position becomes available beyond a liberal conception of democracy and by starting from a concept of radical democracy. In this respect, a too simple equation that associates

(the political accommodation of) religion with democracy and conspiracy belief exclusively with authoritarian political ideas does not add up.

On the other hand, one should not underestimate the radicalization dynamics that can accompany conspiracy ideologies, even when they are supposedly taking place under the guise of democracy. Democracy is not a self-perpetuating process, and it is a constant challenge for democracies to turn the irrational and emotional into the rational and factual so that democracies and societies are not disintegrated.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Adorno, T., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, R. N. (1950). *The authoritarian personality*. Harper & Row.

Christoph, S. (2022). On conspiracy thinking: Conspiracist ideology as a modern phenomenon. *Politics and Governance*, *10*(4), 135–145.

Czech, F. (2022). Links Between Conspiracy Thinking and Attitudes Toward Democracy and Religion: Survey Data From Poland. *Politics and Governance*, *10*(4), 192–202.

Farkhari, F., Schlipphak, B., & Back, M. D. (2022). Individual-level predictors of conspiracy mentality in Germany and Poland. *Politics and Governance*, *10*(4), 203–215.

Galego, D. (2022). The anti-homophobia bill (PLC 122) in Brazil: Conspiracies and conflicts between the constitution and the bible. *Politics and Governance*, *10*(4), 216–228.

Hidalgo, O. F. (2022). Religions and conspiracy theories as the authoritarian "other" of democracy? *Politics and Governance*, *10*(4), 146–156.

Ladini, R., & Vezzoni, C. (2022). When believing in divine immanence explains vaccine hesitancy: A matter of conspiracy beliefs? *Politics and Governance*, *10*(4), 168–176.

Pickel, G., Öztürk, C., Schneider, V., Pickel, S., & Decker, O. (2022). Covid-19-Related Conspiracy Myths, Beliefs, and Democracy-Endangering Consequences. *Politics and Governance*, *10*(4), 177–191.

Popper, K. (2011). *The open society and its enemies* (4th ed.). Routledge. (Original work published in 1945)

Schlipphak, B., Isani, M., & Back, M. D. (2022). Conspiracy theory beliefs and political trust: The moderating role of political communication. *Politics and Governance*, *10*(4), 157–167.

Yendell, A., & Herbert, D. (2022). Religion, conspiracy thinking, and the rejection of democracy: Evidence from the UK. *Politics and Governance*, *10*(4), 229–242.

About the Authors

Oliver Fernando Hidalgo is a senior lecturer at the Department of Politics of the University of Münster and an adjunct professor of political science at the University of Regensburg. From 2015 until 2017, and during the winter term 2022–2023, he has been a visiting professor of political theory at Münster. His main research topics are the history of political thought, democratic theory, politics and religion, and international political theory.

Alexander Yendell (PhD) is a sociologist at the Research Institute Social Cohesion in Leipzig. He is spokesperson for the Sociology of Religion section of the German Sociological Association and a board member of the Centre for the Research on Right-Wing-Extremism and Democracy at Leipzig University. Yendell currently is head of the research projects Anti-Muslim Racism, Anti-Black Racism and Antiziganism in the Institutional Action of Public Authorities and Combating and Preventing Racism in Public Authorities and Sports Associations. His research focuses on right-wing extremism, political protest, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia.

Article

On Conspiracy Thinking: Conspiracist Ideology as a Modern Phenomenon

Stefan Christoph

Department of Political Science, University of Regensburg, Germany; regensburg@stefan-christoph.de

Abstract
Conspiracism is a well-known topos in the history of humankind. Cassius Dio wrote about it as did anti-Judaic authors in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, from the dawn of modernity until today, we have faced the rise of a new phenomenon. Pretty much on the eve of the French Revolution, conspiracists began to tell anti-Catholic and anti-masonic narratives down to the last detail. Jews, later on, became a recurring foe in those anti-modernist narratives. Conspiracism managed successfully to incorporate other forms of anti-modernism to form a fairly new form of thinking that I call "conspiracist ideology." While Enlightenment was the setting in which this amalgamation could take place, conspiracist ideology and its intellectual roots were characterized by a deep rejection of enlightenment thinking. The dialectical nature of conspiracist ideology is what makes it interesting from a historical perspective, in particular for the history of ideas.

Keywords
anti-modernism; conspiracism; conspiracy thinking; Enlightenment; history of ideas; intellectual history

1. Prologue: 300,000 Years of Humankind, 300,000 Years of Conspiracies?

For obvious reasons we cannot tell if our common ancestors some ten or even a hundred thousand years ago did think of conspiracies as we do nowadays: as being thrilling, fascinating, but also wicked and evil. Even more, we do not know if they were pondering conspiracies at all. Barely do we know about the prehistory of ideas—mainly because prehistoric events have not been written down and prehistoric eyewitnesses are hard to get hold of nowadays.

We can assume that a conceptualization of conspiracies necessarily would not exist before (complex) societies emerged. A prehistoric Homo Sapiens has no use in thinking some hyenas or a pack of mammoths would conspire against them since those beasts have no moral compass which can be corrupted or which could be addressed. Even contact with other sapiens only happened occasionally in the early times of hunter-gatherers. That two or more of them would conspire to commit some evil deeds was quite unlikely at that time because we can see ingroup–outgroup mecha-

nisms growing together with the complexity of society (Smaldino, 2019, pp. 111–112). Even if so, they would hardly reach a scale on which they would become relevant in the terms of political science. So was this maybe the "golden age" of humankind, before conspiracies? When Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality Among Men*, he did not mention "conspiracies" as a word (Rousseau, 1754/1913). Though, he might well have meant that—respectively their absence—when describing the human "state of nature," a state in which everything happens in a "uniform manner" and therefore the human has neither a need for conspiracy nor conspiracism.

Fast forward to the Greek Dark Ages. We find complex societies as well as a commonly understandable language. However, we do not know of any written sources from that time, but we are acquainted with stories that must already have had an oral tradition and which were written down later, like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or the genealogy of gods in Hesiod's *Theogony*. "The belief in the Homeric gods whose conspiracies explain the history of the Trojan War is gone," Sir Karl Popper wrote (Popper, 1945/2011, p. 306). Reading the archaic Greek

stories can give us the impression that advanced civilizations in ancient times had a concept of conspiracy and that this was so common, they even used it for literary purposes. In fact, and even though this may sound commonplace, the stories of the ancient gods and demigods can be read as a projection of the political and cultural history then and before. The topic of conspiracies has been a well-known narrative in political and literary history—fiction and non-fiction—since then, be it the mythological stories of the Trojan War, the actual crime behind Cicero's Catiline Orations, but also the bogus and anti-Jewish narrative of well poisoning in the European Middle Ages. They all show us that humankind has had a concept of conspiracy for at least some thousand years.

Without going deep into detail, conspiracies, in the past and today, can be characterized as (a) deeds targeted to achieve some goal (b) two or more conspirators have agreed to commit (c) clandestinely. This can be seen as a most minimalistic characterization of what a conspiracy is and most scholars of conspiracism could agree on that definition (e.g., Aaronovitch, 2009, pp. 4–5; Anton, 2011, p. 30; Barkun, 2003, p. 3; Douglas et al., 2017, p. 538; Giry & Tika, 2020, pp. 113–114; Goodnight & Poulakos, 1981, p. 299; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014, p. 25; Lutter, 2001, p. 18; Pfahl-Traughber, 2002, p. 31). As our subject will not be a phenomenology of conspiracies but an account of conspiracy thinking, this working definition will suffice. Real conspiracies are most likely "banal" and a byproduct of "institutional disorganization" (Jane & Fleming, 2014, p. 28), other than the subjects told in what I will call "conspiracist ideology" from this point on.

This article is meant to work out the history of ideas of this modern form of conspiracy thinking. Conspiracist ideology, in this sense, is a truly modern phenomenon that did not emerge until the eve of the French Revolution, the time of rationalism and early modernism. Conspiracist ideology borrows the concept of conspiracy and settles it into this fairly new intellectual environment. In the following, I will depict the concept of conspiracist ideology from a systemic point of view, as a form of thinking that was paralleled by more general developments in the modern history of ideas (Section 2). This attempt is novel insofar as most of the comprehensive literature on conspiracy thinking is leaning towards focusing on either a systematic approach to conspiracy thinking or a contextualized one. While both approaches have advantages depending on the research design, blending diachronic and synchronic perspectives might give us a deeper understanding of how conspiracy thinking has worked and still works today. Hence, in Section 3, I will point out that conspiracist ideology has presented and still does present itself in different narratives that have roots in this common form of thinking that consists of the merging of ideology with conspiracy thinking. Section 4 gives an outlook on the problems and threats this form of thinking poses, mostly to liberal democracies as they tend to be most vulnerable to the mechanisms of conspiracist ideology.

2. The Eve of the French Revolution; Or to Think Like a Conspiracist

In 1797 French Jesuit Augustin Barruel published his first book in a series on the history of Jacobinism. Fifteen of its eighteen subheadings mention "conspiracy" or a similar term. The "anti-Christ" conspiracy (Barruel, 1797/1800, p. 17) that had been spread all over Europe (pp. 351–353) was, he tells us, plotted by Voltaire, king Frederick of Prussia, and the Encyclopédistes d'Alembert and Diderot (pp. 18–19). Abbé Barruel's ex-post explanation of the French Revolution and the events leading to it was not actually a novelty at that time. Preceding Barruel, for example in Germany, a group of anti-revolutionaries published conspiracy literature from the mid-1780s on. Barruel himself was not only featured by German anti-revolutionaries but also by the "father of British conservatism," Edmund Burke, as Seidler (2016, pp. 137–140) points out. In 1698, almost a hundred years before Barruel, a London leaflet warned against a freemason conspiracy (Winter, 1698).

The 18th century in Middle Europe was marked by a decline in social stratification, scientific advance, the industrialization of economy, and, not least, the "de-sacralization" (Hausberger & Lehners, 2011, p. 12) or "disenchantment" (Weber, 1917/2004, p. 12) of the world. The French Revolution was not the cause of modernization and modernism in Europe but the consequence of changes in the history of ideas in this *siècle des Lumières* that had begun some decades or even over a century before.

Conspiracist ideology, I would argue, is not only by its content and history tied to rationalism and the period of enlightenment but, even more closely, by its structure. Conspiracist ideology is not merely a "form of narration" (*Erzählform* as Seidler, 2016, p. 137, says for the 18th century "conspiracy theories"), but can be characterized as a "form of thinking" (*Denkform*) as described analogously by Ernst Cassirer for the "myth" (Cassirer, 1924/2010, pp. 35–91). What characterizes conspiracist ideology may—for better handling and better understanding—be categorized into four dimensions, following Parsons' (1956, p. 23) AGIL paradigm.

2.1. Logical-Epistemological Dimension: Adaption—Structures Behavior and/or Reasoning

Empirical research from the past years onwards shows that the epistemic dimension has a great influence on the formation of and belief in conspiracism. In their comprehensive paper, Lamberty and Imhoff (2021, p. 204) summarize these phenomena under the keyword "epistemic motives." I think—from a history of ideas point of view rather than an empirical one—this dimension is worth further differentiation as I will do in this subsection and the following.

First and foremost, conspiracist ideology is closely tied to the emergence of the Enlightenment. When the

period of enlightenment was characterized by the dispute between rationalists and empiricists, conspiracist ideology took the stance of an anti-thesis to empiricism. Early rationalism was characterized by the method of deduction, in other words: deducing the explanation of phenomena through universal principles and reason. While, to a certain extent, this is a normal and even quite useful instrument, conspiracist ideology is quite radical at this point. Nevertheless, I would not mention Augustin Barruel side-by-side with renowned rationalists like René Descartes or Baruch de Spinoza. While the latter were part of an ongoing epistemological debate, conspiracist ideologists to some extent disregarded empirical learning. Phenomena may only be interpreted in a certain, default way. This "a-priori-ism" (Jane & Fleming, 2014, p. 36) or "motivated reasoning" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 12) is the first attribute by which conspiracist ideologies' *Denkform* may be characterized.

Following this radically deductive way of thinking, conspiracists' "end-oriented belief…is willing to contort the available evidence to support a preferred conclusion" (Collins, 2012, p. 77). They tend to accept poor evidence if it only supports their aprioristic assumptions. Like Barruel, early proponents of conspiracist ideology gave little or no evidence for their allegations. In his three books on the history of Jacobinism, Barruel describes his alleged conspiracy down to the last detail. He "proves" it only by hermeneutic interpretations and by syllogisms but not by empirical standards. Later conspiracists would heighten the bar a little over ground-level but would still be more than willing to accept dubious sources. Even more, conspiracists tend to accept evidence that contradicts official statements more than accepting "mainstream" evidence, as studies, for example, on the 9/11 conspiracism show (Wood & Douglas, 2013, p. 8).

On the other hand, conspiracists tend to a form of thinking I will call "congruency thinking." They tend to scrutinize anomalies and inconsistencies in explanations of certain events and dramatically overrate their influence. While conspiracists do not accept pure chance as an explanation for those anomalies, they tend to build up highly complex, "hyper-rational" (Groh, 1996, p. 15) hypotheses of pure syllogisms. In a de-sacralized or disenchanted world, there must be no teleological blank space. But conspiracists can fill it: As every phenomenon must happen for some reason, a mechanistic worldview could evolve that demands some kind of reason for any phenomenon in a disenchanted world. Or as Max Weber put it in his 1917 *Science as a Vocation*:

> Thus the growing process of intellectualization and rationalization does *not* imply a growing understanding of the conditions under which we live. It means something quite different. It is the knowledge or the conviction that if *only we wished* to understand them we *could* do so at any time. It means that in principle, then, we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that, on the contrary, we can in principle

> *control everything by means of calculation*. That in turn means the disenchantment of the world. (Weber, 1917/2004, pp. 12–13)

As Lamberty and Imhof, Douglas et al. (2019) combine this dimension of conspiracism under the umbrella term "epistemic motives." While I tend to differentiate this dimension further as I did here, nevertheless, Douglas et al. (2019, pp. 7–8) enumerate quite important effects of this dimension like "perceiv[ing] patterns in randomness," "cognitive closure," or the Linda problem (conjunction bias).

2.2. Perceptive-Epistemological Dimension: Goal-Attainment—Structures Personal Motives

Conspiracist ideology uses a certain perception of the alleged conspiracies and conspirators. Abstract phenomena that are regarded by them as problematic—like, e.g., enlightenment philosophy, democratization, the decline of religiosity, or the emergence of capitalism—are being personalized into certain groups of people—sophists, politicians, atheists, and economists (Barruel, 1801, p. 268)—or even specific individuals—Voltaire, Frederick of Prussia, d'Alembert, and Diderot. This personalization often goes hand in hand with a projection of one's own hidden motives into the alleged conspirators—like power, wealth, or glory. In this case, the motives of the conspirators often become more exaggerated than the projected motives had been.

When a certain group of people profit (or may profit) from the alleged conspiracy, they are blamed as the conspirators. In the world view of conspiracist ideology, a conspiracy suspect cannot act morally or ethically but is limited to decisions that augment their wealth or power. Sometimes, alleged conspirators do not even show interest in money or might, but act out of pure evil: "They often behave more like villains in old comic books or movie series, being evil for evil's sake" (Collins, 2012, p. 74).

Even if that were true—which it obviously is not—large-scale conspiracies would necessarily involve huge resources and a great number of people to be involved. By realistic standards of logistics, human resources, or sometimes even the laws of physics, many alleged conspiracies would not be able actually to happen. Conspiracist ideology does not meet general standards of plausibility. But conspiracists, for example, tend to underestimate systematically the required size of a conspiracy, e.g., with the moon landing hoax theory or 9/11 conspiracism. Conspiracist ideologists also often underestimate the logistic accounts an alleged conspiracy would need; or overestimate the power of the alleged conspirators. Despite the mere omnipotence of the conspirators, conspiracists are always able to find some weak spots in the conspiracy. Groh (1996, p. 13) describes this as a kind of "conspiracist paradox," where conspirators are more competent than "common mortals" but have weak spots to be exploited.

Conspiracist ideology tends to totalize its explanation of phenomena as it lacks ambiguity tolerance. Stretching the arc to our first observation, conspiracist ideology's a-priori-ism renders it difficult to learn from new information. This kind of "ideological learning" (Miller, 1986, p. 434) instead "splits" new problem contexts. When conspiracist ideology fails to learn from new information, this information instead is incorporated into the wider framework of the existing ideology and thus, this ideology becomes immunized. Conspiracist ideologists render information disproving their arguments as an assault on their own worldview. Disagreement and debunking thus are interpreted as proof of the truth of their own conspiracist ideology.

2.3. Socio-Psychological Dimension: Integration—Structures Interaction With Society

The first conspiracist ideologists showed no intention to take part in the enlightenment debate between rationalists and empiricists that we saw some paragraphs before. They were rather disapproving of all those new and modern forms of thinking. Like with the first conspiracists, later conspiracist ideology always formed a critique on modernization one way or the other. Anti-masonic conspiracist ideology's main stance from the beginning was a strong rejection of world views perceived as being modern. For example, Barruel's (1801, p. 268) enemies of Catholicism were sophists, politicians, atheists, and economists. Those can be read as signifiers for four properties of modernization: (a) modern enlightenment philosophy, (b) democratization and/or revolution, (c) the decline of religious dogma, and (d) early capitalism. Later, conspiracist ideologies became more pronounced regarding their enmity toward modernism. Conspirators have been accused of capitalism as well as communism (Benz, 2007, p. 106; Groh, 1992, p. 305), been accounted for "Marxism, Darwinism, liberalism, individualism, atheism as well as, in recent times, the emancipation of women, sexualization and abortion, in a nutshell, everything that promotes the dissolution of traditional relations and the decay of morals" (Hagemeister, 2004, p. 90). Conspiracist ideology, from a psychological point of view, therefore is able to dissolve dissonant perceptions of reality (Groh, 1992, p. 18). They can, superficially, answer the "unanswered questions"—according to Brotherton (2016, p. 8), the very essence of conspiracy thinking. As recent research in the field of psychology shows, psychological factors also play a major role in the belief in conspiracism (e.g., Lamberty & Imhoff, 2021). Lamberty and Imhoff (2021, p. 204) also show that individual experience of deprivation plays a minor role in comparison to a perceived political deprivation which is congruent to categorizing critique in modernization into the socio-psychological dimension of conspiracist ideology.

As we learned before, conspiracy thinking as a political phenomenon emerged together—or in reaction to—the occurrence of early complex societies. Not only because a certain amount of civilization is needed to conceptualize the phenomenon of conspiracies, but also because conspiracy thinking can be a reaction to the alienation humans experience. This is even more true in modern civilization than it was in older ones. In the situation of an ever more complex world in modern times, conspiracist ideology can give simple answers. As old religious, as well as political and scientific, dogmata were questioned, modernity since the period of enlightenment has become more complex. So it is not that big a surprise that the first Conspiracist ideologists had been clergymen as well as conservative statesmen. But we must not be surprised either, that the stance on modernism and the instrument for the reduction of complexity that conspiracist ideology gives us was soon to be expanded to nearly every other area of human existence.

Those simple answers call for simple solutions, so complex phenomena are reduced to monocausal or relatively simple mechanisms of problem-solving by conspiracists. This mechanism leads to a kind of self-empowerment of conspiracists which makes conspiracist ideology quite attractive from a socio-psychological perspective. Of course, as the underlying explanations of the world are too monocausal, this only provides pseudo-self-empowerment and conspiracist ideology's offer for problem-solving can only stay a fictitious one. Social psychology research also calls a similar phenomenon—more on social-psychological rather than individual-psychological means—by the name "collective narcissism" as an ingroup–outgroup mechanism (e.g., de Zavala et al., 2009; Marchlewska et al., 2019; van Prooijen, 2018, p. 57). In both ways, this mechanism can fulfill a psychological function for an individual who has experienced alienation in a modern, globalized, and capitalist society.

2.4. Contentual-Ideological Dimension: Latency—Structures the Maintenance of Learned/Acquired Values and Patterns

Most prominently pronounced is this reduction of complexity in the view of history that conspiracist ideology is based on. Conspiracist ideology tells us that global history could be altered merely by the intentional action of some particular actors (Groh, 1996, p. 13), meaning "powerful" actors. Such an intentional view of history, despite playing a major role in historiography for quite a long time, was also contested by enlightenment philosophy. The progress thinking and advocacy for universal human rights that we see, for example with the Marquis de Condorcet (1795), gives any individual agency in the course of history, resulting in quite complex social interaction schemes. Conspiracist ideology's view of history is one of a few powerful actors—in contrast to a modernist view of history, shaped by the many, but interdependent people.

For conspiracist ideology, such evil persons can only be faced with enmity and hostility. In recent literature,

this Manichaeism, dualistic worldview or friend-and-foe-thinking has been described as central to conspiracy thinking (e.g., Groh, 1992, p. 273, 1996, p. 18; Rogalla von Bieberstein, 2002, p. 17). These observations of the mechanisms of ingroup–outgroup bias in conspiracist ideology are rooted in an ideological monism, in which people are no homines duplicates (Durkheim, 1914) comprised of both lower instincts and morality. In the ideological monism of conspiracist ideology, people are confined to either the former or the latter. Dualism and dialectics (as not only Durkheim shows in his concept of homo duplex, but as most notoriously Descartes elaborated earlier in his mind–matter dualism) are concepts that have been rediscovered by enlightenment and modern philosophy. The ideological monism of conspiracist ideology is in fact a tendency to reject recognizing that actors can be driven by more than only one interest at a time; that they are able to subordinate their interest in, e.g., economic, political, or personal power to their moral compass.

In the end, conspiracist ideology works with broad-brush images of its enemies. This allows an openness for adopting all kinds of prejudices in general and in specific situations, re-occurring enemies more in-depth. The work of early protagonists of conspiracist ideology was already full of stereotypes, slurs, and even hatred against certain groups of the population, such as Freemasons, Jews, Jesuits, and many more. Some recent sociological and psychological research (Bartoschek, 2017; Imhoff, 2015, pp. 136–137; Pickel et al., 2020, p. 105) shows clear correlations between prejudicial attitudes and conspiracism—while there seem to be different findings if those correlations are distinctive for every kind of prejudice (Frei & Nachtwey, 2022, p. 15).

While we see in those topoi that conspiracist ideology offers a form of thinking which is significantly different and opposed to Enlightenment thinking, the emergence of Enlightenment philosophy may have also been a positive influence on the development of conspiracist ideology. One may find it ironic that the scientific approach to the world could lead to a most unscientific explanation pattern. Scholars of the history of ideas would call it the "dialectic of Enlightenment" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1969) rather than "irony."

The previous approximation to the phenomenon gives us an impression of the dialectical character of conspiracist ideology. We see not only that it is a phenomenon that de facto emerged in the antecedence of Enlightenment and the French Revolution, but we see why it fits well into this dispute of world views beginning back then but characterizing modernity until today.

3. One, Two, Three Many Conspiracist Ideologies?

While the last section tried to approximate the common characteristics of conspiracist ideology as a form of thinking shares, there are indisputably different narratives told under the umbrella of conspiracist ideology. Thus,

we are facing the question: Is there a conspiracist ideology or are there many conspiracist ideologies?

3.1. A Papal Conspiracy

We can find predecessors of early modern conspiracist ideology in early modern England, for instance, from the 1534 Act of Supremacy that effectively emancipated the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church and when Roman Catholics in England were eyed suspiciously as they were said to be allied with the English monarch as well as the pope. Not exactly helpful regarding the public image of Roman Catholicism in England was the fact that Pope Pius IV in 1570 dispensed all Roman Catholics from their obedience to the English monarch. In the ongoing two centuries, not only real events like the Gunpowder Plot or Jacobite claims to the throne were attributed to Roman Catholics but also tragic—but supposedly unrelated—ones like the 1666 Great Fire of London. Allegations culminated in anti-Catholic legislation like the 1698 Popery Act in which priesthood of Roman Catholicism was effectively forbidden in England.

In fact, combatting Roman Catholicism was not a stance of anti-modernism. On the contrary, the events following the English Reformation led to enormous steps in modernization in early modern England. But within the 18th and 19th centuries, anti-Catholicism and conspiracy theories merged into what we came to know as conspiracist ideology. Most prominently, the Jesuit order had been accused of conspiracy, no longer only in England but also in Catholic countries. After the kings of Portugal, France, and Spain had forbidden the Jesuit order in their territories—after at least partly faked allegations—in 1773 pope Clement XIV officially dissolved the Jesuits.

Anti-Catholicism and even anti-Catholic conspiracist ideology is present at least up until the 20th century. As recently as 1960, then-Democratic nominee John F. Kennedy felt obliged to publicly announce that no "Catholic prelate would tell the President—should he be Catholic—how to act," that he would not "accept instructions on public policy from the pope" and that he was "not the Catholic candidate for president…[but] the Democratic Party's candidate for president who happens also to be a Catholic."

18th-century France on the other hand was entangled in an intra-Catholic dispute between Jansenists (more or less "Catholic Enlighteners") and traditionalist Catholics like the Jesuit order. Other then-Catholic countries, like Bavaria, had been a site of this dispute as well. Jansenists were mixed together with rationalists and Encyclopedists like Diderot and D'Alembert (Graßl, 1968, pp. 3, 18).

As we see, there is an anti-Catholic and anti-Jesuit line of thought that, nevertheless, brings us to the Catholic priest and Jesuit Augustin Barruel. What at first glance seems improbable, is closely related to the way conspiracist ideology works in a sense of the history of ideas. Modern conspiracy thinking tends to absorb

ideologies and merge them with its own form of thinking. Both together alloy to the phenomenon of conspiracist ideology.

3.2. Freemasons and Jews

A most prominent amalgamation of this kind is that between anti-Masonism (and later on antisemitism) and conspiracy thinking that is still predominant in conspiracist ideology today.

One of the first anti-masonic leaflets (de Hoyos & Brent Morris, 2010, p. 14) dates back to 1698 and is titled *To All Godly People, in the Citie of London*. It tells us about the:

> Mischiefs and Evils practiced in the sight of GOD [sic] by those called Freed Masons….For this devllish [sic] Sect of men are Meeters [sic] in secret which swear against all without their Following. They are the Anti Christ which was to come leading Men from Fear of GOD [sic]. (Winter, 1698)

Like in England, anti-masonic conspiracism spread over Germany in the pre-revolutionary era; the most important work of 18th-century conspiracism being the 1786 *Enthüllung des Systems der Weltbürger-Republik* (*Revealing the System of the Cosmopolitan Republic*) by Ernst August Anton Göchhausen that mixed Freemasons, Illuminati, and Jesuits alike (Pfahl-Traughber, 1993, pp. 13–14).

Cosmopolitism can be read as a *chiffre* and a signifier for modernization in opposition to a kind of natural order. More than that, the author of the 1786 pamphlet opens a dichotomy between the citizen and cosmopolitan that already resembles Carl Schmitts' later friend-and-foe dichotomy (Albrecht, 2011, pp. 97–99). In this early example, we can see how conspiracy thinking and anti-masonic literature slowly amalgamate into conspiracist ideology, showing the first of its main components like Manichaeism and a critique on modernization.

Göchhausen (1786) also makes a stance on the secrecy of masonry and its rites. Being secret of course makes masonry quite a good vessel for projections of all sorts. Later on, in the 19th century, masonry was seen as "contrary to the open spirit of Christianity" (Wallach, 1873, p. 2), as seeking "opportunity to do evil" (Ward, 1828, p. 4) and as promoting socialism or democracy (Rogalla von Bieberstein, 2002, p. 25).

But, not even ten years after Göchhausen's work, a Blackfriar preacher was the first to (publicly) make a connection between Freemasons and Jews (Rogalla von Bieberstein, 2002, pp. 19–20). Freemasons and Jews have, from then on, been the most prominent victims of conspiracists. Over the long 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, those remained the main narratives of conspiracist ideology, even though they have been connected, equated, or replaced by democrats, socialists, or other signifiers of modernity (Pfahl-Traughber, 1993,

p. 18; Rogalla von Bieberstein, 2002, pp. 25, 27). Or as Hofstadter (1964, p. 79) put it in his renowned essay *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*: "One meets here again the same frame of mind, but a different villain.''

Before going to Richard Hofstadter's 1960s and the post-WWII era, allow me to take two further stances on the historical process of amalgamation of conspiracist ideology in the 19th century that should have had long-lasting consequences.

There is an ongoing debate about whether modern antisemitism is a completely new phenomenon or just an evolution of old anti-Judaism (Gräfe, 2016, pp. 83–89; Salzborn, 2014, pp. 12–15). We can find that, during the 18th and 19th centuries, amid the progress of the Enlightenment, science developed new hypotheses which gained more social impact than ever before. During that time, old anti-Judaic prejudices were able to establish a connection to the then-up-to-date biological and anthropological research. Enlightenment thinking and Enlightenment's scientific approach paved the way for modern, biologistic, and essentialist racism (though Enlightenment philosophy also paved the ground for universal human rights and Fraternité). So, Jew-targeted hatred became disenchanted in the Age of Enlightenment: A mash-up of Jew-targeted hatred and essentialist racism led to modern antisemitism (Vartija, 2020). Even more, the first elements of anti-modernist (Salzborn, 2014, p. 13) and anti-emancipatory (Wyrwa, 2019, pp. 25–26) ideology were incorporated into modern antisemitism quite early. Those facts lay the foundation for a long-lasting relationship between modern antisemitism and conspiracy thinking as the most prominent form of conspiracist ideology.

The most influential work of this strain of conspiracist ideology is the so-called *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a fictitious work about an alleged congress of Jewish leaders (Hagemeister, 2020, p. 139). The work has been used for antisemitic propaganda from Czarist Russia and the German NS Regime until today. It has also been used to delegitimize ideas of democracy and liberalism since. From a history of ideas perspective, the *Protocols* is quite a phenomenal object of study. On the one hand, it contains text parts that date as far back as the 1840s to Alexandre Dumas, which actually propagated democracy and liberalism instead of opposing them.

On the other hand, the text has quite an astonishing history of impact. The *Protocols* has been published and propagated by counter-revolutionaries and Nazi writers, but also most prominently by Henry Ford and Gamal Abdel Nasser. As early as the 1920s it already had been debunked as fake. But this did not do any harm to the antisemites' fascination for the work. The debunking of the *Protocols* even played its very own role in the totalization of 20th-century antisemitism when Adolf Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*: "They are supposed to be based on "forgery," the *Frankfurter Zeitung* keeps moaning and screaming to the world every week; the best proof that they are genuine" (Hartmann et al., 2016, p. 325).

Contemporary Islamism also still refers to the *Protocols*, e.g., when the founding charter of Hamas reads:

> The Zionist plan is limitless. After Palestine, the Zionists aspire to expand from the Nile to the Euphrates. When they will have digested the region they overtook, they will aspire to further expansion, and so on. Their plan is embodied in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and their present conduct is the best proof of what we are saying. (Islamic Resistance Movement, 1988)

Interesting from the point of view of the history of ideas is the re-enchantment of *Protocols*-based antisemitism by Hamas and other Islamic radicals. Here, modern antisemitic conspiracist ideology from the *Protocols* (re)amalgamates with radical Islamistic Jew-hatred.

3.3. UFOs, Aliens, and Conspirituality

Another line of continuity is quite notable: The *Protocols* also lead into narratives of conspiracist ideology that are not, at least at first glance, antisemitic or Jew-related. British conspiracist ideologist David Icke writes:

> I don't accept that the *Protocols* are "Jewish" in the way people have come to understand that term. They are the work of the reptile-Aryans and made to appear "Jewish" so that we lose the plot. (Icke, 1999)

It is Icke who propagates (and popularized) the idea of a conspiracy of shape-shifting reptiloids to govern the Earth. Knowing that one of the reptiloid clans in Icke's narrations is the "Rothschilds," everyone may make up their own mind about his narrations being antisemitic or not. Nevertheless, Icke closes the gap to another amalgamation into conspiracist ideology that happened in the second half of the 20th century.

In fact, Icke was not the first and surely not the last to connect UFO topics and other spiritualistic or holistic thinking to conspiracy narratives. Ward and Voas (2011) coined the keyword "conspirituality" for this amalgamation. They summarized conspirators' narratives from a range, like UFO thinking up to New Age spiritualism under their concept. Even though the idea of linking conspiracy thinking with esotericism and the concept phrase "conspirituality" seem quite appealing, I merely think that the phenomenon Ward and Voss are writing about is not at all new, but only a new amalgamation of a certain ideology into the wider framework of conspiracist ideology. Asprem and Dyrendal (2015, p. 367), when criticizing Ward and Voas' concept, also refer to modern conspiracy thinking's teleological roots in the era of Enlightenment (p. 374). Nevertheless, like conspiracist ideology, modern esotericism finds its roots in Enlightenment (Neugebauer-Wölk et al., 2013). As both forms of thinking share a similar history, they blend quite well. A contemporary form of this amalgamation of conspiracy thinking and spiritualism or esotericism has gained media coverage since 2017: the QAnon movement. QAnon managed to blend most radical conspiracy narratives (like "blood-libel"-narrations, "deep state"-conspiracy thinking) with esotericism (like "secret knowledge"-esotericism, apocalypticism, millennialism; see MacMillen & Rush, 2022). QAnon became a most politically relevant phenomenon when it had the potential to interfere with the 2020 US presidential election and when it did trigger the events on January 6, 2021, the storm on the US Capitol (Yablokov & Chatterje-Doody, 2022, pp. 10–11).

In another most recent account, a form of amalgamation of science denialism and conspiracist ideology gained greater public coverage through the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, this is no truly novel phenomenon, as science denialists—not only climate change deniers but also anti-vaccine and other conspiracists—for years now have crowded conspiracist ideology.

Over the history of conspiracy thinking until today, we see the same form of thinking we already learned to know from Barruel and other early Conspiracist ideologists. But conspiracist ideology by its very own definition passes through an evolutionary process in which new ideologies are amalgamated effectively to become an inseparable part of conspiracist ideology itself. Instead of letting itself be challenged by new challenges, conspiracist ideology incorporates them. This way, conspiracist ideology can match its universal and total claim of an explanatory account to reality.

Answering the question about one or many conspiracist ideologies is therefore futile. Conspiracist ideology, by its very concept, is a form of thinking that can absorb other different ideologies. Hence, conspiracist ideology always works alike, even though in history it represents itself in many different narratives.

4. Are We Seriously in Danger?

In history, conspiracist ideology has sometimes been used to legitimize rule. The German NS regime most definitely used conspiracy narratives to legitimize and stabilize their rule, as did the Soviet dictator Stalin with allegations of a Trotskyist conspiracy within the Great Terror, the "rootless cosmopolitan"-campaign, and the "doctors' plot." Conspiracies have also been blamed for train crashes as well as not fulfilling five-year plans (Aaronovitch, 2009, p. 61). Late-18th-century conspiracists like Barruel and Starck had been apologetic towards the (then-no more-existing) Ancien Régime.

In liberal democracies, however, conspiracist ideology, more than legitimizing regimes, is an instrument of delegitimization. While I tend to agree with Joseph Uscinski that conspiracy thinking can be a warning sign for a political system (Uscinski, 2018, p. 242), other than him, who gives conspiracy thinking some kind of cathartic function or at least makes it a necessary antagonist in

the democratic "war of political ideas" (p. 238), I think democratic societies are most vulnerable to conspiracist ideology. Conspiracist ideology cannot necessarily work as a source of democratic legitimization. This works mostly through three mechanisms inherent in democratic systems:

- Conspiracist ideology operates with prejudices, with an intentional view of history, and an absolute friend-or-foe way of thinking. Those are characteristics of mere authoritarian politics while being adverse to democratic politics. On the other hand, political sociology shows that conspiracism can play a key role in the formation of far-right political attitudes (Schießler et al., 2020, p. 297).
- As conspiracist ideology rejects basic democratic or democratically determined values, it is hard to incorporate into a democratic political system and its public discourse (e.g., Pickel et al., 2020, p. 90).
- As conspiracist ideology limits the problem-solving skills of a system—or vice versa, it proposes ineffective solutions to problems—a political system influenced by conspiracist ideology can gain no legitimacy through solving people's problems, be it a democratic or an authoritarian regime.

Looking into the political history and the history of ideas, one can see how conspiracism managed to incorporate different anti-modernist ideas in the past and also effectively legitimize or delegitimize political systems. This is—and can only be—a brief sketch of the mechanisms by which conspiracist ideology interacts with political institutions and political systems. Nonetheless, it underlines why the study of the history of ideas of conspiracy thinking in general, and conspiracist ideology in particular, is most beneficial for the study of political science.

To democracy, conspiracist ideology actually can pose a serious threat, be it through domestic turmoil and the rise of populism as depicted above, or through the reinforcement of authoritarian regimes that political institutions and systems have to deal with externally. Similar issues may apply to conspiracist ideology's impact on the logic of democracy-building and regime change as those depicted mechanisms may help to immunize authoritarianism and obstruct the emergence of a liberal-democratic civil society.

On the good side, we might be able to take a further step toward the prevention and debunking of conspiracist ideology by looking at its history of ideas and, subsequently, how past generations have dealt or not dealt with this ideology. My intention with this analysis was to go a brief step further into this.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Aaronovitch, D. (2009). *Voodoo histories: The role of conspiracy theory in shaping modern history*. Jonathan Cape.

Albrecht, A. (2011). *Kosmopolitismus: Weltbürgerdiskurse in Literatur, Philosophie und Publizistik um 1800* [Cosmopolitism: Global citizen discourse in literature, philosophy and journalism]. De Gruyter.

Anton, A. (2011). *Unwirkliche Wirklichkeiten. Zur Wissenssoziologie Von Verschwörungstheorien* [Unreal realities. On the sociology of knowledge of conspiracy theories]. Logos.

Asprem, E., & Dyrendal, A. (2015). Conspirituality reconsidered: How surprising and how new is the confluence of spirituality and conspiracy theory? *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *30*(3), 367–382. https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2015.1081339

Barkun, M. (2003). *A culture of conspiracy. Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*. University of California Press.

Barruel, A. (1800). *Denkwürdigkeiten zur Geschichte des Jakobinismus vom Abbé Barruel, Erster Theil* [Memorabilia on the history of Jacobinism by the Abbé Barruel, Part I]. Peter Waldeck. (Original work published 1797)

Barruel, A. (1801). *Historie du Clergé pendant la Revolution Française, Tome premier* [History of the clergy during the French Revolution, Part I]. Chez les Libraires & Marchands de Nouveautes.

Bartoschek, S. (2017). *Bekanntheit von und Zustimmung zu Verschwörungstheorien—Eine empirische Grundlagenarbeit* [Prominence and approval of conspiracy theories—An empirical basic work]. JMB.

Benz, W. (2007). *Die Protokolle der Weisen von Zion. Die Legende von der jüdischen Weltverschwörung* [The protocols of the elders of Zion. The legend of the Jewish world conspiracy]. Beck.

Brotherton, R. (2016). *Suspicious minds: Why we believe conspiracy theories*. Bloomsbury Sigma.

Cassirer, E. (2010). *Philosophie der symbolischen formen. Zweiter teil: Das mythische denken* [Philosophy of symbolic forms. Part two: Mythical thinking]. Felix Meiner. (Original work published 1924)

Collins, L. (2012). *Bullspotting: Finding facts in the age of misinformation*. Prometheus Books.

de Hoyos, A., & Morris, S. B. (2010). *Is it true what they say about freemasonry? The methods of anti-masons*. M. Evans.

de Zavala, A. G., Cichocka, A., Eidelson, R., & Jayawick-

reme, N. (2009). Collective narcissism and its social consequences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *97*(6), 1074–1096. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016904

Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (2017). The psychology of conspiracy theories. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *26*(6), 538–542. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261

Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Advances in Political Psychology*, *40*(S1), 3–35. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568

Durkheim, É. (1914). Le dualisme de la nature humaine et ses coditions sociales [The dualism of human nature and its social conditions]. *Scientia, 15*, 206–221.

Frei, N., & Nachtwey, O. (2022). *Quellen des "Querdenkertums." Eine politische Soziologie der Corona-Proteste in Baden-Württemberg* [Sources of "Querdenkertum." A political sociology of corona protests in Baden-Württemberg]. SocArXiv. https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/8f4pb

Giry, J., & Tika, P. (2020). Conspiracy theories in political science and political theory. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 108–120). Routledge.

Göchhausen, E. A. A. (1786). *Enthüllung des Systems der Weltbürger-Republik: In Briefen aus der Verlassenschaft eines Freymaurers* [Revelation of the system of the cosmopolitan republic: In letters of the legacy of a Freemason].

Goodnight, G. T., & Poulakos, J. (1981). Conspiracy rhetoric: From pragmatism to fantasy in public discourse. *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, *45*(4), 299–316. https://doi.org/10.1080/10570318109374052

Gräfe, T. (2016). *Antisemitismus in Deutschland 1815–1918: Rezensionen—Forschungsüberblick—Bibliographie* [Antisemitism in Germany 1815–1918: Reviews—research overview—bibliography]. Books on Demand.

Graßl, H. (1968). *Aufbruch zur Romantik. Bayerns Beitrag zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte 1765–1785* [Departure to romanticism. Bavaria's contribution to German intellectual history 1765–1785]. C. H. Beck.

Groh, D. (1992). *Anthropologische Dimensionen der Geschichte* [Anthropological dimensions of history]. Suhrkamp.

Groh, D. (1996). Verschwörungen und kein Ende [Conspiracies and no end in sight]. In K. M. Michel & T. Spengler (Eds.), *Kursbuch Verschwörungstheorien* [Class book on conspiracy theories] (pp. 12–26). Rowohlt.

Hagemeister, M. (2004). Die jüdische Verschwörung [The Jewish conspiracy]. In H. Reinalter (Ed.), *Typologien des Verschwörungsdenkens* [Typologies of conspiracist thinking] (pp. 89–99). Studien Verlag.

Hagemeister, M. (2020). Die "Weisen von Zion" als Agenten des Antichrists [The "Elders of Zion" as agents of the anti-Christ]. In J. Kuber, M. Butter, U. Caumanns, B.-S. Grewe, & J. Großmann (Eds.), *Von Hinterzimmern und geheimen Machenschaften. Verschwörungstheorien in Geschichte und Gegenwart* [On backrooms and secret machinations. Conspiracy theories in history and present] (pp. 139–153). Akademie der Diözese Rottenburg-Stuttgart. https://doi.org/10.25787/IDADRS.V0I3.257

Hartmann, C., Vordermayer, T., Plöckinger, O., Töppel, R., Raim, E., Trees, P., Reizle, A., & Seewald-Mooser, M. (Eds.). (2016). *Hitler, Mein Kampf: Eine kritische edition* [Hitler, My Struggle: Critical edition]. Institut für Zeitgeschichte.

Hausberger, B., & Lehners, J.-P. (2011). Das 18. Jahrhundert: Eine Beschleunigung [18th century: An acceleration]. In B. Hausberger & J.-P. Lehners (Eds.), *Die Welt im 18. Jahrhundert* [The world in the 18th century] (pp. 12–41). Mandelbaum.

Hofstadter, R. (1964). The paranoid style in american politics. *Harper's Magazine*, *1964*(November), 77–86. https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics

Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. W. (1969). *Dialektik der Aufklärung* [Dialectic of enlightenment]. S. Fischer.

Icke, D. (1999). *The biggest secret. The book that will change the world*. Bertelsmann Industry Services.

Imhoff, R. (2015). Beyond (right-wing) authoritarianism: Conspiracy mentality as an incremental predictor of prejudice. In M. Bilewicz, A. Cichocka, & W. Soral (Eds.), *The psychology of conspiracy* (pp. 122–141). Routledge.

Imhoff, R., & Bruder, M. (2014). Speaking (un–)truth to power: Conspiracy mentality as a generalised political attitude. *European Journal of Personality*, *28*(1), 25–43. https://doi.org/10.1002/per.1930

Islamic Resistance Movement. (1988). *The covenant of the Islamic resistance movement*. The Avalon Project. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp

Jane, E. A., & Fleming, C. (2014). *Modern conspiracy: The importance of being paranoid*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Kennedy, J. F. (1960). *Address to the greater Houston Ministerial Association*. American Rhetoric. https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfkhoustonministers.html

Lamberty, P., & Imhoff, R. (2021). Verschwörungserzählungen im Kontext der Coronapandemie [Conspiracist narratives in context of the Corona pandemic]. *Psychotherapeut*, *66*(3), 203–208. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00278-021-00498-2

Lutter, M. (2001). *Sie kontrollieren alles!: Verschwörungstheorien als Phänomen der Postmoderne und ihre Verbreitung über das Internet* [They're controlling everything!: Conspiracy theories as a postmodern phenomenon and their spread through the internet]. edition fatal.

MacMillen, S. L., & Rush, T. (2022). QAnon—Religious roots, religious responses. *Critical Sociology*, *48*(6), 989–1004. https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205211063565

Marchlewska, M., Cichocka, A., Łozowski, F., Górska, P., & Winiewski, M. (2019). In search of an imaginary enemy: Catholic collective narcissism and the endorsement of gender conspiracy beliefs. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, *159*(6), 766–779. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2019.1586637

Marquis de Condorcet, N. (1795). *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* [Sketch of an historical image of the progress of the human mind]. https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb10702170?page=,1

Miller, M. (1986). *Kollektive Lernprozesse. Studien zur Grundlegung einer soziologischen Lerntheorie* [Collective learning processes. Studies on the foundations of a sociological theory of learning]. Suhrkamp.

Neugebauer-Wölk, M., Geffarth, R., & Meumann, M. (Eds.). (2013). *Aufklärung und Esoterik: Wege in die Moderne* [Enlightenment and esotericism: Ways to modernism]. De Gruyter.

Parsons, T. (1956). *Politics and social structure*. Free Press.

Pfahl-Traughber, A. (1993). *Der antisemitisch-antifreimaurerische Verschwörungsmythos in der Weimarer Republik und im NS-Staat* [The anti-semite, anti-masonist myth of conspiracy in the Weimar Republic and the NS state]. New Academic Press.

Pfahl-Traughber, A. (2002). "Bausteine" zu einer Theorie über "Verschwörungstheorien": Definitionen, Erscheinungsformen, Funktionen und Ursachen ["Elements" on a theory of "conspiracy theories": Definitions, phenomena, functions, and reasons]. In H. Reinalter (Ed.), *Verschwörungstheorien: Theorie—Geschichte—Wirkung* [Conspiracy theories: Theory—history—effects] (pp. 30–44). Studien Verlag.

Pickel, G., Pickel, S., & Yendell, A. (2020). Zersetzungspotenziale einer demokratischen politischen Kultur: Verschwörungstheorien und erodierender gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt? [Decomposition potential in a democratic political culture: Conspiracy theories and erosion of social cohesion?] In O. Decker & E. Brähler (Eds.), *Autoritäre Dynamiken: Alte Ressentiments—Neue Radikalität. Leipziger Autoritarismus Studie 2020* [Authoritarian dynamics: Old resentments—New radicalism. Leipzig study on authoritarianism 2020] (pp. 89–118). Psychosozial Verlag.

Popper, K. (2011). *The open society and its enemies*. Routledge. (Original work published 1945)

Rogalla von Bieberstein, J. (2002). Zur Geschichte von Verschwörungstheorien [On the history of conspiracy theories]. In H. Reinalter (Ed.), *Verschwörungstheorien: Theorie—Geschichte—Wirkung* [Conspiracy theories: Theory—history—effects] (pp. 15–29). Studien Verlag.

Rousseau, J. J. (1913). *Discourse on the origin of inequality among men*. J. M. Dent and Sons. (Original work published 1754)

Salzborn, S. (2014). *Antisemitismus: Geschichte, Theorie, Empirie* [Antisemitism: History, theory, empiricism]. Nomos.

Schießler, C., Hellweg, N., & Decker, O. (2020). Aberglaube, Esoterik und Verschwörungsmentalität in Zeiten der Pandemie [Superstition, esotericism and conspiracist mentality in pandemic times]. In O. Decker & E. Brähler (Eds.), *Autoritäre Dynamiken: Alte Ressentiments—Neue Radikalität. Leipziger Autoritarismus Studie 2020* [Authoritarian dynamics: Old resentments—new radicalism. Leipzig study on authoritarianism 2020] (pp. 283–308). Psychosozial Verlag.

Seidler, J. D. (2016). *Die Verschwörung der Massenmedien: Eine Kulturgeschichte vom Buchhändler-Komplott bis zur Lügenpresse* [The conspiracy of mass media: A cultural history from the bookseller-plot to lying press]. transcript.

Smaldino, P. E. (2019). Social identity and cooperation in cultural evolution. *Behavioural Processes*, *161*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beproc.2017.11.015

Uscinski, J. E. (2018). The study of conspiracy theories. *Argumenta*, *3*, 233–245.

van Prooijen, J.-W. (2018). *The psychology of conspiracy theories*. Routledge.

Vartija, D. (2020). Revisiting Enlightenment racial classification: Time and the question of human diversity. *Intellectual History Review*, *31*(4), 603–625. https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2020.1794161

Wallach, W. A. (1873). *Anti-masonic Christian herald and national reform advocate*.

Ward, C., & Voas, D. (2011). The emergence of conspirituality. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *26*(1), 103–121. https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2011.539846

Ward, H. D. (1828). *The anti-masonic review and magazine* (Vol 1). Vanderpool & Cole Printers.

Weber, M. (2004). *Science as a vocation.* Hackett Publishing Company. (Original work published 1917)

Winter, M. (1698). *To all godly people, in the citie of London*. http://www.freemasons-freemasonry.com/beresiner18.html

Wood, M. J., & Douglas, K. M. (2013). "What about building 7?" A social psychological study of online discussion of 9/11 conspiracy theories. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*(409). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00409

Wyrwa, U. (2019). Zur Entstehung des Antisemitismus im Europa des 19. Jahrhunderts. Ursachen und Erscheinungsformen einer wahnhaften Weltanschauung [On the origins of antisemitism in 19th century Europe: Reasons and phenomena of a delusional worldview]. In M. König & O. Schulz (Eds.), *Antisemitismus*

im 19. Jahrhundert aus internationaler Perspektive [19th century antisemitism from an international perspective] (pp. 13–38). Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Yablokov, I., & Chatterje-Doody, P. N. (2022). *Russia Today and conspiracy theories: People, power and politics on RT*. Routledge.

About the Author

Stefan Christoph studied at the University of Leipzig and the University of Regensburg where he received a bachelor's degree in political science and law and a master's degree in democracy science. He is currently working towards his PhD with research on conspiracist ideology in democratic societies. Stefan Christoph's further research interests are political theory and history of ideas, in particular theories of legitimacy, construction of knowledge, and social contract theory, as well as terrorism research, far-right extremism, and antisemitism. He works as a parliamentary adviser on science policy at the regional parliament of Bavaria.

Article

Religions and Conspiracy Theories as the Authoritarian "Other" of Democracy?

Oliver Fernando Hidalgo

Department of Politics, University of Münster, Germany; hidalgoo@uni-muenster.de

Abstract
This article theorises and conceptualises the ambivalent role of religions and conspiracy theories in modern democracies. Based on a concise comparison of both phenomena, it elaborates the similar risks and functions of religions and conspiracy theories for the political community without neglecting the fact that, under secular conditions, the spread of conspiracy narratives might outweigh those of religious messages in the long run. That observation seems particularly relevant for contemporary governance and political science, as a tendency towards social anomie in the sense of Durkheim can be deduced from democratic theory, which significantly increases democracy's need for compensatory moral and cognitive authorities.

Issue
This article is part of the issue "The Role of Religions and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes" edited by Oliver Hidalgo (University of Münster) and Alexander Yendell (Leipzig University).

1. Introduction

As Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* presented the first serious theory on conspiracy theories in the social sciences (Popper, 1963/2002, Chapter 14), the core of his argument was that all conspiracy theories underestimate the complexity of modern societies by claiming that social phenomena and events are generally the intended result of mutually coordinated action. According to Popper, only this fundamental misunderstanding can lead to the misperception that a small circle of conspirators control and manipulate millions of people's thoughts and actions and run the state or even the world in secret (cf. Pigden, 1995). This is precisely why the discovery of "real" conspiracies and secret agreements can never confirm the "conspiracy theory of society" as such, simply because real conspiracies are inevitably on a much smaller scale.

In the same context, Popper compared the belief in conspiracy theories with religious superstition insofar as in the secular environment of modern societies, powerful individuals and groups simulate or even replace the traditional omnipotence of gods. Thus, conspiracy theo-

ries can be seen both as surrogate religions *and* as antagonism to rather differentiated religious beliefs (Wood & Douglas, 2019). In turn, this ambivalence raises the question of what role both phenomena play in democracy, as religious accommodation here is often appreciated as a factor in providing social capital and public welfare (e.g. Böckenförde, 2013; Greenawalt, 2009; Habermas, 2005; Putnam, 2000; Rosenblum, 2022), while conspiracy theories usually share a pejorative image. Is this perhaps a misperception that ignores the obvious analogies between religious convictions and "belief" in conspiracies (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2015, 2019; Dyrendal, 2020)—a phenomenon which has experienced a rapid rise during the Covid-19 crisis (Parmigiani, 2021)?

This article argues that the ambivalence both conspiracy theories and religions imply for democratic societies is due to democracy's own paradoxes that are linked to the significant lack of authority inherent in all democratic decisions and procedures. Proceeding from a theoretical comparison of religions and conspiracy theories (Section 2), the argument recurs on Durkheim's concept of anomie to demonstrate why democracy is always susceptible to being supplemented by external

authorities at best, and thwarted at worst (Section 3). Such "authorities" as, for instance, (secular) religions and conspiracy theories promise atomised individuals not only intellectual orientation and meaning but also a collective identity and a way out of (subjectively perceived) powerlessness. Moreover, religions and conspiracy theories assume almost the same "functions" in the democratic state: as resources for complexity reduction, moral authority, and normative legitimacy, even if—in the case of conspiracy theories—these are mostly carried out in a one-sided manner necessarily undermining any tolerance towards dissenting opinions and thus democratic plurality (Section 4).

2. Religions and Conspiracy Theories: On General Similarities and Dissimilarities

The relation between conspiracy theory and religion can be considered through the lens of three components—conspiracy theory *in*, *about*, and *as* religion (Dyrendal, 2020; Robertson et al., 2019). While the first perspective deals with different types of conspiracy beliefs that apply ideologically to certain religious groups, the second one presents religions as actors, as it happens, for instance, in the antisemitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or the *Trojan Horse Affair*, which alleged there had been an "Islamisation" of secular state schools in Birmingham (Holmwood & O'Toole, 2018). Finally, the focus on conspiracy theory *as* religion examines the philosophical, psychological, cognitive, and emotional underpinnings that characterise both cultural concepts, generally emphasising that belief is the most important dimension of both conspiracy theories and religions (cf. Bronner, 2003, 2011; Goertzel, 1994).

This contribution centres on the third component—conspiracy theory *as* religion—which includes the question of to what extent conspiracy theory can be understood as a continuation of religious modes of thinking and therefore as a (secular) substitute for religion itself. In this respect, the social and political idea of "democracy" (as well as the concept of "science") provides a sort of *tertium comparationis*, being able to identify such aspects in which conspiracy theory and religion definitely coincide. Proceeding from this, it will become possible to analyse similar functions conspiracy theories and religions are taking up in democratic societies.

This approach presupposes a few introductory remarks that contour the fundamental comparability of conspiracy theory and religion in terms of the nature of thought and behaviour under the circumstances created by modern democracies. Thus, the following paragraphs aim to clarify the five most relevant characteristics in this respect.

First, both religion and conspiracy theories are situated *beyond empiricism*, i.e., their effectiveness does not depend on the empirical verifiability of their assumptions. Instead, it is precisely the claim of religions and conspiracy theories to illuminate people and to make statements about a world that eludes sensory perception, supported experience, and intersubjective falsifiability. Another parallel between religions and conspiracy theories is that both usually mix fact and fiction, supernatural things or beings and conventional experience. Some well-developed conspiracy theories, such as those of Alex Jones or David Icke, are not even inferior to religious belief systems in their grasp of complex interrelationships. Hence, they are similar not only in wanting to control the uncertain, the empirically unprovable, to a certain extent (Schließler et al., 2020) but also in that they share an esoteric approach to the world (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2019; Taguieff, 2005), which offers explanatory frameworks scientific explanations cannot address (Keeley, 2019).

Second, both religions and conspiracy theories primarily address *people's feelings and emotional needs* (Douglas et al., 2020). They help them deal with fears and insecurities and provide emotional support, particularly during societal crises (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). In this way, they contribute to terror management (Greenberg et al., 2008), i.e., to the constructive handling of one's own mortality or the imponderable risks of life (Vail et al., 2010). On the other hand, they differ in that religions usually convey a positive message of salvation and redemption, while conspiracy narratives, although generally situated between secular scepticism and spiritual salvation (Aupers & Harambam, 2019), mostly only identify the negative—the conspiracy and its authors—without themselves developing a concrete idea of the optimal, paradisiacal state (Tezcan, 2020). However, they overlap again in that both the followers of religions and conspiracy theories are able to draw comfort and confidence from their beliefs since both "faith systems" claim to be part of a sort of moral crusade to solve the world's ills. Although religions and conspiracy theories often share a rather apocalyptic view of the world (Barkun, 2013), they actually succeed in ensuring that their followers do not remain pessimistic but face the approaching challenges with a particular kind of optimism.

Third, religions as well as conspiracy theories offer *intellectual orientation* by a particular "holistic cognitive style" being focused on big pictures and connections between elements rather than on individual details (Wood & Douglas, 2019). So, both offer a cognitive explanation of how the world and human coexistence can be understood and how one can attain information about it. However, the (minority of) enlightened religions of today can reflect on themselves as forms of belief rather than knowledge (Blume, 2020). They know and accept that they interpret the world and the objects and phenomena that exist in it from a religious-metaphysical point of view and not according to the methodological standards of modern sciences. In contrast, conspiracy theorists are mostly convinced that the results of science, insofar as they contradict their own views, are part of the conspiracy, while the conspiracy theories themselves supposedly reflect the "true" state of (uncorrupted) science.

In this respect, conspiracy theories apparently find it more difficult than modern enlightened religions to separate belief from knowledge, although there are definitely some conspiracy groups that unapologetically accept the lack of reason in their epistemological position. Hence, especially against the background of religions' diversity, it is plausible that a religious perspective finds it easier to tolerate ambiguity than a conspiracy theory. Instead, conspiracy theories tend to immunise against any contradiction since counter-arguments can always be dismissed as part of the conspiracy.

Fourth, from a genuinely political point of view, religions and conspiracy theories are *comparable* because they often correspond with the impression of individual and collective *powerlessness* (cf. Adorno et al., 1950/1967; Blanuša & Hristov, 2020, pp. 72–73). While this impression could reduce one's intention to engage in politics (Jolley & Douglas, 2014), it could also encourage believers to do so (Jolley et al., 2020). Just as religions have often been attested to serve as a motivational factor for political and social engagement and personal, altruistic commitment to the community, conspiracy theories can be interpreted as an immediate call to political activity. Hence, in certain contexts, conspiracy theories could also "inspire collective action and social change attempts, especially in reaction to threatening events" (Jolley et al., 2020, p. 232), organising protests (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), among other things. In this concern, the perception of having uncovered a conspiracy is an explicit or at least implicit call to hold those responsible accountable and change the situation in a legitimate manner contrary to the conspirators' plans. Accordingly, the fighters against a conspiracy subjectively find themselves in any case in the camp of the "good guys" who are morally superior (Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013) and put a stop to the "evil," which is another parallel to the political effect of religions, which promise the actions of believers a normative standard, a direction of thrust, with which they are in harmony with their beliefs. In this context, it is much more than a coincidence that conspiracy theories often emphasise the alleged power of actually powerless groups, religious or ethnic minorities, etc. (Nera et al., 2021), to ascribe the counter-conspirators a politically powerful role with a chance of success. However, the political impetus of such counter-conspiracism is radical since it is shaped by a deep distrust of democratic institutions (Miller et al., 2016; Moore, 2017, 2018; Renard, 2015). Moreover, it would seem that no arrangement with the conspirators is possible, which is why only a revolutionary tabula rasa promises any political success. Concerning the political power of religions, on the other hand, not only radical but also moderate projects and reforms seem to be conceivable.

Finally, religions and conspiracy theories are proper resources to build *collective identities*. Following the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982), this mainly needs a positive distinction of one's own social group identity, i.e., the in-group, from a relevant, negatively connoted out-group. By belonging to a "religion," such a distinction is easy to achieve since the recourse to the religious promises epistemological and ontological certainty as well as a performative differentiation of "believers" and "non-believers" (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). This makes it possible to divide the political space into "us" and "them," friends and enemies, which is why political conflicts are often structured along religious identity markers, without the causes of these conflicts themselves necessarily being religiously based (Hidalgo, 2018, pp. 225–253). As "moral communities," religious communities can unite their members even without "faith" in a theological sense, which predestines them as a resource for identity even in secular or pluralistic environments (Graham & Haidt, 2010). Therefore, conspiracy theories as secular substitutes to religions can also enforce social identity (Dyrendal, Asprem, & Robertson, 2019, p. 43), distinct in-groups and out-groups, friends, and enemies by dividing the evil side of the perpetrators, stooges, followers, and ignoramuses of a conspiracy from the good, which consists of initiated connoisseurs, opponents, and innocents of the same conspiracy (cf. Biddlestone et al., 2020; Van Eck Duymaer van Twist & Newcombe, 2019). Furthermore, conspiracy theories can be seen as appropriate agents to separate a positive in-group from a negative out-group, since individuals are expected to exhibit more pejorative attitudes and behaviours towards social out-groups to the extent that those out-groups are perceived as realistic threats (Stephan et al., 2009). Just like religions, conspiracy theories can also establish an identity apart from group dynamics in the form of interpersonal or self-image processes (Biddlestone et al., 2021). But again, the differences between religions and conspiracy theories may not be underestimated since the latter currently have more problems creating compromises, an overlapping consensus or a modus vivendi between "believers" and "non-believers" and, thus, almost inevitably lead to a friend-enemy dichotomy in the sense of Carl Schmitt. In contrast, for religions, the aforementioned ways of mutual understanding are easier to achieve. Additionally, compared to religions, the ability of conspiracy theories to build communities is rather superficial and provisional, as the need for uniqueness—the claim to know things that others do not—is higher among conspiracy theorists than among religious believers (Lantian et al., 2017).

As a result, we can state that both religions and conspiracy theories work as moral, intellectual, and political authorities within modern societies, at least for the believers of corresponding religious or conspiracy-theoretical messages. In this respect, they each build an entity that normally does not lose its persuasiveness through scientific research, empirical studies, or fact-checking; on the contrary, it is located in a vacuum in which (many) people continue to form their emotional identity and stability. As will be shown in the next section, this potential of religions and conspiracy myths is of immense importance, especially in a democracy, as

the latter cultivates a significant lack of cognitive orientation and security. The vacuum in which religions and conspiracy theories thrive is therefore created by democracy itself.

3. Anomie as the Hidden Tendency of Modern Democracies

It was not only the theory of radical democracy (following, e.g., Claude Lefort, Richard Rorty, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Rancière, or Bonnie Honig) that elevated contingency to the central character of the rule of the people and made it a kind of commonplace of political theory that democratic politics is beyond (metaphysical) claims to truth. What classical authors from Plato to Alexis de Tocqueville, John Dewey, and Hannah Arendt emphasised, namely that (mass) democracy is to a certain extent at war with knowledge and expertise, so that its own epistemic dimension always remains vague, is still one of the least controversial findings of contemporary political science. Therefore, the famous judgement of Hans Kelsen that the results of democratic politics must be evaluated beyond the distinction of "right and wrong" and "good and evil" is still valid. As Kelsen (2006, p. 236) wrote:

> If the question of what is socially right, what is good, what is best, could be answered in an absolute, objectively valid, directly binding…way for all: then democracy would be utterly impossible. For what could be the point of voting and letting the majority decide on a measure whose correctness is beyond all doubt?

Kelsen's understanding of the paradoxical "essence" of democracy leads to the insight that, for democracy, two highly contradictory principles are constitutive: the *quantitative* (i.e., the majority, the power of the large number) and the *qualitative* (i.e., the public good, the rule of law or social justice). Both principles shape democracy but finally remain independent of each other. This makes it conceivable how majority decisions can undermine the rule of law, even though in a democracy, there can be no legitimate law beyond majority rule. This includes that the origin of law, which should qualify and, if necessary, limit people's sovereignty within a constitutional democracy, cannot depend on its justification by the popular will. Consequently, such a "constitutional law" becomes a blind spot in democratic theory, which means what is to be considered as "law" is logically decoupled from those criteria of legitimacy that can be clearly identified as "democratic." Thus, Jacques Derrida speaks about the "mystical foundation of authority" in democracy, a mysterium which is connected with the "autoimmunity" of democracy (Derrida, 1990, 2005), i.e., democracy's particular tendency to self-destruction, whenever an "undemocratic" group of political actors attempt to gain the majority of voters to abolish civil rights and democratic institutions with the help of legally implemented

"democratic" procedures. In different words, democracy must end up in an insoluble contradiction with itself if it declares the quantitative principle of universal suffrage/majority decision to be inviolable while at the same time arming against possible (anti-democratic?) aberrations of "people's" voting with the help of qualitative guidelines and constitutional boundaries. From this, Kelsen (2006, p. 227) drew the radical conclusion that democracy needs a clear priority of quantity against quality. Since (secular) democracy is not allowed to refer to any "higher" normative truth, it must rely on the positive cognitive capacity of human beings. This requires that the "coercion" of a legal order has to be legitimised solely "by the consent of at least the majority of those whom the coercive order is intended to help." As an "expression of political relativism," which opposes any authoritarian claim to truth and therefore the logic of "political absolutism," democracy cannot fix a point outside itself, from which it could, if necessary, even be asserted against the principle of majority. Instead, Kelsen (2006, p. 163) stressed that "the quality which appears under the name of the people" is synonymous with a "fiction not being checked any longer" but "set into reality," an expression that anticipated Rancière's (1998) emphasis of "the non-identity of the people."

Under the conditions of the democratic paradox between the principles of quantity and quantity, Kelsen felt compelled to accept even the structural weakness of majority rule (in which liberal thinkers such as Madison, Tocqueville, or Mill had seen the danger of a tyranny of the majority) without any reservation. Nevertheless, in terms of democratic theory, it would, of course, be legitimate to avoid such radical consequences as Kelsen's and to recognise the authority of law without demanding its origin in the majority in a strict sense. Hence, it could be just as "democratic" to argue against Kelsen and in favour of the rule of law as a necessary limit to the majority principle. However, since democracy consists of contradictory principles such as quantity and quality, it hardly provides a clear normative orientation. And although democracy undoubtedly has its own normativity, which is primarily in the effective moderation of political discourses and the equal legitimacy of alternative political positions (Hidalgo, 2014, pp. 511–574), it is precisely this normativity that denies the option to describe certain positions within the aporetic framework of democracy as definitively "right" and the counter-position analogously as definitively "wrong." Therefore, the plurality or even the contradiction of legitimate views becomes nothing but the paradoxical program of democracy, whereby the normative "correctness" of concrete decisions is always guaranteed by the fact that the same decisions could have been different.

Accordingly, democracy always implies the "other" side of how it presents itself at a particular moment. One can say that democracy is not characterised by radical contingency but, as seen by a very presuppositional relationism, which, in many cases, cannot be adequately

depicted by compromises, the middle between two extremes, etc. Consequently, in the numerous situations in which the contradictory norms of democracy coexist largely unmediated, the tolerance of counter-positions becomes the democratic virtue par excellence. Such tolerance, however, is characterised by its own paradox: That it cannot be legally enforced and remains epistemologically and normatively amorphous as a merely subjective relational standard (cf. King, 1976, 51–54).

Thus, democracy, in theory and practice, is always in danger of leaving its supporters normatively in the dark and overtaxing them individually and collectively. At the same time, this shows an overall pathology of popular sovereignty, which can be called the "anomie" of democracy as this pathology expresses precisely the state of weakened or even absent social, political, and cultural norms, rules and parameters of order that Durkheim (1893/1997) or Merton (1949) had in mind as they designed the category of anomie in modern sociology. That democracy tends to an individual and social anomie follows the fact that, in democracy, the validity of law and order and their establishment through appropriate procedures are structurally decoupled. And although democracy has procedural norms that could compensate for the lack of content-based norms to a certain extent, the citizens' trust in such procedural norms is insufficient to avoid epistemological insecurity. Consequently, an intersubjectively comprehensible, universally valid emergence of law or norms justifying coercive power is definitely an impossibility in and for democracy. Against the background of the necessarily incomplete, aporetic "democratic" procedures and the "non-identity" of the people, the normative validity of law implies an evident gap in democratic theory.

As a result, the state of anomie, in which the vulnerable foundation of all legal norms becomes individually and socially transparent, is like a sword of Damocles in democracy, where the justification of all norms of law and conduct must remain vague or even self-contradictory. This is the reason why no rules emerge in democratic practice that are really clear and binding for all. And although all citizens must yet obey the existing rules, in a democracy everyone—the government as well as the opposition—can set out to change them according to their own ideas. This obviously leads to the constant dynamics, temporary nature and continual law changes in democracy, whose opposing principles will always find their respective partisans and political representatives. Moreover, the nevertheless "possible" declaration of norms in democracy, which always has to restrict itself, balance opposing positions, and renounce claims of absoluteness, can only insufficiently guarantee that the individual and social need for authority and orientation usually are satisfied by the validity of laws that are not contested. So, the existing framework of norms in democracy can always be challenged from two sides: by the *minority* as an expression of persisting inadequacies and injustices caused by the political and social system; and by the *majority* as an available object that can (or must) be reshaped by virtue of its own claim to power. Such mutually legitimate questioning of the existing normative framework in democracy threatens to lead to anomie as soon as the aporias of democracy provoke an individual and social lack of orientation, the subjective feeling of being overwhelmed, and therefore the increasing desire for "simple," clearly deducible rules and authorities.

4. The Ambivalent Role of (Substitute) Religions and Conspiracy Theories as External Authorities in Democracy

The relevance of the idea of anomie as a general conceptualisation of the pathological sides of modern democracies becomes more evident when we return to the context of religions and conspiracy theories. In this respect, it is anything but a coincidence that the term "anomie" originally marked a theological expression for the breaking of religious and ethical laws (Orrú, 1987) before being introduced into sociology by Durkheim as a synonym for "normlessness" (not understood in an anarchic way) and "social alienation." Durkheim gained this view from Guyau's (1887/1897) *L'Irréligion de l'avenir*, which described anomie as "the absence of apodictic, fixed, and universal rules" (cf. Orrú, 1983, p. 505). In his works, Durkheim (1893/1997, 1897/2005) interpreted anomie as the loss of social homogeneity and solidarity, which—in the increasingly individualised, industrialised, and secularised modern society—gave rise to people's unfulfillable desire for socially shared meaning along universally binding rules. For Durkheim, this fundamental loss converged with the erosion of traditional religion and religiosity, the lack of social bonding, and the plurality of values. Proceeding from this assumption, he understood anomie not as a form of individual despair and alienation but rather as a lack of social integration and, thus, a collective disease of modern society.

Durkheim's diagnosis that anomie, social disintegration and destructive competitions of moral perspectives are consequences of the declining (eternal) norms and values of traditional religions led him to a new functional concept of religion to conceive religion as the enduring source of human social identity and collective morality still in secular society (Durkheim, 1912/2001). In this respect, Durkheim suggested that it could become the task of substitute religions to evoke the necessary integrative force of morality and law for the social and political body. Furthermore, the problem of secularisation that Durkheim described as an aftermath of eroded religious norms is almost identical to the social state of epistemological and normative uncertainty provoked by the aporias of modern democracy. This immediately reminds us of the five characteristic analogies between religions and conspiracy theories that can now be interpreted as a plausible compensation for democracy's affinity with the state of anomie. As we have seen in Section 3, democracy

stands precisely for the lack of emotional safety, moral orientation, and intellectual authority that—to some extent—can be expected from religions as well as from conspiracy theories. Therefore, both phenomena should be discussed together as a possible external authority being able to therapy democracy's particular pathology, at least on a subjective level.

About traditional religions, the relevant discussion about their relationship to democracy has already been reconstructed in the way that these authors who are convinced of a positive role of religion in modern democracy definitely have religion in mind as an authoritarian counterweight to the vices of popular sovereignty (Hidalgo, 2021). Apart from Durkheim, similar positions can be found, e.g., in De Tocqueville (1840/2002), Bellah et al. (1985), Casanova (1994, 2009), Putnam (2000), Taylor (1991, 2002), Lübbe (2004), Toft et al. (2011), or Böckenförde (2013, pp. 112–114). Following Rousseau and his idea of a "civilised" form of religion, the aforementioned authors consequently wanted to solve modern democracy's tendency to anomie, atomisation, emotional insecurity, and normative disorientation in the field where the problem once arose, namely in the (missing) lines between religion and modern politics. However, under the current conditions, this undertaking seems to attempt to square the circle. Since pluralisation and individualisation as main catalysts of an anomic, disintegrative society (cf. Merton, 1949) are relativising all cultural identity structures, they have significantly changed the area of (traditional) religions as well, as many sociologists have emphasised (e.g., Beck, 2010; Davie, 1990, 2002; Hervieu-Léger, 2004; Luckmann, 1991; Stark & Finke, 2000). In this respect, the risks of anomie can hardly be contained with the help of religious resources. Instead, the very attempt to use religion to re-establish an anchor for "truth" and "authority" in a democracy that basically contradicts its own logic and characteristics could be counterproductive to the goal of social integration and normative orientation if it seeks a state of socio-religious homogeneity that is irrevocably lost in modern pluralistic and multi-religious societies. Such a cultural backlash which, in Europe, is currently being orchestrated by right-wing populist and anti-Muslim actors (cf. Brubaker, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), would even have to undermine itself performatively since considerable resistance would come from a large number of (alternative) religious groups and minorities, and especially from the continuously growing number of non-religious citizens. Therefore, the compensatory role of substitute religions and conspiracy theories may become even more relevant under the conditions of modern secularisation.

However, the possibility that conspiracy theories might replace religions' function as an authoritarian counterweight to democracy is rather underexposed so far (see, e.g., Butter & Knight, 2020; Dyrendal, Robertson, & Asprem, 2019). Although some authors have already focussed their attention on the cognitive science of reli-

gion (e.g., Boyer, 2001; Norenzayan et al., 2006) to suggest that conspiracy theories may have "quasi-religious" functions (cf. Franks et al., 2013) and to compare conspiracy theories and religions along the categories of "superstition, seekership and salvation" (Robertson & Dyrendal, 2018), there is a lack of reflection on the topic in terms of democratic theory. In contrast to the elaborated research on the functions of conspiracy theories in authoritarian regimes (e.g. Giry & Gürpınar, 2020) and authoritarian ideologies (e.g. Wood & Gray, 2019) or also for (right-wing) populism and extremism (e.g. Bartlett & Miller, 2010; Bergmann, 2018; Bergmann & Butter, 2020; Lipset & Raab, 1970; Van Prooijen et al., 2015), the focus on the general relationship between democracy and conspiracy is rather one-sided. And instead of (also) analysing the compensatory role of conspiracy myths and narratives for the pathology of democracy, the scholars discuss almost exclusively the vices and pathologies conspiracy theories imply for democracy, e.g., misinformation (Bronner, 2013; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009) or political radicalisation (Lee, 2020).

Proceeding from the diagnosis of democracy's own tendency to anomie means, to a certain degree, a changing perspective. At least in theory, and preferably under secular conditions, conspiracy myths and narratives are supposed to provide the "impossible knowledge" (Hristov, 2019) that many democratic citizens desire whenever they are tired of the moral and normative uncertainty the democratic system cultivates. With regard to the aporetic and anomic character of democracy, a specific social-psychological and political function of conspiracy theories could thus be identified that was originally attributed rather to religions, i.e., to avoid social anomie by (a) providing a kind of "knowledge" based upon common comprehensibility and reduced complexity which is nevertheless protected against any scientific or methodological falsifiability, (b) strengthening people's emotional security and (c) intellectual orientation, (d) relieving the "believers" of their subjective and collective feelings of powerlessness, and finally (e) offering atomised individuals an opportunity to build a collective identity and to become part of a normatively legitimised political project.

At least theoretically, the attractiveness of conspiracy theories in democracy—or even better, for democratic citizens—becomes evident since we focus on the concept of anomie as a hidden pathology of democracy that is in urgent need of compensation by moral and cognitive authorities. On the other hand, this perspective must not forget the immense risks and problems conspiracy theories (and religions) usually generate. In this respect, it is important to consider the ambivalent role of conspiracy myths for democracy. To achieve this, we can again refer to the comparison between religion and conspiracy theories, which has already drawn our attention to the relative "shady sides" of conspiracy myths. In this regard, it is important to mention, or repeat, the following:

- Conspiracy theories, as well as religions, are suited to manipulate people with the help of invented information, fake news, and fake facts, and to frighten them with completely exaggerated or irrational threat perceptions.
- Compared to religions, conspiracy theories not only tend to spread purely negative messages without offering consolation and moderation through positive prospects, but due to their pseudo-scientific claim and the resulting ignorance or instrumentalisation of expertise, they also fail to strike a balance between (counterintuitive) valid knowledge and emotional stability.
- As a result of the friend/enemy dichotomy that they almost inevitably provoke, conspiracy theories create extreme social and political polarisations, which necessarily undermine the democratic respect for political opponents and their alternative opinions.
- In sum, the potential for collective political power that goes hand in hand with conspiracy theories is threatened to be used less for participation in policy-making processes and overcoming post-democratic structures than for the formulation of radical political projects and the emergence of fantasies of violence.

Additionally, a positive role of conspiracy theories in democracy is burdened by two aspects. First, trust in conspiracy theories is often accompanied by mistrust of democratic institutions. As long as the followers of conspiracy theories do not immediately fall into political apathy and passivity, what they organise as resistance and protest against the (alleged) conspirators may subjectively speak in favour of saving democracy but is objectively in danger of damaging the idea of democracy as such. Second, and in this respect, conspiracy myths and (traditional) religions are again very similar (cf. Girard, 1989); intergroup conspiracy theories have a scapegoat function whenever accusing certain individuals and minorities of being responsible for crises and anxiety-provoking events (Moscovici, 1987). While this function can indeed strengthen collective identity and homogeneity, it is at the same time a fundamental contradiction to individual rights and democratic pluralism.

Apart from these burdens, the substantive similarities between religions and conspiracy theories suggest that the positive role traditionally accorded to religion as an authoritarian counterweight to democracy could, in theory, also be assumed by conspiracy theories. Nonetheless, the social sciences have paid little attention to this perspective so far, which may have to do with two things in the usual treatment of the topic. On the one hand, the comparatively (too) negative image of conspiracy theories may result from the fact that religion today is considered a priori to be an ultimately state-regulated category that has proven its accommodation accordingly

(see Taira, 2022, Chapter 4), while conspiracy theories are almost always ascribed a dangerous and irrational character. On the other hand, the academic reflection of conspiracy theories—including this article—is still dominated by the social-psychological focus on pathologising the subject, rather than taking them seriously as religious phenomena (Robertson, 2017).

5. Conclusion

The increasing belief in conspiracies and conspiracy theories is due to the ontological insecurity generated by the rationalism and scepticism inherent in modern societies, which also delegitimises traditional sources of moral and epistemic authority such as religion (Aupers, 2012). Here, two interwoven developments are very remarkable: that the declining power of organised religion corresponds with the growing mistrust in the social and political order and that the proliferation of conspiracy myths is obviously *not* captured by the Zeitgeist of scepticism—on the contrary, it finds highly favourable conditions (Blanuŝa & Hristov, 2020, p. 78). This intertwinement suggests that the need for religious truths and authorities in a secular environment for many people does not disappear but merely shifts. However, this (authoritarian) need for unambiguity and reliability can neither be satisfied by scientific knowledge (which always remains provisional and incomplete) nor by political processes and negotiations in a modern democracy. As De Tocqueville (2002, Vol. 2, Part 1, Chapter 2) already noted, democracy itself is rather the prototype of doubt and scepticism, or better: It is the social and institutional *expression* of the permanent doubt of its citizens.

The thesis that conspiracy theories today tend to replace traditional religions as the "authoritarian other" of democracy, which at the same time complements and undermines it, obviously requires further empirical research to confirm. In this respect, we must not forget that many contemporary conspiracy theories do not fit the conceptual model of belief as they invite an ironic or non-serious attitude (Knight, 2000). Nevertheless, all current indications suggest that research findings on the ambivalent role of religion in democracy can also be transferred to the field of conspiracy theories, especially if we look at the diffuse quasi-religious spirituality of the New Age movements that are closely associated with conspiracy myths and has already taken over several functions of the organised religions (Dyrendal, 2020). However, because of the additional disadvantages that conspiracy theories have compared to religions, this could be more of a curse than a blessing for democracy.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Adorno, T., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, R. N. (1967). *The authoritarian personality*. Wiley. (Original work published 1950)

Asprem, E., & Dyrendal, A. (2015). Conspirituality reconsidered: How surprising and how new is the confluence of spirituality and conspiracy theory. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *30*(3), 367–382.

Aspre, E., & Dyrendal, A. (2019). Close companions? Esotericism and conspiracy theories. In A. Dyrendal, D. G. Robertson, & E. Asprem (Eds.), *Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion* (pp. 207–233). Brill.

Aupers, S. (2012). "Trust no one": Modernization, paranoia and conspiracy culture. *European Journal of Communication*, *27*(1), 22–34.

Aupers, S., & Harambam, J. (2019). Rational enchantments: Conspiracy theory between secular scepticism and spiritual salvation. In A. Dyrendal, D. G. Robertson, & E. Asprem (Eds.), *Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion* (pp. 48–69). Brill.

Barkun, M. (2013). *A culture of conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*. University of California Press.

Bartlett, J., & Miller, C. (2010). *The power of unreason: Conspiracy theories, extremism and counterterrorism*. Demos.

Beck, U. (2010). *A god of one's own: Religion's capacity for peace and potential for violence*. Polity.

Bellah, R., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Stanford University Press.

Bergmann, E. (2018). *Conspiracy & populism: The politics of misinformation*. Springer.

Bergmann, E., & Butter, M. (2020). Conspiracy theory and populism. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 330–343). Routledge.

Biddlestone, M., Cichocka, A., Zezelj, I., & Bilewicz, M. (2020). Conspiracy theories and intergroup relations. In M. Butter & P. Knight. (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 219–230). Routledge.

Biddlestone, M., Green, R., Cichocka, A., Sutton, R., & Douglas, K. (2021). Conspiracy beliefs and the individual, relational, and collective selves. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *15*(10). https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12639

Blanuša, N., & Hristov, T. (2020). Psychoanalysis, critical theory, and conspiracy theory. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 67–80). Routledge.

Blume, M. (2020, March 3). Verschwörungsmythen und Religion. Was sie verbindet und was sie trennt [Conspiracy myths and religion: What connects and separates them]. *Katholisch.de*. https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/27368-verschwoerungsmythen-und-religion-was-sie-verbindet-und-was-sie-trennt

Böckenförde, E.-W. (2013). *Recht, Staat, Freiheit* [Law, state, freedom]. Suhrkamp.

Boyer, P. (2001). *Religion explained: The evolutionary origins of religious thought*. Basic Books.

Bronner, G. (2003). *L'empire des croyances* [The empire of beliefs]. Presses universitaires de France.

Bronner, G. (2011). *The future of collective beliefs*. Bardwell Press.

Bronner, G. (2013). *La démocratie des crédules* [The democracy of the gullible]. Presses universitaires de France.

Brubaker, R. (2017). Between nationalism and civilizationism: The European populist moment in comparative perspective. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *40*(8), 1191–1226.

Butter, M., & Knight, P. (Eds.). (2020). *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories*. Routledge.

Casanova, J. (1994). *Public religions in the modern world*. University of Chicago Press.

Casanova, J. (2009). *Europas Angst vor der Religion* [Europe's fear of religion]. Berlin University Press.

Davie, G. (1990). Believing without belonging: Is this the future of religion in Britain? *Social Compass*, *37*(4), 455–469.

Davie, G. (2002). *Europe: The exceptional case. Parameters of faith in the modern world*. DLT.

De Tocqueville, A. (2002). *Democracy in America*. University of Chicago Press (Original work published 1840)

Derrida, J. (1990). Force of law: The "mystical foundation of authority." *The Cardozo Law Review*, *11*(5/6), 919–1046.

Derrida, J. (2005). *Rogues. Two essays on reason*. Stanford University Press.

Douglas, K. M., Cichocka, A., & Sutton, R. M. (2020). Motivations, emotions, and belief in conspiracy theories. In M. Butter & P. Knight. (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 181–191). Routledge.

Durkheim, É. (1997). *The division of labour in society*. Free Press (Original work published 1893)

Durkheim, É. (2001). *The elementary forms of religious life*. Oxford University Press (Original work published 1912)

Durkheim, É. (2005). *Suicide. A study in sociology*. Routledge (Original work published 1897)

Dyrendal, A. (2020). Conspiracy theory and religion. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 371–383). Routledge.

Dyrendal, A., Asprem, E., & Robertson, D. G. (2019). Conspiracy theories and the study of religion(s): What we

are talking about, and why it is important. In A. Dyrendal, D. G. Robertson, & E. Asprem (Eds.), *Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion* (pp. 21–47). Brill.

Dyrendal, A., Robertson, D. G., & Asprem, E. (Eds.). (2019). *Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion*. Brill.

Franks, B., Bangerter, A., & Bauer, M. W. (2013). Conspiracy theories as quasi-religious mentality: An integrated account from cognitive science, social representations theory, and frame theory. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00424

Girard, R. (1989). *The scapegoat*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Giry, J., & Gürpınar, D. (2020). Functions and uses of conspiracy theories in authoritarian regimes. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 317–329). Routledge.

Goertzel, T. (1994). Beliefs in conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, *15*(4), 731–742.

Graham, J., & Haidt, J. (2010). Beyond beliefs: Religions bind individuals into moral communities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *14*, 140–150.

Greenawalt, K. (2009). *Religion and the constitution. Vol. 1: Free exercise and fairness*. Princeton University Press.

Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., & Arndt, J. (2008). A uniquely human motivation: Terror management. In J. Y. Shah & W. L. Gardner (Eds.), *Handbook of motivation science* (pp. 113–134). Guilford Press.

Guyau, J.-M. (1897). *The non-religion of the future. A sociological study*. Holt. (Original work published 1887)

Habermas, J. (2005). Vorpolitische Grundlagen des demokratischen Rechtsstaates? [Pre-political foundations of the democratic constitutional state?] In J. Habermas (Ed.), *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion. Philosophische Aufsätze* [Between naturalism and religion: Philosophical essays] (pp. 106–118). Suhrkamp.

Hervieu-Léger, D. (2004). *Pilger und Konvertiten. Religion in Bewegung* [The pilgrim and the convert: Religion in movement]. Ergon.

Hidalgo, O. (2014). *Die Antinomien der Demokratie* [The antinomies of democracy]. Campus.

Hidalgo, O. (2018). *Politische Theologie* [Political theology]. Springer.

Hidalgo, O. (2021). Religion as a paradigm of authority, hierarchy, and (in)equality: On conceptualizing linkages between religious patterns of thought and illiberal politics in modern democracy. In A. Hennig & M. Weiberg-Salzmann (Eds.), *Illiberal politics and religion in Europe and beyond: Concepts, actors, and identity narratives* (pp. 65–92). Campus.

Holmwood, J., & O'Toole, T. (2018). *Countering extremism in British schools? The truth about the Birmingham trojan horse affair*. Policy Press.

Hristov, T. (2019). *Impossible knowledge: Conspiracy theories, power, and truth*. Routledge.

Imhoff, R., & Bruder, M. (2014). Speaking (un-)truth to power: Conspiracy mentality as a generalised political attitude. *European Journal of Personality*, *28*, 25–43.

Jolley, D., & Douglas, K. M. (2014). The social consequences of conspiracism: Exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one's carbon footprint. *British Journal of Psychology*, *105*(1), 35–56.

Jolley, D., Mari, S., & Douglas, K. M. (2020). Consequences of conspiracy theories. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 231–241). Routledge.

Keeley, B. L. (2019). Is belief in providence the same as a belief in conspiracy? In A. Dyrendal, D. G. Robertson, & E. Asprem (Eds.), *Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion* (pp. 70–86). Brill.

Kelsen, H. (2006). *Verteidigung der Demokratie* [Defence of democracy]. Mohr Siebeck.

King, P. (1976). *Toleration*. Allen & Unwin.

Knight, P. (2000). *Conspiracy culture: From the Kennedy assassination to the x-files*. Routledge.

Lantian, A., Muller, D., Nurra, C., & Douglas, K. M. (2017). "I know things they don't know!": The role of need for uniqueness in belief in conspiracy theories. *Social Psychology*, *48*(3), 160–173.

Lee, B. (2020). Radicalisation and conspiracy theories. In M. Butter & P. Knight. (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 344–356). Routledge.

Lipset, S. M., & Raab, E. (1970). *The politics of unreason: Right-wing extremism in America, 1790–1970*. Harper & Row.

Lübbe, H. (2004). Staat und Zivilreligion. Ein Aspekt politischer Legitimität [State and civil religion. An aspect of political legitimacy]. In H. Kleger & A. Müller (Eds.), *Religion des Bürgers. Zivilreligion in Amerika und Europa* [Religion of the citizen: Civil religion in America and Europe] (pp. 195–220). LIT.

Luckmann, T. (1991). *Die unsichtbare Religion* [The invisible religion]. Suhrkamp.

Merton, R. K. (1949). *Social theory and social structure: Toward the codification of theory and research.* Free Press.

Miller, J. M., Saunders, K. L., & Farhart, C. E. (2016). Conspiracy endorsement as motivated reasoning: The moderating roles of political knowledge and trust. *American Journal of Political Science*, *60*(4), 824–844.

Moore, A. (2017). Conspiracies, conspiracy theories and democracy. *Political Studies Review*, *16*(1), 2–12.

Moore, A. (2018). On the democratic problem of conspiracy politics. In J. E. Uscinski (Ed.), *Conspiracy theories and the people who believe them* (pp. 111–121). Oxford University Press.

Moscovici, S. (1987). The conspiracy mentality. In C. F. Graumann & S. Moscovici (Eds.), *Changing conceptions of conspiracy* (pp. 151–169). Springer.

Nera, K., Wagner-Egger, P., Bertin, P., Douglas, K. M.,

& Klein, O. (2021). A power-challenging theory of society, or a conservative mindset? Upward and downward conspiracy theories as ideologically distinct beliefs. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *51*(4/5), 740–757.

Norenzayan, A., Atran, S., Faulkner, J., & Schaller, M. (2006). Memory and mystery: The cultural selection of minimally counterintuitive narratives. *Cognitive Science*, *30*(3), 531–553.

Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019). *Cultural backlash: Trump. Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge University Press.

Orrú, M. (1983). The ethics of anomie: Jean-Marie Guyau and Émile Durkheim. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *34*(4), 499–518.

Orrú, M. (1987). *Anomie. History and meanings*. Allen & Unwin.

Parmigiani, G. (2021). Magic and politics: Conspirituality and Covid-19. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *89*(2), 506–529.

Pigden, C. (1995). Popper revisited, or what is wrong with conspiracy theories? *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, *25*(1), 3–34.

Popper, K. (2002). *The open society and its enemies (4th ed.).* Princeton University Press (Original work published 1963)

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone*: *The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.

Rancière, J. (1998). *Disagreement: Politics and philosophy*. University of Minnesota Press.

Renard, J.-B. (2015). Les causes de l'adhésion aux théories du complot [The causes of adherence to conspiracy theories]. *Diogène*, *249–50*, 107–119.

Robertson, D. G. (2017). The hidden hand: Why religious studies need to take conspiracy theories seriously. *Religion Compass*, *11*(3/4). https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12233

Robertson, D. G., Asprem, E., & Dyrendal, A. (2019). Introducing the field: Conspiracy theory in, about, and as religion. In A. Dyrendal, D. G. Robertson, & E. Asprem (Eds.), *Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion* (pp. 1–18). Brill.

Robertson, D. G., & Dyrendal, A. (2018). Conspiracy theories and religion: Superstition, seekership, and salvation. In J. E. Uscinski (Ed.), *Conspiracy theories and the people who believe them* (pp. 411–421). Oxford University Press.

Rosenblum, N. (Ed.). (2022). *Obligations of citizenship and demands of faith: Religious accommodation in pluralist democracies*. Princeton University Press.

Schließler, C., Hellweg, N., & Decker, O. (2020). Aberglaube, Esoterik und Verschwörungsmentalität in Zeiten der Pandemie [Superstition, esotericism, and conspiracy mentality in times of pandemic]. In O. Decker & E. Brähler (Eds.), *Autoritäre Dynamiken: Alte Ressentiments—Neue Radikalität. Leipziger Autoritarismus Studie 2020* [Authoritarian dynamics: old resentments—New radicalism. Leipzig authori-

tarianism study 2020] (pp. 283–308). Psychosozial Verlag.

Stark, R., & Finke, R. (2000). *Acts of faith: Explaining the human side of religion*. University of California Press.

Stephan, W. G., Ybarra, O., & Rios Morrison, K. (2009). Intergroup threat theory. In T. D. Nelson (Ed.), *Handbook of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination* (pp. 23–56). Taylor & Francis.

Sunstein, C. R., & Vermeule, A. (2009). Symposium on conspiracy theories: Conspiracy theories—Causes and cures. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, *17*(2), 202–227.

Taguieff, P.-A. (2005). *La foire aux Illuminés. Ésotérisme, théories du complot, extrémisme* [The Illuminati fair: Esotericism, conspiracy theories, extremism]. Mille et une nuits.

Taira, T. (2022). *"Taking religion seriously": Essays on the discursive study of religion*. Brill.

Tajfel, H. (1982). *Social identity and intergroup relations*. Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, C. (1991). *The malaise of modernity*. House of Anansi Press.

Taylor, C. (2002). *Varieties of religion today: William James revisited*. Harvard University Press.

Tezcan, L. (2020). *Der Joker der Verschwörung— Verschwörungstheorien als negativer Glaube* [The joker of conspiracy: Conspiracy theories as negative beliefs]. WWU Münster. Exzellenzcluster "Religion & Politik". https://www.uni-muenster.de/Religion-und-Politik/aktuelles/schwerpunkte/epidemien/thema08_verschwoerung.html

Toft, M. D., Philpott, D., & Shah, T. S. (Eds.). (2011). *God's century: Resurgent religion and global politics*. W. W. Norton.

Vail, K. E., Rothschild, Z. K., Weise, D. R., Solomon, S., Pyszczynski, T., & Greenberg, J. (2010). A terror management analysis of the psychological functions of religion. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *14*(1), 84–94.

Van Eck Duymaer van Twist, A., & Newcombe, J. (2019). "Trust me, you can't trust them": Stigmatised knowledge in cults and conspiracies. In A. Dyrendal, D. G. Robertson, & E. Asprem (Eds.), *Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion* (pp. 152–179). Brill.

Van Prooijen, J.-W., & Douglas, K. M. (2017). Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations. *Memory Studies*, *10*(3), 323–333.

Van Prooijen, J.-W., & Jostmann, N. B. (2013). Belief in conspiracy theories: The influence of uncertainty and perceived morality. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *43*(1), 109–115.

Van Prooijen, J.-W., Krouwel, A. P. M., & Pollet, T. V. (2015). Political extremism predicts belief in conspiracy theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *6*(5), 570–578.

Wood, M. J., & Douglas, K. M. (2019). Are conspiracy theories a surrogate for God? In A. Dyrendal, D. G.

Robertson, & E. Asprem (Eds.), *Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion* (pp. 87–105). Brill.

Wood, M. J., & Gray, D. (2019). Right-wing authoritarianism as a predictor of pro-establishment versus anti-establishment conspiracy theories. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *138*, 163–166.

Ysseldyk, R., Matheson, K., & Anisman, H. (2010). Religiosity as identity. Toward an understanding of religion from a social identity perspective. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *14*, 60–71.

About the Author

Oliver Fernando Hidalgo is a senior lecturer at the Department of Politics of the University of Münster and an adjunct professor of political science at the University of Regensburg. From 2015 until 2017, and during the winter term 2022–2023, he has been a visiting professor of political theory at Münster. His main research topics are the history of political thought, democratic theory, politics and religion, and international political theory. Oliver's recent publications include the study "The Role of Religious Actors in the Covid-19-Pandemic: A Theoretically Based Empirical Analysis With Political Recommendations for Action" (2021, together with Alexander Yendell and Carolin Hillenbrand) and the development of a special issue on new antisemitism for *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* (Volume 6, Issue 1, 2022).

Article

Conspiracy Theory Beliefs and Political Trust: The Moderating Role of Political Communication

Bernd Schlipphak [1],*, Mujtaba Isani [2], and Mitja D. Back [3]

[1] Department of Political Science, University of Münster, Germany
[2] German Center for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM), Germany
[3] Department of Psychology, University of Münster, Germany

* Corresponding author (bernd.schlipphak@uni-muenster.de)

Abstract

A plentitude of research has analyzed citizens' belief in conspiracy theories and its individual-level correlates. Yet, the effects of (political) context factors on the causes and effects of individual belief in conspiracy theories are still neglected. However, such context should be especially relevant when it comes to the impact of one's belief in conspiracy theories on one's political preference. In this article, we argue that the communication of governmental actors exerts a moderating influence on the link leading from a belief in conspiracy theories to political attitudes. In a nutshell, the belief in conspiracy theories should make citizens less likely to distrust their government—and the political system in general—in contexts where these theories are shared or at least publicly represented by governmental actors. Using two original data sets with data from Germany, Poland, and Jordan (Study 1) and data from Germany, Poland, Sweden, and France (Study 2), we test our argument based on an overall sample of about 10,000 cases. Our results indicate that higher degrees of generic conspiracy theories beliefs are associated with higher levels of political distrust across countries. Yet, confirming our argument, such an effect takes place less strongly in those countries in which governmental actors use conspiracy theories as a political communication strategy.

Keywords

conspiracy beliefs; conspiracy mentality; conspiracy theories; political communication; political trust

Issue

This article is part of the issue "The Role of Religions and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes" edited by Oliver Hidalgo (University of Münster) and Alexander Yendell (Leipzig University).

1. Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the existence and effect of conspiracy theories—and citizens' belief in them—have become more relevant to politics. While the debate about an actual increase in the number of citizens believing in such theories is still ongoing (see Uscinski et al., 2022), there has been an increasing number of studies on the causes of belief in conspiracy theories over the last 15 years in the fields of psychology and political science alike (for a meta-review see Goreis & Voracek, 2019). Despite this breadth of research, our knowledge about the effects of belief in conspiracy theories on political

attitudes remains limited. Research indicates that this belief may become problematic for societal cohesion as it is associated with populist attitudes and right-wing, left-wing, and religious extremism (Imhoff et al., 2022; Mancosu et al., 2017; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Vegetti & Littvay, 2021; Walter & Drochon, 2020). This previous research has also connected belief in conspiracy theories to closely aligned concepts, such as populism. In the words of Castanho Silva et al. (2017, p. 425): "To make a musical analogy, one could maintain that if populism is the theme, then many conspiracy theories are variations on the theme." Importantly, prior research has only recently started looking into the effect of political

contexts—such as the communication of conspiracy theories by governing actors—when analyzing the impact of belief in conspiracy theories on citizens' political attitudes (Adam-Troian et al., 2021; Imhoff et al., 2022; Marinov & Popova, 2022).

In this article, we set out to explore the question of whether the political communication of governmental actors influences the effect belief in conspiracy theories has on political attitudes: Our argument is that the former does exert a moderating influence on *the link* leading from belief in conspiracy theories to political attitudes. In a nutshell, belief in conspiracy theories should make citizens less likely to distrust their government—and the political system in general—in contexts where these theories are shared or at least publicly represented by governmental actors. In making this argument, we include more recent literature on the active use of conspiracy theories in the political communication of populist and/or authoritarian actors, such as the Chinese, Russian, Hungarian, or Polish governments, hence linking research on belief in conspiracy theories to that of conspiracy theories communication (see, e.g., Davies, 2016; Huang, 2017; Plenta, 2020; Yablokov, 2015; for a more general argument see Hameleers, 2021).

We test our argument by analyzing two innovative studies: Study 1 uses full-scale measures of conspiracy mentality and political trust in three countries (Germany, Jordan, Poland); Study 2 uses a more limited measure of conspiracy mentality in four countries (France, Germany, Poland, Sweden). Our results indicate, first, that higher degrees of generic belief in conspiracy theories is associated with higher levels of political distrust. Yet, confirming our argument, this effect is weaker for citizens living in countries where governmental actors use conspiracy theories as a political communication strategy. Our findings have important implications that we outline in the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

How do conspiracy theories—theories that attribute the causes of key events or situations to secret plots executed by powerful, evil forces—shape political attitudes and behaviors? Conspiracy narratives exist in every society, but much of the literature on conspiracy beliefs in political science has been quite US-oriented. Examples include the John F. Kennedy assassination (McAdams, 2011), the paranoid style of American politics (see van der Linden et al., 2021), Trump's "birther movement" (Drochon, 2018), and the 9/11 attacks (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2004). However, Europe is no stranger to belief in conspiracies. This is historically illustrated with the "protocols of the elders of Zion" and has also been shown empirically in research on conspiracy thinking and mentality (Walter & Drochon, 2020; for important conspiracy mentality concepts see also Brotherton et al., 2013; Bruder et al., 2013).

Such theories may also be prevalent in other areas outside of Europe and America, such as in the former Soviet Union, Latin America, and especially the Middle East, where they have been described as "pervasive" (Brown, 1984, p. 234), "widespread" (Fuller, 1991, p. 21), "innumerable" (Brown, 1980, p. 67), "prominent" (Nyhan & Zeitzoff, 2018, p. 3), and "almost universal" (Field, 1996, p. 167). Most recently, Schlipphak et al. (2021) demonstrated that generic belief in conspiracy theories is much more widespread in Jordan compared to Poland or Germany.

There is a large literature in social and political psychology on the nature and causes of conspiracy theories (for a review and meta-analysis see again Goreis & Voracek, 2019). Early scholars tended to pathologize them as the delusions of an "uncommonly angry mind" (Hofstadter, 1971). This pathological perspective has waned with the growing recognition that conspiracy theories often enjoy broad popular awareness and support. Indeed, scholars have identified several key psychological predispositions that facilitate conspiratorial thinking, including mistrust, cynicism, powerlessness, Machiavellianism, Manichaeanism (belief in a cosmic struggle of good vs. evil), and even superstition (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Douglas & Sutton, 2011; Douglas et al., 2019; Goertzel, 1994; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Swami et al., 2010). They have also shown that conspiratorial thinking approaches something of a general tendency or mentality (Enders et al., 2021; for the operationalization of such a mentality see again Brotherton et al., 2013; Bruder et al., 2013), as believers in one conspiracy theory tend to adopt others as well, even if they factually contradictory (Wood et al., 2012) or concocted by the researchers (Swami et al., 2010).

Despite their prevalence and potential political influence, only few authors have analyzed the political consequences of conspiracy theories. In their recent review article, Douglas et al. (2019, p. 18) note that "research also suggests that CTs [conspiration theories] can influence political attitudes. However, this may depend on people's existing predispositions." They indicate that belief in conspiracy theories may have an effect on prejudice, health-related choices, the denial of scientific evidence (for example, climate change), and workplace engagement. Yet, when it comes to the effect of these beliefs on political attitudes, the evidence is scarce. Jolley and Douglas (2014) have exposed UK undergraduates to articles arguing for or against one of two conspiracy theories: (a) secret plots surrounding the death of Princess Diana and (b) the concoction of climate change. In both cases, the authors found that exposure to pro-conspiracy treatments decreased willingness to participate in relevant institutions, either by voting or reducing their carbon footprint, respectively (for similar findings in the US see Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Moreover, these effects were mediated by feelings of political powerlessness. More recently, several researchers have indicated that belief in conspiracy theories is, moreover, correlated to populist attitudes, religious and left- and right-wing extremism, as well as political violence (Castanho Silva

et al., 2017; Mancosu et al., 2017; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Vegetti & Littvay; 2021). In addition, Walter and Drochon (2022) find a correlation between trust in public figures and belief in conspiracy theories using an analysis of nine countries, including the US and European countries.

So far, however, research on belief in conspiracy theories among citizens has not yet analyzed whether the communication of governmental actors may have an effect on the correlation between belief in conspiracy theories and political attitudes. This is surprising given an increasing number of research on the use of conspiracy theories as tools of communication, especially among populist and/or authoritarian governments. From the 1980s onwards, the use of conspiracy theories by political actors has been outlined by several authors (e.g., Brown, 1984; Field, 1996; Fuller, 1991; Gray, 2010; Radnitz, 2022). More recently, research has focused on large authoritarian countries—such as China or Russia—and countries that would have been considered rather stable democracies until five years ago, such as Poland or Hungary. For Russia, Yablokov (2015) demonstrates how conspiracy theories form a substantive part of coverage in the governmental-led broadcast *Russia Today*. Davies (2016) illustrates how and what kind of conspiracy theories are used by the Polish government and, more specifically, Jaroslaw Kasczynski. Plenta (2020) demonstrates that conspiracy theories with George Soros as the conspiratorial actor are strategically employed in Central Europe. And while there is some research indicating that increased levels of such conspiracy theories communication may result in increasing levels of belief in conspiracy theories among citizens (Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Einstein & Glick, 2015; Hameleers, 2021; Kim & Cao, 2016; Schlipphak et al., 2021), no research has so far focused on whether conspiracy theories communication may actually impact the link between belief in conspiracy theories and political attitudes.

3. Theory and Hypotheses

We argue that the context of the political system—more specifically, the degree to which a government uses conspiracy theories as tools of communication—moderates the effect of belief in conspiracy theories on governmental distrust. And why should there be an effect of belief in conspiracy theories on governmental distrust in the first place? In a nutshell, the following mechanism should be at work: At the level of citizens, believing in conspiracy theories is associated with a higher probability of showing favorable attitudes toward populism and populist actors. These attitudes strongly correlate with distrust in mainstream political actors, who are blamed by populist actors for being corrupt and betraying the true will of the people. Hence, as parts of the literature have already indicated (e.g., Imhoff et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2016), we should expect a negative effect of belief in conspiracy theories on governmental trust across political contexts. Thus we hypothesize:

H1: A citizen believing in conspiracy theories will be more likely to distrust the government compared to a citizen not believing in conspiracy theories.

Yet, this expectation needs to be further specified in our view, considering the important role of context factors, more specifically, the context of political or governmental communication in a given country. When looking at the communication of populist and mainstream political actors, the research so far indicates that populist actors use conspiracy theories as a communication tool to a much larger degree than is true for mainstream political actors (see Davies, 2016; Hameleers, 2021; Huang, 2017; Plenta, 2020; Yablokov, 2015). From a conceptual point of view, this makes perfect sense, as the concept of populism and that of conspiracy theories share a lot of components, such as the separation between an evil outgroup and a (homogenous) ingroup, the latter being betrayed by members of the outgroup that only care for themselves and their interests.

In the past, the roles of populists and mainstream political actors were rather set: Populists have always been part of the opposition, while the government has been formed by actors from the political mainstream. Over the last 15 years or so, this picture has drastically changed, with populist actors—who are using conspiracy theories as communication tools—becoming part of the government in more and more countries, among them the US, Brazil, Poland, and Hungary. The question then emerges: Why should citizens' beliefs in conspiracy theories still be negatively associated with their trust in governmental actors, given that exactly those governmental actors seem to share (and even reinforce) the conspiracy theories citizens believe in?

Our answer to this question—and the main argument of this article—is that it should make a difference in the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and governmental (dis)trust whether the government actually uses conspiracy theories as a tool of political communication. In fact, if governmental actors are using such theories, the effect of believing in conspiracy theories on governmental trust may be reversed, with those citizens not believing in conspiracies becoming more and more skeptical of the current government, and those believing in conspiracy theories becoming more favorable toward it. In general, then, if governmental actors share conspiracy theories, we would expect the direction of the effect of belief in conspiracy theories on governmental trust to become positive instead of negative. Yet, such a straightforward change of direction effects should be prevented by the fact that conspiracy mentality is, per default, robustly related to distrusting politicians (and even humans) in general. Thus, several conspiracy believers will remain skeptical of political actors and the political system. We should expect these people to further distrust governmental actors even if the latter communicated using conspiracy theories as well. In sum, we expect governmental communication of conspiracy

theories to weaken but not reverse the negative relationship between conspiratorial belief and governmental trust at the individual level. Thus we hypothesize:

> H2: The effect expected in H1 is weaker in countries where governmental actors use conspiracy theories within their political communication.

To test our hypotheses, we implemented two subsequent surveys among close to 10,000 citizens in five countries from the European and MENA regions. In the remainder, we will introduce and report the findings of each of the two studies separately.

4. Study 1: Research Design and Empirical Findings

In Study 1, using the survey agencies KANTAR and NAMAS, we ran a survey among 4,113 respondents in Germany, Poland, and Jordan. For each of these three countries, the aim was to sample 1,300 participants. The actual number of participants added up to 1,451 in Poland, 1,358 in Germany, and 1,304 in Jordan. In Germany and Poland, the survey was implemented as an online survey (computer-assisted web interview), while in Jordan we used the format of face-to-face interviews (computer-assisted personal interview).

4.1. Generic Conspiracy Beliefs

As a measure for generic conspiracy beliefs, we included the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire as proposed by Bruder et al. (2013). The original questionnaire consists of five statements on general conspiratorial items, but one of them comes with cross-cultural problems, especially if asked in an authoritarian setting such as Jordan, where "government agencies closely monitor all citizens." Hence, we decided to only ask participants for the remaining four statements. For each of these four statements, participants were asked to rate their likelihood of being true, ranging from 0% to 100% (with options changing in steps of 10%).

4.2. Governmental Trust

As a measure of political and nonpolitical trust, we asked respondents to indicate—on a scale from 0 to 10—how much they trusted several institutions or persons, with 0 indicating "no trust at all" and 10 indicating "complete trust." This measure has been widely used in cross-country surveying, such as in the European Social Survey (2022). Besides asking about respondents' trust in parliament, the legal system, the police, the European Parliament, the United Nations, and the army, we also asked about their trust in federal governments. In Jordan, we asked about respondents' trust in the prime minister. In contrast to asking respondents anything about the monarchy, asking about their evaluation of or trust in the prime minister is possible and generates meaningful

answers even in such an autocratic context (Shamaileh & Chaábane, 2022).

4.3. Context Factor: Governmental Communication of Conspiracy Theories

As we have argued and demonstrated elsewhere in more detail (Bollwerk et al., 2021), the three countries vary in governmental usage of conspiracy theories as an instrument of communication. The Polish government led by the right-wing populist PiS party and its main figure Jaroslav Kaczynski has been indicated to make Poland a country in which "conspiracy beliefs seem ubiquitous in social and political life" (Soral et al., 2018, p. 372). While there are indications that governmental actors—including the Jordan monarchy—also use and explicitly accept the use of conspiracy theories by political and media elites, conspiracy theories on the elite level seem to be lesser distributed compared to the Polish case. In Germany, we found no indication of any of the governmental actors distributing conspiracy theories (see our elaborate exploration in Bollwerk et al., 2021). Hence, based on H2 we would expect to find the strongest negative effect of belief in conspiracy theories on governmental trust in Germany and the smallest effect in Poland. We, therefore, chose to run a regression model using interaction terms separately for Jordan and Poland, making the qualitatively adapted expectations based on H2 directly observable.

To control for potential other effects of the country context, we include country dummies for two out of the three countries (with Germany being the baseline case). Such additional effects may include variation in the historical role of conspiracy theories in social life, the variation in educational systems and political knowledge, the variation in settings of the political system, and so on.

4.4. Empirical Findings

The descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables for each country in Study 1 are shown in Table 1. Jordan had the highest mean for the dependent variable of governmental trust, followed by Germany and Poland with similar levels of governmental trust. Although it may seem counterintuitive to have stronger governmental trust in authoritarian countries, previous research has shown that governmental trust is higher in authoritarian countries, which could be due to the fear of the perceived survey sponsor in authoritarian countries (Isani & Schlipphak, 2020). Conspiracy mentality is highest in Jordan, followed by Poland and then by Germany. As for the control variables, the means show that the samples were balanced regarding gender and age, with the share of female participants being 53.3% (Poland), 52.7% (Germany), and 49.8% (Jordan), and the mean age showing a somewhat older sample in Germany (46.9) compared to Poland (40.8) and Jordan (40.3). Higher education is measured as a

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for Study 1.

Variables	Germany		Poland		Jordan		
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.–Max.
Dependent variable							
Governmental trust	4.07 (1259)	2.68	4.06 (1199)	2.36	5.57 (1304)	3.25	0–10
Independent variables							
Conspiracy belief	6.54 (1225)	2.08	6.67 (1261)	2.00	8.06 (1225)	1.72	0–10
Control variables							
Female	0.53 (1300)	0.50	0.53 (1305)	0.50	0.50 (1304)	0.50	0–1
Age	46.85 (1286)	13.35	40.76 (1300)	12.68	40.27 (1304)	14.87	18–85
Higher education	0.76 (1175)	0.43	0.89(1121)	0.31	0.71 (1304)	0.47	0–1

Note: Number of observations in parentheses.

dichotomous variable. In Germany and Poland, this is coded as 1 if the respondent has more than 12 years of school education. In Jordan, this is coded as 1 if the respondent has had education above high school. Higher education is lowest in the Jordan sample, followed by our samples in Germany and Poland. Yet, these differences may also be caused by the different education systems.

Table 2 shows the results of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression that were estimated to test the main hypotheses of our article. In the regression results shown, Germany is the comparison (omitted) country variable. The more citizens believed in conspiracy theories, the less they trusted their government (H1). In addition, and as expected in H2, the relationship between conspiracy belief and the government was most substantive in the German context, followed by Jordan and then by Poland, relating to each of the contexts of government. Figure 1 visualizes this effect in

a more straightforward way, demonstrating that the impact of conspiracy mentality on governmental trust was strongest for respondents in Germany and weakest for Polish respondents.

As far as the control variables are concerned, gender was significantly related to trust in government, with women being more trusting. Education was not related to trust in government and neither was age. The non-effect of education seems contra-intuitive but it may be caused by a suppression effect of the context. Indeed, when running the models separately in the three countries, education was positively correlated to trust in government in Germany and negatively related to governmental trust in Poland. This finding emphasizes that the effect of education levels on governmental trust was dependent on the context, not on a general education effect mediated by social trust, as some would assume.

Table 2. Ordinary least squares (OLS) explaining trust in government in their respective contexts.

	Trust in Government
Independent variables	
Conspiracy belief	−0.58*** (0.04)
Poland	−2.93*** (0.38)
Jordan	−0.12 (0.45)
Poland*conspiracy belief	0.45*** (0.05)
Jordan*conspiracy belief	0.31*** (0.06)
Controls	
Female	0.36*** (0.09)
Age	0.01 (0.00)
Higher education	−0.07 (0.10)
N	3,562
R^2	13%

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; * = significant at the 0.05 level; ** = significant at the 0.01 level; *** = significant at the 0.001 level.
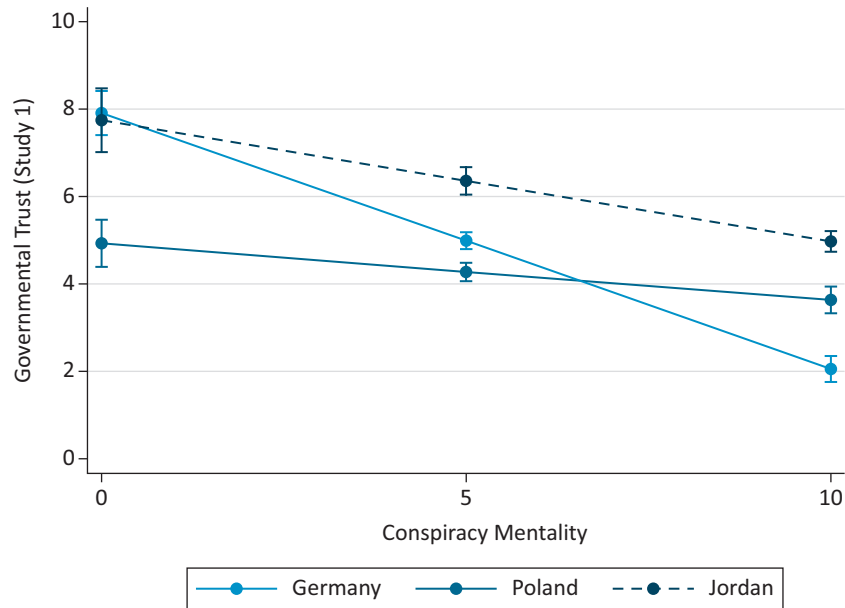
Figure 1. Predicted effects of conspiracy mentality on governmental trust by country.

5. Study 2: Research Design and Findings

In our second study, again using the survey agency KANTAR, we fielded a survey among 5,011 respondents in Germany (1,402), France (1,208), Sweden (1,200), and Poland (1,201). Study 2 was fielded in a different project context compared to Study 1, so we were only able to cover Germany and Poland again, while Jordan as a case stydy had to be dropped. Despite the change in countries between studies, the plurality of countries allows us to test our innovative argument in a more comparative and reliable way than previous studies, mostly focusing on only one or two countries (for an exception see Adam-Troian et al., 2021; Imhoff et al., 2022). Also, in contrast to the online and face-to-face survey modes used in Study 1, we fielded a computer-assisted telephone interview survey for Study 2. To correct for the slightly biased samples when it comes to gender, age, and education, we used weighting factors provided by the data collection agency.

5.1. Generic Conspiracy Belief

To measure generic conspiracy beliefs, we asked respondents to indicate to what degree they agree with the following statement: "There are many important things happening in the world which are steered by influential groups and which the public is never informed about." A scale from 1 ("do not at all agree") to 6 ("completely agree") was drawn.

5.2. Governmental Trust

To measure citizens' trust in one's federal government, we used the same indicator as in Study 1, with 0 indicating "no trust at all" and 10 "indicating complete trust."

5.3. Context Factor: Governmental Communication of Conspiracy Theories

When comparing the four countries in Study 2, we observe that one is run by a populist party (Poland), while in the other three countries, the respective largest populist party that is considered to spread conspiracy theories is in stark opposition to the government in place. Following our expectations in H2, we would therefore expect strong negative effects of generic conspiracy beliefs on governmental trust in Germany, France, and Sweden, and weaker effects in Poland. Therefore, we run a regression model with an interaction term measuring the difference of conspiratorial beliefs effects between respondents in Poland (with a government using conspiracy theories communication) and all other countries (with no governmental conspiracy theories communication). To control for potential other effects of the country context, we again included country dummies for three out of the four countries (with Germany being again the baseline case).

5.4. Empirical Findings

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for the variables in Study 2. In this set of data, average governmental trust was highest in Germany, followed by Sweden, France, and Poland. Mean conspiracy belief was highest in Poland, followed by France, Sweden and Germany. Using weights provided by the survey agency, the sample was also well-balanced in regard to gender, age and education. In this study we used the international standard classification of education (ISCED) to measure the education variable which provides more comparable results.

The results of Table 4 again confirmed the expectations formalized in H1 and H2. Germany, here again, is

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Study 2.

Variables	Germany Mean	Std. Dev.	Poland Mean	Std. Dev.	France Mean	Std. Dev.	Sweden Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.–Max.
Dependent variable									
Governmental trust	6.57 (1399)	2.57	2.87 (1196)	3.15	4 .76 (1202)	2.67	6.36 (1196)	2.51	0–10
Independent variables									
Conspiracy belief	3.73 (1362)	1.67	4.38 (1171)	1.59	4.26 (1189)	1.64	3.91 (1166)	1.54	1–6
Control variables									
Female	0.47 (1402)	0.50	0.46 (1200)	0.50	0.51 (1208)	0.50	0.46 (1201)	0.50	0–1
Age	54.05 (1400)	16.50	50.87 (1198)	16.57	60.05 (1206)	16.20	58.51 (1200)	17.30	18–97
Education	4.45 (1387)	2.12	4.91 (1196)	1.94	4.05 (1202)	2.18	4.38 (1191)	1.80	0–8

Note: Number of observations in parentheses.

the comparison (omitted) country variable. Conspiracy beliefs had a strong negative effect on governmental trust (= H1). In addition, the significant effect of the interaction term in Table 4 as well as the predicted effects plotted in Figure 2 demonstrate that this effect of conspiracy belief on governmental trust was weaker for Polish citizens compared to citizens living in countries in which the government are not known for including conspiracy theories in its political communication. When it comes to the control variables, being female was positively and significantly related to governmental trust as was age and education was also positively and significantly related to governmental trust. Still, the overall model masked some differences between countries when running the model separately for each country, with gender having had a significant effect in Germany and Sweden but not in Poland and France, the age effect having been not significant in Sweden and education not having had a significant impact on governmental trust in Poland.

6. Robustness Checks

To test the robustness of the presented findings, we ran several robustness checks all of which can be found in more detail in the Supplementary File. Here, we only report the main findings of these checks. For Study 1,

Table 4. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Explaining Trust in Government in their Respective Contexts for Study 2.

	Trust in Government
Independent variables	
Conspiracy belief	−0.43*** (0.04)
Poland	−1.82*** (0.14)
France	−1.82*** (0.14)
Sweden	−0.31*** (0.14)
Poland*conspiracy belief	0.21*** (0.01)
Controls	
Female	0.36*** (0.10)
Age	0.02*** (0.00)
Education	0.12*** (0.03)
N	4,838
R^2	27.1%

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; * = significant at the 0.05 level; ** = significant at the 0.01 level; *** = significant at the 0.001 level.
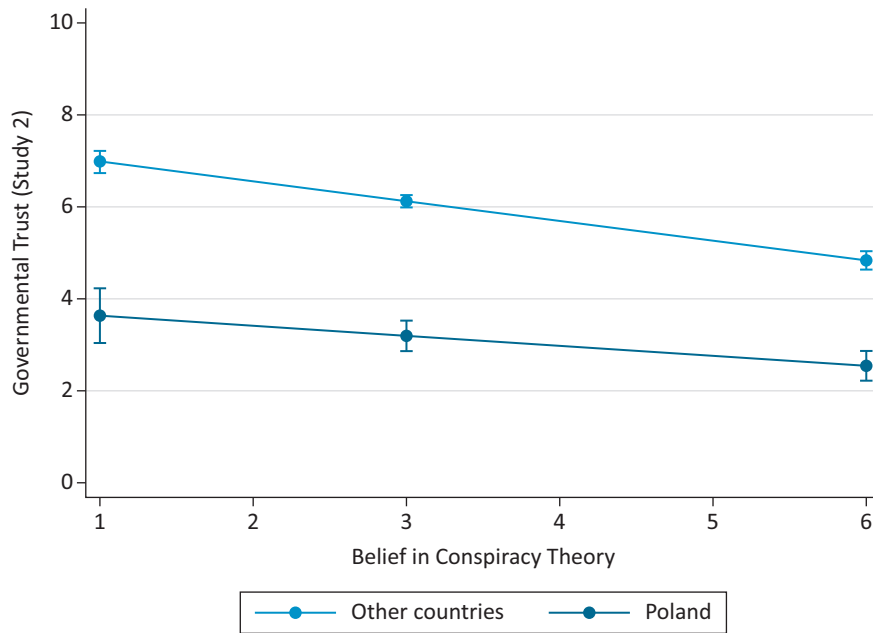
Figure 2. Predicted effects of conspiracy belief on governmental trust.

in our survey, we asked a few questions that could be covariates in our model, namely religiosity, political efficacy, and support for populism (in the German and Polish contexts). Even with the addition of these covariates, our results remained similar (see Supplementary File, Tables A1 and A2). For Study 2, to check whether our results were no artifacts of model selection, we additionally estimated ordinal logit models which also resulted in similar results in terms of the direction and significance of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables (see Supplementary File, Table B1). Furthermore, we ran the model separately by country (see Supplementary File, Table B2). In general, this resulted in findings that further corroborate our theoretical expectations and the models plotted in the main text. Yet, one surprising finding emerged: The effect of conspiracy belief on governmental trust was rather low in Sweden as well, with the effect size being close to the effect size in Poland. We do not have an ad-hoc explanation for this but will come back on it in the conclusion. Overall, we believe our results estimating the relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and governmental trust in the respective country contexts are robust in terms of model selection.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we were interested in whether the political communication of governmental actors influences the effect belief in conspiracy theories has on political attitudes. We argued that the use of conspiracy theories by governmental actors may actually moderate the impact of this belief on governmental trust, with conspiracy beliefs leading to governmental distrust less strongly in those countries in which governmental actors make use of conspiracy theories. To test this argument, we ran two studies in five countries from the European and the MENA regions. The test overall confirmed our argument: Belief in conspiracy theories is related to higher levels of governmental distrust but less so in countries in which governmental actors refer to conspiracy theories themselves.

With these findings, we contribute to two so far rather separate but theoretically and empirically linked research traditions interested in the political use and effects of conspiracy theories. First, we feed into a growing debate about context factors directly affecting the belief in conspiracy theories or moderating the effect of the latter on political and societal attitudes (e.g., Schlipphak et al., 2021; Walter & Drochon, 2020). Second, we contribute to the discussion about the use of conspiracy theories by governmental and populist actors, and its effects on governmental support and more general political attitudes (e.g., Hameleers, 2021; Huang, 2017; Plenta, 2020). Our findings not only inform and connect these lines of research, they also demonstrate that analyzing in greater depth to what extent communication of conspiracy theories may actually help in sustaining public support for governmental actors is a very promising avenue for future research. In the remainder, we discuss three interesting avenues for future research.

The use of conspiracy theories by governmental actors did not have the effect that the majority of believers in conspiracy theories consider governmental actors trustworthy. That is, the distrust toward elites that is inherent to conspiracy theories was not completely canceled out just because these elites share those conspiracy theories. It is sometimes assumed that the use of conspiracy theories by authoritarian actors such as Viktor Orban (in Hungary) or Jaroslav Kaczynski

(in Poland) attracts exactly those parts of the citizenry that believe in conspiracies and have therefore been considered to withdraw from politics and elections. These assumptions are backed up by our findings given that conspiracy-driven distrust was attenuated in countries with populist leaders: At the same time, however, it was not reversed and not even blocked. Believers in conspiracy theories still distrusted their government more than non-believers in populist-led countries with political leaders that apply conspiracy theories in their political communication. These results speak in favor of a strong generic distrusting effect of conspiracy theories belief that applies across political contexts. In addition, it corroborates the idea of an additional weaker context-specific effect of conspiracy theories beliefs that is sensitive to political communication and that particularly applies in democratic, non-populist-led countries most strongly opposing conspiracy theories in their political communication. Future research should further explore and test the opposing ways in which belief in conspiracy theories can impact political trust.

Second, we did not delve into the debate about the difference between strategic communication of conspiracy theories vis-a-vis the existence of conspiracy theories in everyday life public debates. As one of our reviewers correctly pointed out, countries may not only differ in whether political elites use or do not use conspiracy theories strategically but also in the existence and acceptance of conspiracy theories as part of common public narratives. This is important because the use of conspiracy theories in the communication of political actors may be dependent on the degree to which such theories are traditionally shared among the public. In this article, we were not able to further explore this interesting differentiation. It should be tackled in a more fine-grained manner in future research.

Third, our findings come with some obvious limitations that need to be overcome in future research. Due to the usual (financial and project-related) restrictions of scientific research, our findings are based on a selected sample of countries. Although we were able to move beyond most previous research by including four European countries and one country stemming from the MENA region, this still is a very limited sample of countries. Future research has to test our arguments based on a broader sample of country cases, preferably from a larger number of regional contexts. In addition, while H2 is confirmed by both studies, we don't find that much of a difference in Study 2 between the effect sizes of conspiracy beliefs in Poland and Sweden, the latter being among the countries in which we consider conspiracy theories being the least used by governmental actors. We have no ad-hoc explanation for this surprising finding but it needs to be flagged out here and analyzed in future research. The same holds for the question of causality. Our analytical approach is based on the assumption that conspiracy mentality has a causal influence on political trust. Indeed, a conspiracy mentality should be more deeply rooted in the personality of respondents than political trust. Despite these theoretical arguments, given the cross-sectional data at hand, we were not able to provide a strong test of these causal assumptions. Hence, besides replicating our findings, future research might delve more deeply into the issue of causality, either by using panel data or experimental designs.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

References

Abalakina-Paap, M., Stephan, W. G., Craig, T., & Gregory, L. (1999). Beliefs in conspiracies. *Political Psychology*, *20*, 637–647.

Adam-Troian, J., Wagner-Egger, P., Motyl, M., Arciszewski, T., Imhoff, R., Zimmer, F., Klein, O., Babinska, M., Bangerter, A., Bilewicz, M., Blanuša, N., Bovan, K., Bužarovska, R., Cichocka, A., Çelebi, E., Delouvée, S., Douglas, K. M., Dyrendal, A., Gjoneska, B., . . . van Prooijen, J.-W. (2021). Investigating the links between cultural values and belief in conspiracy theories: The key roles of collectivism and masculinity. *Political Psychology*, *42*(4), 597–618.

Bollwerk, M., Schlipphak, B., & Back, M. D. (2022). Development and validation of the Perceived Societal Marginalization Scale. *European Journal of Psychological Assessment*, *38*(2), 137–149. https://doi.org/10.1027/1015-5759/a000651

Brotherton, R., French, C. C., & Pickering, A. D. (2013). Measuring belief in conspiracy theories: The generic conspiracist beliefs scale. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00279

Brown, L. C. (1984). *International politics and the Middle East: Old rules, dangerous game*. Princeton University Press.

Brown, W. R. (1980). *The last crusade: A negotiator's Middle East handbook*. Nelson-Hall.

Bruder, M., Haffke, P., Neave, N., Nouripanah, N., & Imhoff, R. (2013). Measuring individual differences in generic beliefs in conspiracy theories across cultures: Conspiracy mentality questionnaire. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00225

Castanho Silva, B., Vegetti, F., & Littvay, L. (2017). The

elite is up to something: Exploring the relation between populism and belief in conspiracy theories. *Swiss Political Science Review*, *23*(4), 423–443.

Davies, C. (2016, February 16). The conspiracy theorists who have taken over Poland. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/16/conspiracy-theorists-who-have-taken-over-poland

Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2008). The hidden impact of conspiracy theories: Perceived and actual influence of theories surrounding the death of Princess Diana. *Journal of Social Psychology*, *148*, 210–221.

Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2011). Does it take one to know one? Endorsement of conspiracy theories is influenced by personal willingness to conspire. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *50*, 544–552.

Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding Conspiracy Theories. *Political Psychology*, *40*, 3–35.

Drochon, H. (2018). Who believes in conspiracy theories in Great Britain and Europe? In J. E. Uscinski (Ed.), *Conspiracy theories and the people who believe them* (pp. 337–346). Oxford University Press.

Einstein, K., & Glick, D. (2015). Do I think BLS data are BS? The consequences of conspiracy theories. *Political Behavior*, *37*, 679–701.

Enders, A. M., Uscinski, J. E., Klofstad, C. A., Seelig, M. I., Wuchty, S., Murthi, M. N., Premaratne, K., & Funchion, J. R. (2021). Do conspiracy beliefs form a belief system? Examining the structure and organization of conspiracy beliefs. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, *9*(1), 255–271.

European Social Survey. (2022). *European Social Survey*. https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org

Field, M. (1996). *Inside the Arab world*. Harvard University Press.

Fuller, G. (1991). *The center of the universe: The geopolitics of Iran*. Westview Press.

Gentzkow, M. A., & Shapiro, J. M. (2004). Media, education and anti-Americanism in the Muslim world. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *18*(3), 117–133.

Goertzel, T. (1994). Belief in conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, *15*(4), 731–742.

Goreis, A., & Voracek, M. (2019). A systematic review and meta-analysis of psychological research on conspiracy beliefs: Field characteristics, measurement instruments, and associations with personality traits. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00205

Gray, M. (2010). *Conspiracy theories in the Arab world: Sources and politics* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Hameleers, M. (2021). They are selling themselves out to the enemy! The content and effects of populist conspiracy theories. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *33*(1), 38–56.

Hofstadter, R. (1971). The paranoid style in American politics. In D. B. Davis (Ed.), *The fear of conspiracy* (pp. 2–8). Cornell University Press.

Huang, H. (2017). A war of (mis)Information: The political effect of rumors and rumor rebuttals in an authoritarian country. *British Journal of Political* Science, *47*(2), 283–311.

Imhoff, R., Lamberty, P., & Klein, O. (2018). Using power as a negative cue: How conspiracy mentality affects epistemic trust in sources of historical knowledge. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *44*(9), 1364–1379.

Imhoff, R., Zimmer, F., Klein, O., António, J. H. C., Babinska, M., Bangerter, A., Bilewicz, M., Blanuša, N., Bovan, K., Bužarovska, R., Cichocka, A., Delouvée, S., M. Douglas, K., Dyrendal, A., Etienne, T., Gjoneska, B., Graf, S., Gualda, E., Hirschberger, G., . . . van Prooijen, J.-W. (2022). Conspiracy mentality and political orientation across 26 countries. *Nature Human Behavior*, *6*, 392–403.

Isani, M., & Schlipphak, B. (2020). The role of societal cues in explaining attitudes toward international organizations: The least likely case of authoritarian contexts. *Political Research Exchange*, *2*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2020.1771189

Jolley, D., & Douglas, K. M. (2014). The social consequences of conspiracism: Exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one's carbon footprint. *British Journal of Psychology*, *105*(1), 35–56.

Kim, M., & Cao, X. (2016). The impact of exposure to media messages promoting government conspiracy theories on distrust in the government: Evidence from a two-stage randomized experiment. *International Journal of Communication*, *10*, 3803–3827.

Mancosu, M., Vassallo, S., & Vezzoni, C. (2017). Believing in conspiracy theories: Evidence from an exploratory analysis of Italian survey data. *South European Society and Politics*, *22*(3), 327–344.

Marinov, N., & Popova, M. (2022). Will the real conspiracy please stand up: Sources of post-communist democratic failure. *Perspectives on Politics*, *20*(1), 222–236.

McAdams, J. (2011). *JFK assassination logic: How to think about claims of conspiracy*. Potomac Books.

Miller, J. M., Saunders, K. L., & Farhart, C. E. (2016). Conspiracy endorsement as motivated reasoning: The moderating roles of political knowledge and trust. *American Journal of Political Science*, *60*(4), 824–844.

Nyhan, B., & Zeitzoff, T. (2018). Conspiracy and misperception belief in the Middle East and North Africa. *The Journal of Politics*, *80*(4), 1400–1404.

Oliver, J. E., & Wood, T. J. (2014). Conspiracy theories and the paranoid style(s) of mass opinion. *American Journal of Political Science*, *58*(4), 952–966.

Plenta, P. (2020). Conspiracy theories as a political instrument: Utilization of anti-Soros narratives in Central Europe. *Contemporary Politics*, *26*(5), 512–530.

Radnitz, S. (2022). Why democracy fuels conspiracy theories. *Journal of Democracy*, *33*(2), 147–161.

Schlipphak, B., Bollwerk, M., & Back, M. (2021). Beliefs in

conspiracy theories (CT): The role of country context. *Political Research Exchange*, *3*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2021.1949358

Shamaileh, A., & Chaábane, Y. (2022). Institutional favoritism, income, and political trust: Evidence from Jordan. *Comparative Politics*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.5129/001041522X16331935725154

Soral, W., Bilewicz, M., & Winiewski, M. (2018). Exposure to hate speech increases prejudice through desensitization. *Aggressive Behavior*, *44*(2), 136–146.

Swami, V., Chamorro-Premuzic, T., & Furnham, A. (2010). Unanswered questions: A preliminary investigation of personality and individual difference predictors of 9/11 conspiracist beliefs. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *24*, 749–761.

Uscinski, J., Enders, A., Klofstad C., Seelig M., Drochon H., Premaratne, K., & Murthi, M. (2022). Have beliefs in conspiracy theories increased over time? *PLOS ONE*, *17*(7). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0270429

Uscinski, J., & Parent, J. (2014). *American conspiracy theories*. Oxford University Press.

van der Linden, S., Panagopoulos, C., Azevedo, F., & Jost, J. T. (2021). The paranoid style in American politics revisited: An ideological asymmetry in conspiratorial thinking. *Political Psychology*, *42*(1), 23–51.

Vegetti, F., & Littvay, L. (2021). Belief in conspiracy theories and attitudes toward political violence. *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, *52*(1), 18–32.

Walter, A. S., & Drochon, H. (2020). Conspiracy thinking in Europe and America: A comparative study. *Political Studies*, *70*(2), 483–501.

Wood, M., Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2012). Dead and alive: Beliefs in contradictory conspiracy theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *3*, 767–773.

Yablokov, I. (2015). Conspiracy theories as a Russian public diplomacy tool: The case of Russia Today (RT). *Politics*, *35*(3/4), 301–315.

About the Authors

Bernd Schlipphak is a professor of political science at the University of Münster. After completing his PhD in 2009 at the University of Freiburg, he worked as a postdoc at the University of Salzburg and the University of Goettingen before joining Münster. His work focuses on the intersections between political psychology, political communication, and international politics and has been published in journals such as the *Journal of European Public Policy*, the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, and the *Review of International Organizations*.

Mujtaba Isani (PhD) is a research fellow at the German Center for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM). After completing his PhD at the University of Münster in 2017, he has worked at the University of Mannheim, University of Münster, King Fahd University, and Habib University. He uses computational and experimental methods to answer various questions in the social sciences relating to public opinion, immigrants, extremism, religion, political trust, and international organizations.

Mitja D. Back completed his PhD in 2007 at the University of Leipzig. In 2011 he received the William-Stern prize for outstanding innovative work in the field of personality psychology from the German Psychological Association. Since 2012, he works as a full professor at the University of Münster where he is chair of the psychological assessment and personality psychology section. His research focuses on the conceptualization, assessment, and development of personality as well as its individual, social, and societal consequences.

Article

When Believing in Divine Immanence Explains Vaccine Hesitancy: A Matter of Conspiracy Beliefs?

Riccardo Ladini * and Cristiano Vezzoni

Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan, Italy

* Corresponding author (riccardo.ladini@unimi.it)

Abstract
This article analyzes the relationship between religiosity and vaccine hesitancy by highlighting the role of a specific dimension of religiosity that makes some people more prone to explaining health conditions as a divine agency—the belief in the immanent presence of the divine in everyday life. Accordingly, these people may undervalue the role of vaccination as a solution to cope with a pandemic and may be more skeptical of vaccines. We suggest a mechanism explaining the relationship between religiosity and vaccine hesitancy by focusing on the mediating role of beliefs in conspiracy theories, given that belief in divine immanence and conspiracy theories share the common trait of attributing agency to hidden forces. Beliefs in conspiracy theories, in turn, have been shown to be among the strongest predictors of vaccine hesitancy. By using a moderated mediation analysis on Italian survey data collected during the Covid-19 pandemic, we show that such a mechanism helps explain the relationship between believing in divine immanence and vaccine hesitancy among people not adhering to institutional religiosity. In contrast, this mechanism does not apply when the immanent conception of the divine is framed within a system of beliefs belonging to institutional religion.

Keywords
conspiracy beliefs; Covid-19; religiosity; vaccine hesitancy

Issue
This article is part of the issue "The Role of Religions and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes" edited by Oliver Hidalgo (University of Münster) and Alexander Yendell (Leipzig University).

1. Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the public debate largely focused on the vaccine against SARS-CoV-2. Both the media and academics largely turned their attention to factors associated with vaccine hesitancy, defined as "delay in acceptance or refusal of vaccination despite the availability of vaccination services" (MacDonald & SAGE Working Group on Vaccine Hesitancy, 2015, p. 4163). Previous research has identified convenience, confidence, and complacency as the three main factors associated with vaccine hesitancy (MacDonald & SAGE Working Group on Vaccine Hesitancy, 2015). Moreover, several recent studies have shown that, at the individual level, Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy is socially, psychologically, and politically patterned (Gerretsen et al., 2021;

Lazarus et al., 2020), analogously to hesitancy toward other vaccines (Bish et al., 2011; Makarovs & Achterberg, 2017) and generic vaccine skepticism (Engin & Vezzoni, 2020; Hornsey et al., 2018). While some variables have shown a consistent association with vaccine hesitancy (e.g., level of education, income, trust in politics and science, political affiliation), the association with religiosity needs to be further investigated.

There is some evidence that attending religious services is positively associated with vaccine hesitancy in the US (Barnack et al., 2010; Constantine & Jerman, 2007). Recent studies also report a negative relationship between religiosity and Covid-19 vaccination intention (Bok et al., 2021; Olagoke et al., 2021). Nonetheless, in some countries, no relationship between individual religiosity and vaccine hesitancy has emerged (e.g., for the

Italian context see Engin & Vezzoni, 2020). Moreover, a study exploring reasons for Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy in seven European countries found religious motivation the least frequently mentioned reason (in only 1% of those unsure about getting vaccinated and 2% of those not wanting to get vaccinated; see Neumann-Böhme et al., 2020).

A possible explanation for the inconsistent findings on the relationship between religiosity and vaccine hesitancy could stem from the fact that the relationship varies depending on the specific aspects of religiosity considered. It is therefore necessary to acknowledge the multidimensional nature of the concept of individual religiosity (Glock, 1959) and to explicitly clarify what one means when evoking individual religiosity. The present study focuses specifically on a religious dimension we operationally define as a belief in the immanent presence of the divine in everyday life, namely, attributing divine agency to mundane events. According to this definition, the locus of control is beyond individual choice and is left to supernatural forces. We expect these beliefs to be related to vaccine hesitancy.

To substantiate this relationship, we consider a mechanism suggesting that the effect of beliefs in divine immanence is mediated by conspiratorial beliefs. In our view, the mediation effect builds up in two steps: on the one hand, assumptions about divine agency in one's life share common traits with conspiratorial ideation (e.g., Dyrendal et al., 2018; Frenken et al., 2022; Ladini, 2022; Ward & Voas, 2011); on the other hand, conspiratorial beliefs strongly predict vaccine hesitancy (e.g., Jennings et al., 2021).

The mediating mechanism of conspiratorial beliefs is not always present, as it is conditional on the framework in which a person places their immanent religious belief. When it is framed within a system of beliefs of institutional religion, the mechanism holds more loosely as the immanent presence of the divine assumes a strictly religious connotation. Consequently, we assume a weaker association between beliefs in divine immanence and beliefs in conspiracy theories. When this framework is absent, the mechanism takes hold as the immanence of the divine reflects a broader conception characterized by the attribution of agency to hidden forces, in terms of conspiratorial explanations, which can also be evoked when referring to events like a pandemic. In this second situation, the link between religious beliefs and conspiratorial ideation becomes stronger and, subsequently, affects attitudes about specific matters, including vaccine hesitancy.

To test our hypotheses, we analyzed Italian survey data from the ResPOnsE Covid-19 project collected nearly one year after the beginning of the Covid-19 vaccination campaign and employed new questions assessing beliefs in the immanent presence of the divine and in Covid-19-related conspiracy theories. The peculiarity of the context—a Catholic country strongly hit by the Covid-19 pandemic—makes Italy an interesting case study, even considering that Covid-19 vaccination was largely promoted by the main Catholic authorities, particularly Pope Francis.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

2.1. Religiosity and Vaccine Hesitancy

The relationship between religiosity and vaccine hesitancy is all but trivial. Some studies carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic have shown a positive relationship (Bok et al., 2021; Olagoke et al., 2021). However, religiosity has been measured in various ways, and we can assume that its effects may differ depending on the aspects considered. When analyzing the association between individual religiosity and any attitude or behavior, one should first determine which dimension of religiosity to consider based on the theoretical framework of reference (Siegers, 2019).

From a doctrinal point of view, the position of the religious institutions and authorities about vaccination does not present relevant conflictual elements (Grabenstein, 2013). For Catholics, the main objection against vaccines is the use of cell lines from aborted fetuses (Grabenstein, 2013). Cell lines have also been used to create Covid-19 vaccines—either during the development, testing, or production phase (Wadman, 2020). Nevertheless, the use of this kind of vaccine is acceptable for the Church when there are no valid alternatives. In the specific context of the Coronavirus pandemic, the Pontifical Academy for Life officially expressed its support, claiming that the Covid-19 vaccine presents "no ethical issues" ("Covid-19 vaccines," 2021). Moreover, vaccination against Covid-19 would pursue a common good, minimizing the health risk for vulnerable people, in line with the principles of distributive justice and love (Carson & Flood, 2017). Pope Francis reinforced this position by defining Covid-19 vaccination as "a moral obligation" ("On Covid vaccinations," 2022). Thus, the Catholic church did not object to vaccination. Nonetheless, as Grabenstein (2013, p. 2012) observes, "behaviors of like-minded individuals are not necessarily related to the theological basis of their religions."

Besides belonging to a religious institution, it is therefore important to identify other dimensions of religiosity that may be potentially associated with vaccine hesitancy. Previous research examining doubts about vaccination has shown that "religious claims [of] exemption would be based on arguments pertaining to illness and its outcome being the will of God in which man should not interfere" (Streefland, 2001, p. 164). Such consideration implies a specific dimension of religiosity, namely believing in the immanence of God or other spiritual entities in the mundane world. In general, such beliefs entail a perceived lower level of control over one's life (Schieman et al., 2005), including one's health. In the context of Covid-19, believing in divine immanence could result in the perception that the role of

science and medicine in providing a solution to the pandemic is marginal or irrelevant. Consequently, it could reduce the motivation to get vaccinated and, in extreme cases, it could lead to the decision of refusing the vaccine, as the outcome of one's life is believed to be in the hands of God (Schieman, 2010; Schieman et al., 2005).

Following these considerations, our first hypothesis stands as follows:

H1: Believing in divine immanence is positively associated with vaccine hesitancy.

2.2. The Role of Conspiracy Beliefs

When considering the relationship between believing in divine immanence and vaccine hesitancy, one could argue that other attitudinal, political, and psychological factors may mediate such a relationship. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, Olagoke et al. (2021) have shown that the external health locus of control, namely, the belief that a person's health depends on external factors, partly mediates the relationship between religiosity and Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy.

If we extend the idea of the external locus of control to the existence of external (even hidden) forces that can impact one's life, we naturally come to the possibility that believing in conspiracy theories represents a potential mediator of this relationship, from religiosity to beliefs in conspiracy theories, and from the latter to vaccine hesitancy. The idea of a relationship between religiosity and beliefs in conspiracy theories traces back to the seminal work of Ward and Voas (2011) and has been explored in several studies, both conceptually and empirically (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2015; Dyrendal & Hestad, 2021; Dyrendal et al., 2018; Frenken et al., 2022; Jasinskaja-Lahti & Jetten, 2019; Ladini, 2022). Conspiracy theories were even referred to as "quasi-religious beliefs" (Franks et al., 2013, p. 10).

When focusing on divine immanence, this conceptual link becomes even stronger. Indeed, if conspiracy theories are defined in terms of "attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4), believing in them shares one important trait with the sense of divine immanence. This commonality consists in providing explanations for world events by attributing agency to hidden forces (Keeley, 2018). In terms of divine immanence, the agent is either God or other spiritual entities, aimed at providing order to the world. With respect to conspiracy theories, the agent is represented by a small group of individuals plotting for their own benefit against the common good (Uscinski et al., 2016). The psychological tendency of identifying agency and patterns for the explanation of world events, defined as "agenticity" and "patternicity," was also recognized as a common antecedent for both religious and conspiratorial beliefs (Wood & Douglas, 2018).

Many studies have found robust and consistent evidence of a positive relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy (Bertin et al., 2020; Jennings et al., 2021; Pivetti et al., 2021; van Oost et al., 2022). In the Covid-19 context, several conspiracy theories on big pharmaceutical groups went viral, among which the claim that those groups orchestrated the Covid-19 pandemic to increase their profits by selling their medical products and vaccines—which, in turn, are supposed to have harmful side effects (Ullah et al., 2021).

Conspiracies concerning big pharma are not new or unusual (Blaskiewicz, 2013; Jolley & Douglas, 2014), but in the pandemic situation they were instrumental in the relationship between conspiratorial ideation and negative attitudes toward vaccination. It is worth noting that an individual's conspiratorial beliefs are rarely isolated to one specific conspiracy. Indeed, it has been shown that conspiratorial ideation is usually embedded within a monological system of conspiratorial beliefs (Goertzel, 1994). The list of theories that one believes in can thus be extended to include new emerging conspiracies, for example concerning Covid-19 (Miller, 2020).

In sum, we expect that believing in conspiracy theories mediates the relationship between believing in divine immanence and vaccine hesitancy. Nonetheless, we hold this mechanism as conditional to what beliefs in divine immanence mean for a person. In fact, believing in the immanent presence of God or the divine can have a different meaning, whether or not these beliefs are framed within a system of beliefs derived from institutional religion. Conversely, adherence to institutional religiosity, expressed by active participation within a religious community, supplies a reference framework for one's beliefs and implies a higher religious involvement (Nicolet & Tresch, 2009). Accordingly, for those adhering to institutional religiosity, beliefs in divine immanence are more likely to be coherent with an established theological view and to provide a religious endowment of meaning to their lives. In other words, these immanence beliefs strictly pertain to the religious sphere and are less frequently associated with the tendency to explain world events with agents and patterns beyond the religious sphere. Moreover, institutional religion tends to deter unofficial explanations of world events.

In contrast, for people not adhering to institutional religiosity, beliefs in divine immanence are more likely to pertain to a broader sphere including alternative spirituality and conspiracy beliefs. Indeed, the emergence of conspirituality—a web movement characterized by a combination of conspiracy theories and alternative spirituality—took place outside the sphere of institutional religiosity (Ward & Voas, 2011). In the light of this argumentation, we further specify our hypothesis as follows:

H2. The relationship between believing in divine immanence and vaccine hesitancy is mediated by

beliefs in Covid-19-related conspiracy theories only among people not adhering to institutional religiosity.

3. Data, Measures, and Methods

3.1. Data

The study was carried out in the Italian context, characterized by a particularly homogeneous religious landscape. Italy is a Catholic country, where the large majority of people report belonging to the Catholic religion (73%, according to 2018 data from the European Social Survey). Church attendance has declined significantly since the 1970s (Vezzoni & Biolcati Rinaldi, 2015) but remains higher than in most European countries. Nonetheless, despite this ongoing process of secularization, a consistent portion of the Italian population still perceives the presence of God and the divine in their lives (Garelli, 2020).

Data were collected from the ResPOnsE Covid-19 project carried out by the SPS Trend Lab of the University of Milan. Aimed at monitoring the dynamics of the Italian public opinion during the Covid-19 pandemic, the project consisted of several data collection waves, the first conducted in April–July 2020 with a rolling-cross-section design (N > 15,000; see Vezzoni et al., 2020). In the present study, we analyzed data from wave 4 (1,782 cases in which both specific measures of religiosity and beliefs in Covid-19 conspiracy theories were included) collected during a period in which people not vaccinated against Covid-19 were subject to several restrictions imposed by the Italian government (November–December 2021). The sample was drawn from an opt-in panel of an Italian survey research institute (Swg S.P.A.) and reproduced population distributions for sex and geographical area of residence.

3.2. Measures

The dependent variable in our analyses was vaccine hesitancy, measured by a question assessing vaccination propensity in a hypothetical future pandemic ("If a situation similar to the Covid-19 pandemic occurred again in the future—if there was a vaccine—how favorable would you be to get vaccinated to protect yourself from the virus?"), with answer categories on a 0 (*not at all*)–10 (*totally*) scale. We assume that vaccine hesitancy is a real individual attribute that holds a causal relationship with the measurement outcome, that is, the answer to the question on vaccination propensity is a function of the position of a respondent on the latent attribute indicated as vaccine hesitancy (Borsboom, 2005, p. 153). The function is inverse, as lower scale values indicate higher vaccine hesitancy.

The main independent variable was represented by individual beliefs in divine immanence, measured by an additive index (0–10 scale) of the following three items (measured on a 0–10 agreement scale):

1. Miraculous healings do exist.
2. God intervenes directly in our lives.
3. Prayer can heal physical illness.

All items assume that there is divine intervention in the mundane world. We assume that positive answers imply that the respondent holds the belief that God or other spiritual entities intervene directly in one's life. The consistency of this interpretation is supported by the detection of high average correlations between items (inter-item correlation = 0.76, confirmed also by confirmatory factor analysis with all factor loadings >0.85).

We expected the relationship between believing in divine immanence and vaccine hesitancy to be mediated by beliefs in Covid-19 conspiracy theories. The latent attribute underlying these beliefs pertains to the propensity to think that small groups are plotting for their own benefit against the common good in the specific context of the pandemic. We measured this variable by an additive index (0–10 scale) of three items referring to the level of agreement (0–10 scale) to the following widespread conspiratorial narratives:

1. Behind the diffusion of Covid-19, there is a plan for governments to limit the freedom of citizens.
2. Vaccination is a tool to increase the power of global finance.
3. The communicated data concerning the Covid-19 pandemic are not true.

The items were strongly correlated, supporting the idea that the answers are a function of the same underlying attribute (inter-item correlation = 0.78, confirmed also by confirmatory factor analysis with factor loadings mean = 0.86, with the last item having a slightly lower fit).

Finally, we included a measure of institutional religiosity in the model as a moderating variable. We considered whether the respondent attended religious services in the last seven days (dichotomous: yes, no). We can argue that attendance to religious services has a double edge as far as adherence to an institutional religion is concerned: firstly, it means to be a member of a community organized around an institutional religion and, secondly, it means to be regularly exposed to the official preaching of that institution.

It is worth noting that in the Italian context, to a large extent, attendance at religious services equates to attendance at the Sunday Mass (Vezzoni & Biolcati Rinaldi, 2015), which is a precept of the Catholic church. As the survey does not contain a measure of religious denomination, we cannot identify respondents belonging to non-Christian religions. Nonetheless, those people represent only a small minority of the Italian population (according to 2018 data from the European Social Survey, 3.6% of the Italian population).

Finally, we accounted for the following control variables: gender, age class (three categories), level of

education (three categories), and geographical area (four categories).

3.3. Methods

The relationship between believing in divine immanence and propensity to get vaccinated (H1) was tested through a linear regression model controlling for the above-mentioned socio-demographic variables. For H2, we specified a moderated mediation regression analysis (Hayes, 2022). This model allows us to test the mediating effect of beliefs in Covid-19 conspiracy theories on the relationship between religiosity and vaccine hesitancy while identifying whether this mechanism acts differently depending on institutional religiosity (moderation). A path diagram of the model (without control variables, which are nonetheless included to compute the parameters' estimates) is shown in Figure 1. The model allows for testing whether institutional religiosity, measured by attendance to religious services, moderates both the direct (solid line) and indirect (dashed lines) relationships between believing in divine immanence and vaccination propensity. Analyses were performed using the PROCESS procedure for SPSS Version 4.1 (Hayes, 2022).

4. Results

The large majority of Italian respondents showed a high vaccination propensity (sample mean = 8.37, 86% of respondents providing a score equal to or higher than six). As shown in Table 1, we analyzed whether believing in divine immanence (sample mean = 4.24) is associated with vaccination propensity while controlling for the main socio-demographic variables. The regression analysis supported H1: the stronger the beliefs in divine immanence, the lower the vaccination propensity. The estimated difference in vaccination propensity between people with the weakest and the strongest belief in divine immanence was equal to −0.87 on a 0–10 scale. For what concerns the control variables, Table 1 shows that, consistent with previous research (e.g., Lazarus et al., 2020), highly educated people and older people had a higher vaccination propensity. However, no gender differences were detected.

Our second analysis explored the mechanism underlying the association between religiosity and vaccine hesitancy. According to our second hypothesis, Covid-19-related conspiracy beliefs (sample mean = 3.10) mediates the relationship between believing in divine
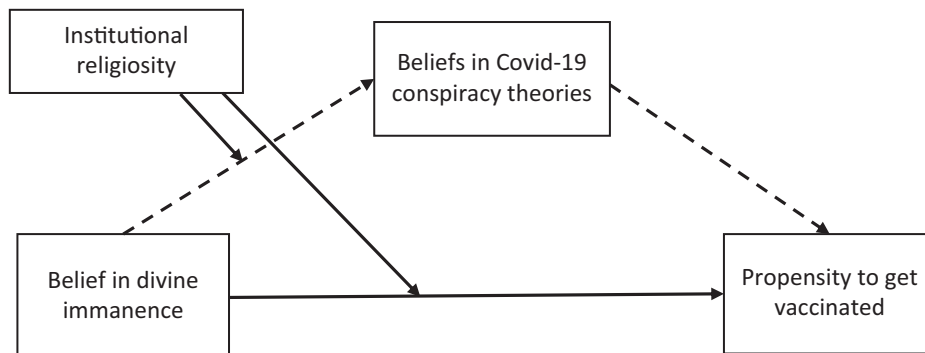
Figure 1. Moderated mediation model.

Table 1. Linear regression analysis with the propensity to get vaccinated as the dependent variable.

Independent variables	Scale/categories	Coefficients (s.e)
Belief in divine immanence	0–10	−0.08*** (0.02)
Gender (Ref. cat.: Female)	Male	0.05 (0.14)
Level of education (Ref. cat.: Low)	Medium	0.48* (0.25)
	High	0.84*** (0.27)
Age class (Ref. cat.: 18–34)	35–54	−0.12 (0.21)
	55 and over	0.89*** (0.21)
Geographical area (Ref. cat.: North–West)	North-East	−0.76*** (0.21)
	Centre	−0.28 (0.21)
	South and Islands	−0.21 (0.19)
Constant		8.09*** (0.33)
R-squared		0.06

Notes: ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1; unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors in parentheses; N = 1,372.

immanence and vaccination propensity, but only for people not adhering to institutional religiosity. In Figures 2 and 3, we split the results of the moderated mediation analysis, by presenting the results respectively for those not adhering to and adhering to institutional religiosity. Figure 2 shows that, among people who did not attend religious services in the last seven days, the negative relationship between believing in divine immanence and propensity to get vaccinated is fully mediated by beliefs in Covid-19 conspiracy theories. The indirect effect is indeed negative (−0.14) and significantly different from zero, while the direct effect proves to be substantially null (0.02, not significantly different from zero).

Conversely, for respondents adhering to institutional religiosity (Figure 3), the relationship between believing in divine immanence and vaccination propensity was not mediated by Covid-19 conspiracy beliefs (indirect effect equal to −0.05, not significantly different from zero). This finding is driven by the weak relationship between believing in divine immanence and conspiratorial beliefs (0.09). This analysis also revealed a persisting positive association between believing in divine immanence and propensity to get vaccinated (direct effect equal to 0.10, significantly higher than zero). Although this effect was not the object of a specific hypothesis, this finding is in line with

prior research. This positive relationship emerged only for those respondents who frame their beliefs within a value system supplied by the Catholic church, which actively supports vaccination.

Finally, the index of moderated mediation, namely, the difference between conditional indirect effects, provides further evidence for H2. The index is equal to 0.09 (difference of the indirect effects between those attending and those not attending religious services), and statistically different from zero (bootstrap 95% confidence interval between 0.02 and 0.17). Complete results of the moderated mediation regression analysis are presented in the online Supplementary File.

5. Discussion

Vaccine hesitancy depends on several individual factors. Our work shows that religiosity also plays a role, although this role remains limited and should be qualified, as various dimensions of religiosity and contexts may differentially impact vaccine hesitancy. Our study focused on Italy, a country where Catholicism is the predominant institutional religion. There are no doctrinal arguments against vaccination and the main Catholic authorities expressed support for vaccines and even reinforced
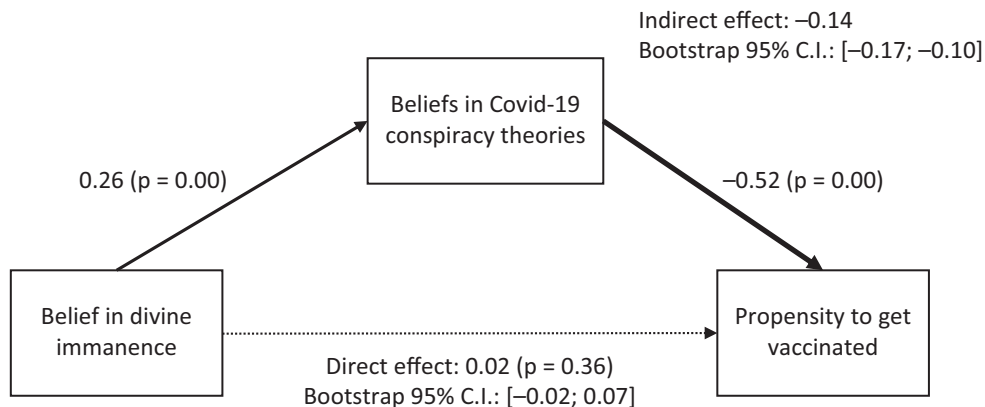
Figure 2. Mediation regression analysis for respondents who did not attend religious services in the last seven days. Notes: Unstandardized regression coefficients; N = 1,372 (non-attenders = 1,002).
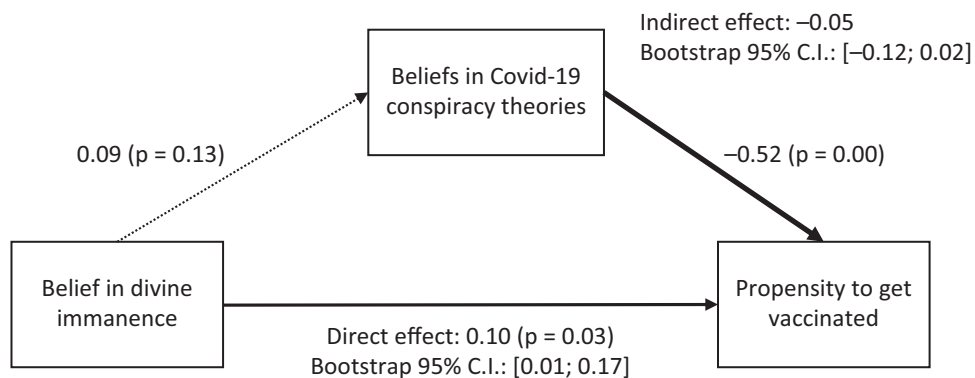
Figure 3. Mediation regression analysis for respondents who attended religious services at least once in the last seven days. Notes: Unstandardized regression coefficients; N = 1,372 (attenders = 370).

their position during the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the Church's tenets and teachings, however, other aspects of individual religiosity may influence one's position about vaccines. We focused on beliefs in divine immanence, namely the propensity to attribute divine agency in the explanation of mundane events. This belief entails a perceived lower level of control over own life, a trait that has proven to enhance vaccine hesitancy (Olagoke et al., 2021). In line with our hypothesis, our findings revealed a positive association between beliefs in divine immanence and vaccine hesitancy. Moreover, we extended our argument by proposing a possible mechanism to explain this association: the mediating role of Covid-19 conspiracy beliefs. Although our findings support this idea, the mediation mechanism only holds for respondents not adhering to institutional religiosity.

Focusing on the mediation mechanism within respondents not belonging to institutional religion, there are two possible interpretations of the role played by beliefs in conspiracy theories. The first, in line with our mediation model, suggests a causal interpretation of the effects, where believing in divine immanence is an antecedent of conspiratorial ideation. The second stresses the similar underlying trait shared by beliefs in divine immanence and conspiracy theories, namely, the attribution of agency to hidden forces. Therefore, among people not belonging to institutional religiosity, believing in divine immanence and conspiracy theories could be rooted in the same system of beliefs. Thus, believing in divine immanence and conspiracy theories would be indicators of the same underlying attribute. In light of this second interpretation, one could argue that, when not framed within a coherent religious view, beliefs in divine immanence cease to pertain to a strictly religious sphere. Following Voas (2009, p. 164), we can expect that, for the majority of these people—belonging to a heterogeneous group characterized by fuzzy fidelity—"religion plays a very minor role (if any) in their lives." Given the relevance and contentious nature of this argument, future research is required to investigate further this argument.

We acknowledge some limitations of our study. Firstly, some of the measures we used to operationalize our concepts should be carefully considered and possibly improved in further research. Our main independent variable, that is, believing in divine immanence, is measured by a battery that was not previously validated. The moderating variable, adhering to institutional religiosity, was sub-optimally measured by means of church attendance. Though several arguments support this choice, it would be important to include better indicators of this dimension in future research. In addition, to ease the interpretation of the results in the moderated mediation analysis, we considered vaccination propensity as a dependent variable rather than respondents' actual Covid-19 vaccination behavior, as it allowed us to estimate linear regression models instead of logistic ones. As a robustness test, we also ran the analysis using the behavioral variable as a dependent outcome and

the results are consistent with the ones presented in this article.

Secondly, we focused on beliefs in Covid-19 conspiracy theories as a mediator of the relationship between believing in divine immanence and vaccine hesitancy, but we cannot rule out that other factors (e.g., locus of control) can mediate such a relationship as well.

Thirdly, our study focused on a scarcely investigated dimension of religiosity which was expected to be theoretically associated with beliefs in conspiracy theories, that is, believing in divine immanence. Our work followed the suggestion raised by Ward and Voas (2011) with the intriguing concept of "conspirituality." In this vein, further research could enrich our understanding by considering other dimensions of religiosity theoretically associated with these beliefs, such as forms of spirituality and alternative religiosity, which share the same cultic milieu (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2015).

Lastly, we have pointed out that our analyses are based on survey data referring to a specific country (Italy) with specific religious characteristics. In particular, a large portion of the Italian population still perceives the presence of God in their lives and adheres to institutional forms of religiosity (Garelli, 2020). We hope to see additional research testing the generalizability of our results beyond our context of reference, especially in more secularized countries.

Despite these limitations, this contribution has aimed at shedding light on the relationship between religiosity and attitudes toward vaccination, by proposing and testing a mechanism—never investigated so far—which provided an explanation to such a relationship. Future research is welcome to proceed in this direction.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

References

Asprem, E., & Dyrendal, A. (2015). Conspirituality reconsidered: How surprising and how new is the confluence of spirituality and conspiracy theory? *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *30*(3), 367–382.

Barnack, J. L., Reddy, D. M., & Swain, C. (2010). Predictors of parents' willingness to vaccinate for human papillomavirus and physicians' intentions to recommend the vaccine. *Women's Health Issues*, *20*(1), 28–34.

Bertin, P., Nera, K., & Delouvée, S. (2020). Conspiracy beliefs, rejection of vaccination, and support for hydroxychloroquine: A conceptual replication-extension in the Covid-19 pandemic context. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *2020*. https://doi.org/10.3389/

fpsyg.2020.565128

Bish, A., Yardley, L., Nicoll, A., & Michie, S. (2011). Factors associated with uptake of vaccination against pandemic influenza: a systematic review. *Vaccine*, *29*(38), 6472–6484.

Blaskiewicz, R. (2013). The big pharma conspiracy theory. *Medical Writing*, *22*(4), 259–261.

Bok, S., Martin, D. E., & Lee, M. (2021). Validation of the Covid-19 disbelief scale: Conditional indirect effects of religiosity and Covid-19 fear on intent to vaccinate. *Acta Psychologica*, *219*. https://pesquisa.bvsalud. org/global-literature-on-novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov/resource/pt/covidwho-1330463

Borsboom, D. (2005). *Measuring the mind: Conceptual issues in contemporary psychometrics*. Cambridge University Press.

Carson, P. J., & Flood, A. T. (2017). Catholic social teaching and the duty to vaccinate. *The American Journal of Bioethics*, *17*(4), 36–43.

Constantine, N. A., & Jerman, P. (2007). Acceptance of human papillomavirus vaccination among Californian parents of daughters: a representative statewide analysis. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *40*(2), 108–115.

Covid-19 vaccines present "no ethical problem," says head of papal academy. (2021, December 22). *National Catholic Reporter*. https://www.ncronline. org/news/vatican/covid-19-vaccines-present-no-ethical-problem-says-head-papal-academy

Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, *40*, 3–35.

Dyrendal, A., & Hestad, K. (2021). Trust in crisis: Conspiracy mentality, lack of trust and religiosity predicted conspiracy beliefs about Covid-19 in a Norwegian sample. *Approaching Religion*, *11*(2), 98–114.

Dyrendal, A., Robertson, D. G., & Asprem, E. (Eds.). (2018). *Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion*. Brill.

Engin, C., & Vezzoni, C. (2020). Who's skeptical of vaccines? Prevalence and determinants of anti-vaccination attitudes in Italy. *Population Review*, *59*(2), 156–179.

Franks, B., Bangerter, A., & Bauer, M. (2013). Conspiracy theories as quasi-religious mentality: An integrated account from cognitive science, social representations theory, and frame theory. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *2013*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013. 00424

Frenken, M., Bilewicz, M., & Imhoff, R. (2022). On the relation between religiosity and the endorsement of conspiracy theories: The role of political orientation. *Political Psychology*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12822

Garelli, F. (2020). *Gente di poca fede*: *Il sentimento religioso nell'Italia incerta di Dio* [People of little faith: Religious sentiment in Italy, that is uncertain of God].

Il Mulino.

Gerretsen, P., Kim, J., Caravaggio, F., Quilty, L., Sanches, M., Wells, S., Brown, E. E., Agic, B., Pollock, B. G., & Graff-Guerrero, A. (2021). Individual determinants of Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy. *PloS ONE*, *16*(11). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0258462

Glock, C. Y. (1959). The religious revival in America? In J. C. Zahn (Ed.), *Religion and the face of America* (pp. 25–42). University of California Press.

Goertzel, T. (1994). Belief in conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, *15*(4), 731–742.

Grabenstein, J. D. (2013). What the world's religions teach, applied to vaccines and immune globulins. *Vaccine*, *31*(16), 2011–2023.

Hayes, A. F. (2022). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.

Hornsey, M. J., Harris, E. A., & Fielding, K. S. (2018). The psychological roots of anti-vaccination attitudes: A 24-nation investigation. *Health Psychology*, *37*(4), 307–315.

Jasinskaja-Lahti, I., & Jetten, J. (2019). Unpacking the relationship between religiosity and conspiracy beliefs in Australia. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *58*(4), 938–954.

Jennings, W., Stoker, G., Bunting, H., Valgarðsson, V. O., Gaskell, J., Devine, D., McKay, L., & Mills, M. C. (2021). Lack of trust, conspiracy beliefs, and social media use predict Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy. *Vaccines*, *9*(6). https://doi.org/10.3390/vaccines9060593

Jolley, D., & Douglas, K. M. (2014). The effects of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories on vaccination intentions. *PloS ONE*, *9*(2). https://doi.org/10.1371/ journal.pone.0089177

Keeley, B. L. (2018). Is belief in providence the same as belief in conspiracy? In E. Asprem, A. Dyrendal, & D. G. Robertson (Eds.), *Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion* (pp. 70–86). Brill.

Ladini, R. (2022). Religious and conspiracist? An analysis of the relationship between the dimensions of individual religiosity and belief in a big pharma conspiracy theory. *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, *52*(1), 33–50.

Lazarus, J. V., Ratzan, S. C., Palayew, A., Gostin, L. O., Larson, H. J., Rabin, K., Kimball, S., & El-Mohandes, A. (2020). A global survey of potential acceptance of a Covid-19 vaccine. *Nature Medicine*, *27*(2), 225–228.

MacDonald, N. E., & SAGE Working Group on Vaccine Hesitancy. (2015). Vaccine hesitancy: Definition, scope and determinants. *Vaccine*, *33*(34), 4161–4164.

Makarovs, K., & Achterberg, P. (2017). Contextualizing educational differences in "vaccination uptake": A thirty nation survey. *Social Science & Medicine*, *188*, 1–10.

Miller, J. M. (2020). Do Covid-19 conspiracy theory beliefs form a monological belief system? *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique*, *53*(2), 319–326.

Neumann-Böhme, S., Varghese, N. E., Sabat, I., Barros, P. P., Brouwer, W., van Exel, J., Schreyögg, J., & Stargardt, T. (2020). Once we have it, will we use it? A European survey on willingness to be vaccinated against Covid-19. *The European Journal of Health Economics*, *21*(7), 977–982.

Nicolet, S., & Tresch, A. (2009). Changing religiosity, changing politics? The influence of "belonging" and "believing" on political attitudes in Switzerland. *Politics and Religion*, *2*(1), 76–99.

Olagoke, A. A., Olagoke, O. O., & Hughes, A. M. (2021). Intention to vaccinate against the novel 2019 coronavirus disease: The role of health locus of control and religiosity. *Journal of Religion and Health*, *60*(1), 65–80.

On Covid vaccinations, Pope says health care is a "moral obligation." (2022, January 10). *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/2022/01/10/1071785531/on-covid-vaccinations-pope-says-health-care-is-a-moral-obligation?t=1649933976667

Pivetti, M., Melotti, G., Bonomo, M., & Hakoköngäs, E. (2021). Conspiracy beliefs and acceptance of Covid vaccine: An exploratory study in Italy. *Social Sciences*, *10*(3). https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10030108

Schieman, S. (2010). Socioeconomic status and beliefs about God's influence in everyday life. *Sociology of Religion*, *71*(1), 25–51.

Schieman, S., Pudrovska, T., & Milkie, M. A. (2005). The sense of divine control and the self-concept: A study of race differences in late life. *Research on Aging*, *27*(2), 165–196.

Siegers, P. (2019). Is the influence of religiosity on attitudes and behaviors stronger in less religious or more religious societies? A review of theories and contradictory evidence. *KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, *71*(1), 491–517.

Streefland, P. H. (2001). Public doubts about vaccination safety and resistance against vaccination. *Health policy*, *55*(3), 159–172.

Ullah, I., Khan, K. S., Tahir, M. J., Ahmed, A., & Harapan, H. (2021). Myths and conspiracy theories on vaccines and COVID-19: Potential effect on global vaccine refusals. *Vacunas*, *22*(2), 93–97.

Uscinski, J. E., Klofstad, C., & Atkinson, M. D. (2016). What drives conspiratorial beliefs? The role of informational cues and predispositions. *Political Research Quarterly*, *69*(1), 57–71.

van Oost, P., Yzerbyt, V., Schmitz, M., Vansteenkiste, M., Luminet, O., Morbée, S., van der Bergh, O., Waterschoot, J., & Klein, O. (2022). The relation between conspiracism, government trust, and COVID-19 vaccination intentions: The key role of motivation. *Social Science & Medicine*, *301*, Article 114926.

Vezzoni, C., & Biolcati Rinaldi, F. (2015). Church attendance and religious change in Italy, 1968–2010: A multilevel analysis of pooled datasets. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *54*(1), 100–118.

Vezzoni, C., Ladini, R., Molteni, F., Dotti Sani, G. M., Biolcati Rinaldi, F., Chiesi, A. M., Guglielmi, S., Maraffi, M., Pedrazzani, A., & Segatti, P. (2020). Investigating the social, economic and political consequences of Covid-19: A rolling cross-section approach. *Survey Research Methods*, *14*, 187–194.

Voas, D. (2009). The rise and fall of fuzzy fidelity in Europe. *European Sociological Review*, *25*(2), 155–168.

Wadman, M. (2020). Vaccines that use human fetal cells draw fire. *Science*, *368*(6496), 1170–1171.

Ward, C., & Voas, D. (2011). The emergence of conspirituality. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *26*(1), 103–121.

Wood, M., & Douglas, K. M. (2018). Are conspiracy theories a surrogate for God? In A. Dyrendal, D. G. Robertson, & E. Asprem (Eds.), *Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion* (pp. 87–105). Brill.

About the Authors

Riccardo Ladini is an assistant professor of political sociology at the Department of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Milan, where he is also a member of the SPS Trend Lab. Inter alia, he is interested in analyzing the influence of religiosity on social and political attitudes. He is a member of the Italian team of the European Values Study.

Cristiano Vezzoni is an associate professor of political sociology at the Department of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Milan, where he also leads the SPS Trend Lab. He is a guest professor at the Centre for Sociological Research at the University of Leuven (KU Leuven). As of 2021, he is the president of the Italian National Election Study (ITANES). His research focuses on electoral behavior and survey research methods.

Article

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

Gert Pickel [1,*], Cemal Öztürk [2], Verena Schneider [1], Susanne Pickel [2], and Oliver Decker [3]

[1] Institute for Practical Theology, University of Leipzig, Germany
[2] Institute for Political Science, University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany
[3] Else-Frenkel-Brunswik Institute for the Study of Democracy, University of Leipzig, Germany

* Corresponding author (pickel@rz.uni-leipzig.de)

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.

Issue

This article is part of the issue "The Role of Religions and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes" edited by Oliver Hidalgo (University of Münster) and Alexander Yendell (Leipzig University).

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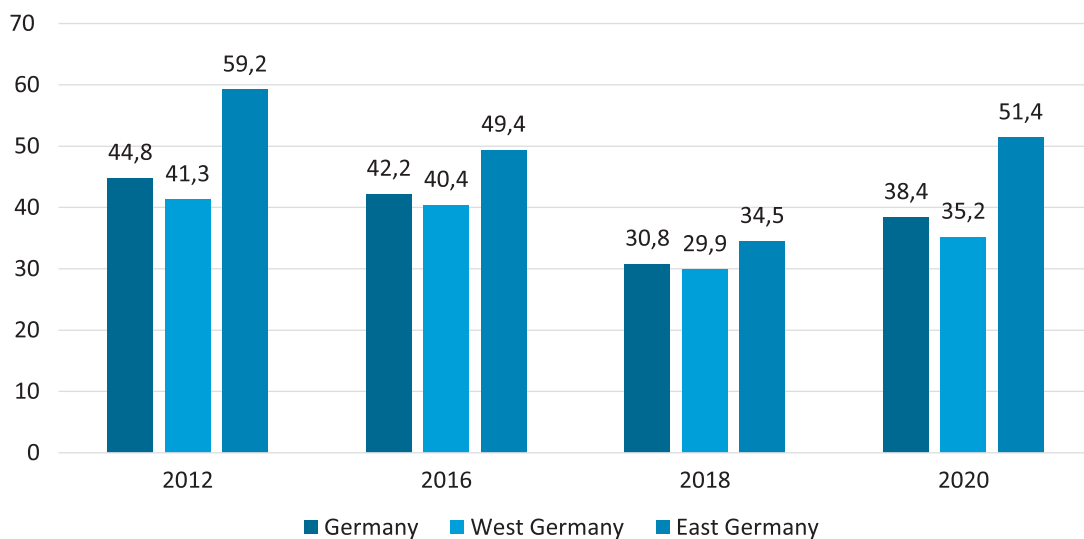
Figure 1. The prevalence of conspiracy mentality in 2012, 2016, 2018, and 2020. Source: Based on Decker et al. (2020, p. 202).

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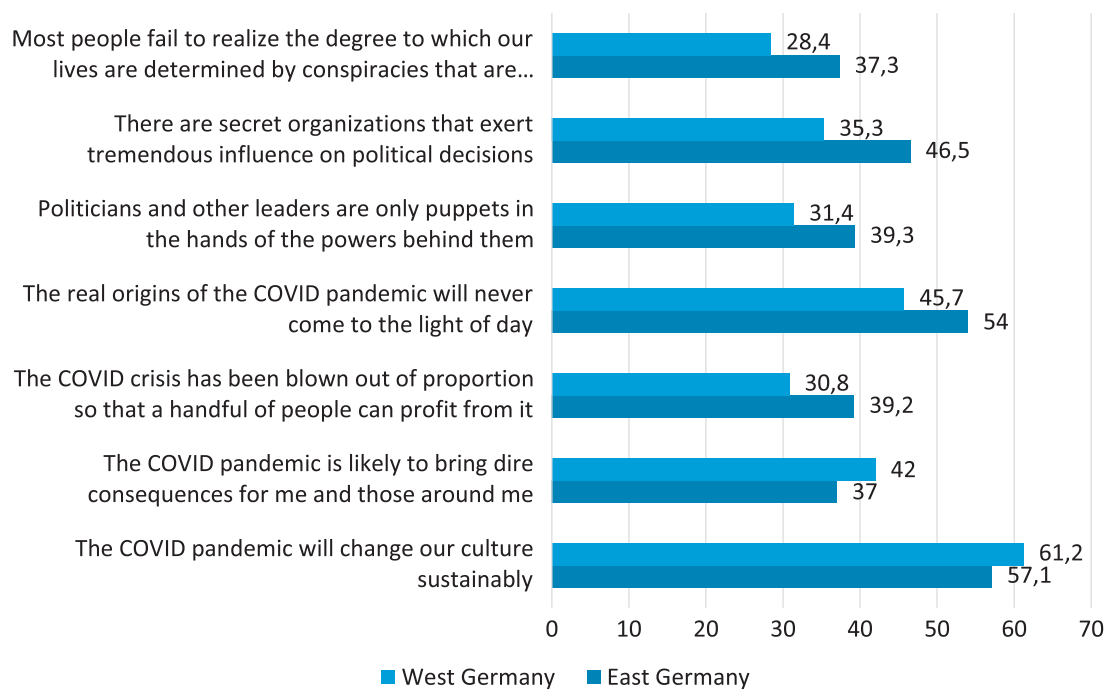
Figure 2. The prevalence of the general conspiracy mentality as well as Covid-19-related conspiracy myths and anxieties. Source: Based on Decker and Brähler (2020).

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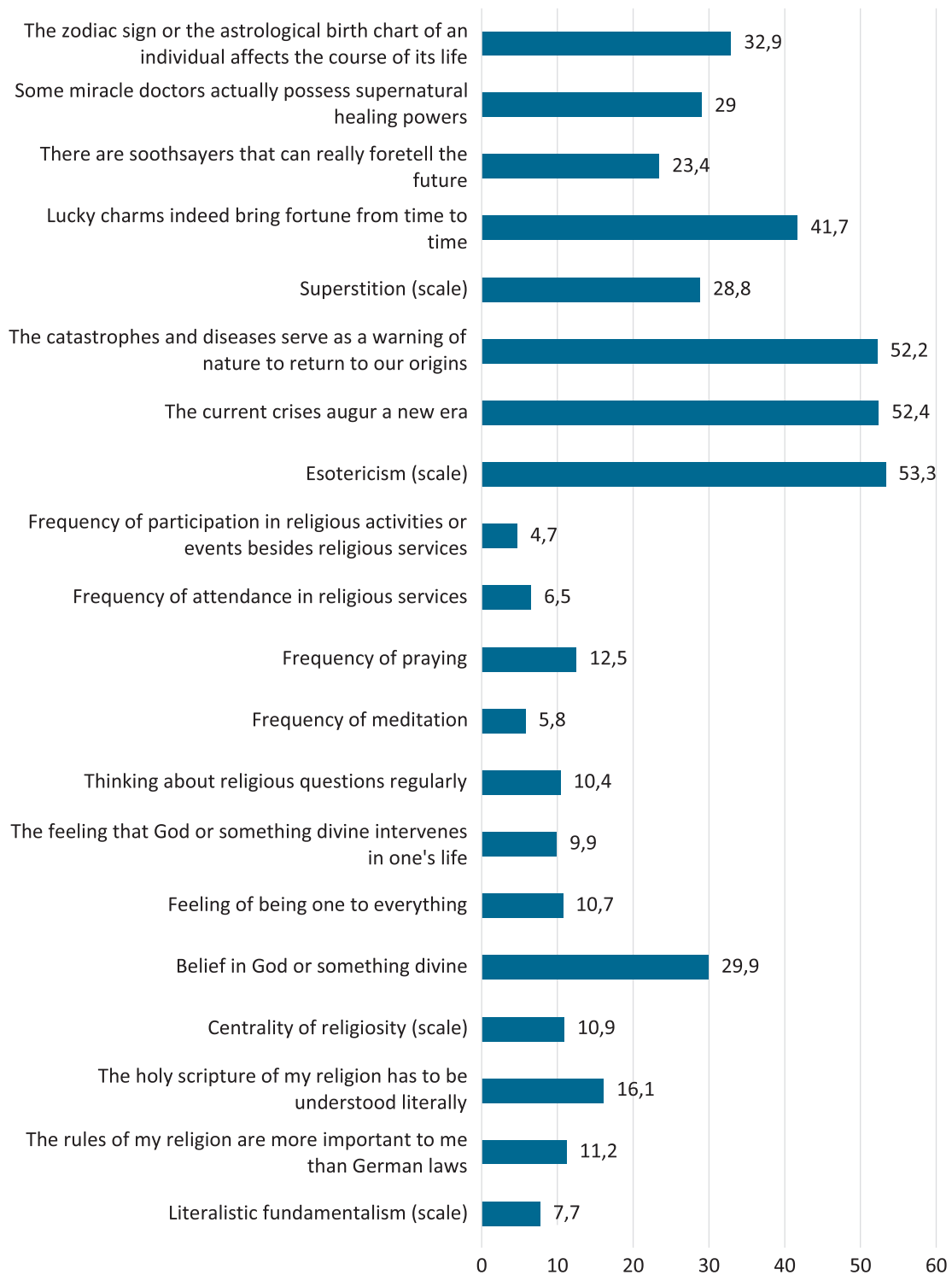
Figure 3. The prevalence of superstition, esotericism, religiosity, and literalistic fundamentalism. Source: Based on Decker and Brähler (2020).

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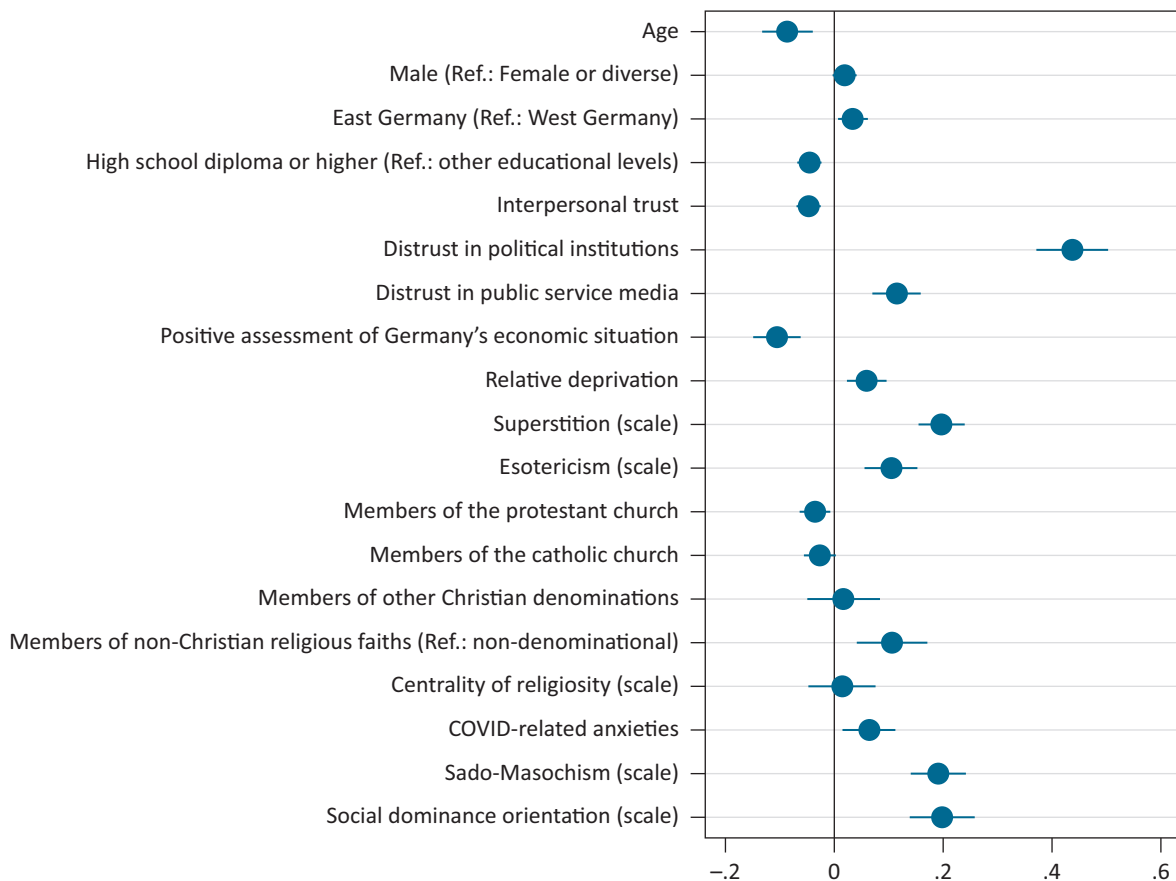
Figure 4. Enabling factors of Covid-19-related conspiracy mentality. Notes: The figure displays the results of an OLS regression; the coefficient plot was generated using the STATA coefplot command (Jann, 2014). Source: Based on Decker and Brähler (2020).

Our second hypothesis, however, remains robust even when controlling for these factors. As already indicated, religiosity (β = .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 (β = −.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 (β = .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 (β = .196, p = .0001)

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

The same applies to sado-masochism (β = .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
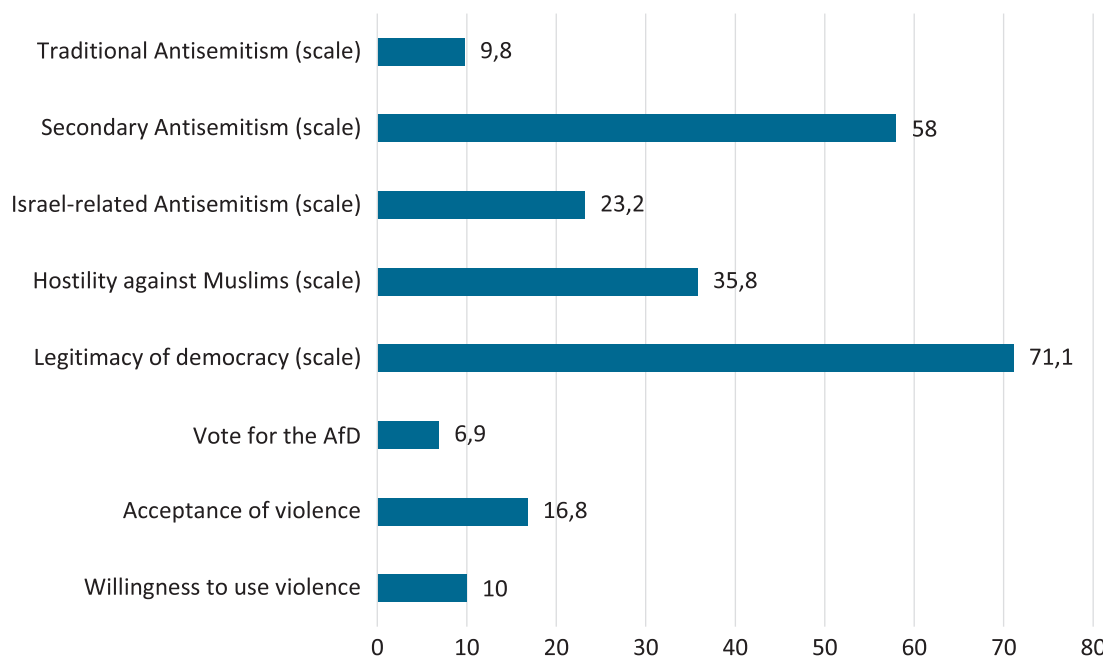
Figure 5. The prevalence of anti-Semitic resentment, hostility toward Muslims, perceptions of legitimacy toward democracy, support for the Alternative for Germany, acceptance of violence, and willingness to use violence. Source: Based on Decker and Brähler (2020).
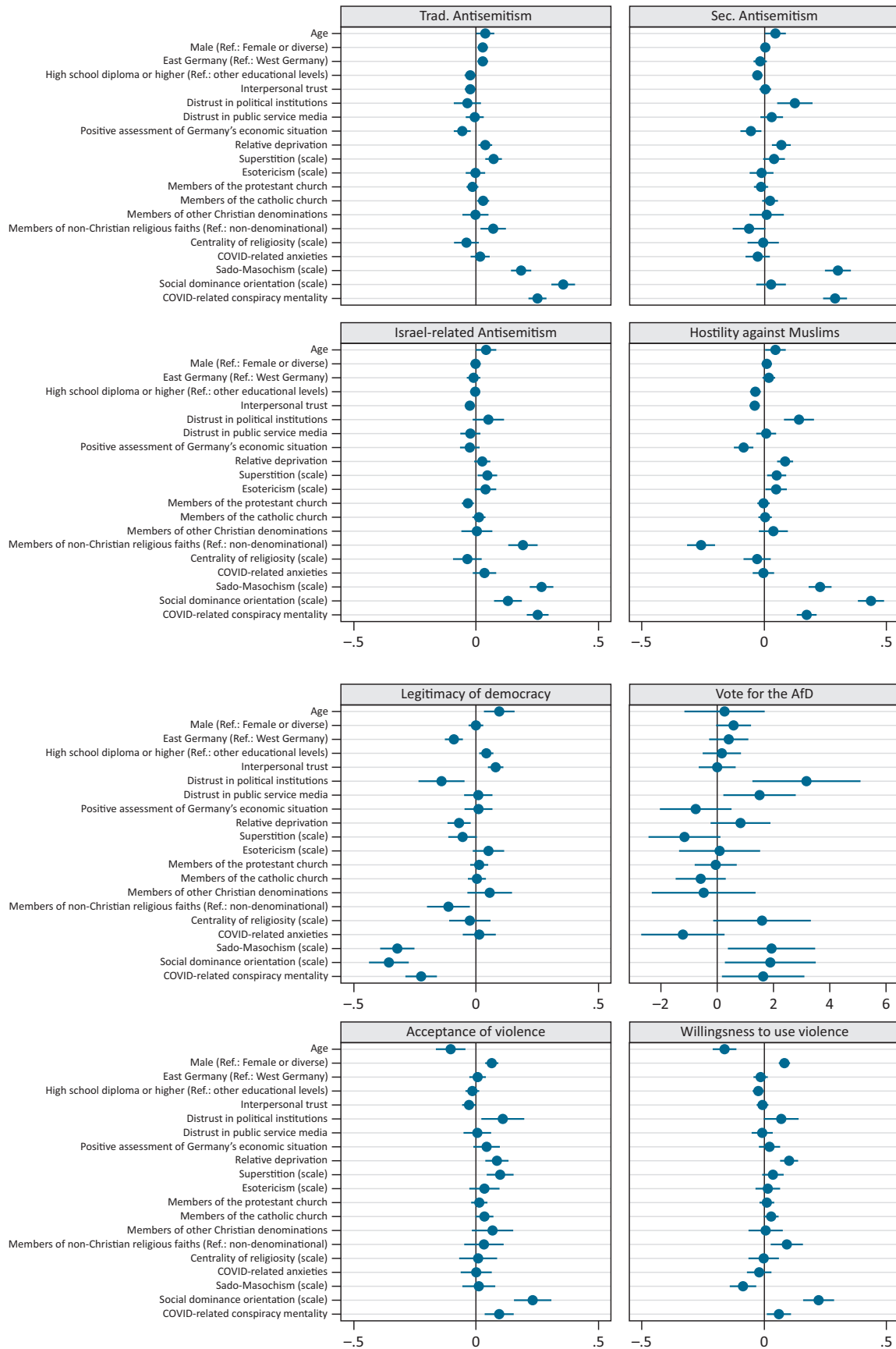
Figure 6. Facilitating factors of democracy-endangering orientations and behavioral intentions. Note: The figure displays the results of OLS regressions and a logistic regression (vote for the Alternative for Germany) based on a coefficient plot (Jann, 2014). Source: Based on Decker and Brähler (2020).

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.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Adorno, T. W. (1976). *Studien zum autoritären Charakter* [Studies on the authoritarian personality]. Suhrkamp Verlag.

Adorno, T. W., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, N. (1950). *The authoritarian personality*. Harper and Brothers.

Butter, M. (2018). *"Nichts ist, wie es scheint." Über Verschwörungstheorien* ["Nothing is as it seems." About conspiracy theories]. Suhrkamp Verlag.

Butter, M. (2021). Verschwörungstheorien: Eine Einführung [Conspiracy theories: An introduction]. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschehen*, *71*(35/36), 4–11.

Decker, O., & Brähler, E. (Eds.). (2020). *Autoritäre Dynamiken. Alte Ressentiments—Neue Radikalität* [Authoritarian dynamics. Old resentments—New radicalism]. Psychosozial Verlag.

Decker, O., Schuler, J., Yendell, A., Schließler, C., & Brähler, E. (2020). Das autoritäre Syndrom: Dimensionen und Verbreitung der Demokratie-Feindlichkeit [The authoritarian syndrome: Dimensions and prevalence of hostility to democracy]. In O. Decker & E. Brähler (Eds.), *Autoritäre Dynamiken. Alte Ressentiments—Neue Radikalität* [Authoritarian dynamics. Old resentments—New radicalism] (pp. 179–209). Psychosozial Verlag.

Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (2017). The psychology of conspiracy theories. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *26*(6), 538–542.

Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Siang Ann, C., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Advances in Political Psychology*, *40*(1), 3–35.

Europe: Churches call for vaccination. (2021, December 14). *Vatican News*. https://www.vaticannews.va/de/welt/news/2021-12/europa-kirchen-impfung-comece-kek-corona-oekumene-eu-hollerich.html

Evans, J. H., & Evans, M. S. (2008). Religion and science: Beyond the epistemological conflict. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *34*, 87–105.

Goertz, S. (2022). *"Querdenker." Ein Überblick* ["Querdenker." An overview]. Springer.

Imhoff, R., & Decker, O. (2013). Verschwörungsmentalität als Weltbild [Conspiracy mentality as a worldview]. In O. Decker, J. Kiess, & E. Brähler (Eds.), Rechtsextremismus der Mitte: Eine sozialpsychologische Gegenwartsdiagnose [Right-Wing Extremism in the center: A social-psychological analysis of the present] (pp. 146–162). Psychosozial Verlag.

Jann, B. (2014). Plotting regression coefficients and other estimates. *The Stata Journal*, *14*(4), 708–737.

Kiess, J., Decker, O., Heller, A., & Brähler, E. (2020). Antisemitismus als antimodernes Ressentiment: Struktur und Verbreitung eines Weltbildes [Antisemitism as anti-modern resentment: Structure and prevalence of a worldview]. In O. Decker & E. Brähler (Eds.), *Autoritäre Dynamiken. Alte Ressentiments—Neue Radikalität* [Authoritarian dynamics. Old resentments—New radicalism] (pp. 211–248). Psychosozial Verlag.

Koopmans, R. (2015). Religious fundamentalism and hostility against out-groups: A comparison of Muslims and Christians in Western Europe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *41*(1), 33–57.

Koopmans, R., Kanol, E., & Stolle, D. (2021). Scriptural legitimation and the mobilisation of support for religious violence: Experimental evidence across three religions and seven countries. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *47*(7), 1498–1516.

Lamberty, P., & Rees, J. H. (2021). Gefährliche Mythen: Verschwörungserzählungen als Bedrohung für die Gesellschaft [Dangerous myths: Conspiracy narratives as a threat to society]. In A. Zick & B. Küppers (Eds.), *Die geforderte Mitte: Rechtsextreme und demokratiegefährdende Einstellungen in Deutschland 2020/2021* [The demanded middle: Right-wing extremist and democracy-endangering attitudes in Germany 2020/2021] (pp. 283–299). Dietz.

Lowicki, P., Marchlewska, M., Molenda, Z., Karakula, A., & Szczepanska, D. (2022). Does religion predict coronavirus conspiracy beliefs? Centrality of religiosity, religious fundamentalism, and Covid-19 conspiracy beliefs. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *187*, 1–9.

Metzenthin, C. (2019). Verschwörungstheorien und Religion. Wissen—Glauben—Vertrauen [Conspiracy theories and religion. Knowledge—faith—trust]. In C. Metzenthin (Ed.), *Phänomen Verschwörungstheorien: Psychologische, soziologische und theologische Perspektive* [Phenomenon conspiracy-theories: Psychological, sociological and theological perspectives] (pp. 9–20). Theologischer Verlag Zürich.

Obaidi, M., Kunst, J., Ozer, S., & Kimel, S. Y. (2021). The "Great Replacement" conspiracy: How the perceived ousting of whites can evoke violent extremism and Islamophobia. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, *25*(7). https://doi.org/10.1177/13684302211028293

Öztürk, C., & Pickel, G. (2019). Islamophobic right-wing populism? Empirical insights about citizens' susceptibility to islamophobia and its impact on right-wing populists' electoral success: Eastern Europe in a comparative perspective. *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe*, *12*(1), 39–62.

Öztürk, C., & Pickel, G. (2022). Der Antisemitismus der Anderen: Für eine differenzierte Betrachtung antisemitischer Einstellungen unter Muslim:innen in Deutschland [The anti-semitism of the others: Towards a differentiated view of anti-semitic attitudes among Muslims in Germany]. *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik*, *6*, 189–231.

Pickel, G. (2017). Religiosität in Deutschland und Europa—Religiöse Pluralisierung und Säkularisierung auf soziokulturell variierenden Pfaden [Religiosity in Germany and Europe—Religious pluralization and secularization on socio-cultural and varying paths]. *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik*, *1*, 37–74.

Pickel, G. (2019). *Weltanschauliche Vielfalt. Wie sich religiöse Pluralität auf die politische Kultur auswirkt*

[Diversity of worldviews. How religious pluralism affects political culture]. Bertelsmann Stiftung.

Pickel, G., Pickel, S., & Yendell, A. (2020). Zersetzungspotenziale einer demokratischen politischen Kultur: Verschwörungstheorien und erodierender gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt? [Corrosive potential of a democratic political culture: Conspiracy theories and eroding social cohesion?]. In O. Decker & E. Brähler (Eds.), *Autoritäre Dynamiken. Alte Ressentiments—Neue Radikalität* [Authoritarian dynamics. Old resentments—New radicalism] (pp. 89–118). Psychosozial Verlag.

Pirro, A. L., & Taggart, P. (2022). Populists in power and conspiracy theories. *Party Politics*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/135406882210 77071

Riesebrodt, M. (2000). Die Rückkehr der Religionen. Fundamentalismus und der "Kampf der Kulturen" [The return of religions. Fundamentalism and the "clash of civilizations"]. C. H. Beck.

Ruiz, J. B., & Bell, R. A. (2021). Predictors of intention to vaccinate against Covid-19: Results of a nationwide survey. *Vaccine*, *39*, 1080–1086.

Salzborn, S. (2021). Verschwörungsmythen und Antisemitismus [Conspiracy myths and anti-semitism]. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschehen*, *71*(35/36), 41–47.

Saroglou, V., Pichon, I., Trompette, L., Verschueren, M., & Dernelle, R. (2005). Prosocial behavior and religion: New evidence based on projective measures and peer ratings. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *44*(3), 323–348.

Schäfer, A., & Zürn, M. (2021). *Die demokratische Regression* [The democratic regression]. Suhrkamp Verlag.

Schließler, C., Hellweg, N., & Decker, O. (2020). Aberglaube, Esoterik und Verschwörungsmentalität in Zeiten der Pandemie [Superstition, esotericism and conspiracy mentality in times of the pandemic]. In O. Decker & E. Brähler (Eds.), *Autoritäre Dynamiken. Alte Ressentiments—Neue Radikalität* [Authoritarian dynamics. Old resentments—New radicalism] (pp. 283–308). Psychosozial Verlag.

Schneider, V., Pickel, G., & Öztürk, C. (2021). Was bedeutet Religion für Rechtsextremismus? Empirische Befunde zu Verbindungen zwischen Religiosität, Vorurteilen und rechtsextremen Einstellungen [What does religion mean for right-wing extremism? Empirical findings on links between religiosity, prejudice and extreme right-wing attitudes]. *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik*, *5*, 557–597.

Schneider, V., Pickel, S., & Pickel, G. (2020). Gesellschaftliche Integration, Radikalisierung und Co-Radikalisierung [Societal integration, radicalization and co-radicalization]. In G. Pickel, O. Decker, S. Kailitz, A. Röder, & J. Schulze Wessel (Eds.), *Handbuch Integration* [Handbook integration] (pp. 1–12). Springer.

Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (1999). *Social dominance*. Cambridge University Press.

van Prooijen, J.-W., & van Vugt, M. (2018). Conspiracy theories: evolved functions and psychological mechanisms. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *13*(6), 770–788.

Vegetti, F., & Littvay, L. (2022). Belief in conspiracy theories and attitudes toward political violence. *Italian Political Science Review*, *53*, 18–32.

Weiß, V. (2021). Verschwörungsglaube in der Pandemie [Conspiracy belief and the pandemic]. *Soziale Probleme*, *32*, 183–192.

About the Authors

Gert Pickel (Prof. Dr., Dipl.-Soz., Dipl.-Pol.) is chair of sociology of religion and church at Leipzig University Germany and head of the cooperation project Racism in Institutions, funded by the German Federal Ministery of Interior. Pickel is also co-director of the Centre of Excellence for Research on Right-Wing Extremism and Democracy at Leipzig University and co-leader of the research institute of social cohesion. Recent publications include the book *Democracy* (2022, Kohlhammer), with Susanne Pickel.

Cemal Öztürk is a PhD candidate and research assistant at the chair of comparative politics at the University of Duisburg-Essen. Cemal's work focuses on the sociopsychological drivers of anti-Muslim prejudice and its political and societal consequences (e.g., voting for right-wing populist parties, right-wing extremism, and radicalization).

Verena Schneider is a research associate at the Department for Sociology of Religion and Churches at Leipzig University, Germany. After a PhD on the impact of Protestantism on attitudes and values in the US and Germany, her research focus is now on religious and social identities, the role of religion in radicalization processes, and the relation between religiosity and prejudice.

Susanne Pickel (Prof. Dr., Dipl.-Pol.) is chair of comparative political science at the University of Duisburg-Essen and head of the Radical Islam vs. Radical Anti-Islam Research Consortium funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. Recent publications include the book *Democracy* (2022, Kohlhammer), with Gert Pickel.

Oliver Decker (Prof. Dr. Phil., Dipl.-Psych.) is chair of social psychology and intercultural practice at Sigmund Freud University Berlin. He is also director of the Else-Frenkel-Brunswik Institute and the Centre of Excellence for Research on Right-Wing Extremism and Democracy, both at the University of Leipzig. Together with Elmar Brähler, he has been responsible for the Leipzig Authoritarianism Studies on right-wing extremist attitudes in Germany since 2002 (until 2018 this was the Leipzig "Centre" Studies). Recent publications include the book Escape into Authoritarianism (2022, Routledge), with Johannes Kiess and Elmar Brähler.

Article

Links Between Conspiracy Thinking and Attitudes Toward Democracy and Religion: Survey Data From Poland

Franciszek Czech

Institute of Intercultural Studies, Jagiellonian University, Poland; franciszek.czech@uj.edu.pl

Abstract

Religion and democracy are not only social institutions but also objects of attitudes. This article focuses on conspiracy thinking and its links with attitudes toward religion and democracy. Due to its contextual character, the study is limited to Poland and the article intends to report the data on the subject from surveys conducted in this country. In terms of conspiracy thinking and attitudes toward religion, the literature review of existing Polish survey data (Study 1) led to the conclusion that not all types of religious life are correlated with conspiracy thinking. Individual spirituality (the centrality of religiosity and the quest orientation of religiosity) matters less in terms of conspiracy thinking than religion understood as a specific element of ideology (Polish Catholic nationalism, religious fundamentalism, or collective narcissism). In terms of attitudes toward democracy (Study 2), the original dataset is coded in a new way (as categorial variables) and then presented. It suggests that, contrary to earlier research, conspiracy thinking does not necessarily lead to the support of anti-democratic attitudes. Alienation as much as radicalization might be a consequence of conspiracy thinking. There is no significant difference in terms of conspiracy thinking between adherents of authoritarian rules and conditional democrats, indifferent democrats, or people with ambivalent opinions on democracy, described in comparative research on political culture as dissatisfied democrats or critical citizens. The lower level of conspiracy thinking has been identified only among consistent democrats.

Keywords

authoritarianism; conspiracy theory; conspiracy thinking; critical citizens; democracy; dissatisfied democrats; Poland; religion; survey data

Issue

This article is part of the issue "The Role of Religions and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes" edited by Oliver Hidalgo (University of Münster) and Alexander Yendell (Leipzig University).

1. Introduction

Considerable effort has been made in recent years to establish the links between conspiracy thinking and its causes and effects. In terms of effects, most researchers point almost exclusively to the negative consequences of conspiracy thinking such as lack of trust in public actors, denial of science, populism, radicalization, prejudice, and violence, all of which are undesirable in terms of a democratic system's consolidation (Butter & Knight, 2020; Douglas et al., 2019). Suggestions that conspiracy theories may have some positive impact are relatively rare (Dentith, 2014; Fenster, 1999). More time and effort have been spent by researchers on determining

the causes of conspiracy thinking, while on the theoretical level, we can distinguish between three broad groups of explanations. The first consists of psychological research on personality traits and cognitive styles. Conspiracy beliefs have been linked to factors such as feelings of self-uncertainty (van Prooijen, 2016), powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999), agreeableness and other traits of the "big five" personality taxonomy (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2016; Swami et al., 2010), lower levels of analytic thinking (Swami et al., 2014), the need for cognitive closure (Marchlewska et al., 2018), non-clinical delusional thinking (Dagnall et al., 2015), or schizotypy (Barron et al., 2014). The second group of studies refers to the situational causes of conspiracy

thinking. Political scientists and psychologists point out such factors of conspiracy beliefs as strong group attachment (Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2014), experiencing election loss, lower educational background, lower levels of income and marginalization (Uscinski & Parent, 2014), as well as other socio-demographic factors (Freeman & Bentall, 2017).

The third group of explanations links conspiracy thinking with the general worldview and more specific social attitudes defined as relatively stable and learned tendencies to evaluate particular objects such as ideas, people, or events (Oskamp & Schultz, 2004). In other words, while the first type of research on conspiracy theory deals with the way of thinking, the second type focuses on the situational context of thinking and the third type of research points to the content of thinking. The existing research within the latter group focuses mainly on attitudes toward political ideologies such as conservatism and liberalism, and the support of specific political parties, such as Democrats and Republicans in the US (Imhoff et al., 2022; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; van der Linden et al., 2021). Besides ideologies and political orientations, studies in this group also cover relations between conspiracy thinking and attitudes toward religion (Dyrendal et al., 2018) or science (Rutjen & Većkalov, 2022). Occasionally, all three types of explanations are discussed (Butter & Knight, 2020; Douglas et al., 2017; Douglas et al., 2019; Lantian et al., 2020).

This study falls under the last-mentioned category of studying social attitudes related to conspiracy thinking. Attitudes toward religion and democracy constitute crucial aspects of citizens' worldviews. It can be assumed that everyone has some stance toward both abstract sets of ideas and those attitudes impact one's actions in the public sphere. Therefore, the objective of the article is to study relations between conspiracy thinking on one side and, on the other side, two important objects of attitudes which refer to the pillars of social order, namely religion and democracy.

Studying links between conspiracy thinking and social attitudes generates specific problems since conspiracy thinking can also be understood as a type of attitude. However, there is no absolute consensus on such a fundamental issue as a broad class (*genus proximum*) to which conspiracy thinking belongs. On the one hand, there is a tradition to define conspiracy thinking as a universalist type of Hofstadter's (1965/1996) paranoid style or even conspiracy mentality (Moscovici, 1987), which brings them close to the first group of variables discussed above, and cognitive style in particular. In this case, "conspiracy thinking is a stable predisposition that drives individuals to view events and circumstances as the product of Conspiracies" (Smallpage et al., 2020, p. 264). On the other hand, approaches related to the classic categories of paranoid style and conspiracy as mentality are criticized (e.g., Butter, 2021) and conspiracy thinking is defined, often indirectly, as a type of attitude toward the public sphere. Based on the find-

ing that believing in one conspiracy theory is strongly related to believing in other conspiracy theories, conspiracy thinking is defined rather as a worldview and "the common root of conspiracy thinking is the belief in the deceptive nature of authorities" (Castanho Silva et al., 2017). Understanding conspiracy thinking as an attitude prioritizes the content of beliefs over the way of thinking, and consequently suggests analogies with populism rather than with paranoia (Butter, 2020). Furthermore, researchers dedicated to countering conspiracy theories assume that conspiracy thinking does not include absolutely "stable predispositions," and eventually can be changed, as with other attitudes, by appropriate interventions (Krekó, 2020). It seems that the initially more popular conceptualizing of conspiracy thinking as a mentality or a distinctive cognitive style is less promising than understanding it as a type of attitude. Eventually, most of the indicators of conspiracy thinking in the empirical research, including those reported below, boil down to the matter of attitudes toward specific claims regarding the public sphere.

In the case of research into correlations between two attitudes, particular interpretative problems appear; cause and effect relations between conspiracy thinking and other attitudes are not as clear-cut, as in the case of psychological and situational factors, which are by definition perceived as independent variables. Let us, therefore, use this article as an example: While conspiracy theory is an independent variable in research on religion, it is a dependent variable in research on democracy.

Furthermore, attitudes are more context-dependent than universalist psychological traits or objective situational causes and effects. For example, definitions of conservatism and liberalism can largely vary among societies. Moreover, positive attitudes toward democracy mean something different in democratic and authoritarian countries. It does not mean that generalizations are unacceptable in the case of studying links between conspiracy thinking and social attitudes, but the role of the context should be carefully considered since it can explain some of the differences in obtained data. Due to the considerable role of cultural context, the study is limited to the situation in Poland, although specific patterns of conspiracy thinking in Central and Eastern Europe have already been demonstrated by Astapova et al. (2021). Considering Poland's democratic political system and the significant role of religion in public life, it is difficult to imagine that these attitudes are not an important—positive or negative—point of reference for individuals. Although the communist regime collapsed in 1989, Poland is still considered a relatively new and fragile democracy (Stanley, 2019). Therefore, attitudes toward democracy and the role of religion in the public sphere of this predominately catholic country, where religion remains an important element of civic culture, are under constant scrutiny (Zuba, 2021). The study extends the range of this scrutiny by exploring the attitudes toward religion and democracy in the context of

conspiracy theories, which are believed to constitute the greatest challenge for new democracies as much as for well-established ones.

In summary, this article aims to report research on links between conspiracy thinking and religion and democracy in Poland. The attitudes toward these social institutions seem to be useful for characterizing citizens' worldviews since even the large category of people who do not support any political party has, as is widely supposed, at least some opinion on democracy and religion. Both the institutions and those attitudes towards them constitute an important and continual topic of public debate in Poland. The data can, therefore, be useful to better understand the role of conspiracy thinking in this country, and perhaps suggest more general conclusions on its nature.

The initial overview of existing research revealed that there is a striking asymmetry within it regarding both aspects of the worldview in Poland. The association between religiosity and the belief in conspiracy theories receives greater coverage than the link between attitudes toward democracy and conspiracy thinking. Taking this into account, the following section of the article consists of a literature review of the Polish surveys on religiosity and conspiracy thinking. Sections 3 through 6 introduce and analyse completely new survey data to acknowledge the relationship between attitudes toward democracy and conspiracy thinking. The discussion presented in the final section embraces the conclusions from both studies (literature review of research on religion and survey data on democracy) into attitudes related to conspiracy thinking.

2. Religion and Conspiracy Thinking in Poland: Literature Review

The first nationwide survey on links between conspiracy thinking and religiosity in Poland was conducted in 2009 (Bilewicz et al., 2013). Religiosity, measured by church attendance, was weakly related to a belief in the Jewish conspiracy (r = .08, p < .05). In 2010, conspiracy theory became a huge topic after the President of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, and 95 other top Polish officials, died in an air disaster near the Russian city of Smoleńsk. According to a representative survey from 2012, the higher the number of people who declared religious practices, the higher the number of those who accepted the crash-related conspiracy theory. Among the people participating in religious services several times a week, 40% believed that President Kaczyński could have been assassinated, while among the non-churchgoers, only 18% believed the theory (CBOS, 2012). It should be noted that the crash-related conspiracy theories had partisan contours and were popular mostly among right-wing, conservative Kaczyński's voters, who are also more religious.

Another wave of research interest in the relationship between conspiracy thinking and religion was brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Łowicki et al. (2022),

in a series of two studies, conducted research among Polish Roman Catholics which demonstrated that religious fundamentalism is positively related to coronavirus conspiracy beliefs (r = .18, p < 0.001; r = .20, p < 0.001). It should be added that religious fundamentalism was measured on different scales in both studies. In the first study, a 12-item Polish adaptation of the Altemeyer and Hunsberger (2004) scale was employed and respondents were asked to answer whether they agreed or disagreed with statements such as: "God has given mankind a complete, unfailing guide to happiness and salvation, which must be followed absolutely" and "The basic cause of evil in this world is Satan, who is still constantly and ferociously fighting against God." In the second study, a Political Beliefs Questionnaire was used to gain insight into the more contextualized attitude of Polish Catholic nationalism (measured by agreement or disagreement with statements such as: "Christian values should be particularly protected in Poland" and "Poland should be a more Catholic country"). Nevertheless, according to the same research, centrality of religiosity (a 5-item scale with statements such as: "How often do you think about religious issues?" "To what extent do you believe that God or something divine exists?" and "How often do you take part in religious services?") was non-significantly correlated with the conspiracy beliefs in the first study, while significantly and negatively correlated in the second study (r = −.13, p < p. 01). However, the authors explain that the centrality of religion in the personal worldview does not determine the substance of religious beliefs endorsed by an individual. Therefore, specific beliefs could be correlated in different ways with conspiracy thinking (Łowicki et al., 2022).

As a side note, while religiosity was treated as an independent variable in the above-discussed study, Boguszewski et al. (2020) have defined it in another way, demonstrating that some people accepted two specific Covid-19-related conspiracy theories ("The virus was deliberately released to reduce the problem of overpopulation in the world" and "The coronavirus is part of a political and economic war between the US and China"). Furthermore, it was declared that during the pandemic, more time was devoted than ever before to prayer and other religious practices (r = .136, and. 130, p < .01, respectively). Such a view indicates that relations between conspiracy theories and religiosity are two-directional.

Aside from religious fundamentalism and the centrality of religiosity, three orientations of religiosity are distinguished: religiosity being intrinsic ("religion is important as it answers questions about the meaning of life"), extrinsic ("I pray because I have been taught to do it"), and a quest ("doubting is an important part of being religious"). Grzesiak-Feldman (2016) discusses these categories in the context of a study on a non-representative sample conducted in 2012. Correlation analysis has proved that the stronger the belief in the theory on the assassination of President Kaczyński in Smoleńsk, the

higher the intrinsic (r = .34, p < .01) and extrinsic (r = .21, p < .01) orientation of religiosity. Simultaneously, there was no relationship between the conspiracy claim regarding the 2010 Smoleńsk catastrophe and the quest orientation of religiosity (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2016, p. 135). On the other hand, the defensive identification with one's religious group, captured by religious collective narcissism, was found to be a robust predictor of another specific conspiracy theory related to cultural wars (Marchlewska et al., 2019).

The Catholic church, for historical reasons (the importance of Pope John Paul II for the democratic Solidarity Social Movement, for instance, or the role of the church for the sustainment of identity during the partition period before World War I), has a high profile in the Polish public sphere; thus, religion is relatively more politically laden. Frenken et al. (2022) suggest that "this might translate into substantial correlations between religiosity and [conspiracy theory] endorsement." According to them, the correlation of the endorsement of specific conspiracy theories with religiosity was significantly positive based on international meta-analysis and datasets from Poland. However, after applying control for political orientation, correlations of conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy mentality with religiosity decreased substantially in Poland, and conspiracy mentality showed modest negative correlations with religiosity (Frenken et al., 2022). Additionally, as the researchers conclude, national contexts are also important. Countries such as Poland, where religiosity is more rooted in political culture, tend to have relatively stronger intercorrelations between religiosity, conspiracy beliefs, and political orientation.

Overall, the literature review of quantitative research shows links between religiosity and conspiracy thinking are relatively well-developed in Poland. Most of the research was conducted after 2010. The data suggests that while some types of religiosity (religious fundamentalism, Polish catholic nationalism, religious collective narcissism, the intrinsic and extrinsic orientation of religious life) correlate positively with conspiracy thinking, other types (the centrality of religiosity and the "quest" orientation of religiosity) are not related to it. A conclusion might be drawn that the tendency for conspiracy thinking is not related to religiosity when understood as individual spiritual life. It is rather related to religion as a socially rooted set of beliefs integrated within the political program, and while such a type of religiosity seems to be extremely context-dependent, it does not only mean that the national context mentioned above is crucial. The research on links between specific religions (only in one of the quoted research articles were the data sets limited to Catholics) and conspiracy thinking can provide new insight. Moreover, since data shows that supporters of opposition parties have a higher tendency for using conspiratorial interpretative schemes (Czech, 2018; Uscinski & Parent, 2014), the election result can impact the relationship between politically motivated religious beliefs and conspiracy thinking. Many of the studies mentioned above were conducted before 2015 when the conservative Law and Justice party as well as other right-wing parties in Poland were in opposition. This could contribute to a higher level of conspiracy thinking among more religious conservative voters. The comparative data from 2013 and 2017 (Frenken et al., 2022) seem to confirm this view. Nevertheless, more data is needed to establish how the political situation moderates religiosity and conspiracy thinking. In addition, since most of the discussed data focused on specific conspiracy theories, further research on the general tendency for using conspiratorial interpretative schemes would be useful to avoid measuring the correlation between conspiracy thinking and specific conspiracy theories popular among conservative citizens, such as the above-mentioned Kaczyński assassination theory. Last, but not least, more data on the mediation of conspiratorial beliefs and religiosity in education would be an interesting study. The impact of religion might be different among people with varied educational backgrounds.

3. Attitudes Toward Democracy and Conspiracy Theories: An Introduction

As previously mentioned, in the context of attitudes related to conspiracy theories, the research on religion is far more advanced than on attitudes toward democracy. The problem of distrust in the public sphere started to gravitate to the centre of comparative research on political culture at least two decades ago (Norris, 1999; Putnam, 2000), and became institutionalized with almost synonymous concepts of "critical citizens" (Norris, 2011) and "dissatisfied democrats" (Klingemann, 1999). In a nutshell, both terms refer to people who believe in the abstract principles of democracy, while at the same time expressing discontent with the performance of the existing democratic system. They are seeking alternative political order (e.g., some version of direct democracy), but not the authoritarian type. They are dejected, but not necessarily radical. Dissatisfied democrats are often characterized by their distrust toward the political class and public actors, but suspicious distrust within conspiracy thinking has not yet been fully explored. The departure point in the research on political positions and conspiracy thinking is the chapter by Inglehart (1987), who concluded: The more extremist political position (both right- and left-wing), the greater the tendency for conspiracy theories (understood as complete distrust). Later on, many scholars have also come to believe that conspiracy thinking leads to radicalization and the popularity of undemocratic or even violent extremist narratives (Albertson & Guiler, 2020; Lee, 2020; van Prooijen et al., 2015).

Some insights are provided here by Pantazi et al. (2021), who discovered evidence that the rejection of representative democracy by conspiracy theorists does not necessarily mean support for an authoritarian government. Their studies indicate that general belief in

conspiracy theories is associated with decreased support for representative democracy (r = −.384, p < .01), whereas support for direct democracy is increased (r = .373, p < .01), which is mediated by political cynicism and feelings of powerlessness. Hence, it can be said that some conspiracy theorists are dissatisfied democrats, who focus on the deficits of the existing representative democracies but do not necessarily support any kind of authoritarian government. Dissatisfaction with democracy at work does not lead to the rejection of democratic principles, but rather to a quest for a better model of democracy and an ambivalent assessment of it.

Although the issue of attitudes toward democracy has been well-researched in Poland since the very beginning of the democratic transformation in 1989, and conspiracy thinking has attracted the growing attention of Polish scholars in the last decade, both topics were hardly ever studied together. First of all, Korzeniowski (2010, 2012) observed in 2002 (r = −.122, p < .001) and 2010 (r = −.029, < .05) that high political paranoia is correlated with a less positive attitude toward democracy. He defined "political paranoia" as a construct measured on a 6-item scale by similar indicators to conspiracy thinking, such as: "We will never know those who really ruled, rule, and will rule," and "In politics, nothing really happens openly; all the key political decisions are made secretly.''

Another rare exception is the article based on a nationwide representative survey, which proves that people with deeper internalized conspiratorial explanation schemes have a tendency to support anti-systemic parties (U = 38525, p < 0.001). An anti-system party, according to Sartori's (1976, p. 133) definition, is a "belief system that does not share the values of the political order within which it operates." It should be added that those parties differ from one another when it comes to attitudes toward democracy, but no one openly supports authoritarian rules, while at least one promotes direct democracy (Czech, 2018).

4. Research Design

To fill the gap in the research on the relationship between conspiracy thinking and attitudes toward democracy in Poland, new data are introduced and discussed in the following sections. This study relies on data selected from a broader set initiated by the author and administrated by ABR SESTA public opinion and analytics research centre. The nationally representative CAWI online survey of 1,013 Polish citizens above the age of 18 was conducted in May 2020. Respondents were selected randomly from a nationally representative online panel. Sample characteristics are considered representative of Polish adults regarding their age, gender, and place of residence. When it comes to the basic socio-demographic variables, the structure of the respondents was as follows: 52% of the respondents were female, 29% were people aged 18–34, 36% were 35–54 years old, and 35% were aged over 55.

To measure conspiracy thinking, the 7-item scale of conspiratorial distrust toward the public sphere, employed earlier in the Polish context several times since 2014, was used (e.g., Czech, 2018). The score is based on the attitude toward the following statements:

1. Key information on crucial events in the public sphere is intentionally hidden from the eyes of citizens.
2. Politicians, while making decisions, usually listen to powerful secret groups instead of the voices of citizens.
3. Seemingly accidental situations, such as economic crises, are in fact carefully planned
4. Most corporations regularly break the law, corrupt authorities, and fabricate documents in order to increase profits.
5. Most wars break out only because global corporations have a vested interest in it.
6. The most important political decisions in my country are accepted by agents of third countries' secret services.
7. There is one secret organization controlling everything that happens in world politics.

The number of statements the respondent agrees with indicates the level of conspiratorial distrust toward the public sphere. The internal consistency of the scale is acceptable (α = .73).

When it comes to attitudes toward democracy, the most popular scale in Poland, which has been systematically applied for more than 30 years, was applied (e.g., Kolarska-Bobinska, 2007; Korzeniowski, 2015). The scale of the support of democracy is based on three statements:

1. Democracy has an advantage over other forms of government.
2. Sometimes, undemocratic governments can be more desirable than democratic governments.
3. For people such as me, it is not relevant whether the government is democratic or undemocratic.

The internal consistency of the scale is also acceptable (α = .7).

5. Attitudes Toward Democracy

At the initial stage of analysis, the correlation between conspiracy thinking and attitude toward democracy was calculated, with the results showing a small but significant positive relationship (p = .209, p < .001) between conspiracy thinking and a lack of support for democracy. Hence, the findings of Korzeniowski (2010, 2012) were confirmed. However, this conclusion might be misleading since claims that "democracy has no advantage over other forms" or that "it is not relevant whether the government is democratic" seem not to be constructively

valid indicators for the support of authoritarian rules, as is sometimes interpreted in Polish literature. In fact, the lack of support for democracy does not automatically equal the support of authoritarian rules, and attitudes toward democracy might vary greatly if analysed in detail. Therefore, drawing inspiration from Grzesiak-Feldman's (2016) analysis of three orientations of religiosity, where categorical variables were employed, it was decided to re-code initial data in a new way. Previously, the three indicators of attitudes toward democracy were coded either together or separately on an ordinal scale, whereas here, a nominal scale of attitudes toward democracy was introduced based on inductive coding. As a result, an ad-hoc classification system is proposed here to distinguish specific attitudes toward democracy. Classification is understood in this context as a technique of grouping objects with respect to their similarity or homogeneity. It shares its function with clustering analysis, although the classification model is used to assign specific cases into a priori defined classes, while in the case of clustering, the number of classes is unknown and they are detected based on statistical analysis (Ahlquist & Breunig, 2012).

This method of classification allows for a more nuanced insight into attitudes toward democracy. Instead of a place on a scale between pro-democratic and anti-democratic orientation, seven specific positions on democracy have been proposed. Supposing that each answer to one of the three questions regarding the attitude toward democracy is meaningful, eight different stances can be distinguished. Someone who agrees that "democracy has an advantage over other forms of governments" and disagrees with the two other statements can be seen as the most confident supporter of democracy and be called a consistent democrat. If someone supports democracy agreeing with two statements, but simultaneously claims that "sometimes undemocratic governments can be more desirable" then they can be called a conditional democrat. They generally support democracy, but sometimes (it is not determined when; perhaps during a state of crisis or war) there are better systems. An indifferent democrat is someone who supports democracy but claims that for people like him or her, at the end of the day, it is not relevant whether the government is democratic or undemocratic. In a similar vein, indifferent autocrats and consistent autocrats

(or anti-democrats) can be distinguished. Both claim that democracy has no advantage over other forms of government and agree that undemocratic governments can be more desirable. However, the former thinks that it is not relevant whether the government is democratic or undemocratic, while the latter thinks otherwise. Someone who agrees or disagrees with all the statements can be categorized as ambivalent toward democracy; this is the only attitude indicated by two combinations of answers. The first form of hesitance goes like this: "Democracy is good, but not always, and it really does not matter for people like them." The other version of ambivalence is expressed in the following way: "Democracy is not the best regime, but undemocratic systems are not better, although it does not mean that the political system is meaningless for people like them." In both cases, democracy is simultaneously criticized and supported to a certain extent. It can also be assumed that people with an ambivalent position on democracy do not have a clear opinion or support democracy per se, but they prefer some alternative version of it. Hence, it might be argued that conditional, indifferent, and ambivalent democrats can be considered critical citizens or dissatisfied democrats mentioned in the previous section. Supposedly, adherents of various types of direct democracy are present in this group. The last attitude can be characterized as alienation. According to this view, democracy does not have any advantage over other forms of social order, and undemocratic governments are not more desirable than democratic governments, but it really does not matter for the people on the street. All the distinguished attitudes toward democracy, together with their indicators, are presented in Table 1.

Perhaps some attitudes are not as self-evident as others. An obvious limitation of the presented typology of attitudes toward democracy is that nearly all attitudes are measured by a unique combination of answers. In the next stage of research, further indicators should, therefore, be used to evaluate each stance. Nevertheless, the presented typology allows us to look innovatively at the existing data, enabling us to observe that attitudes toward democracy are more nuanced than opposition between democrats and non-democrats or autocrats. To gain more insights, the distribution of each attitude toward democracy in Polish society with regard to education is considered in the next step.

Table 1. Classification of attitudes toward democracy.

	Statement 1	Statement 2	Statement 3
Consistent democrats	+	−	−
Conditional democrats	+	+	−
Ambivalence	+/−	+/−	+/−
Indifferent democrats	+	−	+
Consistent autocrats	−	+	−
Indifferent autocrats	−	+	+
Alienation	−	−	+

Notes: "+'' means agreement with the given statement, while "–'' means disagreement or no opinion.

As Table 2 indicates, consistent democrats are the most numerous in Polish society (42%). Together with indifferent and conditional democrats, 60% of the public support democracy. On the other hand, 13% of the population are autocrats, of which 7% can be characterized as consistent autocrats. Additionally, to test the relationship between education and attitudes toward democracy, Cramer's V analysis was performed for the crosstabs. A significant test result was recorded (V = 0.12; df = 18; p < 0.001), which means that the observed numbers differ significantly from the expected numbers. It can be noted that the most educated Poles were relatively the most numerous among consistent democrats as well as consistent autocrats. Hence, contrary to the common belief, less educated people are not necessarily overrepresented among supporters of autocratic power. For example, only 6% of consistent autocrats are people with education up to the vocational level (11% of the sample), while 50% are people with higher education (43% of the sample). Instead, less educated people have a tendency to be consistent democrats (30%), conditional democrats (18%), ambivalent (15%), or alienated (16%), rather than consistent indifferent autocrats (5%), indifferent democrats (7%), or consistent autocrats (8%).

Referring to the relationship between attitude toward democracy and conspiracy thinking, non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed to discover the difference in the level of belief in conspiracy theories. The analysis showed statistically significant differences among people with different attitudes toward democracy. However, the strength of these effects can be considered as weak. To check which means indicated different results, pairwise comparisons were made. It was established that consistent democrats have significantly lower levels of belief in conspiracy theories than other groups.

The findings (Table 3.) enable the conclusion to be drawn that conspiracy theories are no more popular among supporters of authoritarian forms of rules, as has sometimes been assumed (Korzeniowski, 2010, 2012). Rather, people with a similar level of conspiratorial distrust toward the public sphere can considerably vary in their view of democracy. Some of them might be consistent or indifferent autocrats, but others are conditional or indifferent democrats. People with an ambivalent or alienated stance towards democracy also share similar characteristics in terms of conspiracy thinking. The results are in line with data showing that people with the highest tendency to believe in conspiracy theories vote for various political parties, but the highest level of conspiracy thinking, similar to the electorate of anti-systemic (but not necessary authoritarian) parties, can be found within the group of non-voters, who feel alienated from the political system and have decided to withdraw from the political sphere (Czech, 2018). Only consistent democrats stand out since they are characterized by a lower level of conspiracy thinking. Nevertheless, to be more precise in terms of causation, low-intensity conspiracy thinking makes space for unconditional support for democracy. To gain a more detailed picture of the problem, pairwise comparisons were made (Table 4.).

Table 2. Cross table for the relationship between education and attitudes towards democracy.

		Education				
		Middle school or lower	Vocational school	Secondary school	Higher education	Total
Attitudes toward democracy	Consistent democrats	3 0,3%	31 3,1%	187 18,5%	203 20,0%	424 41,9%
	Conditional democrats	3 0,3%	18 1,8%	45 4,4%	65 6,4%	131 12,9%
	Ambivalence	2 0,2%	15 1,5%	109 10,8%	73 7,2%	199 19,6%
	Indifferent democrats	1 0,1%	7 0,7%	28 2,8%	20 2,0%	56 5,5%
	Consistent autocrats	0 0,0%	8 0,8%	31 3,1%	31 3,1%	70 6,9%
	Indifferent autocrats	3 0,3%	5 0,5%	32 3,2%	22 2,2%	62 6,1%
	Alienation	0 0,0%	16 1,6%	30 3,0%	25 2,5%	71 7,0%
Total		12 1,2%	100 9,9%	462 45,6%	439 43,3%	1013 100,0%

Table 3. The results of the Kruskal-Wallis tests for the difference in the level of belief in conspiracy theories between people with different attitudes towards democracy.

	Consistent democrats (n = 424)		Conditional democrats (n = 131)		Ambivalence (n = 199)		Indifferent democrats (n = 56)		Consistent autocrats (n = 70)		Indifferent autocrats (n = 62)		Alienation (n = 71)		χ^2	p	ε^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Conspiracy thinking	23,09	5,52	25,22	5,58	26,10	6,12	25,23	5,52	26,11	6,21	26,53	4,79	24,97	5,21	61,13	< 0,001	0,06

Notes: The results of the Kruskal-Wallis tests for the difference in the level of belief in conspiracy theories between people with different attitudes towards democracy; χ^2 stands for the result of the Kruskal-Wallis test; p stands for the significance of the Kruskal-Wallis test; ε^2 stands for the strength of the effect.

Table 4. Pairwise comparisons of attitudes toward democracy in terms of conspiracy thinking.

Sample 1—Sample 2	Test statistics	Standard error	Standardized test statistics	Significance	Adjusted significance[a]
Consistent democrats—Alienation	−88.644	37.464	−2.366	.018	.378
Consistent democrats—Conditional democrats	−109.601	29.205	−3.753	.000	.004
Consistent democrats—Indifferent democrats	−112.188	41.541	−2.701	.007	.145
Consistent democrats—Ambivalence	−158.995	25.105	−6.333	.000	.000
Consistent democrats—Consistent autocrats	−160.275	37.693	−4.252	.000	.000
Consistent democrats—Indifferent autocrats	−181.111	39.725	−4.559	.000	.000
Alienation—Conditional democrats	20.956	43.057	.487	.626	1.000
Alienation—Indifferent democrats	23.543	52.217	.451	.652	1.000
Alienation—Ambivalence	70.351	40.388	1.742	.082	1.000
Alienation—Consistent autocrats	71.631	49.211	1.456	.146	1.000
Alienation—Indifferent autocrats	92.467	50.784	1.821	.069	1.000
Conditional democrats—Indifferent democrats	−2.587	46.647	−.055	.956	1.000
Conditional democrats—Ambivalence	−49.394	32.872	−1.503	.133	1.000
Conditional democrats—Consistent autocrats	−50.675	43.256	−1.172	.241	1.000
Conditional democrats—Indifferent autocrats	−71.511	45.038	−1.588	.112	1.000
Indifferent democrats—Ambivalence	46.807	44.196	1.059	.290	1.000
Indifferent democrats—Consistent autocrats	−48.087	52.381	−.918	.359	1.000
Indifferent democrats—Indifferent autocrats	−68.924	53.862	−1.280	.201	1.000
Ambivalence—Consistent autocrats	−1.280	40.600	−.032	.975	1.000
Ambivalence—Indifferent autocrats	−22.116	42.494	−.520	.603	1.000
Consistent autocrats—Indifferent autocrats	−20.836	50.953	−.409	.683	1.000

Notes: Each line tests the null hypothesis that the distributions of Sample 1 and Sample 2 are the same; asymptotic significance (two-tailed tests) is displayed; the significance level is 05; [a] multiple assay significance values were corrected by the Bonferroni method.

7. Concluding Remarks

As previously stated, attitudes toward religion and democracy constitute crucial aspects of the worldview. It is difficult to imagine an adult citizen in Poland, or any other democratic state, who has neither opinion on religion nor attitude toward democracy. Those positions are crucial since they impact daily routines, political choices, and other decisions made by citizens. The literature review of surveys on conspiracy thinking in Polish society reveals that more attention is certainly paid to the study of religion than the attitudes toward democracy. Paradoxically, the wave of studies on Polish conspiratorial religiosity started to grow in the decade of progressive laicization or privatization of religion, which is also perceived as the time when there was a surge in conspiracy thinking.

The studies reviewed in this article suggest that not all types of religiosity correlate positively with conspiracy thinking. Individual spirituality (the centrality of religiosity and the quest orientation of religiosity) matters less in terms of conspiracy thinking than religion understood as a specific element of ideology (Polish Catholic nationalism, religious fundamentalism, or collective narcissism). This kind of religiosity, more than the former, depends on social context and is shaped by religious leaders. Therefore, as mentioned in the final paragraph of the review section, further research on specific religious groups and movements in the changing societal context is required.

Further attention should also be paid to the relationship between conspiracy thinking and attitudes toward democracy. The analysis indicates that, contrary to common assumptions, deep internalization of conspiratorial explanatory schemes does not necessarily lead to a surge in support of authoritarian rules, as earlier research suggested (Korzeniowski, 2010, 2012). Rather, the opposite is true: a low level of conspiracy thinking leads to the consistent support of democracy. There is no significant difference in terms of conspiracy thinking between (consistent and indifferent) autocrats and (ambivalent, indifferent, and conditional) democrats characterized in the literature as critical citizens or dissatisfied democrats (Klingemann, 1999; Norris, 2011). The results also suggest that another consequence of conspiracy thinking might not be radicalization, but alienation, which can lead to apathy and a withdrawal from political behaviours such as voting. Alienation usually remains in the shadows of radicalization, but it is a problem on its own since over 35% of voters in Poland regularly refuse to cast their votes. There is no doubt, therefore, that further reflection on social attitudes in the context of conspiracy thinking might be fruitful.

The main limitation of the data presented in the article is that they come exclusively from Poland. As already discussed above, in the case of attitudes, context matters more than personality traits or cognitive styles and research in other countries is needed to make more reliable general conclusions. Furthermore, both scales used in the second study (on conspiracy thinking and attitudes toward democracy) have previously been applied in Poland, but hardly ever in other countries, making even indirect comparisons less trustworthy. Regarding further limitations, the problem with the measurement of attitudes toward democracy was discussed in detail already. Also, due to the discussed problem with constructive validation of indicators for the support of authoritarian rules (a claim that "democracy has no advantage over other forms" does not necessarily indicate support for authoritarian forms of government), a new classification of attitudes toward democracy has been introduced. Nevertheless, each respective attitude is indicated by a specific combination of features. To boost constructive validation, more than three indicators of attitudes toward democracy would be useful. Despite those limitations, the initial findings presented here promise an interesting field of research into the intersection between conspiracy theory research and studies on political culture.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Abalakina-Paap, M., Stephan, W., Craig, T., & Gregory, W. L. (1999). Beliefs in conspiracies. *Political Psychology*, *20*(7), 637–647.

Ahlquist, J. S., & Breunig, C. (2012). Model-based clustering and typologies in the social sciences. *Political Analysis*, *20*(1), 92–112.

Albertson, B., & Guiler, K. (2020). Conspiracy theories, election rigging, and support for democratic norms. *Research & Politics*, *7*(3), 1–9.

Altemeyer, B., & Hunsberger, B. (2004). A revised religious fundamentalism scale: The short and sweet of it. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, *14*(1), 47–54.

Astapova, A., Colăcel, O., Pintilescu, C., & Scheibner, T. (Eds.). (2021). *Conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe: Tropes and trends*. Routledge.

Barron, D., Morgan, K., Towell, T., Altemeyer, B., & Swami, V. (2014). Associations between schizotypy and belief in conspiracist ideation. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *70*, 156–159.

Bilewicz, M., Winiewski, M., Kofta, M., & Wójcik, A.

(2013). Harmful ideas: The structure and consequences of anti-semitic beliefs in Poland. *Political Psychology*, *34*(6), 821–839.

Boguszewski, R., Makowska, M., Bożewicz, M., & Podkowińska, M. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on religiosity in Poland. *Religions*, *11*(12). https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11120646

Butter, M. (2020). *The nature of conspiracy theories*. John Wiley & Sons.

Butter, M. (2021). Bad history, useless prophecy: The "paranoid style" revisited. *symploke*, *29*(1), 21–42.

Butter, M., & Knight, P. (Eds.). (2020). *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories*. Routledge.

Castanho Silva, B., Vegetti, F., & Littvay, L. (2017). The elite is up to something: Exploring the relation between populism and belief in conspiracy theories. *Swiss Political Science Review*, *23*(4), 423–443.

CBOS. (2012). *Katastrofa pod Smoleńskiem—kto wierzy w teorie zamachu?* [Smoleńsk air disaster—Who believes in conspiracy theories?] (Research Report BS/85/2012).

Czech, F. (2018). Conspiracy theories are not only for election losers. Anti-system parties and conspiratorial distrust in Poland. *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, *47*(4), 663–675.

Dagnall, N., Drinkwater, K., Parker, A., & Clough, P. (2015). Paranormal experience, belief in the paranormal, and anomalous beliefs. *Paranthropology*, *7*(1), 4–14.

Dentith, M. (2014). *The philosophy of conspiracy theories*. Springer.

Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (2017). The psychology of conspiracy theories. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *26*(6), 538–542.

Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, *40*, 3–35.

Dyrendal, A., Robertson, D. G., & Asprem, E. (Eds.). (2018). *Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion*. Brill.

Fenster, M. (1999). *Conspiracy theories: Secrecy and power in American culture*. University of Minnesota Press.

Freeman, D., & Bentall, R. P. (2017). The concomitants of conspiracy concerns. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, *52*(5), 595–604.

Frenken, M., Bilewicz, M., & Imhoff, R. (2022). On the relation between religiosity and the endorsement of conspiracy theories: The role of political orientation. *Political Psychology*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12822

Grzesiak-Feldman, M. (2016). *Psychologia myślenia spiskowego* [Psychology of conspiracy thinking]. Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.

Hofstadter, R. (1996). *The paranoid style in American politics and other essays*. Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1965)

Imhoff, R., Zimmer, F., Klein, O., António, J. H., Babinska, M., Bangerter, A., & van Prooijen, J. W. (2022). Conspiracy mentality and political orientation across 26 countries. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *6*(3), 392–403.

Inglehart, R. (1987). Extremist political positions and perceptions of conspiracy: Even paranoids have real enemies. In C. F. Graumann & S. Moscovici (Eds.), *Changing conceptions of conspiracy* (pp. 231–244). Springer.

Klingemann, H. D. (1999). Mapping political support in the 1990s: A global analysis. In P. Norris (Ed.), *Critical citizens: Global support for democratic government* (pp. 31–56). Oxford University Press.

Kolarska-Bobinska, L. (2007). Consolidation of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe after enlargement: The Polish case in comparison. *Totalitarismus und Demokratie*, *4*(1), 63–73.

Korzeniowski, K. (2010). *Polska paranoja polityczna. Źródła, mechanizmy i konsekwencje spiskowego myślenia o polityce* [Polish political paranoia. Sources, mechanisms and consequences of conspiratorial thinking about politics]. IP PAN.

Korzeniowski, K. (2012). Paranoja polityczna jako rys społeczno-politycznej mentalności Polaków [Political paranoia as a trait of the socio-political mentality of Poles]. *Studia Ekonomiczne*, *75*(4), 545–567.

Korzeniowski, K. (2015). What social support for democracy may mean when we know how democracy is colloquially understood. *Československá Psychologie*, *59*, 67–78.

Krekó, P. (2020). Countering conspiracy theories and misinformation. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 242–256). Routledge.

Lantian, A., Wood, M., & Gjoneska, B. (2020). Personality traits, cognitive styles and worldviews associated with beliefs in conspiracy theories. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 155–167). Routledge.

Lee, B. (2020). Radicalization and conspiracy theories. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 344–356). Routledge.

Łowicki, P., Marchlewska, M., Molenda, Z., Karakula, A., & Szczepańska, D. (2022). Does religion predict coronavirus conspiracy beliefs? Centrality of religiosity, religious fundamentalism, and COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. *Personality and individual differences*, *187*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.111413

Marchlewska, M., Cichocka, A., & Kossowska, M. (2018). Addicted to answers: Need for cognitive closure and the endorsement of conspiracy beliefs. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *48*(2), 109–117.

Marchlewska, M., Cichocka, A., Łozowski, F., Górska, P., & Winiewski, M. (2019). In search of an imaginary enemy: Catholic collective narcissism and the endorsement of gender conspiracy beliefs. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, *159*(6), 766–779.

Mashuri, A., & Zaduqisti, E. (2014). We believe in your conspiracy if we distrust you: The role of intergroup distrust in structuring the effect of Islamic identification, competitive victimhood, and group incompatibility on belief in a conspiracy theory. *Journal of Tropical Psychology*, *4*(11), 1–14.

Moscovici, S. (1987). The conspiracy mentality. In C. F. Graumann & S. Moscovici (Eds.), *Changing conceptions of conspiracy* (pp. 151–169). Springer.

Norris, P. (Ed.). (1999). *Critical citizens: Global support for democratic government*. Oxford University Press.

Norris, P. (2011). *Democratic deficit: Critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge University Press.

Oskamp, S., & Schultz, P. W. (2004). *Attitudes and opinions*. Psychology Press.

Pantazi, M., Papaioannou, K., & van Prooijen, J. W. (2021). *Power to the people: The hidden link between support for direct democracy and belief in conspiracy theories*. *Political Psychology*, *43*(3), 529–548.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon and Schuster.

Rutjen, B. T., & Većkalov, B. (2022). Conspiracy beliefs and science rejection. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *46*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101392

Sartori, G. (1976). *Parties and party systems: A framework for analysis*. Cambridge University Press.

Smallpage, S. M., Drochon, H., Uscinski, J. E., & Klofstad, C. (2020). Who are the conspiracy theorists? Demographics and conspiracy theories. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 263–277). Routledge.

Stanley, B. (2019). Backsliding away? The quality of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, *15*(4), 343–353.

Swami, V., Chamorro-Premuzic, T., & Furnham, A. (2010). Unanswered questions: A preliminary investigation of personality and individual difference predictors of 9/11 conspiracist beliefs. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *24*(6), 749–761.

Swami, V., Voracek, M., Stieger, S., Tran, U. S., & Furnham, A. (2014). Analytic thinking reduces belief in conspiracy theories. *Cognition*, *133*(3), 572–585.

Uscinski, J. E., & Parent, J. M. (2014). *American conspiracy theories*. Oxford University Press.

van der Linden, S., Panagopoulos, C., Azevedo, F., & Jost, J. T. (2021). The paranoid style in American politics revisited: An ideological asymmetry in conspiratorial thinking. *Political Psychology*, *42*(1), 23–51.

van Prooijen, J.-W. (2016). Sometimes inclusion breeds suspicion: Self-uncertainty and belongingness predict belief in conspiracy theories. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *46*(3), 267–279.

van Prooijen, J.-W., Krouwel, A. P. M., & Pollet, T. (2015). Political extremism predicts belief in conspiracy theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *6*(5), 570–578.

Zuba, K. (2021). Not so much societal: The Catholic church in Poland as a veto player. *East European Politics and Societies*, *36*. https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254211018773

About the Author

Franciszek Czech is a tenured associated professor of political science and sociology at the Institute of Intercultural Studies, Faculty of International and Political Studies, Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland. His research is focused on conspiracy narratives and emotions in political culture as well as public discourses. He is also interested in global and area (Southeast Asian) studies. He currently sits on the Advisory Board of the ERC-funded project Populism and Conspiracy Theory (PACT).

Article

Individual-Level Predictors of Conspiracy Mentality in Germany and Poland

Fahima Farkhari [1,*], Bernd Schlipphak [2], and Mitja D. Back [1]

[1] Department of Psychology, University of Münster, Germany
[2] Department of Political Science, University of Münster, Germany

* Corresponding author (fahima.farkhari@wwu.de)

Abstract
Conspiracy mentality (CM), the general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories, has been linked to political behaviors, prejudice, and non-compliance with public health guidelines. While there is increasing evidence that conspiracy beliefs are pervasive, research on individual-level predictors of CM is scarce. Specifically, we identify three gaps in research: First, evidence on the question which individual-level characteristics predict CM is inconsistent and often based on small samples. Second, personality, political, and religious predictors are usually examined in isolation. Third, differences on the societal level have been mostly neglected. In the present research, we gathered CAWI (Study 1) and CATI (Study 2) data on generalized interpersonal trust (GIT), right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), and religiosity in two politically and culturally different European countries, namely Germany (N = 2,760) and Poland (N = 2,651). This allowed for a well-powered test of three theoretically relevant predictors of CM, including their unique predictive value. Moreover, we were able to explore whether these associations replicate across or are moderated by country context. Our findings underline the role of GIT and RWA in predicting CM in both countries. Analyses based on RWA subdimensions yielded a differentiated picture of the role of RWA. Furthermore, we found cross-country differences with stronger associations of GIT and RWA with CM in Germany. Findings are discussed concerning political and religious differences between the examined countries.

Keywords
conspiracy mentality; generalized interpersonal trust; personality; religiosity; right-wing authoritarianism

1. Introduction

Conspiracy mentality (CM) is defined as a general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories (Bruder et al., 2013; Dyrendal et al., 2021). CM has been shown to predict disengagement from normative and engagement in non-normative political action (Douglas, 2021; Imhoff et al., 2021) and prejudices towards outgroups (Bruder et al., 2013). CM is moreover predictive of critical public health behaviors such as vaccine hesitancy and lower adherence to governmental health guidelines (Pummerer et al., 2022; Winter et al., 2022). Conspiratorial thinking exists, although to varying

degrees, across cultures and populations which has been recently shown in two studies conducted across 26 countries (Imhoff et al., 2022; see also Bruder et al., 2013). Furthermore, previous research has yielded numerous individual-level predictors as potential predictors of CM (Bowes et al., 2021; Lantian et al., 2020). However, existent research on individual-level predictors of CM is incomplete and inconsistent, was often based on small samples in a selected country context, and examined personality, political, and religious predictors in isolation. We aim at a joint analysis of personality, political, and religious predictors of CM in the German and Polish general population, more specifically focusing on

generalized interpersonal trust (GIT), right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), and religiosity. While interpersonal trust is acknowledged as a central personality trait for explaining conspiracy beliefs, previous research either examined its role in the belief in very specific conspiracy theories or measured interpersonal trust concerning very specific groups of individuals and institutions (see Wood & Douglas, 2018). RWA is considered a central sociopolitical attitude for the prediction of conspiracy beliefs but was also mostly examined with respect to the belief in specific conspiracy theories (e.g., Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015; Wood & Gray, 2019), furthermore yielding inconsistent relationships with conspiracy beliefs (Hartman et al., 2021; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Finally, despite growing interest in the relationship between religiosity and conspiracy beliefs in the face of contradicting theoretical expectations, previous findings are still inconclusive as they yielded mixed results (Frenken et al., 2022). Here, we examine the association of CM with GIT, RWA, and religiosity based on two surveys with large national samples in Germany and Poland. This allows us (a) to provide a well-powered test of three theoretically relevant predictors of CM, (b) to investigate their unique predictive value, and (c) to explore whether these associations replicate across or are moderated by country context.

2. Individual-Level Predictors of Conspiracy Mentality

CM is a complex construct that can be influenced by personality, political, and religious characteristics; however, it is typically examined concerning only one of these groups of individual-level variables and in comparatively small samples. For instance, in a comprehensive review of psychological research on conspiracy beliefs, Goreis and Voracek (2019) identified 96 studies of which only six (Furnham, 2013; Galliford & Furnham, 2017; Gumhalter, 2012; Lahrach & Furnham, 2017; Mancosu et al., 2017; Oliver & Wood, 2014) investigated personality, political, and religious variables jointly. Of these, four were conducted on comparably small samples (181 ≤ N ≥ 335; for details see Goreis & Voracek, 2019, Supplementary Table 1). Furthermore, numerous studies on psychological predictors of conspiracy beliefs focus on explaining belief in specific conspiracy theories instead of CM. Conspiracy theories are explanations of (typically unusual) events based on alleged secret intentions and actions of (typically powerful) actors (Wood & Gray, 2019). They can differ from each other, e.g., regarding their narratives, degree of (im)probability, and popularity (Bilewicz et al., 2015). Thus, the study of the endorsement of specific conspiracy theories needs to be distinguished from the study of CM which refers to a general tendency to endorse conspiracy beliefs irrespective of the specific content of conspiracy theories (Imhoff, 2015). Taken together, it is still not known how robustly personality, political, and religious variables are associated with CM and what their unique contribution to explaining CM is. We will focus on one variable of each of these

groups which we consider particularly important based on theoretical and empirical considerations—namely GIT, RWA, and religiosity—and will examine these jointly. This will allow us to examine both the robustness of their predictive power as well as their unique contribution to predicting CM.

2.1. Generalized Interpersonal Trust and Conspiracy Mentality

Individuals low in GIT disbelieve the goodness of the world and have a generalized expectancy that other individuals or groups cannot be relied on (Rotter, 1980). Due to its role in social interactions and relationships, interpersonal trust is a personality variable of central interest in personality as well as psychological research more generally (Fleeson & Leicht, 2006; Krueger & Meyer-Lindenberg, 2019). Regarding conspiracy beliefs, interpersonal trust is considered one of the "earliest subjects investigated" (Wood & Douglas, 2018, p. 246) among personality traits. From a theoretical point of view, interpersonal trust should be a meaningful personality variable in explaining conspiracy beliefs as narratives of secretly colluding groups are consistent with the hostile worldview of individuals low in interpersonal trust. Accordingly, CM might be associated with lower GIT. Indeed, numerous studies found a negative relationship between interpersonal trust and conspiracy beliefs. However, most of them focused on the belief in specific conspiracy theories or measured trust with respect to specific individuals (e.g., neighbors, relatives) or specific institutions (e.g., authorities, government; see Jovančević & Milićević, 2020; Lantian et al., 2016; Marques et al., 2022; Wood & Douglas, 2018) with the latter often being included as actors in conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen, 2018). In contrast, research on the relationship between GIT (i.e., trust towards other humans in general) and CM is scarce. Here we aim to fill this gap. We expect GIT to be negatively related to CM (H1).

2.2. Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Conspiracy Mentality

RWA is a key construct regarding individual differences in the political domain (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). Previous research suggests the existence of (at least) two dimensions of political ideology: Preferences for more versus less equality and preferences for openness versus tradition, with the former being more strongly related to attitudes towards economic issues and the latter being more strongly related to attitudes towards sociocultural issues (Federico & Malka, 2021). The dual-process motivational model of ideology and prejudice (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010) proposes that these attitudinal dimensions are reflected in the individual's social dominance orientation (a preference for hierarchical intergroup relations) and RWA. Already early conceptualizations of authoritarianism suggested a relationship with conspiracy beliefs

considering conspiratorial belief as an integral characteristic of authoritarian individuals originating from the projection of their own dangerous impulses onto the world (Adorno et al., 1950; Imhoff, 2015). Modern conceptualizations define RWA as individual differences in the propensity for submission to authorities, conventionalism, and aggression towards those who deviate from social norms (Altemeyer, 1998; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). As outlined by the dual-process motivational model, RWA is closely linked to the belief that the social world is an inherently dangerous place and predicts negative attitudes towards individuals perceived as socially deviant (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). Following these conceptualizations, individuals high in RWA should show a general tendency to endorse conspiracies that build around groups perceived as threatening ingroup and societal values and stability (Wood & Gray, 2019). According to another line of argumentation, politically right-leaning as compared to left-leaning individuals should be more susceptible to conspiracy beliefs due to their higher levels of institutional distrust (van der Linden et al., 2021). Some scholars argue that certain cognitive predispositions related to RWA, such as cognitive rigidity and intuitive thinking, predispose them to a higher susceptibility to conspiracy theories due to difficulties in otherwise grasping the complexity of the world (Richey, 2017). In sum, there are strong theoretical reasons to expect an association between RWA and CM.

As suggested by some authors, however, individuals high in RWA may be resistant to the belief in conspiracy theories that challenge the existing societal order, e.g., depicting authority figures as conspiratorial actors (Hartman et al., 2021; Wood & Gray, 2019). Considering that the measurement of CM usually includes items referring to authorities, it seems plausible to assume that the RWA subdimension "authoritarian submission" (RWA(AS)) shows different relationships with CM compared to the subdimensions "conventionalism" (RWA(C)) and "authoritarian aggression" (RWA(AA)). Previous research, including research on potential differential effects of the RWA subdimensions, focused on the relationship between RWA and the belief in specific conspiracy theories (e.g., Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015; Wood & Gray, 2019). Research regarding the relationship between RWA and CM, however, is scarce. While most of the few existent studies found significantly positive relationships (Bruder et al., 2013; Đorđević et al., 2021; Dyrendal et al., 2021; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014, Studies 3, 4, 5), others did not (Hartman et al., 2021; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014, Studies 1, 2). In a recent international project spanning 26 countries (combined N = 104,253), Imhoff et al. (2022) found CM to be related to (right-wing) political orientation and to be more prevalent among voters of politically extreme parties with stronger effects found for the extreme right. However, the authors did not include a measure of RWA. We aim to add to this research by explicitly focusing on RWA as a central attitudinal, political personality variable and CM

as a dispositional conspiracy mindset. Against the background of numerous theoretical arguments surrounding the nature and correlates of RWA as well as previous findings, we expect RWA to be positively related to CM (H2). Furthermore, based on theoretical considerations and previous empirical evidence (Hartman et al., 2021; Wood & Gray, 2019), we expect the relationship between RWA(AS) and CM to be non-significant (H3).

2.3. Religiosity and Conspiracy Mentality

Religiosity is a multifaceted construct including a range of related aspects such as religious beliefs, devotion, and practice (Hackney & Sanders, 2003; Rowatt & Al-Kire, 2021). It is either assessed with measures of these different aspects or measures of self-ascribed religiousness that aim to capture the core of religiosity (McAndrew & Voas, 2011). In our study, we are interested in the core of religiosity which better reflects the overall religious identity of individuals than specific religious aspects. The link between religiosity and CM has often been discussed given analogies between religions and conspiracy theories, including the ascription of agency to invisible forces, the distinction between good and evil forces, and the conviction that everything is connected (Franks et al., 2013; Ladini, 2022). How exactly religiosity is linked to CM is, however, disputed. According to the "complement hypothesis" (Frenken et al., 2022, p. 5), the same individuals should be inclined towards both religious and conspiracy beliefs due to similar cognitive tendencies to interpret the world. According to the "belief replacement hypothesis" (Jasinskaja-Lahti & Jetten, 2019, p. 940), non-religious individuals should be more likely to endorse conspiracy theories due to a natural human need to believe in some higher entity that gives individuals a sense of meaning, to understand the world, and to thereby perceive some sense of control. Empirical evidence on these questions is still scarce. In a meta-analysis including studies that used either measures of specific or generic conspiracy beliefs, Stasielowicz (2022) found a small positive correlation between religiosity and conspiracy beliefs ($r = .14$). Investigating the relationship between religiosity and generic conspiracy beliefs across nine studies (N = 4,804), Frenken et al. (2022) found mixed results across studies and overall, a significantly positive correlation of small size ($r = .10$). In a series of additional studies, the authors' findings were again inconsistent. We aim to provide more empirical evidence on the link between religiosity and CM with two well-powered studies across two countries (RQ1).

3. The Role of Country Context

Previous research on the prediction of CM has mostly been conducted in one specific country and neglected the influence of societal characteristics such as religious and political culture. While there is initial evidence that the spread of conspiracy theories and the mean level

of CM differ across countries with differences in the political and religious spheres (e.g., Bruder et al., 2013; Salali & Uysal, 2021; Schlipphak et al., 2021), it is still unclear whether these differences affect the relationship between personality, political, and religious characteristics and CM. It is thus an open empirical question, whether the prediction of CM by GIT, RWA, and religiosity is influenced by or invariant across country contexts. We argue that there is reason to expect cross-country differences.

As previous studies have demonstrated, conspiracy narratives constitute a particular characteristic of populist rhetoric (Imhoff et al., 2022). Some authors suggest that the communication of conspiracy theories by elites should lead to a lower societal stigma of believing conspiracy theories in general, resulting in higher mean levels of CM in countries led by populist governments (Schlipphak et al., 2021; but see also Imhoff et al., 2022). The communication of conspiracy theories by political elites may not only foster the individual emergence of a conspiratorial mindset, but also influence how strongly personality, political, and religious characteristics affect CM. For GIT, two diverging expectations can be derived: On the one hand, as argued earlier, it seems plausible that individuals with a weaker GIT are particularly susceptible to conspiracy narratives due to their hostile worldview. In a country led by populists whose communication includes the spread of conspiracy theories, individuals with lower GIT might therefore develop a particularly strong conspiratorial mindset. Following this argument, the relationship between GIT and CM should be stronger in countries led by populists. On the other hand, the narratives communicated by political elites who rely on conspiracy theories may be more consistent with the worldview of distrustful individuals, which may promote felt closeness towards political elites and weaken the conspiratorial idea of collusions, considering that conspiracy theories often refer to actions allegedly conducted by powerful groups including governmental institutions (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Following this reasoning, we would expect a weaker relationship between GIT and CM in populist-led countries. Here, we explore the moderating role of country context regarding the association between GIT and CM (RQ2).

When it comes to RWA, there is also reason to assume differences in its relationship with CM across countries with political differences. Some authors maintain that "conspiracies are for losers" (Uscinski & Parent, 2014) meaning that individuals whose preferred political candidate or party has lost the elections and who do not feel represented by their government are more susceptible to conspiracy theories than those whose interests are politically represented. In a country led by a right-wing government, individuals high as compared to low in RWA should have stronger perceptions of political representation and political control (for a discussion of the link between political control and conspiracy beliefs see Imhoff et al., 2022). Consequently, the association between RWA and CM should be weaker in countries with a right-wing government than in countries with politically moderate or left-wing governments (H4). In an exploratory manner, we will also examine potential cross-country differences in the association between the three subdimensions of RWA and CM.

Regarding the role of country context in the link between religiosity and CM, there is to date little empirical evidence. Therefore, it is still an open question whether a potential relationship between religiosity and CM differs depending on the political and religious culture. Here, we explore a potential moderating role of country context regarding the association between religiosity and CM (RQ3).

The present research tests the moderating role of country context by focusing on Germany and Poland, two countries with significant differences in the political and religious spheres. While the Polish government is ruled since 2015 by the populist right-wing party PiS which is characterized by semi-authoritarian politics (Meijers & van der Veer, 2019), Germany's right-wing party AfD obtained a minority of the votes in the past federal elections and remained in the opposition. Furthermore, while Germany and Poland are both predominantly Christian countries, Poland displays a significantly higher level of religiosity as well as low political and religious pluralism (Joshanloo & Gebauer, 2020; Karpov, 2002). In addition, in Poland, church attendance is substantially higher and more closely related to religiosity than in Germany (Storm, 2017). Overall, we consider the selected countries to represent adequate cases to test the hypothesized cross-country differences in the association between individual-level GIT, RWA, and religiosity on the one hand and CM on the other hand.

4. The Present Research

The present research aims at investigating three classes of potential correlates of CM—namely personality, political, and religious characteristics—thereby focusing on GIT, RWA, and religiosity. Within the scope of an interdisciplinary project between psychology and political science, we conducted two surveys with large national samples in Germany and Poland. This allowed us to provide robust tests of (a) the predictive value of GIT, RWA, and religiosity in explaining CM, (b) their unique predictive power, and (c) the replicability and potential moderation of these associations across two countries with differences in the political and religious sphere. In sum, the following hypotheses and research questions will be tested:

H1: GIT is negatively associated with CM.

H2: RWA is positively associated with CM.

H3: RWA(AS) is non-significantly associated with CM.

RQ1: Is religiosity associated with CM?

RQ2: Is the association between GIT and CM different in Poland as compared to Germany?

H4: The association between RWA and CM is weaker in Poland as compared to Germany.

RQ3: Is the association between religiosity and CM different in Poland as compared to Germany?

5. Methods

5.1. Participants

Data for the present article are based on a computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) survey (Study 1) and a computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) survey (Study 2). Each study was conducted respectively in Germany and Poland by the survey agency Kantar TNS. Study 1 was fielded in June 2018 and Study 2 was fielded in November–December 2020. The recruitment was based on random address-based sampling (Study 1) and dual-frame sampling based on fixed and mobile network numbers (Study 2). The target group was aged between 18 and 99 years in Study 1 and entitled to vote at the national parliamentary elections at the time of study in Study 2. This resulted in random samples of the populations. The total German sample size was N = 2,760 and the total Polish sample size was N = 2,651. The sample size was determined based on the resources available for the study implementation. Our hypotheses were not preregistered. Details on the criteria for data exclusion are presented in the Supplementary File.

In Study 1, 1,358 respondents participated in the German survey and 1,451 respondents in the Polish survey. After data cleaning, the final samples consisted of 1,087 respondents in Germany (52.16% female; M_{age} = 47.04, SD_{age} = 13.28) and 1,047 respondents in Poland (52.24% female; M_{age} = 41.13, SD_{age} = 12.95).

In Study 2, 1,402 respondents participated in the German survey and 1,200 respondents in the Polish survey. The final sample consisted of 1,265 respondents in Germany (46.17% female; M_{age} = 53.66, SD_{age} = 16.46) and 1,092 respondents in Poland (45.33% female; M_{age} = 50.37, SD_{age} = 16.44).

5.2. Materials

The items used in Study 1 and Study 2 can be found in the Supplementary File.

In Study 1, we measured CM based on four items of the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ; Bruder et al., 2013; eleven-point scale: 0% = certainly not to 100% = certain; $α$ = .84). To measure GIT, we asked respondents to indicate whether they believe that most people can be trusted or that one cannot be too careful in dealing with other people (eleven-point scale: 1 = one cannot be careful enough to 11 = one can trust most people; Roßteutscher et al., 2019). To mea-

sure RWA, we administered the Authoritarianism Short Scale by Beierlein et al. (2014) consisting of nine items (five-point scale: 1 = do not agree at all to 5 = agree completely; $α$ = .86), with respectively three items measuring RWA(AA), RWA(AS), and RWA(C). Religiosity was assessed with an item asking respondents how religious they consider themselves (eleven-point scale: 0 = not religious at all to 10 = very religious; European Social Survey, 2021).

In Study 2, we measured CM with a single-item measure based on the items of the CMQ (Bruder et al., 2013): "There are many important things happening in the world that are controlled by influential groups without the public's knowledge" (six-point scale: 1 = do not agree at all to 6 = fully agree). To measure GIT, we used the same item as in Study 1 with a six-point scale. RWA was measured using three items of the scale used in Study 1, respectively measuring one of the three dimensions of RWA (six-point scale: 1 = do not agree at all to 6 = fully agree; $α$ = .48). We used one item per subdimension to maintain the scale's validity and chose the items according to their highest loading on the respective RWA subdimension as reported in the validation studies conducted by Beierlein et al. (2014, p. 35; see also Table 1). The low level of Cronbach's alpha of the RWA scale used in Study 2 reflects a common problem of short scales. It can be explained by the low number of items as Cronbach's alpha increases with the number of items and by comparatively heterogeneous items covering different subdimensions resulting in small inter-item correlations (Rammstedt & Beierlein, 2014). Some authors suggest using the test-retest reliability as a more reliable indicator of the reliability of short scales (for a summary see Rammstedt & Beierlein, 2014). Religiosity was assessed with a single-item measure asking respondents how religious they consider themselves (six-point scale: 1 = not religious at all to 6 = deeply religious). Overall, due to time constraints limiting the length of the questionnaire, we chose fewer items in Study 2 compared to Study 1. However, all items used in Study 2 were also used in Study 1, apart from minor differences in wording and differences regarding the scale range (see the Supplementary File).

6. Results

6.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlational Analyses

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of our study variables. Mean levels of CM, RWA, and religiosity were higher in the Polish than in the German samples. Correlations among all variables can be found in the Supplementary File. To derive meta-analytic correlations for each country, we applied the R package "metafor" (R Core Team, 2021; Viechtbauer, 2010) and calculated sample-size weighted correlations across the country-specific samples. In both countries, we found negative correlations between GIT and CM ($r_{Germany}$ = −.25,

$p < .001$, 95% CI [−.29, −.21]; r_{Poland} = −.15, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−.19, −.11]), positive correlations between RWA and CM ($r_{Germany}$ = .20, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.16, .24]; r_{Poland} = .11, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.06, .15]), and non-significant correlations between religiosity and CM ($r_{Germany}$ = .03, $p = .21$, 95% CI [−.01, .07]; r_{Poland} = .04, $p = .06$, 95% CI [−.00, .08]).

Our analyses of the relationship between the RWA subdimensions and CM yielded positive correlations between RWA(AA) and CM ($r_{Germany}$ = .21, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.17, .25]; r_{Poland} = .13, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.08, .17]) and between RWA(C) and CM ($r_{Germany}$ = .20, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.16, .24]; r_{Poland} = .13, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.08, .17]) in both countries. RWA(AS), however, was not significantly related to CM in either of the countries ($r_{Germany}$ = .04, $p = .07$, 95% CI [−.00, .08]; r_{Poland} = −.01, $p = .69$, 95% CI [−.05, .03]).

6.2. Prediction by Individual-Level Predictors

To assess the unique contribution of GIT, RWA, and religiosity in predicting CM, we applied multiple linear regression analyses. All continuous variables were z-standardized prior to the analyses. To derive meta-analytic effect sizes for each country, we used again the R package "metafor" and fitted meta-analytic fixed-effects models by weighting the effect sizes by study sample size. In both countries, CM was negatively predicted by GIT ($b_{Germany}$ = −.24, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−.28, −.19]; b_{Poland} = −.14, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−.18, −.09]), positively predicted by RWA ($b_{Germany}$ = .18, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.13, .22]; b_{Poland} = .10, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.06, .14]) and non-significantly predicted by religiosity ($b_{Germany}$ = .03, $p = .16$, 95% CI [−.01, .07]; b_{Poland} = .03, $p = .16$, 95% CI [−.01, .07]; see also Figure 1). Results of the analyses including sociodemographic control variables did not differ substantially and can be found in the Supplementary File.

Regarding the analyses based on the RWA subdimensions, we found CM to be positively predicted by RWA(AA) ($b_{Germany}$ = .19, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.14, .23]; b_{Poland} = .12, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.07, .16]) and RWA(C) ($b_{Germany}$ = .18, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.14, .22]; b_{Poland} = .15, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.10, .19]), but non-significantly predicted by RWA(AS) ($b_{Germany}$ = .03, $p = .16$, 95% CI [−.01, .07]; b_{Poland} = −.02, $p = .35$, 95% CI [−.06, .02]) in both countries (see also Figure 2).

6.3. Moderation by Country

Figure 3 visualizes interactions of country and, respectively, GIT, RWA, and religiosity, on CM in Study 1 (Panel A–C) and Study 2 (Panel D–F). Meta-analytically pooled across all samples, we found a significantly positive interaction of country (Germany = 0, Poland = 1) and GIT (b = .11, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.05, .16]), indicating that the negative prediction of CM by GIT was weaker in Poland as compared to Germany (see Figure 3 Panel A and D; Table S8 additionally presents the results of simple slopes analyses). We also found a significantly negative interaction of country and RWA (b = −.08, $p < .01$, 95% CI [−.14, −.02]), indicating that the positive prediction of CM by RWA was weaker in Poland as compared to Germany (see Figure 3, Panel B and E). No interaction was found for country and religiosity (b = .00, $p = 1.00$, 95% CI [−.06, .06]; see Figure 3, Panel C and F).

Regarding our exploratory analyses on interactions of country and the RWA subdimensions on CM, only the pooled interaction with RWA(AA) was significant and negative (b = −.08, $p < .01$, 95% CI [−.13, −.02]), indicating that the positive prediction of CM by RWA(AA) was weaker in Poland as compared to Germany (see also Supplementary File, Figure S1, Panel A and D). In the Supplementary File, the results of the interaction analyses on the other two subdimensions (Table S10) as well as the respective simple slopes analyses (Table S11) can be found.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the study variables.

| | Germany | | | | Poland | | | |
| | Study 1 | | Study 2 | | Study 1 | | Study 2 | |
Variable	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
CM	7.44	2.08	3.74	1.67	7.65	1.94	4.39	1.57
Age	47.04	13.28	53.66	16.46	41.13	12.95	50.37	16.44
Female	0.52	0.50	0.46	0.50	0.52	0.50	0.45	0.50
Education	14.65	3.20	4.45	2.11	16.42	3.47	4.92	1.94
GIT	5.71	2.47	3.82	1.29	5.49	2.47	2.94	1.54
RWA	3.28	0.77	3.58	1.12	3.78	0.70	4.17	1.18
Religiosity	4.06	2.99	2.67	1.52	6.10	3.10	3.40	1.64
N	1,087		1,265		1,047		1,092	

Notes: M = mean; SD = standard deviation; N = total sample size; gender was dummy-coded (0 = male, 1 = female); education indicates the years spent at any educational institution in Study 1 and the educational level following the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) ranging from ISCED 0 to ISCED 8 in Study 2.
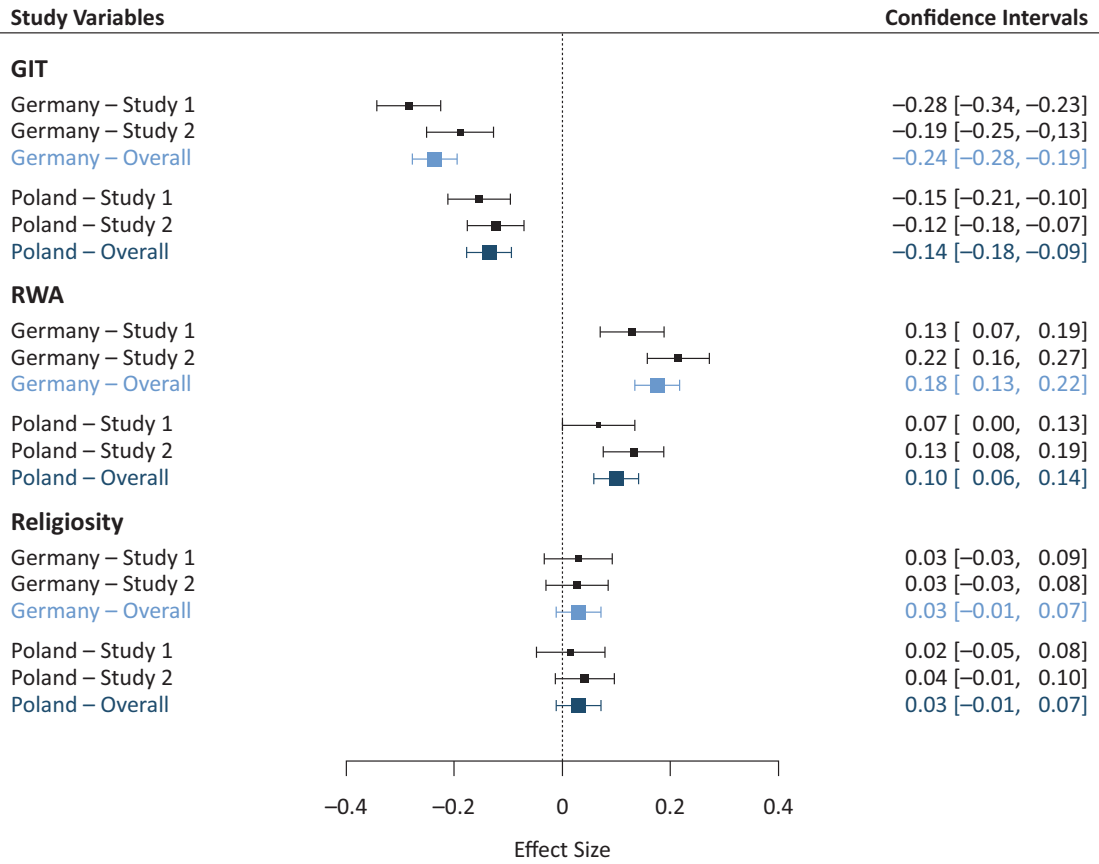
Study Variables	Confidence Intervals

GIT

Germany – Study 1	−0.28 [−0.34, −0.23]
Germany – Study 2	−0.19 [−0.25, −0,13]
Germany – Overall	−0.24 [−0.28, −0.19]
Poland – Study 1	−0.15 [−0.21, −0.10]
Poland – Study 2	−0.12 [−0.18, −0.07]
Poland – Overall	−0.14 [−0.18, −0.09]

RWA

Germany – Study 1	0.13 [0.07, 0.19]
Germany – Study 2	0.22 [0.16, 0.27]
Germany – Overall	0.18 [0.13, 0.22]
Poland – Study 1	0.07 [0.00, 0.13]
Poland – Study 2	0.13 [0.08, 0.19]
Poland – Overall	0.10 [0.06, 0.14]

Religiosity

Germany – Study 1	0.03 [−0.03, 0.09]
Germany – Study 2	0.03 [−0.03, 0.08]
Germany – Overall	0.03 [−0.01, 0.07]
Poland – Study 1	0.02 [−0.05, 0.08]
Poland – Study 2	0.04 [−0.01, 0.10]
Poland – Overall	0.03 [−0.01, 0.07]

Effect Size

Figure 1. Study-specific and meta-analytic predictions of CM by GIT, RWA, and religiosity in Germany and Poland.

Study Variables	Confidence Intervals

RWA — Authoritarian Aggression

Germany – Study 1	0.15 [0.09, 0.21]
Germany – Study 2	0.22 [0.16, 0,28]
Germany – Overall	0.19 [0.14, 0.23]
Poland – Study 1	0.14 [0.07, 0.20]
Poland – Study 2	0.09 [0.04, 0.14]
Poland – Overall	0.12 [0.07, 0.16]

RWA — Authoritarian Submission

Germany – Study 1	−0.00 [−0.06, 0.06]
Germany – Study 2	0.06 [0.00, 0.12]
Germany – Overall	0.03 [−0.01, 0.07]
Poland – Study 1	−0.07 [−0.13, −0.01]
Poland – Study 2	0.03 [−0.02, 0.09]
Poland – Overall	−0.02 [−0.06, 0.02]

RWA — Conventionalism

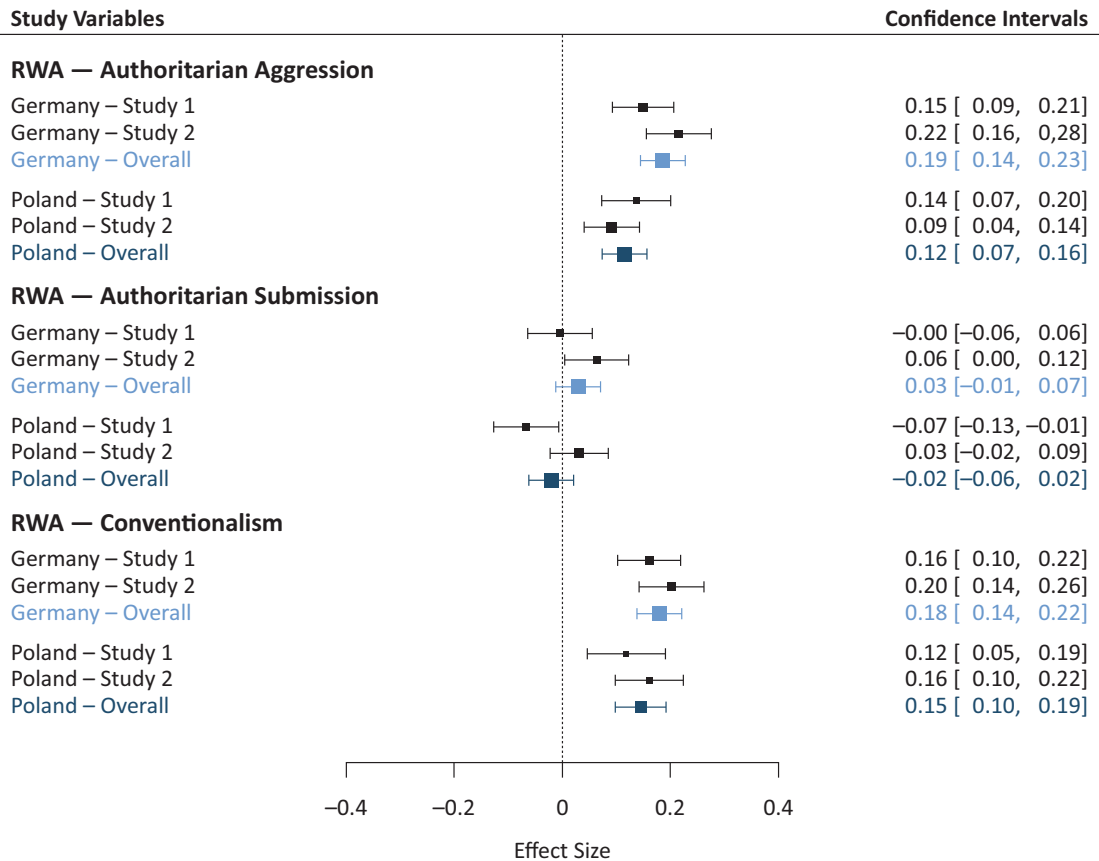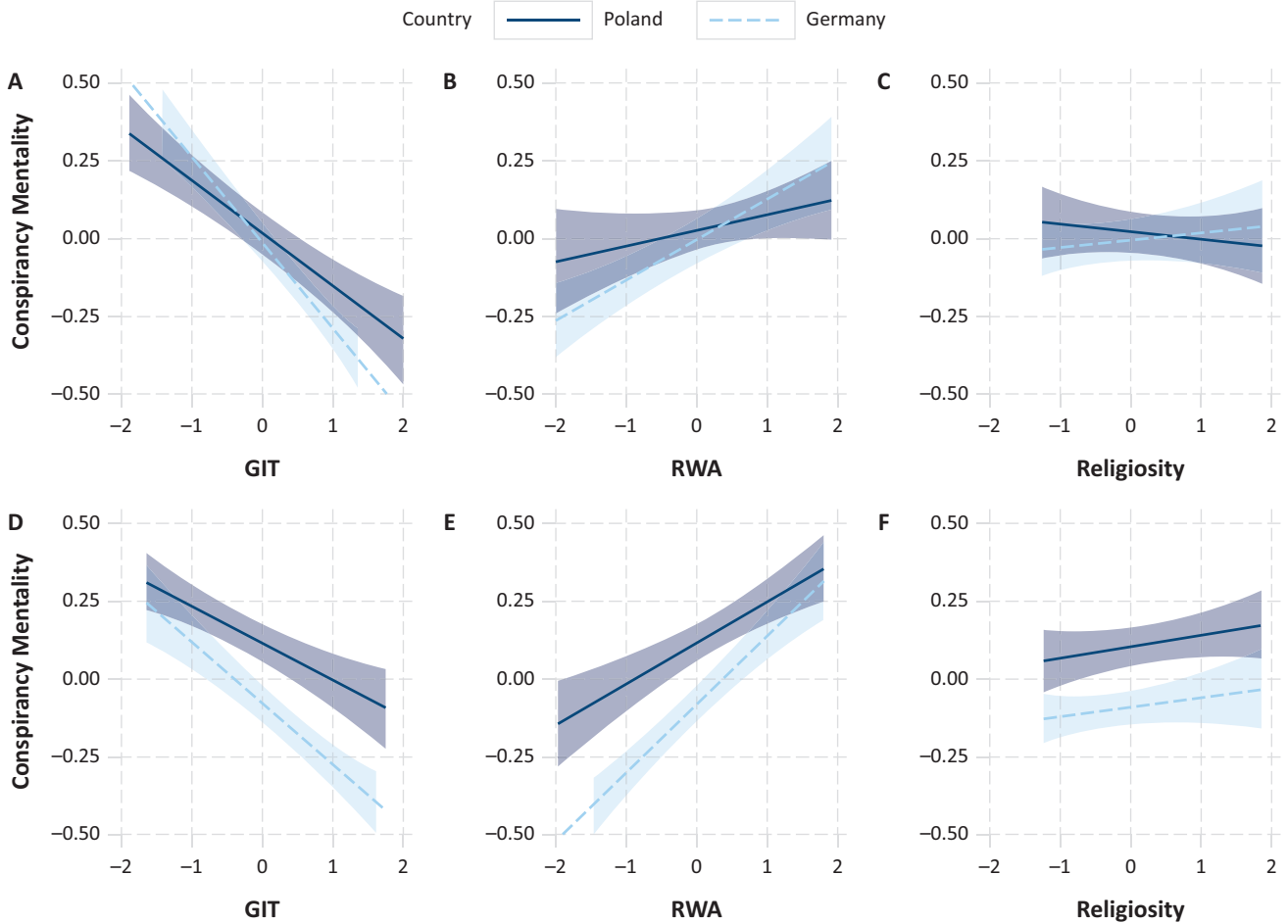| Germany – Study 1 | 0.16 [0.10, 0.22] |
Germany – Study 2	0.20 [0.14, 0.26]
Germany – Overall	0.18 [0.14, 0.22]
Poland – Study 1	0.12 [0.05, 0.19]
Poland – Study 2	0.16 [0.10, 0.22]
Poland – Overall	0.15 [0.10, 0.19]

Effect Size

Figure 2. Study-specific and meta-analytic predictions of CM by the three subdimensions of RWA in Germany and Poland.

Figure 3. Interactions of country and, respectively, GIT, RWA, and religiosity in Study 1 (Panel A–C) and Study 2 (Panel D–F).

7. Discussion

The present research sought to investigate how GIT, RWA, and religiosity are related to CM in two countries with marked differences in the political and religious spheres. We analyzed this question based on respectively two studies in Germany and Poland. In both countries, we found unique negative predictions by GIT, positive predictions by RWA, and non-significant predictions by religiosity. The positive prediction of CM by RWA also applied to RWA(AA) and RWA(C). In addition, we found weaker predictions of CM by GIT and RWA in Poland as compared to Germany.

Our findings support the argument that distrustful individuals are generally more inclined to believe conspiracy theories as conspiracy theories are consistent with their hostile worldview. Furthermore, they are in line with previous findings on the relationship between CM and interpersonal trust with respect to specific groups (Lantian et al., 2016; Marques et al., 2022; Wood & Douglas, 2018). Our research adds to this research by providing first robust insights on the relationship between GIT, that is interpersonal trust towards other humans in general, and CM.

The overall positive prediction of CM by RWA is consistent with earlier conceptualizations of RWA (Adorno

et al., 1950) as well as the modern dual-process motivational model of ideology and prejudice (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010) which both consider a dangerous worldview as an integral part of RWA. It is also in line with arguments made based on correlates of RWA, such as institutional distrust and specific cognitive predispositions (van der Linden et al., 2021), and most empirical findings (Bruder et al., 2013; Đorđević et al., 2021; Dyrendal et al., 2021; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Importantly, they add to previous research which mainly focused on the relationship between RWA and the belief in specific conspiracy theories (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015; Wood & Gray, 2019) and political ideology in general (Imhoff et al., 2022). Also, in line with arguments based on the multidimensional nature of RWA and some existent empirical findings (Hartman et al., 2021; Wood & Gray, 2019), CM was not significantly predicted by RWA(AS) while being positively predicted by RWA(AA) and RWA(C).

The non-significant relationship found between religiosity and CM is not consistent with either of the proposed implications of "conspiracism as religion" (Frenken et al., 2022; Ladini, 2022); neither with the idea that non-religious individuals are attracted to conspiracy beliefs as the latter satisfy needs that otherwise would be satisfied by religion ("belief replacement hypothesis") nor with the idea that the same individuals are drawn

towards both conspiracy and religious beliefs due to specific cognitive predispositions ("complement hypothesis"). Empirically, our result is consistent with about half of the studies included in Frenken et al.'s (2022) meta-analysis but inconsistent with the overall finding of Frenken et al. (2022) and Stasielowicz (2022). Our research adds to the few existent studies on the relationship between religiosity and CM and indicates that different mechanisms may be at play resulting in an overall non-significant relationship.

The weaker negative predictions by GIT found in Poland as compared to Germany support the idea that distrustful individuals feel more associated with governments that fall back on conspiracy narratives due to the shared hostile worldview. The weaker positive predictions by RWA found in Poland as compared to Germany align with the idea that "conspiracies are for losers" (Uscinski & Parent, 2014): Polish individuals high in RWA should feel more represented by their government, accordingly, perceive higher political control and therefore be less drawn to conspiracy theories than their German counterparts. However, when conducting the analyses separately for the RWA subdimensions, we find this result only for RWA(AA). Finally, our finding of a consistently non-significant relationship between religiosity and CM in both countries does not suggest effects of political and religious culture on the relationship between religiosity and CM. While our findings on cross-country differences regarding GIT and RWA are supported by a range of theoretical arguments, our results contradict some findings of Frenken et al. (2022). The authors found a stronger positive relationship between CM and right-wing political orientation in Poland than in Germany and a (weakly) negative relationship between CM and religiosity in both countries. Compared to our studies, the studies of Frenken et al. (2022) display some differences, e.g., regarding the scale labeling (e.g., the use of labels that assess the strength of belief instead of religiosity when asking for the respondents' religiosity), the measurement of political ideology (e.g., the use of a left-right self-placement and therefore assessment of both the economic and social dimension of political ideology), and the societal context of the studies (their data collection in both countries took place before the Covid-19 pandemic). The potential role of these different study characteristics in explaining inconsistent findings should be the subject of further studies.

Following effect size guidelines in research on individual differences (Gignac & Szodorai, 2016), the relationships we found between GIT and CM as well as RWA and CM are mostly small to medium in size, with GIT being more predictive of CM than RWA in both countries. The country-specific differences to which our data point suggest that the relationships found between personality, political, and religious individual-level characteristics and CM are context-dependent. That is, while GIT and RWA seem to predict CM across different countries, the effects vary in size (see also Hornsey & Pearson, 2022).

Being consistent with the idea that "conspiracies are for losers," our data suggest that stable societal conditions in which individuals feel politically represented and perceive some sense of control may help to reduce the prevalence of conspiracy beliefs. The propensity to believe in conspiracy theories may be particularly harmful if individuals with high CM are embedded within a context in which they are exposed to conspiracy theories that foster beliefs with vast implications for the physical and psychological well-being of individuals. Examples of such conspiracy theories are specific Covid-19-related conspiracy theories that question the necessity of adhering to health guidelines or conspiracy stereotypes targeting specific (e.g., ethnic) groups of individuals. Thus, to better understand the implications of cross-country differences as found in our work, it is of interest to understand the relative role of CM and its individual-level predictors regarding societal consequences as a function of the popularity of certain conspiracy theories within the given context.

Future research that builds on the present findings is needed both to increase their generalizability across countries and measures and to zoom into the relevant psychological and political communication processes. First, future research should include a larger range of country contexts. Here, we focused on two countries characterized by substantial differences in the political and religious spheres. To increase the generalizability of our results, the present research should be replicated in other politically moderate, democratic as well as semi-authoritarian, right-wing states. In addition, including measures of left-wing authoritarianism and samples of countries governed by left-wing parties would help to differentiate between the influence of content-specific aspects of political attitudes and aspects related to the extremity of attitudes on CM. Both left- and right-wing extremism might be associated with conspiracy beliefs due to the common tendency of the political extremes to believe in simple answers and to display intolerance towards deviating opinions (Imhoff et al., 2022). Finally, if possible, future research should also account for the overall political context, widening the perspective beyond the political orientation and conspiracy theory communication of the reigning government.

Second, future research might apply both more intensive and fine-grained assessments of relevant variables. Regarding CM, we applied relatively brief measures and even a single-item measure in one study. Although such measures of CM display good psychometric properties (Lantian et al., 2016), they do not allow to adequately test whether the specific item content plays a role when it comes to country-specific differences. Conspiracy items referring to authorities, for instance, might be more strongly affected by differing political contexts than others. Similarly, more comprehensive measures of religiosity including a variety of religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices, would allow for a more in-depth understanding of the relationship between religiosity

and CM. Although it seems that single-item measures of religiosity represent well various religious dimensions (Klein et al., 2012), CM may still be uniquely and differentially related to specific aspects of religiosity while being unrelated to others. First attempts to consider the multidimensionality of religiosity indeed yielded different predictions (Ladini, 2022; Stasielowicz, 2022).

Finally, as both studies were cross-sectional, they do not allow for causal inferences. To establish a better sense of the assumed underlying mechanisms, future studies should employ both longitudinal data and experimental designs including manipulations which increase the salience of specific political or religious aspects of the respective country.

8. Conclusion

Investigating the role of GIT, RWA, and religiosity in predicting CM in Germany and Poland, we replicated earlier findings that point towards negative predictions by GIT, positive predictions by RWA, and non-significant findings regarding religiosity. We also found that unlike RWA(AA) and RWA(C), RWA(AS) is not related to CM. In addition, we found cross-country differences, namely weaker predictions by GIT and RWA in Poland as compared to Germany. These findings underline the important role of contextual differences: The political and religious culture may not only affect the general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories but also shape who is more inclined to believe in conspiracy theories.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

References

Adorno, T. W., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, R. N. (1950). *The authoritarian personality*. Harper & Brothers.

Altemeyer, B. (1998). The other "authoritarian personality." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, *30*, 47–92. Academic Press. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-*2601*(08)60382-2

Beierlein, C., Asbrock, F., Kauff, M., & Schmidt, P. (2014). *Die Kurzskala Autoritarismus (KSA-3). Ein ökonomisches Messinstrument zur Erfassung dreier Subdimensionen autoritärer Einstellungen* [Authoritarianism short scale (KSA-3): An economic measure to assess three subdimensions of authoritarian attitudes] (GESIS Working Paper 2014/35). GESIS—Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences. https://doi.org/10.6102/zis228

Bilewicz, M., Cichocka, A., & Soral, W. (2015). *The psychology of conspiracy* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315746838

Bowes, S. M., Costello, T. H., Ma, W., & Lilienfeld, S. O. (2021). Looking under the tinfoil hat: Clarifying the personological and psychopathological correlates of conspiracy beliefs. *Journal of Personality*, *89*(3), 422–436. https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12588

Bruder, M., Haffke, P., Neave, N., Nouripanah, N., & Imhoff, R. (2013). Measuring individual differences in generic beliefs in conspiracy theories across cultures: Conspiracy mentality questionnaire. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00225

Đorđević, J. M., Žeželj, I., & Đurić, Ž. (2021). Beyond general political attitudes: Conspiracy mentality as a global belief system predicts endorsement of international and local conspiracy theories. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, *9*(1), 144–158. https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.4550

Douglas, K. M. (2021). Are conspiracy theories harmless? *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, *24*. https://doi.org/10.1017/SJP.2021.10

Duckitt, J., & Sibley, C. G. (2010). Personality, ideology, prejudice, and politics: A dual-process motivational model. *Journal of Personality*, *78*(6), 1861–1894. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2010.00672.x

Dyrendal, A., Kennair, L. E. O., & Bendixen, M. (2021). Predictors of belief in conspiracy theory: The role of individual differences in schizotypal traits, paranormal beliefs, social dominance orientation, right wing authoritarianism and conspiracy mentality. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *173*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.110645

European Social Survey. (2021). *ESS 9 2018 Documentation report edition 3.1*. https://doi.org/10.21338/NSD-ESS9-2018

Federico, C., & Malka, A. (2021). *Ideology: The psychological and social foundations of belief systems.* PsyArXiv. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/xhvyj

Fleeson, W., & Leicht, C. (2006). On delineating and integrating the study of variability and stability in personality psychology: Interpersonal trust as illustration. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *40*(1), 5–20. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2005.08.004

Franks, B., Bangerter, A., & Bauer, M. (2013). Conspiracy theories as quasi-religious mentality: An integrated account from cognitive science, social representations theory, and frame theory. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00424

Frenken, M., Bilewicz, M., & Imhoff, R. (2022). On the relation between religiosity and the endorsement of conspiracy theories: The role of political orientation. *Political Psychology*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12822

Furnham, A. (2013). Commercial conspiracy theories: A pilot study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00379

Galliford, N., & Furnham, A. (2017). Individual difference factors and beliefs in medical and political conspiracy theories. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, *58*(5), 422–428. https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop. 12382

Gignac, G. E., & Szodorai, E. T. (2016). Effect size guidelines for individual differences researchers. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *102*, 74–78. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.06.069

Goreis, A., & Voracek, M. (2019). A systematic review and meta-analysis of psychological research on conspiracy beliefs: Field characteristics, measurement instruments, and associations with personality traits. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00205

Grzesiak-Feldman, M. (2015). Are the high authoritarians more prone to adopt conspiracy theories? The role of right-wing authoritarianism in conspiratorial thinking. In M. Bilewicz, A. Cichocka, & W. Soral (Eds.), *The psychology of conspiracy* (pp. 117–139). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315746838

Gumhalter, N. (2012). *Dimensionalität und psychologische Korrelate des Glaubens an Verschwörungstheorien* [Dimensionality and psychological correlates of the belief in conspiracy theories] [Unpublished Master's thesis]. University of Vienna.

Hackney, C. H., & Sanders, G. S. (2003). Religiosity and mental health: A meta–analysis of recent studies. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *42*(1), 43–55. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.t01-1-00160

Hartman, T. K., Marshall, M., Stocks, T. V. A., McKay, R., Bennett, K., Butter, S., Gibson, M. J., Hyland, P., Levita, L., Martinez, A. P., Mason, L., McBride, O., Murphy, J., Shevlin, M., Vallières, F., & Bentall, R. P. (2021). Different conspiracy theories have different psychological and social determinants: Comparison of three theories about the origins of the COVID-19 virus in a representative sample of the UK population. *Frontiers in Political Science*, *3*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.642510

Hornsey, M. J., & Pearson, S. (2022). Cross-national differences in willingness to believe conspiracy theories. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *47*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101391

Imhoff, R. (2015). Beyond (right-wing) authoritarianism. In M. Bilewicz, A. Cichocka, & W. Soral (Eds.), *The psychology of conspiracy* (pp. 122–142). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315746838

Imhoff, R., & Bruder, M. (2014). Speaking (un-)truth to power: Conspiracy mentality as a generalised political attitude. *European Journal of Personality*, *28*(1), 25–43. https://doi.org/10.1002/per.1930

Imhoff, R., Dieterle, L., & Lamberty, P. (2021). Resolving the puzzle of conspiracy worldview and political activism: Belief in secret plots decreases normative but increases nonnormative political engagement. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *12*(1), 71–79. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1948550619896491

Imhoff, R., Zimmer, F., Klein, O., António, J. H. C., Babinska, M., Bangerter, A., Bilewicz, M., Blanuša, N., Bovan, K., Bužarovska, R., Cichocka, A., Delouvée, S., Douglas, K. M., Dyrendal, A., Etienne, T., Gjoneska, B., Graf, S., Gualda, E., Hirschberger, G., . . . Van Prooijen, J.-W. (2022). Conspiracy mentality and political orientation across 26 countries. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *6*(3), 392–403. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01258-7

Jasinskaja-Lahti, I., & Jetten, J. (2019). Unpacking the relationship between religiosity and conspiracy beliefs in Australia. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *58*(4), 938–954. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12314

Joshanloo, M., & Gebauer, J. E. (2020). Religiosity's nomological network and temporal change. *European Psychologist*, *25*(1), 26–40. https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000382

Jovančević, A., & Milićević, N. (2020). Optimism-pessimism, conspiracy theories and general trust as factors contributing to COVID-19 related behavior: A cross-cultural study. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *167*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110216

Karpov, V. (2002). Religiosity and tolerance in the United States and Poland. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *41*(2), 267–288. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.00116

Klein, C., Gottschling, S., & Zwingmann, C. (2012). Deutschsprachige Fragebögen zur Messung von Religiosität/Spiritualität. Ein empirisch gestützter Vergleich ausgewählter Skalen [German questionnaires for measuring religiosity/spirituality. An empirically supported comparison of selected scales]. *Spiritual Care*, *1*(3), 22–35. https://doi.org/10.1515/spircare-2012-0039

Krueger, F., & Meyer-Lindenberg, A. (2019). Toward a model of interpersonal trust drawn from neuroscience, psychology, and economics. *Trends in Neurosciences*, *42*(2), 92–101. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tins.2018.10.004

Ladini, R. (2022). Religious and conspiracist? An analysis of the relationship between the dimensions of individual religiosity and belief in a big pharma conspiracy theory. *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica*, *52*(1), 33–50. https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2021.15

Lahrach, Y., & Furnham, A. (2017). Are modern health worries associated with medical conspiracy theories? *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, *99*, 89–94.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychores.2017.06.004

Lantian, A., Muller, D., Nurra, C., & Douglas, K. M. (2016). Measuring belief in conspiracy theories: Validation of a French and English single-item scale. *International Review of Social Psychology*, *29*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.5334/irsp. 8

Lantian, A., Wood, M., & Gjoneska, B. (2020). Personality traits, cognitive styles and worldviews associated with beliefs in conspiracy theories. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 155–167). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429452734

Mancosu, M., Vassallo, S., & Vezzoni, C. (2017). Believing in conspiracy theories: Evidence from an exploratory analysis of Italian survey data. *South European Society and Politics*, *22*(3), 327–344. https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2017.1359894

Marques, M. D., Ling, M., Williams, M. N., Kerr, J. R., & McLennan, J. (2022). Australasian public awareness and belief in conspiracy theories: Motivational correlates. *Political Psychology*, *43*(1), 177–198. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12746

McAndrew, S., & Voas, D. (2011). *Measuring religiosity using surveys: Survey Question Bank topic overview 4*. University of Surrey. https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/files/32802473/FULL_TEXT.PDF

Meijers, M. J., & van der Veer, H. (2019). MEP responses to democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland. An analysis of agenda-setting and voting behaviour. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *57*(4), 838–856. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12850

Oliver, J. E., & Wood, T. J. (2014). Conspiracy theories and the paranoid style (s) of mass opinion. *American Journal of Political Science*, *58*(4), 952–966. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12084

Pummerer, L., Böhm, R., Lilleholt, L., Winter, K., Zettler, I., & Sassenberg, K. (2022). Conspiracy theories and their societal effects during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *13*(1), 49–59. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F19485506211000217

R Core Team. (2021). R: A language and environment for statistical computing [Computer software]. https://www.R-project.org

Rammstedt, B., & Beierlein, C. (2014). Can't we make it any shorter? The limits of personality assessment and ways to overcome them. *Journal of Individual Differences*, *35*(4), 212–220. https://doi.org/10.1027/1614-0001/a000141

Richey, S. (2017). A birther and a truther: The influence of the authoritarian personality on conspiracy beliefs. *Politics & Policy*, *45*(3), 465–485. https://doi.org/10.1111/polp. 12206

Roßteutscher, S., Schoen, H., Schmitt-Beck, R., Weßels, B., Wolf, C., Bieber, I., Stövsand, L.-C., Dietz, M., & Scherer, P. (2019). *Vorwahl-Querschnitt* [Pre-election cross section] (GLES 2017; Version 5.0.1).

GESIS Data Archive. https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13234

Rotter, J. B. (1980). Interpersonal trust, trustworthiness, and gullibility. *American Psychologist*, *35*(1), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.35.1.1

Rowatt, W. C., & Al-Kire, R. L. (2021). Dimensions of religiousness and their connection to racial, ethnic, and atheist prejudices. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *40*, 86–91. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.08.022

Salali, G. D., & Uysal, M. S. (2021). *Why some hesitate more: Cross-cultural variation in conspiracy beliefs, belief in science, and vaccine attitudes*. MedRxiv. https://doi.org/10.1101/2021.07.09.21260228

Schlipphak, B., Bollwerk, M., & Back, M. (2021). Beliefs in conspiracy theories (CT): The role of country context. *Political Research Exchange*, *3*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2021.1949358

Sibley, C. G., & Duckitt, J. (2008). Personality and prejudice: A meta-analysis and theoretical review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *12*(3), 248–279. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868308319226

Stasielowicz, L. (2022). Who believes in conspiracy theories? A meta-analysis on personality correlates. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *98*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2022.104229

Storm, I. (2017). Does economic insecurity predict religiosity? Evidence from the European Social Survey 2002–2014. *Sociology of Religion*, *78*(2), 146–172. https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srw055

Uscinski, J. E., & Parent, J. M. (2014). Conspiracy theories are for losers. In J. E. Uscinski & J. M. Parent (Eds.), *American conspiracy theories* (pp. 130–153). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199351800.003.0006

van der Linden, S., Panagopoulos, C., Azevedo, F., & Jost, J. T. (2021). The paranoid style in American politics revisited: An ideological asymmetry in conspiratorial thinking. *Political Psychology*, *42*(1), 23–51. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12681

Van Prooijen, J.-W. (2018). *The psychology of conspiracy theories* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315525419

Viechtbauer, W. (2010). Conducting meta-analyses in R with the metafor package. *Journal of Statistical Software*, *36*(3), 1–48. https://doi.org/10.18637/jss.v036.i03

Winter, K., Pummerer, L., Hornsey, M. J., & Sassenberg, K. (2022). Pro-vaccination subjective norms moderate the relationship between conspiracy mentality and vaccination intentions. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, *27*(2), 390–405. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjhp. 12550

Wood, M. J., & Douglas, K. M. (2018). Conspiracy theory psychology: Individual differences, worldviews, and states of mind. In J. E. Uscinski (Ed.), *Conspiracy theories and the people who believe them* (pp. 245–256). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/

10.1093/oso/9780190844073.003.0016

Wood, M. J., & Gray, D. (2019). Right-wing authoritarianism as a predictor of pro-establishment versus anti-establishment conspiracy theories. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *138*, 163–166. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2018.09.036

About the Authors

Fahima Farkhari completed her studies in psychology in 2019 at the University of Mannheim and works as a research assistant at the chair of psychological assessment and personality psychology, University of Münster. Her research focuses on the role of personality in the political context. She has worked on the susceptibility to political misinformation and conspiracy theories. Her methodological expertise lies in quantitative approaches.

Bernd Schlipphak is a professor of political science at the University of Münster. After completing his PhD in 2009 at the University of Freiburg, he worked as a postdoc at the University of Salzburg and the University of Göttingen before joining Münster. His work focuses on the intersections between political psychology, political communication, and international politics, and has been published in journals such as the *Journal of European Public Policy*, the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, and the *Review of International Organizations*.

Mitja D. Back completed his PhD in 2007 at the University of Leipzig. In 2011 he received the William-Stern prize for outstanding innovative work in the field of personality psychology from the German Psychological Association. Since 2012 he works as a full professor at the University of Münster, where he is chair of the psychological assessment and personality psychology section. His research focuses on the conceptualization, assessment, and development of personality as well as its individual, social, and societal consequences.

Article

The Anti-Homophobia Bill (PLC 122) in Brazil: Conspiracies and Conflicts Between the Constitution and the Bible

Diego Galego

Public Governance Institute, KU Leuven, Belgium; diego.galego@kuleuven.be

Abstract

Despite the growing violence against LGBTQ people nationwide, the National Congress of Brazil has failed to pass any legislation protecting LGBTQ rights. The executive and judiciary have compensated for this legislative gap by protecting LGBTQ rights through palliative LGBTQ policies. By historically analyzing the anti-homophobia bill PLC 122 and presenting a discourse analysis of ten anti-LGBTQ rights bills, as well as the results of semi-structured interviews with key actors involved in the billing process (2001–2021), this article seeks to unpack why and how the anti-homophobia bill was never approved in Congress. In part, Congress' delay in approving the anti-homophobia bill is due to conservative opposition, a weak coalition between the executive and legislative branches of government, and the fact that more religious parliamentarians are represented in politics. As a result, LGBTQ bills introduced to Congress have become political weapons used by conservative and fundamentalist religious politicians as part of electoral campaign strategies. The anti-homophobia bill has opened a political window where anti-LGBTQ discourses sustain conservative politics and enforce the alliance between religion and politics. Moreover, the bill has strengthened the religious and conservative discourse, policy manipulation and the emergence of conspiracy theories—framing the bill as "opposing God's people" and as constraining the freedom of religion and spreading fear of pastors and priests being jailed. The main conclusion is that policy and political discourses oscillate between making decisions according to the Constitution or the Bible, creating constraints and opportunities for the approval of the LGBTQ bill in the Brazilian Congress.

Issue

This article is part of the issue "The Role of Religions and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes" edited by Oliver Hidalgo (University of Münster) and Alexander Yendell (Leipzig University).

1. Introduction

On 13 June 2019, the LGBTQ community in Brazil celebrated a legal victory assuring LGBTQ rights in the country: The Supreme Federal Court decided on the criminalization of LGBTphobia. The Court's decision came as a consequence of Congress' almost two-decade delay in deliberating on the anti-homophobia bill, which remains to this day without legislative approval. This lagging in legal protection for LGBTQ people is a paradox, given the fact that Brazil is reported to be one of the most violent countries in the world for LGBTQ people (de Oliveira & Mott, 2020; Gastaldi et al., 2021; Mendos, 2019). Introduced to Congress in 2001, bill PL 5.003 protecting

LGBTQ rights passed in a plenary vote in the House in 2006; it became bill PLC 122 when entering the Senate, where it was blocked for nine years before being shelved in 2015.

PLC 122 is not the only bill that has been blocked in Congress. After more than three decades of democratization in Brazil, since 1985, the federal Legislature has failed to pass legislation on several LGBTQ issues introduced to Congress (e.g., same-sex marriage [PL 1151/1995], anti-homophobia [PL 5003/2001], and the recognition and possibility for transgender people to use a social name in official documents [PL 6655/2006, PL 2976/2008]). Consequently, as presented by Arguelhes and Ribeiro (2017), the Supreme

Federal Court was the first and only legislative chamber protecting LGBTQ rights in Brazil. The Brazilian paradox leads us to ask why and how the anti-homophobia bill PLC 122 has never (since its presentation two decades ago) been approved in the Brazilian Congress.

Despite growing interest and research analyzing the opposition to LGBTQ bills introduced to Congress in Brazil during the democratic period (1985–present; see Santiago Gomes da Silva, 2020; Santos & de Melo, 2018), a deep historical analysis, particularly focusing on enablers and obstructers of anti-homophobia bill PLC 122, is lacking in the literature. Such analysis is ever more relevant since the 2019 Supreme Court decision criminalizing LGBTphobia. Additionally, after the 2018 general elections, the Brazilian political landscape became ever more polarized, leading to radicalization and manipulation of policy discourses mainly affecting social policies and human rights (Iamamoto et al., 2021; Rocha et al., 2021). Opposition to LGBTQ rights in the Brazilian Congress is not a project initiated by the far-right government; it dates back to the Constituent time (1988) and similar discourses, concerns, and strategies persisted throughout its legislative history. For example, discourses on morality became even more widespread through the wave of "gender ideology" and anti-gender, anti-LGBTQ movements (Corrêa et al., 2021). In addition, concerns regarding the traditional family configuration and preservation of its values were diffused, leading to spreading social fear about the destruction of the cornerstone values of society. Finally, the repertoire of anti-LGBTQ rights strategies is increasing with the internet. While the legislative procedure may be the immediate strategy to block a bill's approval, conspiracy theories and fake news rapidly spread through social media, influencing public opinion to oppose LGBTQ rights (Feliciani et al., 2017).

This article provides a historical narrative analysis (Gotham & Staples, 1996) of the PLC 122 bill process from 2001 to 2021. By combining this narrative analysis with a discourse analysis of ten anti-LGBTQ rights bills, the article reveals patterns of enablers and obstructers in the bill's approval process, such as actors involved, political discourses, and frames and strategies deployed by activists and politicians to either support or oppose LGBTQ rights in Brazil. The analysis contributes to understanding how and why the PLC 122 bill was unsuccessful in the Brazilian Congress by revealing a number of factors influencing political decisions on the bill and the conditions that led to the judicialization of LGBTQ rights in Brazil.

2. Institutional Factors Determining the Legislative Impasse

In many countries, the LGBTQ movement has developed strategic actions to overcome backlashes and to push its agenda forward into legislation to protect LGBTQ rights (Holzhacker, 2012; Swiebel, 2009). A strategy often used by social movements to pursue their goals is venue shopping. Activists seek the appropriate institution to support and help them achieve the movement's goals (Pralle, 2003). In the case of Brazil, the federal system contributes to venue shopping by enabling or obstructing the conditions for LGBTQ policymaking. In terms of the institutional setting, the legislative power is composed of a bicameral structure, the House and Senate. By shifting from one institution to another—federal executive, legislative, and judiciary—activists and politicians push the policy and political agendas toward social policies and rights (Friedman, 2009). However, conservative ideology has been a driver for several setbacks experienced by the LGBTQ movement in Congress (Santos & de Melo, 2018).

Furthermore, Brazil has 32 registered political parties (Tribunal Superior Eleitoral, 2022) and 23 of these (according to the last election of 2018) are represented in a House composed of 513 parliamentarians; because 15% of the seats go to the most voted party, coalition building is inevitable to govern in Brazil (Hiroi, 2008). Such a political context leads to checks and balances and constraints in policy and political agenda-setting at the federal level. For example, the federal executive depends on Congress' approval of budgetary allowance to develop governmental programs and policies, while members of parliament rely on presidential budget allowance to accomplish their campaign promises and respond to the needs of their electorate (Fenwick et al., 2017; Macaulay, 2017).

Brazil's LGBTQ policies and politics have received growing attention from scholars focusing on parties as tools to enable and advance LGBTQ rights via legislative procedures in the national Congress (Marsiaj, 2006; Santos, 2016; Schulenberg, 2009). However, as noted by scholars, conservative religious parliamentarians in the national Congress have been the primary opponents blocking LGBTQ bills during the democratic period (Santos & de Melo, 2018). After democratization in 1985, Brazil's liberal policy agenda widened with the Workers' Party government taking over the federal executive in 2003 (Avritzer, 2017; Levy, 2012; Loureiro & Saad-Filho, 2018). Nevertheless, given the highly fragmented Congress, little progress has been made regarding LGBTQ rights in a (inevitable) coalition government. Conservative opposition to LGBTQ rights dates back to the dictatorship period but persists into the democratic period. Since the National Constituent Assembly of 1988, conservative religious parliamentarians have opposed the inclusion of the term "sexual orientation" in the Constitutional text (Lelis & de Oliveira, 2021). Such opposition escalated throughout the years in Congress, mainly when religious groups capitalized on their votes to elect evangelical pastors (e.g., Parliamentarian Marco Feliciano, Senators Magno Malta and Marcelo Crivella; for a specific review see Lacerda, 2017). Corrales (2019, p. 1), analyzing the expansion and backlash against LGBTQ rights in Latin America, states that "evangelicals have become the most powerful actors blocking

progress" on LGBTQ rights. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, in the last census of 2010, Christianity is still the most prominent religion in Brazil—with 64.6% Catholics and 22.2% Evangelicals and Protestants (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2010).

Although we find religious representation in Congress since the 1988 Constituent Assembly (Trevisan, 2013), the Evangelical Parliamentarian Front was only created in 2015. The Evangelical Front aims to defend and advocate for "family values, human life, and the protection of the excluded" and to follow "the execution of policies, as well as participate in the improvement of the Brazilian legislation in the interest of society and in key debates on national issues" (Campos, 2015, p. 1). The Evangelical Front highlights the influence of religious organizations within Congress, which counter-balances power in a coalition government like that found in Brazil (Chaisty et al., 2014). One example is President Dilma Rousseff's veto of the educational material "School Without Homophobia" in 2011. At the time, the Evangelical caucus was part of the coalition government and pressured Rousseff by spreading fake news on the school material, saying it would "sexualize kids" (Irineu, 2016). Therefore, a controversial declaration came from the president that "she would not accept sexual options propaganda" ("Não aceito propaganda," 2011). The material from the Ministry of Education was never promoted. In 2019, the Evangelical Front was the third biggest thematic grouping in Congress, with 202 affiliated members, including 194 parliamentarians and eight senators (House of Representatives, n.d.). The Evangelical Front, with increasing influence in Congress' decision-making, also facilitates a stronger tied coalition between a more conservative federal executive and the legislative branches (Cascione & de Araújo, 2019). Complementary to conservative politics, scholars analyzing fundamentalist agendas in Brazil find a high level of distortion of reality and the reductionist view of Brazilian society as being polarized (Corrêa et al., 2021; Maranhão Fo & De Franco, 2019; Rocha et al., 2021). Religious fundamentalist and conservative politics became more explicit with the 2018 election, whereby a far-right government with extremist discourse opposing LGBTQ rights (Presidência da República, 2019) was elected. Brazil follows right-wave tendencies seen across the world, with political polarization being increasingly used as a weapon to spread conspiracy theories (Recuero et al., 2020), especially during election campaigns as seen in countries like the USA (Albertson & Guiler, 2020) and Hungary (Plenta, 2020). Similar to anti-gender campaigns in Europe (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018), the instrumentalization of religious discourses is also present during election campaigns in Brazil, reflected in more conservative politicians being elected to Congress.

In sum, institutional factors determine options for advancing human rights agendas, especially that of the LGBTQ movement and its ability to shift the focus of its advocacy efforts from the legislative to the judiciary branches of government. Considering this, and the knowledge gap related to this impasse, this article analyses factors that influenced the non-approval of the PLC 122 bill, using the conceptual dimensions presented in the next section to guide the narrative and discourse analysis surrounding the billing process in Brazil.

3. Political/Policy Discourse and Discourse Manipulation: Conspiracy Theories

The concept of radicalization has become a signifier of "radical" facts from which rhetoric can directly influence public opinion through the manipulation of discourse (Githens-Mazer, 2012). Therefore, the concept is pervaded by much confusion in its applicability to reality, leading to conspiracy theories playing a role in current policy and political frames in many countries (Sedgwick, 2010). Conspiracy theories are often conceptualized as patterns of misinformation, manipulation, and collusion of unknown "truth" about the world, leading to societies' conditional behavior (Byford, 2011). Such conspiracies also lead to a negative connotation of the word "conspiracy," which in academia found an open field of research focusing on political discourse conditioning people's thinking by lies (Baden & Sharon, 2021). In this vein, scholars of philosophy, political science, psychology, and sociology became interested in learning the causes and effects of conspiracy theories, especially those that are widespread in many cultures and societies, even more in the twenty-first century with the ventures of media communication sharing faster information (Butter & Knight, 2018; Clarke, 2002). Information has sometimes been manipulated and shaped towards what is convenient to those who control them to influence public opinion. This dynamic can reach a radicalization stage with unwanted or intentionally created consequences by a person or collective spreading the information (Baden & Sharon, 2021). When conspiracy theories are associated with policy agendas or political decisions, misinformation is the first to appear in radicalized political environments such as polarized politics, left and right, good and bad, trustful and distrustful (Butter & Knight, 2018; Recuero et al., 2020).

Moreover, conspiracy theories are ideas and stories originating from events threatening social order. They are conceived as a "resource for delegitimating not only at an individual level, as a means of undermining the credibility of an individual author, academic, politician or activist but also on a collective level" (Byford, 2011, p. 23). A survey conducted by Rezende et al. (2019) with higher education students in Brazil highlighted five categories of conspiracy theories in the country according to students' perceptions: (a) theories without a scientific basis, (b) manipulation by secret societies, (c) explanation of social reality, (d) contestation of social facts, and (e) the control of information. These categories resonate with a collective imaginary that plays a role

in spreading conspiracy theories in Brazil, potentially influencing decision-making and shaping policymaking in a country where public opinion is often used as a powerful weapon during election campaigns (Prado & Correa, 2018). To analyze conspiracy theories specifically related to the anti-homophobia bill in Brazil, this article defines conspiracy theories as the combination of political/policy discourse and discourse manipulation. The definitions of these dimensions are shown in Table 1.

By focusing on these features of radicalization, the case of Brazil's anti-homophobia bill PLC 122 illustrates how political discourse is distorting policy frames by creating conspiracy theories leading to the electoral defeat of LGBTQ rights supporters, the delay of the approval of the LGBTQ rights bill in Congress and sometimes the very denial of the existence of LGBTQ problems in Brazilian society. The anti-homophobia bill (PLC 122) generated many anti-LGBTQ rights bills after its first approval in the House in 2006. Moreover, the PLC 122 bill triggered many conspiracy theories and consequently increased legislative bureaucracies inherent to the legislative procedure to block and delay any other LGBTQ bill approval in Congress. Navigating the conspicuous environment of Brazilian politics, this article identifies conspiracy theories from ten anti-LGBTQ rights bills introduced to Congress. It also analyses other indicators including institutional constraints and opportunities, actors involved and decisions taken about bill PLC 122 by supporters and opponents throughout the billing process.

4. Methods and Data Collection

This article presents a historical narrative analysis (Gotham & Staples, 1996) by investigating the case of the PLC 122/2006 bill and by providing a discourse analysis (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012) of ten anti-LGBTQ rights bills introduced to Congress. Historical analysis is a helpful tool to provide a comprehensive understanding of a case by investigating actors, discourse, and events

around a historical fact. This article's historical analysis is based on three questions:

1. Who are the key actors?
2. What are the frames and discourses used in the anti-LGBTQ rights bills?
3. What strategies are enabling or obstructing the approval of the PLC 122 bill?

Several sources inform the answers to these questions. Data collection was based on the following protocol:

- First, LGBTQ rights bills were retrieved from the online archive of the House of Representatives by searching for bills, including the keyword "homophobia" during the democratic period between 1985 and 2021. This search generated a database of 68 bills introduced to Congress between January 2001 and December 2021 (Figure 1).
- Second, by reading each bill to identify its main purpose, bills were coded into two main categories, for and against. Among the 68 bills, 58 (85,2%) are pro-LGBTQ rights and 10 (14,7%) are against LGBTQ rights. Other indicators were also categorized, such as the authors of the bill, political parties' affiliation, and the bill's main topic and aims (Table 2).
- Third, additional sources were collected and analyzed, such as Court case dossiers on the criminalization of the LGBTphobia process. For example, the analysis of the Court cases MI 4733 and ADO 26 contributed to building the historical narrative based on different institutional settings where LGBTQ activists deployed the venue shopping strategy to approve the anti-homophobia bill.
- Fourth, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven politicians (Poli) and eight activists (Act) involved with the anti-homophobia bill case. Using snowball sampling (Gray, 2004),

Table 1. Operationalization of three dimensions of radicalization.

Dimension	Definition	Examples
Political discourse	The politician's discourse about a policy problem to increase voter support for an election or a policy agenda.	Politicians' public speeches in any situation transmit information to public or private audiences, which can deliberately use socio-political issues to sustain conservative discourses.
Discourse manipulation	The use of specific concepts, words, and frames to distort the reality of socially and politically excluded communities.	Policy actors frame discourses to distort information, hide, or deny the existence of a social or political problem, covering up the realities of LGBTQ people.
Conspiracy theories	Misinformation, manipulation, and collusion of unknown truths about the world.	The creation of a parallel reality to influence public opinion on socio-political problems is often framed as a threat to traditional social values.

interviews were conducted between June and August 2021. Interviews were coded and anonymized to comply with institutional ethical committee approval and to preserve the interviewee's identity.

- Fifth, the public discourse of politicians opposing LGBTQ rights in Congress was analyzed by collecting secondary material such as social media posts, newspaper articles, and public speeches available online.

5. Findings

Figure 1 shows the number of bill entries (for and against) found in the archive of the House of Representatives mentioning the keyword "homophobia" (N = 68). Since this article focuses on understanding how and why LGBTQ bills did not succeed in getting approval in Congress, strategies used to influence the bill's process are also explored. Complementarily, ten anti-LGBTQ bills were scrutinized to examine how the opposition discourse has counterargued the PLC 122 bill proposal by introducing anti-LGBTQ rights bills to Congress (Table 2).

The year 2019 marks the year that the most LGBTQ bills (with the word homophobia) were introduced to Congress, totaling 19 bills (13 for and six against). This does not come as a surprise, given the fact that opposition to LGBTQ rights intensified in the Brazilian Congress after the 2018 election, and even more after the Supreme Court criminalized LGBTphobia in June 2019.
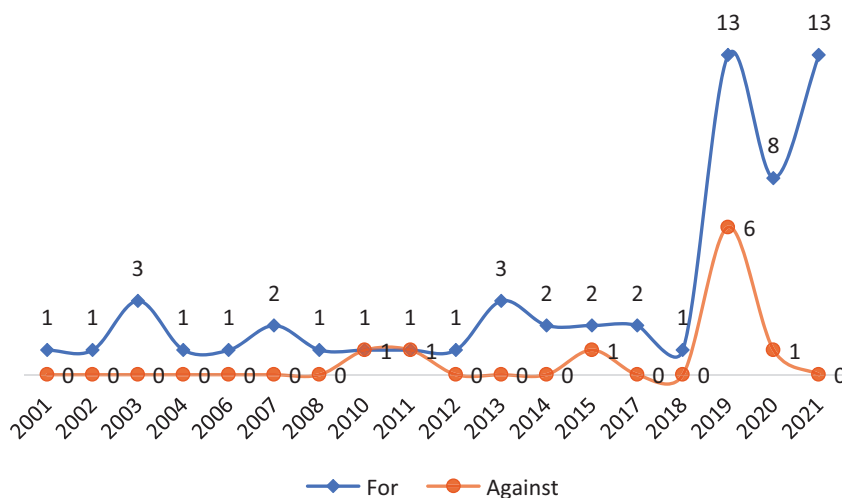
Table 2 presents ten anti-LGBTQ rights bills identified in the House archive mentioning the keyword "homophobia." Records found were introduced to Congress between 2010 and 2020. The narratives against LGBTQ rights, people, and policies are often reverberated by religious fundamentalist representatives (Feliciani et al., 2017), which generate conspiracy theories useful for electoral campaigns.

The anti-LGBTQ rights bills present some common ground: apart from being introduced by religious and right-wing politicians, they counterargue the need for LGBTQ rights bills by framing the discourse as if heterosexual people were suffering similar prejudices in society. Some examples are the bills proposing a penalty against "heterophobia," establishing a day of "heterosexual pride," and protecting religious freedom exempt from an accusation of "crime of homophobia." Such narratives have been used to influence public opinion over LGBTQ rights and bills, increasing voters' support during electoral years by spreading moral panic and receiving support from Christian voters for defending traditional family values and religious freedom. Comparatively speaking, as shared by an interviewee, the dialogue between progressists and conservatives before 2013 was less strategically political and more upfront: "We did not have any conflict in terms of policy agenda. They did not support our initiatives—but neither did they intervene in them" (Poli.6). Such a shift in dialogue demonstrates an increase of strategies used by opponents to reinforce a conservative ideology in Congress, block LGBTQ bills and introduce anti-LGBTQ bills.

Regarding the authors of anti-LGBTQ bills and their political parties' ideology, if placing them in the political spectrum of left-center-right ideologies, most of them are located in center-right, right, or far-right parties (Figure 2). Such phenomena bring to light how Brazilian politics polarizes disputes in electoral results, more evident in the general elections of 2018, with several rallies emphasizing the left-right battle for the presidency (Iamamoto et al., 2021; Rocha et al., 2021).

6. Discourses and Strategies Behind Bill PLC 122/2006

Bill PLC 122 was never approved in the Brazilian Congress because of the articulated strategies deployed by conservative parliamentarians—increasing the constraints


Figure 1. The number of bills (for and against) introduced to the Brazilian House of Representatives including the keyword "homophobia" between 2001 and 2021 (N = 68).

Table 2. Ten anti-LGBTQ rights bills mentioning "homophobia" were introduced to Congress between 2010 and 2020.

Code	Year	Bill number	Author(s)	Aims
1	2010	PL 7382/2010	Eduardo Cunha (PMDB)	To create a penalty against "heterophobia"—discrimination against heterosexual people.
2	2011	PL 734/2011	Marcelo Aguiar (PSC); Acelino Popó (PRB); Lauriete (PSC)	To create the national program "Viver de Bem"—Sem Estigma e Preconceito no Brasil ("To Live Well"—Without Stigma and Prejudices in Brazil).
3	2015	PL 1411/2015	Rogério Marinho (PSDB)	To typify "ideological harassment," especially in school education.
4	2019	PL 4949/2019	Otoni de Paula (PSC)	To amend Law 7.716/1989 on anti-racism and discrimination, to include gender identity and sexual orientation as crimes, but with freedom of speech for religious purposes.
5	2019	PL 4075/2019	Bia Kicis (PSL)	To change article 25 of Law 9.868/1999 balancing the authority between the three branches of government (executive, judiciary, and legislative).
6	2019	PL 4370/2019	Dr. Jaziel (PL)	To establish the accomplishment of the "principles of legal reserve" in the penal code.
7	2019	PL 925/2019	Pastor Sargento Isidório (AVANTE)	To create a National Day of Heterosexual Pride.
8	2019	PL 4946/2019	Eli Borges (SOLIDARIEDADE)	To preserve religious freedom according to the federal Constitution of 1988.
9	2019	PL 3266/2019	Márcio Labre (PSL)	To add to Law 7.716/1989, article 1, stating that "homophobia or any other form of sexual orientation cannot be considered by analogy as a crime of anti-racism by race or color."
10	2020	PL 4892/2020	Léo Motta (PSL)	To justify that the refusal to allow openly homosexual people to perform religious ceremonies does not characterize a crime of homophobia.

for the legislative procedure, influencing public opinion, and spreading conspiracy theories. After the 2007 general elections, the Senate had a new composition when the PLC 122 entered the Upper House for the legislative procedure. As a result, opposition to the PLC 122 intensified after approval by the House in 2006. However, by the time the Workers' Party was governing the federal executive and with a coalition government, it reached a majority in Congress and the chairmanship of the Congressional Human Rights Committee, which was a bottleneck for the criminalization of LGBTphobia. These conditions seemed appropriate to approve the PLC 122 bill in the Senate that year. However, opponents to LGBTQ bills used legislative procedures of submitting bill PLC 122 for evaluation to the Social Affairs Committee before sending it to the Human Rights Committee and the Committee of the Constitution, Justice and Citizenship (interviewee Poli.2 and Poli.5). This implied appointing a different rapporteur for the bill, most likely someone from the opposition.

SOLIDARIEDADE
AVANTE

LEFT ←————————————|————————————→ RIGHT

PMDB PRB   PL PSC
PSDB
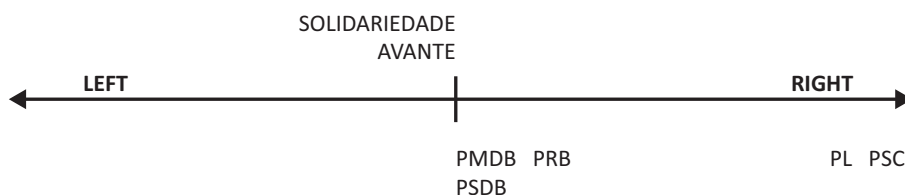
Figure 2. Authors of anti-LGBTQ rights bill political parties' ideologies in the political spectrum left-center-right.

However, as an interviewee explained: "LGBTQ policy advisors working within Congress discovered this strategy and were able to intercept the appointment of a rapporteur from the opposition. As a result, Senator Fatima Cleide was re-appointed" (Poli.5). Such action from policy advisors set the beginning of a long battle in the Senate, with strong opposition by the religious fundamentalist senator Magno Malta (Poli.2).

Conservative and religious opposition set up camps in committees and the public hearings and asked for revisions to the bill every time it was included in a committee's agenda for a vote. As explained by one interviewee:

> The opposition used to be in a large group for the Committee's debate. So, we started doing the same. Arriving before them, taking the space, everyone with a [a copy of the] Constitution. When they raised the Bible, we raised the Constitution. It was a strategy of marketing. (Poli.5)

Despite only a few religious fundamentalists having seats in the Senate from 2006 to 2010, they were "very noisy." As a result, they provoked moral panic among other senators, as described by interviewees (Poli.2, Poli.5, and Poli.7). Also, according to an interviewee, the opponents of the LGBTQ bills sometimes resorted to intimidation and blackmail:

> We did not expect the cruelty from the opposition, blackmailing parliamentarians to boycott the LGBTQ bills. We were not unethical in putting the bill to the vote in the House (2006) when the opposition was not there; we were strategic. We did not blackmail a congressperson because their kids were gay or lesbian, unlike the fundamentalists who did so. (Poli.5)

Furthermore, fundamentalist ideas were reinforced by anti-gender, anti-LGBTQ, and gender ideology discourses, opening a crusade against everything that could infringe upon "traditional family values" (Corrêa et al., 2021; Prado & Correa, 2018). An interviewee emphasized that "in 2013, former parliamentarian Eduardo Cunha unified the fundamentalists in Congress. Since then, it became impossible to dialogue with religious fundamentalist agendas" (Poli.4). Bill PLC 122 was the scapegoat first to unify the opposition, second to be an example against traditional values and third to enhance moral panic in the church's followers. The discourses against LGBTQ rights rapidly spread with the internet, where web pages disseminated evangelical discourses, misinformation and religious fundamentalist ideas to sustain opposition to the bill in the Senate (Natividade & de Oliveira, 2009).

According to Hiroi (2008), delaying the approval of a bill in a bicameral legislative system like Brazil is often a strategy emerging from legislative election years, political bargains, and controversial issues. The opposition used this strategy to influence the policymaking process against bill PLC 122, deliberately preventing possible committee approval and submission to a Senate plenary session. Even though the opposition constantly used such a strategy to delay or gridlock the anti-homophobia bill, the PLC 122 was approved by the Committee of Social Affairs. As explained by an interviewee: "We managed to approve the bill in the Committee of Social Affairs when Magno Malta was not there; then, it went to the Committee on Human Rights" (Poli.5). However, the delay in the legislative procedure reached the end of the 52nd Legislature; legislative elections happened in 2010 and Senator Fatima Cleide lost the re-election. Therefore, in 2011 the bill was shelved. In that election, Marta Suplicy, the first parliamentarian to introduce an LGBTQ bill to Congress, became a senator representing the state of São Paulo. Suplicy asked to re-open the bill's approval process in 2011 and became the rapporteur until 2013 when she was appointed minister of culture for the federal government (Mendes, 2012). Moreover, in 2011 public demonstrations and protests took place in major cities in Brazil for and against (Torres & Pozzebom, 2011) bill PLC 122 ("Lei que criminaliza homofobia," 2011).

As part of the legislative procedure blocking the approval of PLC 122, the "traditional family values" discourse was used as a powerful weapon to elect evangelicals to oppose the "bill contrary to God's people." Therefore, the discourse on bill PLC 122 propagated conspiracy theories using religious terms and a language of fear, as shared by an interviewee:

> I understood that this bill had something useful for unifying churches. It was the bill against God's people. This idea unified the conservatives. The PLC 122 would destroy the churches, jail pastors, and prohibit bringing homophobic topics to church services. In his radio program, a famous evangelical pastor, Silas Malafaia, said that evil was blond and lived in Sorocaba [referring to Iara Bernardi, the author of the bill]. In the 2006 elections, bill PLC 122 helped to elect more conservative and evangelicals to Congress. (Poli.6)

Conspiracy theories emerging from bill PLC 122 were the most effective in influencing public opinion and resulted in an electoral defeat of politicians supporting the bill and the election of conservative religious candidates (Poli.2). Additionally, the manipulation of the discourse creating conspiracies over the PLC 122 bill sentenced the bill to a constant delay, which triggered two litigation cases to the Supreme Court, criminalizing LGBTphobia under the anti-racism Law 7.716/1989. However, even after the Court's decision, PLC 122 is still used in political discourses to oppose traditional family values. For example, in his speech at the Symposium of Christian Citizenship held in Brasilia in October 2021, President Jair Bolsonaro said:

> Who remembers bill PLC 122, which destroyed the book of Romans and punished those who did not

accept such behavior inside churches with at least three years in prison? Who remembers the PNDH-3 [National Plan on Human Rights established in 2009], which had 128 items against the family, with a specific chapter calling for "deconstructing heteronormativity"? Unfortunately, we cannot forget these because some people returning to the government will restore them. (TV Brasil, 2021)

In summary, the passage of the PLC 122 bill in the Lower House in 2006 unified religious opposition to LGBTQ rights in Congress; it was clear that the bill could be capitalized upon during the election campaigns of conservative parliamentarians. Among the discourses propagated by opponents of the bill are moral panic, fear, and conspiracy theories creating a social imaginary that the approval of an LGBTQ bill would destroy traditional family values, jail pastors, and forbid freedom of speech by religious representatives. These discourses are coupled with legislative strategies to block pro-LGBTQ bills in Congress and, beyond that, to introduce anti-LGBTQ rights bills to Congress. While Congress refused to approve the LGBTQ bills assuring LGBTQ people's rights, the Supreme Court of Brazil is the ultimate authority in deciding upon LGBTQ rights in the country today.

7. Judicialization of LGBTQ Policies: What Triggered the Litigation Cases?

To compensate for the legislative gap in LGBTQ issues in the country, since 2011, the Supreme Court has assured LGBTQ rights (Table 3). Some contextual conditions for this dynamic are the solid opposition to LGBTQ rights in Congress, a weak coalition government, and a lack of LGBTQ representatives at the national level. To answer the question of what triggered the litigation cases, an empirical analysis of bill PLC 122 highlights two events that led the organized Brazilian LGBTQ movement to change tactics from targeting the legislative branch to focusing on the judiciary in its advocacy efforts.

The first event concerns bill PLC 122, processed on 10 May 2012. The Senate Committee on Human Rights held a meeting where Request number 62/2012 eliminated Request number 27 from the process. Request number 27 had been presented by senator Magno Malta, suggesting the inclusion of two evangelical pastors as official members in the bill's public hearings and debates: pastor Silas Malafia and Joide Miranda (Bernardi, 2001), vocal opponents of the bill. Senator Marta Suplicy, in turn, tried to make agreements with the religious opposition but failed to secure any commitment to approve the bill in a committee while she was rapporteur. The constraints indicated how challenging it would be to approve the bill in the Senate. On that same day (10 May 2012), the Brazilian Lesbians, Gays, Travestis, Transsexuals, and Intersex Association (ABGLT) opened a lawsuit against the federal Congress with the Mandatory Injunction (MI 4733) at the Supreme Federal Court (Supremo Tribunal Federal, 2019b). Since senator Suplicy became the Minister of Culture in September 2012, bill PLC 122 became more vulnerable to the next opposition maneuver in 2013.

The second event happened on 4 December 2013 when senator Eduardo Lopes (from the Brazilian Republican Party) presented a request to the Senate Committee on Human Rights to merge the PLC 122 bill with the PLS 236/2012 bill (proposing a penal code reform); this request followed the Committee's approval of allowing the merging of this bill's approval process on 17 December (Bernardi, 2001). Such a strategy represented the best opportunity for the opposition to block the anti-homophobia bill, justified by a legislative procedure. As a result, the PLC 122 bill would remain under review in the penal code reform bill. Before 2013, Paulo Iotti, a lawyer proponent of the litigation actions representing ABGLT, had attempted, without success, to get left-wing parties to support and sue the federal Congress with the legal action Direct Action of Unconstitutionality by Omission (ADO 26; Poli.3). After these maneuvers in the Senate against

Table 3. Supreme Federal Court cases on LGBTQ rights between 2011 and 2020.

Year	Actors	Policy output
2011	Supreme Federal Court	Recognition of same-sex couples as a family under the Constitution (ADI 4.277/2011).
2011	Supreme Federal Court	Civil Union extended to same-sex couples (ADPF 132/2011).
2013	National Council of Justice	Civil Unions for same-sex couples' conversion into marriage (Resolution 175/2013).
2018	Supreme Federal Court	Transgender people being allowed to change their name and gender (assigned by birth) in official documents without sex redesignation surgery.
2019	Supreme Federal Court	The criminalization of LGBTphobia (ADO 26/2019 and MI 4.733/2019).
2020	Supreme Federal Court	LGBTQ people being eligible to give blood donations.

the anti-homophobia bill, a representative of the center-left Popular Socialist Party (PPS, renamed Cidadania in 2019) contacted Iotti and began negotiations to open the ADO 26. On 19 December 2013, the party president, Roberto Freire, signed the legal action accusing the federal Congress of deliberate legislative omission of the anti-homophobia bill (Poli.3).

The conservative political ideology that blocked many LGBTQ bills in Congress is also detectable in the Supreme Federal Court cases. It is explicit in the diverse amici curiae opposing the criminalization, either evangelical organizations or evangelical representatives as lawyers of the opposition (MI 4733 and ADO 26; see Supremo Tribunal Federal, 2019a, 2019b). Although the argument of opposition lawyers was in line with Constitutional power restrictions allocated to each branch of government (emphasizing the role of Congress as the legislator in the country), religious arguments predominantly downplayed the violence LGBTQ people suffer in Brazil. By manipulating the reality with a defensive discourse on LGBTQ issues already under evaluation in Congress, the opposition amici curiae proffered astonishing arguments opposing the criminalization of LGBTphobia.

Representing the National Association of Evangelical Judges, lawyer Luigi Braga used the freedom of religious speech argument to say:

> If the judiciary understands that it can do justice by itself by acting as the legislative power, we would like to plead for a reservation regarding article 20…and ensure the right to religious freedom to continue preaching the Biblical texts even if eventually they are contrary to intelligence and are attributed as ignorance to some Christians, religious and Jews. May this Court know how to observe this social fact called the Bible, the Koran, and the Torah. (TV Justiça, 2019)

Moreover, the Mixed Parliamentarian Front for Family minimized the violence against LGBTQ people by defending controversial arguments by comparing it with the absolute number of homicides in the country. Lawyer Cicero Gomes Lages said:

> This Court cannot allow a single case of homicide, [free] aggression practiced in any corner of this country, to be considered as if it was a general rule as if we lived in chaos and under Nazi ideology. Homosexuals, gays, and LGBTs live harmoniously in society, parade in the country's capitals playing the bass drum, offending people, especially Jesus Christ. Moreover, it is not true that they are being attacked, as is often said that when murdered their hearts are ripped out. There is no such thing. They exhibit themselves the way they want to and are not harassed for this. We have over 60 thousand homicides per year. These cases amount to more than the victims of the war in Syria, for example. Now, they [the LGBTQ move-

ment] say that there is prejudice, crimes of race, and racism. Oh, stop it. Use a court to bring this argument when the National Congress is willing to resolve this issue. Why does the [PPS] not seek the votes it needs to obtain the majority and control of the national Congress in Brazilian society?…Brazilian society democratically rejects PPS….The PPS wants the votes of the gay community, the LGBT community, and nothing more. (TV Justiça, 2019)

In summary, despite religious opposition in the Court trial attempting to convince the judge's decision to turn against LGBTQ rights, the Supreme Court was more progressive than the legislative branch and decided to protect and uphold every LGBTQ right in Brazil today. While parliamentarians constantly seek voter support for elections or re-elections, Court judges do not depend on votes to keep their position. Legislators took advantage of legislative procedures to block the approval of the LGBTQ bill, leading to the litigation cases decided by the Court. However, the Court's decisions are palliative solutions until legislators legislate upon the matter. In this sense, a more conservative composition of the Court could reverse decisions, block progressist agendas and enforce conservative ideologies, especially if coalited with a conservative executive and legislative. Under such circumstances, a democratic country might risk becoming a Potemkin democracy.

8. Conclusion

This article provides a historical narrative analysis and discourse analysis to understand why and how the anti-homophobia bill PLC 122 was never approved in the Brazilian Congress. First introduced to Congress in 2001, the PLC 122 bill was approved in the House in 2006. However, when sent to the Senate, it faced a deadlock and was not approved until it was simply shelved in 2015. Consequently, the criminalization of LGBTphobia came about via a judiciary decision in June 2019. This decision intensified the anti-LGBTQ rights bill proposal process in Congress, particularly in 2019, with a far-right government and a conservative Congress endorsing the opposition to LGBTQ rights. The LGBTQ bill's defeat in Congress is the outcome of controversy in policymaking in Brazil, which often oscillates in framing its decisions according to the Constitution or the Bible. Conservative parliamentarians used several strategies ranging from legislative procedures (asking for revisions to the bill) to conspiracy theories. The former was effective in delaying the bill's approval in the Senate. The latter influenced public opinion to elect evangelical parliamentarians and publicly oppose the PLC1 22 bill. As a result, Brazil still does not have a law created by Congress to protect LGBTQ rights. However, since 2011, the Supreme Federal Court has recognized the rights of LGBTQ people before the Constitution. For example, allowing same-sex marriage, the criminalization of LGBTphobia, the eligibility of

LGBTQ people to be blood donors, and for transgender people to change their name and gender without being subjected to surgery.

This research has shown how political discourses combined with manipulation discourses lead to conspiracy theories on LGBTQ issues and related bills in Brazil. The analysis of ten anti-LGBTQ rights bills introduced to Congress between 2010 and 2020 reveals patterns regarding the authors proposing the bills (primarily right or far-right, religious and conservative politicians), the strategies used to block bill PLC 122, and the type of discourses driving the delays in the legislative procedure for approving any pro-LGBTQ rights bills during the democratic period in Brazil. Politicians frame political discourses according to their interests seeking voters' support. In particular, conservative religious parliamentarians used the PLC 122 bill to manipulate discourses, such as that of traditional family values. Among the discourses, conspiracy theories emerged and spread false ideas behind the content of bill PLC 122, framing it as the bill "against the people of God," against traditional family principles, and spreading fear that it would lead to the jailing of pastors and priests. The anti-homophobia bill PLC 122 aims to protect LGBTQ people through the law against discrimination or violence, physical or verbal.

While in many countries conspiracy theories against LGBTQ rights are isolated to political discourses, navigating the collective imaginary or spreading misinformation, in Brazil the anti-LGBTQ rights agenda has taken the form of bill proposals made to Congress. This opens a debate over LGBTQ citizenship and rights protection in a country with one of the worst global records of violence against LGBTQ people. Further research could benefit from a comparative analysis between democracies, identifying common patterns of conspiracy theories based on religious discourses behind the anti-LGBTQ rights agenda and their translation into the legislative arena (as bill proposals).

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Albertson, B., & Guiler, K. (2020). Conspiracy theories, election rigging, and support for democratic norms. *Research & Politics*, *7*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168020959859

Arguelhes, D. W., & Ribeiro, L. M. (2017). Courts as the first and only legislative chambers? The Brazilian Supreme Court and the legalization of same-sex marriage. *Verfassung in Recht Und Übersee*, *50*(3), 281–299. https://doi.org/10.5771/0506-7286-2017-3-281

Avritzer, L. (2017). The Rousseff impeachment and the crisis of democracy in Brazil. *Critical Policy Studies*, *11*(3), 352–357. https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2017.1363066

Baden, C., & Sharon, T. (2021). Blinded by the lies? Toward an integrated definition of conspiracy theories. *Communication Theory*, *31*(1), 82–106. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtaa023

Bernardi, I. (2001). *Bill PLC 122/2006*. Senado Federal. https://www25.senado.leg.br/web/atividade/materias/-/materia/79604

Butter, M., & Knight, P. (2018). The history of conspiracy theory research. In J. E. Uscinski (Ed.), *Conspiracy theories and the people who believe them* (pp. 33–46). Oxford Academic. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190844073.003.0002

Byford, J. (2011). *Conspiracy theories: A critical introduction*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230349216

Campos, J. (2015). *Ata de eleição da Frente Parlamentar Evangélica do Congresso Nacional* [Minute of the election of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front of the National Congress]. Camara dos Deputados. https://www.camara.leg.br/proposicoesWeb/fichadetramitacao?idProposicao=2026193

Cascione, S., & de Araújo, S. M. V. G. (2019). On the limited potential for congressional caucuses to sustain majority coalitions in Brazil. *Revista de Sociologia e Política*, *27*(72), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1590/1678-987319277205

Chaisty, P., Cheeseman, N., & Power, T. (2014). Rethinking the "presidentialism debate": Conceptualising coalitional politics in cross-regional perspective. *Democratisation*, *21*(1), 72–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2012.710604

Clarke, S. (2002). Conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorising. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, *32*(2), 131–150. https://doi.org/10.1177/004931032002001

Corrales, J. (2019). The expansion of LGBT rights in Latin America and the backlash. In M. J. Bosia, S. M. McEvoy, & M. Rahman (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of global LGBT and sexual diversity politics* (pp. 1–22). Oxford Academic. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190673741.013.14

Corrêa, S., Carreira, D., Simpsom, K., Larrat, S., Bazzo, S., Asano, C., Galli, B., Máximo Prado, M., & Maracci, J. G. (2021). *Ofensivas antigênero no Brasil: Políticas de estado, legislação, mobilização social* [Anti-gender offensives in Brazil: State policies, legislation, social mobilization]. https://sxpolitics.org/ptbr/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/10/E-book-SOGI-21102021.pdf

de Oliveira, J. M. D., & Mott, L. (2020). *Mortes violentas de LGBT+ no Brasil—2019: Relatório do Grupo Gay da Bahia* [Violent deaths of LGBT+ in Brazil—2019: Report by Grupo Gay da Bahia]. Grupo Gay da Bahia. https://grupogaydabahia.com.br/relatorios-anuais-de-morte-de-lgbti

Fairclough, I., & Fairclough, N. (2012). *Political discourse analysis: A method for advanced students*. Routledge.

Feliciani, M. Z., Schirmer, L. C., & Dalmolin, A. R. (2017). The performance of Silas Malafaia against PLC 122: Analysis of his pages of Twitter and Facebook. *PragMATIZES—Revista Latino-Americana de Estudos Em Cultura*, *2017*(13), 92–112. https://doi.org/10.22409/pragmatizes2017.13.a10462

Fenwick, T. B., Burges, S. W., & Power, T. J. (2017). Five faces of presidential governance: Insights from policymaking in democratic Brazil. *Policy Studies*, *38*(3), 205–215. https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2017.1290232

Friedman, E. J. (2009). Gender, sexuality and the Latin American left: Testing the transformation. *Third World Quarterly*, *30*(2), 415–433. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590802681132

Gastaldi, A. B., Mott, L., de Oliveira, J. M. D., Ayres, C. S., Souza, W. V., & da Silva, K. V. C. (2021). *Observatório de mortes violentas de LGBTI+ no Brasil—2020* [Observatory of violent deaths of LGBTI+ in Brazil—2020] (1st ed.). Editora Acontece Arte e Política LGBTI+. https://observatoriomortes violentaslgbtibrasil.org/2020-1

Githens-Mazer, J. (2012). The rhetoric and reality: Radicalisation and political discourse. *International Political Science Review*, *33*(5), 556–567. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512112454416

Gotham, K. F., & Staples, W. G. (1996). Narrative analysis and the new historical sociology. *The Sociological Quartely*, *37*(3), 481–501.

Gray, D. E. (2004). *Doing research in the real world* (1st ed.). SAGE.

Hiroi, T. (2008). The dynamics of lawmaking in a bicameral legislature: The case of Brazil. *Comparative Political Studies*, *41*(12), 1583–1606. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414007308536

Holzhacker, R. (2012). National and transnational strategies of LGBT civil society organisations in different political environments: Modes of interaction in Western and Eastern Europe for equality. *Comparative European Politics*, *10*(1), 23–47. https://doi.org/10.1057/cep. 2010.21

House of Representatives. (n.d.). *Frentes parlamentares* [Parliamentary fronts]. Camara dos Deputados. https://www.camara.leg.br/internet/deputado/frentes.asp

Iamamoto, S. A. S., Mano, M. K., & Summa, R. (2021). Brazilian far-right neoliberal nationalism: Family, anticommunism and the myth of racial democracy. *Globalizations*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2021.1991745

Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. (2010). *Censo demográfico 2010: Características gerais da população, religião e pessoas com deficiência* [2010 demographic census: General characteristics of population, religion and people with disabilities]. http://www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/censo2010/caracteristicas_religiao_deficiencia/default_caracteristicas_religiao_deficiencia.shtm

Irineu, B. A. (2016). *A política pública LGBT no Brasil (2003–2014): Homofobia cordial e homonacionalismo nas tramas da participação social* [LGBT public policy in Brazil (2003–2014): Cordial homophobia and homonationalism in the plots of social participation] [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.24900.96646

Lacerda, F. (2017). Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and representation in Brazilian legislative elections (1998–2010). *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, *32*(93), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.17666/329310/2017

Lei que criminaliza homofobia motiva grande protesto em Brasília [Law that criminalizes homophobia motivates large protest in Brasilia]. (2011, June 1). *G1 Jornal Nacional*. http://g1.globo.com/jornal-nacional/noticia/2011/06/lei-que-criminaliza-homofobia-motiva-grande-protesto-em-brasilia.html

Lelis, R. C., & de Oliveira, A. V. (2021). Exclusionary inclusion: Limitations of advocacy efforts in the struggle for inclusion of sexual orientation in the National Constituent Assembly. *Revista Direito Público*, *18*(97), 748–776. https://www.portaldeperiodicos.idp.edu.br/direitopublico/article/view/5050

Levy, C. (2012). Social movements and political parties in Brazil: Expanding democracy, the "struggle for the possible" and the reproduction of power structures. *Globalizations*, *9*(6), 783–798. https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2012.739340

Loureiro, P. M., & Saad-Filho, A. (2018). The limits of pragmatism: The rise and fall of the Brazilian Workers' Party (2002–2016). *Latin American Perspectives*, *46*(1), 66–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X18805093

Macaulay, F. (2017). Presidents, producers and politics: Law-and-order policy in Brazil from Cardoso to Dilma. *Policy Studies*, *38*(3), 248–261. https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2017.1290231

Maranhão Fo, E. M. d. A., & De Franco, C. (2019). "Girl is princess and wears pink and boy who is prince wears blue": The ideologies of gender and genesis of Damares Alves, the "terribly Christian minister" of human rights. *Revista Brasileira de História Das Religiões*, *35*(12), 297–337. https://periodicos.uem.br/ojs/index.php/RbhrAnpuh/article/view/48106

Marsiaj, J. (2006). Social movements and political parties: Gays, lesbians, and travestis and the struggle for inclusion in Brazil. *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, *31*(62), 167–196. https://

doi.org/10.1080/08263663.2006.10816905

Mendes, P. (2012, September 11). Planalto anuncia troca de Ana de Hollanda por Marta Suplicy na Cultura [Planalto announces exchange of Ana de Hollanda for Marta Suplicy at Cultura]. *G1 Política*. http://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2012/09/planalto-anuncia-troca-de-ana-de-hollanda-por-marta-suplicy-na-cultura.html

Mendos, L. R. (2019). *State-sponsored homophobia*. ILGA. https://ilga.org/state-sponsored-homophobia-report

"Não aceito propaganda de opções sexuais," afirma Dilma sobre kit anti-homofobia ["I do not accept advertising of sexual options," says Dilma about anti-homophobia kit]. (2011, May 26). *Educação UOL*. https://educacao.uol.com.br/noticias/2011/05/26/nao-aceito-propaganda-de-opcoes-sexuais-afirma-dilma-sobre-kit-anti-homofobia.htm

Natividade, M., & de Oliveira, L. (2009). Threatening sexualities: Religion and homophobia(s) in conservative evangelical discourses. *Sexualidad, Salud y Sociedad—Revista Latinoamericana*, *2009*(2), 121–161. https://www.e-publicacoes.uerj.br/index.php/SexualidadSaludySociedad/article/view/32/445

Paternotte, D., & Kuhar, R. (2018). Disentangling and Locating the "global right": Anti-gender campaigns in Europe. *Politics and Governance*, *6*(3), 6–19. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i3.1557

Plenta, P. (2020). Conspiracy theories as a political instrument: Utilisation of anti-Soros narratives in Central Europe. *Contemporary Politics*, *26*(5), 512–530. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020.1781332

Prado, M. A. M., & Correa, S. (2018). Transnational and national portraits of the anti-gender crusades. *Revista Psicologia Política*, 18(43), 444–448. http://pepsic.bvsalud.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1519-549X2018000300003&lng=pt&nrm=iso

Pralle, S. B. (2003). Venue shopping, political strategy, and policy change: The internationalisation of Canadian forest advocacy. *Journal of Public Policy*, *23*(3), 233–260. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X03003118

Presidência da República. (2019). *Em discurso de posse, Bolsonaro pede apoio para reerguer o país* [In inauguration speech, Bolsonaro asks for support to rebuild the country]. https://www.gov.br/planalto/pt-br/acompanhe-o-planalto/noticias/2019/01/no-congresso-bolsonaro-toma-posse-e-pede-apoio-de-parlamentares-para-reerguer-o-pais

Recuero, R., Soares, F., & Vinhas, O. (2020). Discursive strategies for disinformation on WhatsApp and Twitter during the 2018 Brazilian presidential election. *First Monday*, *26*(1). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i1.10551

Rezende, A. T., da Silva, F. M. d. S. M., Ribeiro, M. G. C., Loureto, G. D. L., da Silva Neta, O. F., & Gouveia, V. V. (2019). Conspiracy theories: Meanings in the Brazilian context. *Estudos de Psicologia (Campinas)*, *36*(2), 264–291. https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-0275201936e180010

Rocha, C., Solano, E., & Medeiros, J. (2021). *The Bolsonaro paradox: The public sphere and right-wing counterpublicity in contemporary Brazil*. Springer.

Santiago Gomes da Silva, O. (2020). Judicialization of policy and legislative backlash in Brazil: An analysis of same-sex union judicial recognition (2011–2018). *CSOnline—Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais*, *2020*(31), 533–554. https://doi.org/10.34019/1981-2140.2020.27736

Santos, G. G. d. C. (2016). LGBT movement and political parties in Brazil. *Contemporânea—Revista de Sociologia Da UFSCar*, *6*(1), 179–212. https://doi.org/10.4322/2316-1329.005

Santos, G. G. d. C., & de Melo, B. L. R. (2018). The opposition to LGBT rights in the Brazilian National Congress (1986–2018). *Sociologies in Dialogue*, *4*(1), 80–108. https://doi.org/10.20336/sid.v4i1.93

Schulenberg, S. R. (2009). *Policy stability without policy: The battle over same-sex partnership recognition in Brazil*. SSRN. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1451907

Sedgwick, M. (2010). The concept of radicalisation as a source of confusion. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *22*(4), 479–494. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2010.491009

Supremo Tribunal Federal. (2019a). *MI 4733*. https://portal.stf.jus.br/processos/detalhe.asp?incidente=4239576

Supremo Tribunal Federal. (2019b). *ADO 26*. https://portal.stf.jus.br/processos/detalhe.asp?incidente=4515053

Swiebel, J. (2009). Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender human rights: The search for an international strategy. *Contemporary Politics*, *15*(1), 19–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569770802674196

Torres, T. R., & Pozzebom, E. R. (2011, June 1). Magno Malta e Crivella apóiam manifestação contra PL 122 [Magno Malta and Crivella support demonstration against PL 122]. *Senado Notícias*. https://www12.senado.leg.br/noticias/materias/2011/06/01/magno-malta-e-crivella-apoiam-manifestacao-contra-pl-122

Trevisan, J. B. (2013). Pentecostals in partisan politics in Brazil: From 1989 to 2010. *Anais do IV Encontro Nacional do GT História das Religiões e Religiosidades*, *2013*(15). http://www.dhi.uem.br/gtreligiao/anais4/st8/2.pdf

Tribunal Superior Eleitoral. (2022). *Partidos políticos registrados no TSE* [Political parties registered with the TSE]. https://www.tse.jus.br/partidos/partidos-registrados-no-tse/registrados-no-tse

TV Brasil. (2021, October 5). *Symposium of Christian Citizenship* [Video]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2_2tNpZJWc

TV Justiça. (2019, February 14). *Court trial sessions* [Video]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmDZ_-lueJs

About the Author

Diego Galego, originally from Brazil, holds a PhD in social science from the University of Leuven, Belgium, and public policy from the University of Aveiro, Portugal. He specializes in uncovering the impact of social movements on policymaking. In his forthcoming book, *Queering Public Policy*, Dr. Galego explores the influence of Brazil's LGBTQ+ movement on public policy.

Article

Religion, Conspiracy Thinking, and the Rejection of Democracy: Evidence From the UK

Alexander Yendell [1],* and David Herbert [2]

[1] Research Institute Social Cohesion, Leipzig University, Germany
[2] Department of Sociology, University of Bergen, Norway

* Corresponding author (alexander.yendell@uni-leipzig.de)

Abstract
While some research addresses the relationship between religiosity and political attitudes, little is known about the relationship between religion, conspiracy beliefs, and political culture. Using the concept of authoritarianism, we hypothesise that a conspiracy mentality is likely to be associated with ethnocentric and anti-democratic attitudes, just as some types of religion—e.g., religious fundamentalism—have a close affinity to authoritarian attitudes. Using data from an online UK survey (N = 1093; quota sample, representative of education, gender, age, and region), we enquire to what extent belief in conspiracy theories is associated with xenophobic, racist, and anti-democratic attitudes, which aspects of religiosity in combination with other factors play a role in conspiracy beliefs, and which communicative and interpretative practices are associated with belief in conspiracy ideologies. Our analysis reveals that both belief in classical conspiracy theories and belief in Covid-19 conspiracy theories are significantly related to anti-Muslim sentiments, anti-Black racism, and right-wing extremism. Moreover, a regression analysis shows that an initially discovered relationship between the strength of religiosity and conspiracy mentality disappears once religious fundamentalism is included in the model. The effect of religious fundamentalism is moderated by narcissism and the style of social media use—namely, trusting posts made by one's friends more than the opinions of experts.

Issue
This article is part of the issue "The Role of Religions and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes" edited by Oliver Hidalgo (University of Münster) and Alexander Yendell (Leipzig University).

1. Introduction

Conspiracy beliefs are no longer marginal phenomena but rather associated with significant public threats and harms, including "health risks, negative attitudes and prejudices towards groups in society, political radicalization, political violence, political disengagement and diminishing support for public policies" (Walter & Drochon, 2022, p. 483). In the political sphere, with the rise of right-wing populism, events such as the so-called refugee crisis and, most recently, the Corona pandemic, conspiracy ideologies have become a focus of public

and academic concern linked with threats to democracy and the sustaining of autocratic systems (Hogg, 2021). It is therefore critical to understand how and under what conditions conspiracy theories spread, who supports them and why. Using data from an online UK survey on right-wing extremism and racisms (ReRa UK 2021; quota sample, representative by education, gender, age, and region) we ask to what extent belief in conspiracy theories is associated with xenophobic, racist, and anti-democratic attitudes, what aspects of religiosity in combination with other factors play a role in conspiracy beliefs, and through what communicative and

interpretative practices belief in conspiracy ideologies are spread and intensified—or, conversely, limited in their impact. While the UK is (at the time of writing) only one country, we observe that a recent international comparative (US-European) study found "surprisingly that only 2% of the variance lies at the country level, which tells us that to explain generic conspiracy thinking we must look at people's characteristics more than the characteristics of the country in which they reside" (Walter & Drochon, 2022, p. 497), and that insights into individual-level factors such as personality variables, religiosity, and social media use in one country are likely to have relevance elsewhere.

1.1. Conspiracy Beliefs: Definitions, Functions, and Political Orientation

It is important to define what we mean by conspiracy theories because "by signalling irrationality—these terms can neutralize valid concerns and delegitimize people" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 5). Following the most comprehensive review to date (Douglas et al., 2019), we define conspiracy theories as "attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors" and a conspiracy belief as "belief in a specific conspiracy theory or set of conspiracy theories" (Douglas et al., 2019, pp. 4–5). We use the term "conspiracy mentality" broadly to refer to the idea of "a stable predisposition that drives individuals to see events as the product of a conspiracy" (Walter & Drochon, 2022, p. 484), with a more specific use introduced in Section 2. People seem to be attracted to conspiracy theories when they meet psychological needs more effectively than alternative explanations, including "*epistemic* (e.g., the desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty), *existential* (e.g., the desire for control and security), and *social* (e.g., the desire to maintain a positive image of the self or group)" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 7; see also Hogg, 2021). The belief that others are conspiring against one's group is more likely to develop when the group is (or members perceive themselves to be) stigmatized, disadvantaged, or threatened (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Lower educational qualifications are linked with conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al., 2016), while news media literacy has been found to decrease conspiracy theory endorsement (Craft et al., 2017). On the political spectrum, both US and European evidence suggests that conspiracy theorising is found mostly at the extremes of the far-left and far-right but is stronger on the right (van Prooijen et al., 2015), possibly because the same personality traits (such as a strong need to manage uncertainty) are associated with both phenomena (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 11). Given these tendencies, it makes sense to examine more closely the association of conspiracy beliefs with other characteristics of the far-right, such as xenophobic, racist, and anti-democratic attitudes. Hence, we ask:

RQ1: To what extent is belief in conspiracy theories associated with xenophobic, racist, and anti-democratic attitudes?

1.2. Religion and Conspiracy Beliefs: Towards a Differentiated View

Religion relates to conspiracy thinking in several ways. First religion, and Christianity in particular, is used by right-wing populist and extremist parties and movements as an important marker for their identity politics (Hidalgo et al., 2019). Second, other religious communities take on an important scapegoating function, for example, right-wing populist and extremist discourses using conspiracy narratives to discredit Muslims and Jews, and to justify violence against them (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, 2022; Hidalgo et al., 2019; Yendell, 2021). Third, traditions within religions share structural similarities with conspiracy theories, for example, apocalyptic traditions within many religions articulate belief in hidden forces shaping world history (Barkun, 2013), while some conspiracy narratives have quasi-religious elements, including QAnon, whose supporters not only believe in the quasi-satanic machinations of an almost anti-Christian elite but also identify a saviour figure (Yendell et al., in press). These similarities raise the question, as posed by Robertson et al. (2018, p. 2): "Do 'religious' and 'conspiratorial' inferences about hidden agents and powers draw on shared cognitive resources, heuristics, or biases?"

Some studies suggest that religious individuals are more likely than non-religious to believe in conspiracy theories (Lahrach & Furnham, 2017; Oliver & Wood, 2014). However, Yendell et al. (2021) found that strong religious belief and frequency of prayer are negatively related to conspiracy beliefs and that conspiracy belief is unrelated to religiosity in general, but only to dogmatic religious belief when religious explanations are considered more relevant than scientific ones, suggesting that care is needed to identify which aspects of religiosity relate to conspiracy beliefs. Furthermore, a differentiated consideration of religion seems to be important not only for the analysis of conspiracy mentality. The connection between religiosity and political attitudes, especially to democracy and tolerance of minorities, also yields very different results depending on the dimension of religiosity considered. When studies include multiple indicators of religiosity participation and practice (e.g., attendance at church services, frequency of prayer, etc.) and the centrality of religiosity, these are more likely to be related to pro-democratic values than indicators of identification and membership (Doebler, 2014; Huber & Yendell, 2019; Pollack et al., 2014; Yendell & Huber, 2020), which tend to produce contrary results (Decker et al., 2012, 2016; Decker et al., 2010; Küpper & Zick, 2006, 2010; Pickel & Yendell, 2022).

In summary, there are some indications that active religious participation is unrelated—or negatively

related—to conspiracy beliefs, in contrast to less active participation and more dogmatic belief. Of course, it is very likely that these relationships depend on the denominations and traditions under investigation, and on the teaching and beliefs circulating at the local level, beyond the granularity that can be captured through a survey. Nonetheless, one explanation for the connection between nominal belief and conspiracy thinking could be a lack of exposure to religious teaching, which includes counter-narratives with universalist orientations. Conversely, universalist elements are less emphasised by more dogmatic approaches, which rather resonate with conspiracy thinking. Without the balancing universalist elements, religion can be thus used to provide resources that authors of conspiracy narratives take up and reinterpret to lend a spiritual authority to their worldview and to legitimise notions of superiority and justification for domination, especially in relation to other religious communities. At any rate, the different levels of support for democracy associated with different indicators of religiosity suggests the need for a careful analysis of the role of different types and aspects of religion in relation to conspiracy beliefs. The evidence reviewed so far thus suggests that religion plays a complex role both in relation to conspiracy beliefs and in support of right-wing populism and extremism (linked to conspiracy beliefs, for example, where religious minorities are scapegoated in conspiracy narratives), sometimes feeding and circulating such beliefs, but also sometimes challenging them. We seek to clarify some of this complexity by asking:

RQ2: What types (and indicators) of religion are most associated with conspiracy beliefs?

1.3. Social Media Use and Conspiracy Beliefs

On the issue of circulation, we also seek to clarify the role of social media in relation to the spread of conspiracy beliefs. In response to concerns about the polarising consequences of "filter bubbles" (Pariser, 2011), a substantial body of research has developed demonstrating an association between social media use and conspiracy beliefs (Jamieson & Albarracín, 2020). However, the mechanisms involved, and the direction of influence are not clear. As Enders et al. (2021, p. 1) argue, the association is "often interpreted as evidence that social media causally promote conspiracy beliefs," but it may be that social media simply provide a convenient way to share for those already predisposed. Reviewing evidence on the role of the internet in general in relation to conspiracy beliefs, Uscinski et al. (2018) contend that the internet may not have increased support for conspiracy beliefs as much as is widely believed, arguing (a) that conspiracy sites receive comparatively limited traffic in Western countries compared to major media outlets, (b) that most commentary on such sites is negative, (c) that there is no evidence that people are more

prone to conspiracy thinking since the advent of the internet, and (d) that conspiracy theories tend to "stay concentrated within the communities who already agree with them" (Douglas et al., 2019 p. 15).

However, recent evidence suggests wide diffusion of conspiracy beliefs about Covid-19 in the UK: More than a quarter of a representative sample in September–October 2020 agreed that "the spread of the virus [was] a deliberate attempt by a group of powerful people to make money" and that "the virus [was] a deliberate attempt by governments to gain political control"; the sample also included disturbing levels of antisemitism, with 13.9% agreeing that "Jews have created the virus to collapse the economy for financial gain," and a further 8.9% unsure (Freeman et al., 2020, p. 9). It may be that the conditions of the pandemic have in some way boosted the credibility and amplified the impact of conspiracy beliefs. Furthermore, the arguments made by Uscinski and colleagues concerning specialist websites and blogs devoted to conspiracy theories are not adequate to capture the dynamics of social media, where narratives can spread rapidly as part of everyday peer-to-peer communication, and do not require visits to specialist sites. The circulation of conspiracy beliefs via social media may thus form part of an everyday culture in which such beliefs are normalised and so function as a site for the production of a culture of fascism (Griffin, 2016), testimony to the adaptability of fascism to changing conditions (Griffin, 2019). The dynamics of circulation, reception, and belief in conspiracy narratives on social media are complex, but we seek to shed light on just one, often neglected, aspect—the credibility attached to different sources of information, for example, the views of friends compared to the opinions of experts. We suggest that this, rather than reliance on social media as a source of news, is likely to be associated with conspiracy beliefs. Hence, we ask:

RQ3: Under what conditions is the use of social media associated with conspiracy belief?

2. Theories of Individual Attraction to Conspiracy Beliefs: Psychodynamic Theories and their Development

The concept of the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950; Horkheimer, 1936; Reich, 1933), which follows on from Freud's (1930) psychoanalysis and his concept of the narcissism of small differences, has proven productive in explaining conspiracy thinking (Dyrendal et al., 2021). However, it not only argues for an association between authoritarianism, anti-democratic attitudes, prejudices, and discrimination but also discusses religion and religiosity as supporting as well as immunizing factors regarding fascist, ethnocentric, and antisemitic attitudes. Against the background of Freudian psychoanalysis, its founders argued that unconscious conflicts that have their origin in childhood trigger not

just mental discomfort and illness, as Freud assumed, but also relate to ethnocentric, antisemitic, and fascist attitudes. People who show affinities with a fascist ideology had developed feelings of hatred towards authorities in their childhood, especially their own parents, which they could not express or live out under any circumstances. This pent-up hatred is transferred to others, i.e., marginalized people perceived as weaker and strangers. The authoritarian personality is characterized by power orientation, destructiveness, cynicism, sadomasochism, aggression against those who are weaker, desire for punishment, intellectual hostility, and the division of the world into good and bad. Adorno described the authoritarian personality as "ego-weak." It has a fragile sense of self-worth, and scapegoating, also known as projection, is a very common and immature mechanism to stabilise self-esteem.

Authoritarianism researchers argued that there is a strong connection between authoritarian character structure and fascist ideology. They saw roots in the educational ideal of the Weimar period, which was characterized by strict punishment, including physical, and an emotionally distant dominating father figure. So, the individual does not rebel against their parents because that was impossible, but against others, strangers and those who are considered weak. At the same time, the authoritarian personality tends to identify with a dictator and submit, to be able to share in his strength. And while educational and child-rearing practices have changed substantially since the 1930s, relational bonding and emotional formation processes can still be disrupted, with similar results for individuals' personalities.

In the prominent and often-used f-scale, Adorno includes a subscale that he called "superstition and stereotypy" (Adorno, 1999, pp. 55–56. The content of the five indicators of this subscale deals with astrology, fortune-telling, the scientifically inexplicable, a catastrophic end of the world, and a supernatural power. It is noteworthy that these indicators do not contain any specific Christian terminology. They even partly contradict Christian doctrine. For Adorno, superstition contains a tendency to shift responsibility from the individual to external powers beyond his or her control. Superstition is an indication that the "ego" has already given up because it can no longer determine its own fate. In his discussion of religious concepts that occur in the qualitative interviews of the authoritarianism study, he highlights both the immunizing and problematic functions of Christianity. On one hand, it can function as an immunizing factor, as the Christian doctrine of universal love and the idea of "Christian Humanitas" grants minorities the same rights as majorities (Adorno, 1999, p. 281). In addition, the emphasis on "spirit" tends to inhibit emphasis on physical characteristics such as "racial traits," which have the function of denigrating others based on their descent. But when people only attend church to conform socially (Adorno, 1999, p. 285) this extrinsic religion becomes problematic because it may be used to

distinguish between those who belong and conform and those who do not and hence become part of authoritarian conformity. Conversely, Adorno contends that when people take religion seriously in an internalized way this is a sign of psychological independence. This form of intrinsic religiosity, which underlines the content rather than the distinction between those who belong to a and those who do not, focuses on a universal ethic of love and compassion.

Summarising Adorno's thoughts on the connection between authoritarianism, religiosity, ethnocentrism, and prejudice, there are three salient types of religiosity: (a) Christians who identify with a religious community because it gives them social status and personal security but who lack engagement with the content of religion (especially universalistic ethics) and who tend towards ethnocentrism and fascism (extrinsic religiosity); (b) intrinsically religious Christians who think about their religion and who have no ethnocentric and fascist views; and (c) people who believe in superstition, which usually goes along with ethnocentrism and fascism.

The first two types fit the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity made by Allport and Ross (1967). A more recent concept, developed by Decker et al. (2020), also fits the authoritarian dynamic and addresses conspiracy thinking directly (see also Imhoff & Decker, 2013). The "conspiracy mentality" believes that political decisions are made by rationally calculating groups or individuals in secret and with mostly malicious intent. These groups or individuals control society down to the smallest detail. According to Decker and colleagues, this protects those involved from dealing with the complexity of societal problems and allows authoritarian aggression to be directed at certain groups and individuals because they are easy to track down and target (Decker et al., 2018, pp. 122–23). What is different about the conspiracy mentality and the aspect of projection within the concept of authoritarianism, is that the conspiracy myth is no longer about strengthening the weakened ego, but about reshaping the world: In the world of conspiracy ideologists, the reality principle no longer applies. The world is supposed to adapt to one's own wishes and needs. Such an outlook is potentially more disruptive to democracy than the classic authoritarian personality, which emphasises rule boundedness and the need to respect the authorities—rather, with the link to reality principle broken, the message is to storm the Capitol rather than respect the electoral authorities.

Another concept associated with conspiracy theories is that of social dominance orientation (SDO), which is a measure of the individual level of acceptance of group-based hierarchies and the corresponding inequalities (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001, p. 61; see also Pratto et al., 1994):

SDO is defined as a very general individual differences orientation expressing the value that people place on nonegalitarian and hierarchically structured

relationships among social groups. It expresses general support for the domination of certain socially constructed groups over other socially constructed groups, regardless of the manner in which these groups are defined….Individuals differ in the degree to which they desire group-based inequality and dominance for any number of reasons.

SDO has been shown to have a high level of explanatory power for different kinds of prejudices or political attitudes (e.g., Cohrs & Asbrock, 2009; Dru, 2007; Newman et al., 2014; on Islamophobia see Uenal, 2016). SDO emerged from social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), which is a multilevel theory that focuses on the retention and stability of group-based social hierarchies. These hierarchies bestow privileges on dominant groups and are present in nearly all stable societies. According to Sidanius and Pratto (1999), hierarchies consist of three systems:

- Age (adults are more privileged than children);
- Gender (men usually have more power than women);
- An arbitrary system (culturally defined group-based hierarchies).

The link between SDO and conspiracy mentality is scientifically well-established, and the theory offers high explanatory potential (Dyrendal et al., 2021; Hartman et al., 2021; Swami, 2012; Tonković et al., 2021).

Other concepts focus more on the personality structure of conspiracy believers and partly pathologize belief in conspiracies. Körner (2020) distinguishes between two poles of the conspiracy mentality: People who passively accept their fate and describe what they have experienced as coincidence or bad luck and who do not tend to conspiracy theories form the first pole. On the opposite pole are people who are willing to act, who often proactively search for the causes of events for inner psychological reasons and often against the background of a mental illness in order to be outraged about them and possibly even to counteract them aggressively. According to Körner (2020), most people are between these poles and are not prone to conspiracy theories. However, in the case of terrible events that are difficult to explain, such as the assassination attempt on John F. Kennedy, the attack on the World Trade Centre, and most recently the corona pandemic, even people who are between the poles can be attracted to conspiracy theories.

As an inner psychopathological disposition, narcissistic personality structures are widely discussed, and some studies show a connection between narcissism and the belief in conspiracy ideologies. Kay (2021) concludes that individuals with pronounced narcissism can be divided into two groups. People who are high in grandiose narcissism are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories because of a desire to be unique, and those high in vulnerable narcissism are more likely to believe in conspir-

acies due to heightened paranoia. Other studies also show the correlation between narcissism and the belief in conspiracies (Cichocka et al., 2016; Hughes & Machan, 2021; Kay, 2021; Sternisko et al., 2021). Hence, our fourth research question:

RQ4: To what extent are authoritarian personality, social dominance and narcissism associated with conspiracy beliefs?

Belief in conspiracy theories, the concept of the authoritarian personality, SDO, and narcissism share structural parallels in that they are associated with notions of social hierarchy which are also relevant to anti-democratic and ethnocentric attitudes and prejudices. According to Adorno et al. (1950), in this context, religiosity has both a promoting effect and a weakening one. Religiosity is likely particularly problematic when it has structural parallels to authoritarianism, as is the case with religious fundamentalism (Strube, 2021). Conversely, other—broadly intrinsic—forms of religiosity appear to be less or negatively linked to authoritarianism or conspiracy beliefs; many strands of religious teaching promote questioning of rigid hierarchies and binary distinctions and advocate universal compassion and solidarity. Indeed, some research has found that whereas fundamentalism is positively related to prejudice, questing religion is negatively so (Hunsberger, 1995). Likewise, fundamentalism and spirituality differ in their relationship to environmental attitudes (Preston & Shin, 2022).

Such evidence suggests the need for differentiated measures of religion, especially of a fundamentalist orientation when it comes to assessing the relationship between religion and conspiracy beliefs. Research in the Polish context has found that "religious fundamentalism, unlike centrality of religiosity, is positively related to coronavirus conspiracy beliefs" (Łowicki et al., 2022, p. 1), and the UK provides an interesting context to examine these relationships further. First, as argued above, evidence suggests conspiracy beliefs are widespread, with more than a quarter supporting some conspiracy beliefs and almost 15% supporting antisemitic conspiracy theories (Freeman et al., 2020). Second, high religious diversity, including the presence of a diversity of forms of fundamentalism, enables the assessment of the relationship between conspiracy theories and a wide variety of forms of religion. Case evidence shows some of these forms have been linked to the spread of conspiracy beliefs in the context of Covid-19 (Sweney, 2021), and strong connections have been found between ethnicity and vaccine hesitancy (Freeman et al., 2020, p. 7; Razai et al., 2021, p. 1), for which religiously transmitted conspiracy theories present a plausible pathway of influence.

3. Methods and Measures

We answer our research questions using data from an online survey on right-wing extremism and racism in

the UK conducted in August 2021, based on Respondi's Access Panel and sample-controlled by age, gender, education level, and region, based on official statistics. A total of 1093 people between the ages of 17 and 74 took part in the survey (age m = 44.29; SD = 15.9; female 50,3%; male 49,7%; people with a university degree 29,1%). Of these, 114 people professed their faith in the Catholic Church, 241 in the Church of England, Scotland, Ireland, or Wales, 48 in other Christian churches, 48 in Islam, and 46 in other religions. 483 participants were non-religious. We used measures from the classic conspiracy mentality scale and concerning contemporary corona conspiracy theories. Respondents were also asked about democracy in principle and in practice, disenchantment with politics, and extreme right-wing, anti-Muslim, and anti-Black racist attitudes. In addition to religious affiliation, respondents were asked about the importance of religion in their lives, religious fundamentalist attitudes, their use of social media, and their discussion of issues with people from different backgrounds to their own. The exact wording of the statements is listed in the Supplementary File.

In the first part of the statistical analysis, we discuss respondents' attitudes towards democracy, inclination towards conspiracy ideologies also in relation to the corona pandemic, anti-Muslim, racist, and far-right attitudes, and correlations between conspiracy mentality and these attitudes. In addition, we analyse the association between religious indicators such as the importance of religion and religious fundamentalism and attitudes, and between religion-related indicators and conspiracy mentality. In the second part of the analysis, we perform a stepwise regression to find out which indicators are related to conspiracy mentality in a multivariate model. The models include socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, education, religion-related variables such as religious affiliation, importance of religion in one's life,

religious fundamentalism, authoritarianism, SDO, narcissism, sadism, lack of trust, the importance of social media, and communication with people whose opinion is different from one's own. The individual variables with the exact wording are listed in the Supplementary File.

4. Conspiracy Belief, Religiosity, and Anti-Democratic World Views: Descriptive Results

4.1. Attitudes to Democracy

The overview of frequencies shows that with an amount of 87% a large majority of respondents in the UK support democracy as an idea (see Figure 1). But only just under 50% are satisfied with its functioning, 84% feel they have no control over the actions of government, and more than 50% say there is no point in getting involved in politics. Both "dissatisfaction with democracy" and "political disempowerment" are therefore strong.

What about conspiracy beliefs? A distinction is made between classic conspiracy mentality items (three statements in total) and Covid-19 conspiracy theories (also three statements in total). Figure 3 shows that the belief in conspiracies is strong. One-third of respondents believe that lives are determined by conspiracies hatched in secret. Half of the respondents believe that secret organisations have a strong influence on politics and slightly less than half believe that politicians are puppets controlled by powers behind them. Agreement with Corona conspiracy myths is lower but still high. Just over a quarter of respondents believe that secret, hidden powers are behind the pandemic. About 20% believe that the Corona crisis was exaggerated to benefit a few. Eleven percent of respondents even believe that Bill Gates is behind the pandemic.

Alongside support for democracy, tolerance of diversity is an important imperative in plural societies like
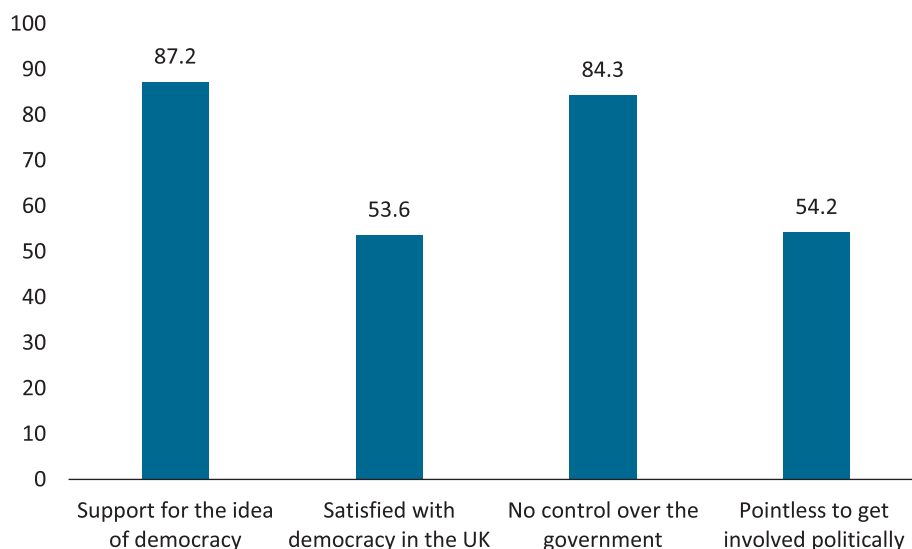
Figure 1. Support of democracy and political apathy. Note: See items 1–4 in the Supplementary File. Source: Own calculations based on the survey.
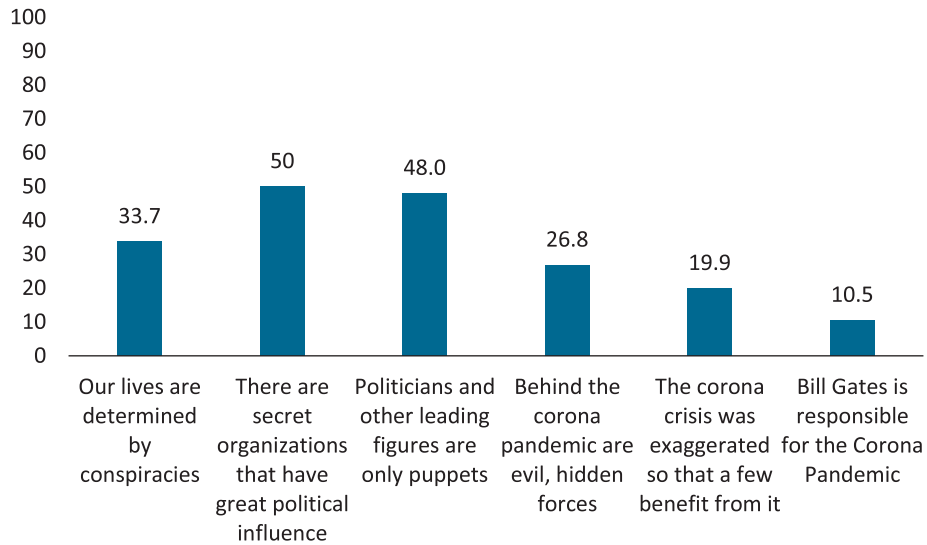
Figure 2. Belief in conspiracies (classic and corona related). Note: See items 5–10 in the Supplementary File. Source: Own calculations based on the survey.

the UK. Figure 3 shows the distribution of far-right, anti-Muslim, and anti-Black racist attitudes. In each case, this is the proportion of those who agreed with twelve far-right, two anti-Muslim, and two anti-Black racist comments. Thus, for the most part, agreement with individual statements is even higher among the population. The diagram thus shows the proportion of those who have a manifest right-wing extremist worldview and are strongly anti-Muslim and anti-Black. The right-wing extremism scale has a Cronbach's alpha of .89, the Muslim hostility scale has a Cronbach's alpha of .81, and the anti-Black scale has a Cronbach's alpha of .74, which is a high to acceptable reliability. Slightly less than a quarter of the population has strong resentment towards Muslims, 5% of the population has strong anti-Black racist attitudes, and about 4% of the population has a

manifest-right extremist worldview, i.e., agree with all twelve statements on right-wing extremism.

What about correlations between belief in conspiracy myths and the attitudes surveyed, and the religiosity indicators? Both the classical conspiracy mentality and belief in corona conspiracy ideologies are negatively correlated with satisfaction with democracy, positively correlated with political apathy, and positively correlated with anti-Muslim sentiment, anti-Black racism, and right-wing extremism (see Table 1). Religious fundamentalism and the importance of religion are weakly positively correlated with democracy satisfaction (except for the importance of religion and support for democracy, which is not significant). Political apathy shows only weak correlations, if any, with the religiosity indicators, which are not significant. What is striking, however, is
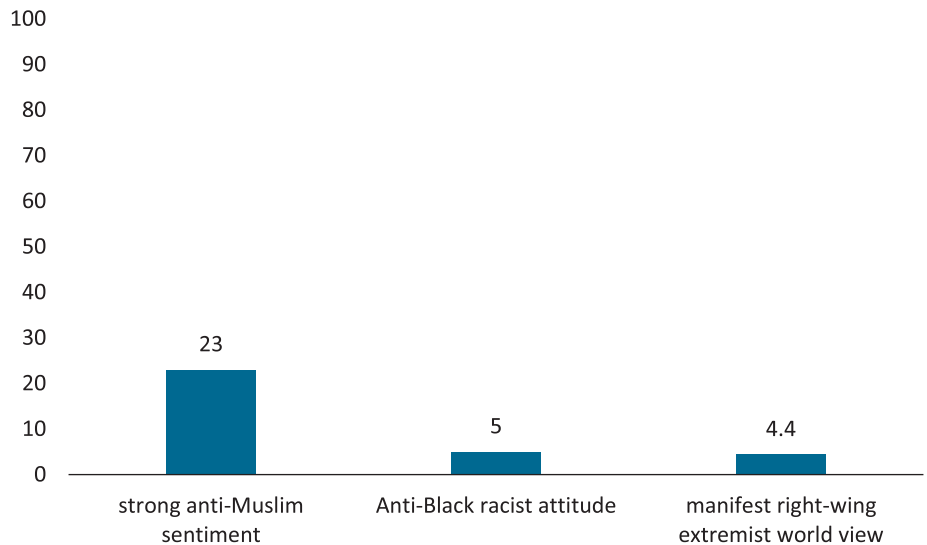
Figure 3. Anti-Muslim sentiment, anti-Black-racism, and manifest right-wing extremist views. Note: See items 11–13 in the Supplementary File. Source: Own calculations based on the survey.

Table 1. Conspiracy mentality, religiosity, and rejection of democratic principles (correlations).

	Conspiracy mentality	Belief in Covid-19 conspiracies	Religious fundamentalism	Importance of religion in one's life
Support of the idea of democracy	–.082***	–.185***	.072*	n.s.
Satisfaction with democracy and how it works in the UK	–.158***	–.070*	.120***	.133***
No point in getting politically involved	.217***	.244***	.096*	n.s.
No control over what government does	.178***	.119***	n.s.	–.063*
Anti-Muslim sentiment	.169***	.214***	.113***	n.s.
Anti-Black racism	.172***	.291***	.326***	.192***
Manifest-right-wing-extremist worldview	.200***	.281***	.297***	.118***
Conspiracy mentality	1	.450***	.158***	.156***
Belief in Covid-19-conspiracies	.450***	1	.267***	.195***
Religious fundamentalism	.158***	.267***	1	.519***
Importance of religion in one's life	.152***	.190***	.519***	1

Notes: Kendall Tau-c, p = *** < .001; p = ** < .01; p = * < .05; n.s. = not significant; for details of the scales and items see Figures 1–3 and the Supplementary File. Source: Own calculations based on the survey.

the finding that both religious fundamentalism and the importance of religion correlate with both racism and right-wing extremism. About anti-Muslim sentiment, religious fundamentalism, conspiracy mentality, and belief in Covid-19 conspiracies are significantly positively correlated with conspiracy beliefs. Furthermore, both religious fundamentalism and the importance of religion correlate with both classical conspiracy mentality and belief in Covid-19 conspiracy myths.

Both conspiracy mentality and the belief in corona conspiracies are thus demonstrably related to attitudes which are problematic for democracy. This is expressed above all in comparatively strong correlations with dissatisfaction with democracy, racist, and anti-Muslim attitudes, as well as extreme right-wing attitudes. The results confirm the findings of other studies that show an influence of belief in conspiracy theories on attitudes toward democracy and right-wing extremism (e.g., Imhoff et al., 2022; Krouwel et al., 2017; Pickel & Yendell, 2020). Also of concern in this context are religiously fundamentalist attitudes and the importance of religion in life.

5. What Influences Belief in Conspiracies? Results of the Multivariate Analysis

Since conspiracy mentality is an important indicator and can help explain political attitudes, it is worth analysing different influencing factors in a complex hypothesis model. We decided on a backward stepwise regression because we particularly want to assess whether the influence of religious indicators not only correlates significantly with conspiracy mentality but also reduces when other indicators are added, especially indicators derived

from psychodynamic theories. A total of five models are available, as shown in Table 2.

5.1. Variables

In the following, we describe the variables in the statistical analysis against the background of theoretical considerations. The exact wording is given in the Supplementary File.

The dependent variable is *conspiracy mentality* and a scale from 1 to 4 was drawn of all three statements on belief in conspiracies, i.e., the sum score of (a) "most people do not realize how far our lives are determined by conspiracies that are concocted in secret," (b) "there are secret organizations that have a great influence on political decisions," and (c) "politicians and other leading figures are only puppets of the powers behind" (Cronbach's alpha = .853).

Independent variables are:

- Gender: Man (0)/Woman (1);
- Age;
- Education: nine levels (low to high);
- Religious affiliation: Christian, Muslim, other (reference category: no affiliation);
- Importance of religiosity: A scale from 1 to 5 was drawn.
- Religious fundamentalism (scale by Pollack et al., 2022): A scale from 1 to 4 was drawn of four statements that measure fundamentalist religious views (sum score, Cronbach's alpha = .896).
- Authoritarianism: A scale from 1 to 5 was drawn that measures authoritarian aggression,

Table 2. Factors which influence belief in conspiracies: Backward stepwise regression (standardized regression coefficients).

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
Age	.071*	.080*	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Gender	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Low education level	.107***	.124***	n.s.	n.s.	.097*
Christian		.148***	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Muslim		.145***	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Other		n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Importance of religiosity			n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Religious fundamentalism			.221***	.156***	.142***
Authoritarianism				n.s.	n.s.
SDO				.108***	.107*
Narcissism				.267***	.190***
Sadism				n.s.	n.s.
Low Interpersonal trust				.109*	.146***
Take most news from social media					n.s.
Trust more in posts of friends than of experts					.199***
Talk with people who disagree with own views					.125**
N	995	995	505	505	505
Corrected R²	.010	.044	.047	.108	.156
Change in R²		.034	.003	.061	.048

Notes: Standardizes regression coefficients, p = *** < .001; p = ** < .01; p = * < .05; n.s. = not significant; for details of the scales and items see Figures 1–3 and the Supplementary File. Source: Own calculations based on the survey.

authoritarian submission, and authoritarian conventionalism (sum score, Cronbach's alpha = .617).

- SDO: A scale from 1 to 7 was drawn of four items on social dominant orientation (sum score, Cronbach's alpha = .775).
- Narcissism: The Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire short scale (NARQ-S) was used (Leckelt et al., 2018 sum score, Cronbach's alpha = .821).
- Sadism: A scale from 1 to 4 was drawn of four items on sadistic attitudes (sum score, Cronbach's alpha = .871).
- Low interpersonal trust: A scale from 1 to 4 was drawn on general interpersonal trust.
- Statement: Most news taken from social media (scale 1 to 4);
- Statement: More trust in posts of friends than of experts (scale 1 to 4);
- Question on how often one talks with people who disagree with own views (scale 1 to 4).

In the first model, only the socio-demographic variables age, gender, and education are included in the calculation. While gender does not play a role, age (beta = .071***) and low education (beta = .107***) are weakly correlated with conspiracy mentality. The explained variance is very low with R² = .010.

In the second model, religious affiliation is taken into account. In addition to age (beta = .080*) and low education (beta = .124***), affiliation with Christianity (beta = .148***) and Islam (beta = .145***) is also correlated with conspiracy mentality. That is, compared with the reference category "no religious affiliation," these two affiliations are associated with the conspiracy mentality. Other religious affiliations do not play a role. The explained variance is slightly increased with R² = .044, but still very low.

The third model is interesting because, with the inclusion of both the importance of religion and religious fundamentalism in the model, only religious fundamentalism remains a relevant factor (beta = .221**). This means that religious affiliation alone is not a relevant explanatory factor. Rather, only a religiously fundamentalist attitude is related to a conspiracy mentality. However, the R² of .047 has become only slightly higher compared to the second model.

This changes in the fourth model, which has an R² of .108. Here, the social psychological indicators such as authoritarianism, SDO, narcissism, sadism and interpersonal trust were considered. While authoritarianism and sadism are not significant, SDO (beta = .108***), narcissism (beta = .267***), and interpersonal trust (beta = .109*) are relevant influencing variables. Simultaneously, the effect of religious

fundamentalism diminishes but remains significant (beta = .156***).

In the fifth and final model, indicators were added to test for a relationship between social media use and conspiracy mentality, and between communication with people of differing views and conspiracy mentality. While reliance on social media as a source of news has no influence, the attitude of trusting the posts of friends more than the opinions of experts correlates positively with the belief in conspiracies (beta = .199***). We hypothesized that conversations with people from different backgrounds would be negatively correlated with belief in conspiracies because such conversations could be an important corrective. However, the indicator is in fact correlated in the other direction (beta = .125**). It may be that conversations with people who have different views are not used by people with strong conspiracy beliefs for exchange, but rather to reinforce their preconceptions, and reinforce a sense of collective identity. This interpretation fits with Sunstein and Vermeule's (2009) idea of a "self-sealing" hermeneutic, in which any new information that contradicts a conspiracy theory is used to confirm the conspiracy belief, as the messenger of the new information is seen as part of the plot in the view of the person who believes the conspiracy myth. This fits well with the result that narcissism is also relevant in the last model, although it has become weaker than in the previous model (beta = 190***). Besides narcissism, low interpersonal trust is also significant and even somewhat stronger than in the previous model (beta = .146***). The education factor also proves to be significant in the last model but is weak (.142***). The last model shows an even higher R^2 (.156***). Religious fundamentalism remains significant and with beta = .142*** only slightly weaker than in the fourth model. With an increase of R^2 = 0.48, it shows that information processing—specifically the credibility assigned to personal and expert sources—is an important factor in explaining the conspiracy mentality.

6. Conclusion

Returning to our research questions, first we find that both classic conspiracy mentality and belief in corona conspiracies go hand in hand with a lack of support for democracy, a lack of a sense of political agency, and with racist, anti-Muslim, and right-wing extremist attitudes. Second, we find that fundamentalist religious beliefs—but not other religious indicators once fundamentalism is considered separately—are associated with a tendency towards conspiracy beliefs. Third, we find that style of social media consumption—trusting the posts of friends over the opinions of experts—is linked to conspiracy beliefs, but that reliance on social media as a source of news is not. Fourth, building on socio-psychological research associated with the theory of the authoritarian personality, we have found that authoritarianism, SDO, and narcissism are strongly

associated with conspiracy beliefs. The high rates of conspiracy thinking warn of the dangers of conspiracy thinking for democracy, given the strong associations between conspiracy thinking and scepticism and opposition towards democracy.

The study has some limitations: The chosen authoritarianism short scale was unsatisfactory and therefore in future studies a more differentiated scale should be used. Also, the study had only a limited number of religiosity items: While religious fundamentalism was well covered, other indicators are needed that provide more information about other forms of religiosity. Furthermore, while we accounted for almost 50% of variance in conspiracy beliefs, this leaves more than 50% unexplained, so further theories should be considered to explain conspiracy mentality. In addition, the causal direction is not always clear: It may be that the conspiracy mentality itself has an influence on media behaviour, for example. Nevertheless, the results of the analysis provide important information on the connections between conspiracy mentality, religiosity and political or anti-democratic attitudes in the context of what Decker et al. (2020) call the "authoritarian syndrome."

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

References

Adorno, T. W. (1999). *Studien zum autoritären Charakter* [The authoritarian personality]. Suhrkamp.

Adorno, T. W., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, R. N. (1950). *The authoritarian personality*. Harper and Brothers.

Allport, G., & Ross, J. M. (1967). Personal religious orientation and prejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *5*(4), 432–443.

Barkun, M. (2013). *A culture of conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*. University of California Press.

Cichocka, A., Marchlewska, M., & de Zavala, A. G. (2016). Does self-love or self-hate predict conspiracy beliefs?

Narcissism, self-esteem, and the endorsement of conspiracy theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *7*(2), 157–166.

Cohrs, J. C., & Asbrock, F. (2009). Right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation and prejudice against threatening and competitive ethnic groups. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *39*(2), 270–289.

Craft, S., Ashley, S., & Maksl, A. (2017). News media literacy and conspiracy theory endorsement. *Communication and the Public*, *2*, 388–401.

Decker, O., Kiess, J., & Brähler, E. (Eds.). (2012). *Die Mitte im Umbruch: Rechtsextreme Einstellungen in Deutschland 2012* [The center in transition: Right-wing extremist attitudes in Germany 2012]. Dietz.

Decker, O., Kiess, J., & Brähler, E. (Eds.). (2016). *Die enthemmte Mitte: Autoritäre und rechtsextreme Einstellung in Deutschland* [The disinhibited center: Authoritarian and far-right attitudes in Germany]. Psychosozial.

Decker, O., Schuler, J., & Brähler, E. (2018). Das autoritäre System heute [The authoritarian system today]. In O. Decker & E. Brähler (Eds.), *Flucht ins Autoritäre: Rechtsextreme Dynamiken in der Mitte der Gesellschaft* [Escape into authoritarianism: The dynamics of right-wing extremism within German society] (pp. 117–156). Psychosozial.

Decker, O., Schuler, J., Yendell, A., Schließler, C., & Brähler, E. (2020). Das autoritäre Syndrom: Dimensionen und Verbreitung der Demokratie-Feindlichkeit [The authoritarian syndrome: Dimensions and spread of hostility to democracy]. In O. Decker & E. Brähler (Eds.), *Autoritäre Dynamiken: Alte Ressentiments—Neue Radikalität: Leipziger Autoritarismus Studie 2020* [Authoritarian dynamics: Old resentments—new radicalities: Leipzig authoritarianism study 2020 (pp. 177–210). Psychosozial.

Decker, O., Weißmann, M., Kiess, J., & Brähler, E. (2010). *Die Mitte in der Krise: Rechtsextreme Einstellungen in Deutschland 2010* [The center in crisis: Right-wing extremist attitudes in Germany 2010]. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Forum Berlin.

Doebler, S. (2014). Relationships between religion and intolerance towards Muslims and immigrants in Europe: A multilevel analysis. *Review of Religious Research*, *56*(1), 61–86. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-013-0126-1

Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., Callan, M. J., Dawtry, R. J., & Harvey, A. J. (2016). Someone is pulling the strings: Hypersensitive agency detection and belief in conspiracy theories. *Thinking & Reasoning*, *22*(1), 57–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/13546783.2015.1051586

Douglas, K., Uscinski, J., Sutton, R., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Advances in Political Psychology*, *40*(Suppl. 1). https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568

Dru, V. (2007). Authoritarianism, social dominance orientation and prejudice: Effects of various self-categorization conditions. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *43*(6), 877–883.

Dyrendal, A., Kennair, L. E. O., & Bendixen, M. (2021). Predictors of belief in conspiracy theory: The role of individual differences in schizotypal traits, paranormal beliefs, social dominance orientation, right wing authoritarianism and conspiracy mentality. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *173*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.110645

Enders, A. M., Uscinski, J. E., Seelig, M. I., Klofstad, C. A., Wuchty, S., Funchion, J. R., Murthi, M. N., Premaratne, K., & Stoler, J. (2021). The relationship between social media use and beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation. *Political Behavior*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09734-6

Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland. (2022). *Zwischen Nächstenliebe und Abgrenzung: Eine interdisziplinäre Studie zu Kirche und politischer Kultur* [Between charity and demarcation: An interdisciplinary study of the church and political culture] (1st ed.). Evangelische Verlagsanstalt.

Freeman, D., Loe, B. S., Chadwick, A., Vaccari, C., Waite, F., Rosebrock, L., Jenner, L., Petit, A., Lewandowsky, S., Vanderslott, S., Innocenti, S., Larkin, M., Giubilini, A., Yu, L.-M., McShane, H., Pollard, A. J., & Lambe, S. (2020). Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy in the UK: The Oxford coronavirus explanations, attitudes, and narratives survey (Oceans) II. *Psychological Medicine*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291720005188

Freud, S. (1930). *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* [Civilization and its discontents]. Internationaler Psychoanalytischer.

Griffin, R. (2016). Fascism's modernist revolution: A new paradigm for the study of right-wing dictatorships. *Fascism*, *5*, 105–129.

Griffin, R. (2019). Mussolini predicted a fascist century: How wrong was he? *Fascism*, *8*, 1–8.

Hartman, T. K., Marshall, M., Stocks, T. V. A., McKay, R., Bennett, K., Butter, S., Gibson Miller, J., Hyland, P., Levita, L., Martinez, A. P., Mason, L., McBride, O., Murphy, J., Shevlin, M., Vallières, F., & Bentall, R. P. (2021). Different conspiracy theories have different psychological and social determinants: Comparison of three theories about the origins of the Covid-19 virus in a representative sample of the UK population. *Frontiers in Political Science*, *3*. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2021.642510/full

Hidalgo, O., Hildmann, P. W., & Yendell, A. (Eds.). (2019). *Religion und Rechtspopulismus* [Religion and right-wing populism]. Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung. https://www.hss.de/download/publications/Argu_Kompakt_2019-3_Religion.pdf

Hogg, M. A. (2021). Uncertain self in a changing world: A foundation for radicalisation, populism, and autocratic leadership. *European Review of Social Psy-*

chology, *32*(2), 235–268. https://doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2020.1827628

Horkheimer, M. (Ed.). (1936). *Studien über Autorität und Familie: Forschungsberichte aus dem Institut für Sozialforschung* [Studies on authority and family: Research reports from the institute for social research]. Librairie Félix Alcan.

Huber, S., & Yendell, A. (2019). Does religiosity matter? Explaining right-wing extremist attitudes and the vote for the Alternative for Germany (AfD). *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe*, *15*(2), 63–85. https://doi.org/10.20413/rascee.2019.12.1.63-82

Hughes, S., & Machan, L. (2021). It's a conspiracy: Covid-19 conspiracies link to psychopathy, Machiavellianism and collective narcissism. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *171*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110559

Hunsberger, B. (1995). Religion and prejudice: The role of religious fundamentalism, quest, and right-wing authoritarianism. *Journal of Social Issues*, *51*(2), 113–129.

Imhoff, R., & Decker, O. (2013). Verschwörungsmentalität als Weltbild [Conspiracy mentality as a worldview]. In O. Decker, J. Kiess, & E. Brähler (Eds.), *Rechtsextremismus der Mitte: Eine sozialpsychologische Gegenwartsdiagnose* [Right-wing extremism of the center: A social-psychological diagnosis of the present] (pp. 146–162). Psychosozial.

Imhoff, R., Zimmer, F., Klein, O., António, J. H. C., Babinska, M., Bangerter, A., Bilewicz, M., Blanuša, N., Bovan, K., Bužarovska, R., Cichocka, A., Delouvée, S., Douglas, K. M., Dyrendal, A., Etienne, T., Gjoneska, B., Graf, S., Gualda, E., Hirschberger, G., . . . van Prooijen, J.-W. (2022). Conspiracy mentality and political orientation across 26 countries. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *6*(3), 392–403. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01258-7

Jamieson, K. H., & Albarracín, D. (2020). The relation between media consumption and misinformation at the outset of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in the US. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-012

Kay, C. S. (2021). The targets of all treachery: Delusional ideation, paranoia, and the need for uniqueness as mediators between two forms of narcissism and conspiracy beliefs. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *93*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2021.104128

Körner, J. (2020). Über Verschwörungstheorien und ihre Anhänger [About conspiracy theories and their supporters]. *Forum der Psychoanalyse*, *36*(4), 383–401.

Krouwel, A., Kutiyski, Y., van Prooijen, J.-W., Martinsson, J., & Markstedt, E. (2017). Does extreme political ideology predict conspiracy beliefs, economic evaluations and political trust? Evidence from Sweden. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, *5*(2), 435–462.

Küpper, B., & Zick, A. (2006). Riskanter Glaube. Religiosität und Abwertung [Risky faith. Religiosity and devaluation]. In W. Heitmeyer (Ed.), *Deutsche Zustände* [German conditions] (pp. 179–88). Suhrkamp.

Küpper, B., & Zick, A. (2010). *Religion and prejudice in Europe. New empirical findings*. Alliance Publishing Trust.

Lahrach, Y., & Furnham, A. (2017). Are modern health worries associated with medical conspiracy theories? *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, *99*, 89–94. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychores.2017.06.004

Leckelt, M., Wetzel, E., Gerlach, T. M., Ackerman, R. A., Miller, J. D., Chopik, W. J., Penke, L., Geukes, K., Küfner, A. C. P., Hutteman, R., Richter, D., Renner, K.-H., Allroggen, M., Brecheen, C., Campbell, W. K., Grossmann, I., & Back, M. D. (2018). Validation of the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire Short Scale (NARQ-S) in convenience and representative samples. *Psychological Assessment*, *30*(1), 86–96. https://doi.org/10.1037/pas0000433

Łowicki, P., Marchlewska, M., Molenda, Z., Karakula, A., & Szczepańska, D. (2022). Does religion predict coronavirus conspiracy beliefs? Centrality of religiosity, religious fundamentalism, and Covid-19 conspiracy beliefs. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *187*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.111413

Newman, B. J., Hartman, T. K., & Taber, C. S. (2014). Social dominance and the cultural politics of immigration. *Political Psychology*, *35*(2), 165–186.

Oliver, J. E., & Wood, T. J. (2014). Conspiracy theories and the paranoid style(s) of mass opinion. *American Journal of Political Science*, *58*(4), 952–966. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12084

Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*. Penguin.

Pickel, G., & Yendell, A. (2020). Zersetzungspotenziale einer demokratischen politischen Kultur: Verschwörungstheorien und erodierender gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt? [Decomposition potentials of a democratic political culture: Conspiracy theories and eroding social cohesion?]. In O. Decker & E. Brähler (Eds.), *Autoritäre Dynamiken: Alte Ressentiments—Neue Radikalität Leipziger Autoritarismus Studie 2020* [Authoritarian dynamics: Old resentments—new radicalities: Leipzig authoritarianism study] (pp. 89–118). Psychosozial.

Pickel, G., & Yendell, A. (2022). Religion as a factor of conflict in relation to right-wing extremism, hostility to Muslims, and support for the AfD. In O. Decker, E. Brähler, & J. Kiess (Eds.), *The dynamics of right-wing extremism within German society: Escape into authoritarianism* (pp. 154–172). Routledge.

Pollack, D., Müller, O., & Demmrich, S. (2022). *Religious fundamentalism among Muslims of Turkish origin in Germany*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Pollack, D., Müller, O., Rosta, G., Friedrichs, N., & Yendell, A. (2014). *Grenzen der Toleranz: Wahrnehmung und Akzeptanz religiöser Vielfalt in Europa* [Limits of toler-

ance: Perceptions and acceptance of religious diversity in Europe]. Springer.

Pratto, F., Sidanius, J., Stallworth, L. M., & Malle, B. F. (1994). Social dominance orientation: A personality variable predicting social and political attitudes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *67*(4), 741–763.

Preston, J. L., & Shin, F. (2022). Opposing effects of spirituality and religious fundamentalism on environmental attitudes. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *80*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2022.101772

Razai, M. S., Chaudhry, U. A. R., Doerholt, K., Bauld, L., & Majeed, A. (2021). Covid-19 vaccination hesitancy. *BMJ*, *373*. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n1138

Reich, W. (1933). *Die Massenpsychologie des Faschismus* [The mass psychology of fascism]. Sexpol Verlag.

Robertson, D., Asprem, E., & Dyrendal, A. (2018). Introducing the field: Conspiracy theory in, about, and as religion. In A. Dyrendal (Ed.), *Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion* (pp. 1–18). Brill.

Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (1999). *Social dominance: An intergroup theory of social hierarchy and oppression*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139175043

Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (2001). *Social dominance: An intergroup theory of social hierarchy and oppression*. Cambridge University Press.

Sternisko, A., Cichocka, A., Cislak, A., & van Bavel, J. J. (2021). National narcissism predicts the belief in and the dissemination of conspiracy theories during the Covid-19 pandemic: Evidence from 56 countries. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672211054947

Strube, S. A. (2021). Fundamentalistische Strömungen im katholischen Glaubensspektrum und Autoritarismus als eine Wurzel fundamentalistischer Religiosität [Fundamentalist trends in the catholic faith spectrum and authoritarianism as a root of fundamentalist religiosity]. In J. Wasmuth (Ed.), *Fundamentalismus als ökumenische Herausforderung* [Fundamentalism as an ecumenical challenge] (pp. 93–113). Brill.

Sunstein, C. R., & Vermeule, A. (2009). Conspiracy theories: Causes and cures. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, *17*(2), 202–227. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2008.00325.x

Swami, V. (2012). Social psychological origins of conspiracy theories: The case of the Jewish conspiracy theory in Malaysia. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *3*. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2012.00280/full

Sweney, M. (2021, October 6). Christian TV channel fined by Ofcom over Covid conspiracy theories. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/oct/06/christian-tv-channel-fined-by-ofcom-over-covid-conspiracy-theories

Tonković, M., Dumančić, F., Jelić, M., & Čorkalo Biruški, D. (2021). Who believes in Covid-19 conspiracy theories in Croatia? Prevalence and predictors of conspiracy beliefs. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.643568

Uenal, F. (2016). Disentangling Islamophobia: The differential effects of symbolic, realistic, and terroristic threat perceptions as mediators between social dominance orientation and Islamophobia. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, *4*(1), 66–90.

Uscinski, J. E., DeWitt, D., & Atkinson, M. (2018). A web of conspiracy? Internet and conspiracy theory. In A. Dyrendal, D. G. Robertson, & E. Asprem (Eds.), *Brill handbooks on contemporary religion. Volume 17: Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion* (pp. 106–130). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004382022_007

Uscinski, J. E., & Parent, J. M. (2014). *American conspiracy theories*. Oxford University Press.

van Prooijen, J.-W., Krouwel, A. P. M., & Pollet, T. (2015). Political extremism predicts belief in conspiracy theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *6*(5), 570–578.

Walter, A. S., & Drochon, H. (2022). Conspiracy thinking in Europe and America: A comparative study. *Political Studies*, *70*(2), 483–501. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720972616

Yendell, A. (2021). Der nicht ganz normale Wahnsinn—Über den Irrsinn der Verschwörungsmentalität und ihr Zusammenhang mit Antisemitismus [The not quite normal madness—The insanity of the conspiracy mentality and its connection with anti-semitism]. In P. W. Hildmann (Ed.), Agitation von Rechts—QAnon als antiesemitische Querfront [Agitation of right-wing QAnon as anti-semitic cross front]. Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung.

Yendell, A., Hidalgo, O., & Hillenbrand, C. (2021). *The role of religious actors in the Covid-19 pandemic: A theory-based empirical analysis with policy recommendations for action.* Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen.

Yendell, A., & Huber, S. (2020). The Relevance of the centrality and content of religiosity for explaining Islamophobia in Switzerland. *Religions*, *11*(3). https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11030129

Yendell, A., Sammet, K., Schnabel, A., Breuer, M., & Köhrsen, J. (in press). Editorial: Folgen der Corona-Pandemie für Religion und alternative Weltinterpretationen [Editorial: Consequences of the Corona pandemic for religion and alternative world interpretations]. *Zeitschrift Für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik*.

About the Authors

Alexander Yendell (PhD) is a sociologist at the Social Cohesion Research Institute in Leipzig. He is a spokesperson for the Sociology of Religion section of the German Sociological Association and a board member of the Centre for the Research on Right-Wing Extremism and Democracy at Leipzig University. Yendell currently is head of the research projects Anti-Muslim Racism, Anti-Black Racism, and Antiziganism in the Institutional Action of Public Authorities and Combating and Preventing Racism in Public Authorities and Sports Associations. His research focuses on right-wing extremism, political protest, antisemitism, and Islamophobia. Picture credits are due to Swen Reichhold.

David Herbert (Professor Dr.) researches and teaches on the sociology of migration, media, and cities at the University of Bergen. He is a member of the research group Migration, Integration, and Mobility and Welfare, Inequality, and Life Course. His recent publications include *Social Media and Social Order*, co-edited with Stefan Fisher-Høyrem at the University of Agder (De Gruyter, 2022).

Politics and Governance is an internationally peer-reviewed open access journal that publishes significant and cutting-edge research drawn from all areas of political science.

Its central aim is thereby to enhance the broad scholarly understanding of the range of contemporary political and governing processes, and impact upon of states, political entities, international organisations, communities, societies and individuals, at international, regional, national and local levels.

cogitatio

www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance