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# The hidden appeal and aversion to political conspiracies as revealed in the response dynamics of partisans

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## ABSTRACT

In this study, we used a mouse-tracking paradigm to capture subtle processing dynamics that may occur when people spontaneously endorse or disavow political conspiracies. Rather than exclusively focus on explicit, endpoint responses, we examined the underlying temptation to respond opposite of what is overtly reported. Our results revealed such tendencies in participants' arm movements as they provided "true" or "false" answers to political conspiracy statements relative to baseline statements. These effects were strongly modulated by whether participants identified with the Republican or Democratic parties. To interpret our findings, we argue that political conspiracies tap into hidden biases that may be at odds with each other, such that, even for nonbelievers of a particular conspiracy, there is an implicit appeal for ideologically-aligned conspiracies driven by motivated reasoning biases, and for believers, an implicit aversion to the same conspiracies driven by accuracy and self-presentation needs.

## 1. Introduction

Conspiracies espousing Barack Obama's Kenyan birth or George W. Bush's role in orchestrating the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 are no longer, if they ever were, exclusively the purview of paranoid individuals wearing tin foil hats. These conspiracies, and others like them, do not simply exist on the ideological fringe, but often find their way into mainstream thinking. By one recent estimate, nearly 50% of respondents in a national survey were found to endorse at least one political conspiracy (Oliver & Wood, 2014). Such widespread appeal suggests that conspiratorial thinking cannot be easily dismissed as a symptom of mass pathology; rather, there is good reason to suspect that conspiratorial thinking taps into normal psychological and social functions (Bost & Prunier, 2013; Sunstein, 2014). Moreover, there is nothing inherently irrational or insidious about these beliefs. What constitutes a conspiracy theory is generally defined as beliefs meant to explain events or processes in reference to powerful agents who operate with secret intent (Bale, 2007; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Indeed, based on this definition, conspiracy theories can eventually be shown to be true. But it is also the case that conspiracy theories fall along a continuum of reasonable to "paranoid-style" thinking (Bale, 2007; Hofstadter, 1965), where suspicions of the powerful are more or less justifiable based on

evidence available to the general public and where truth-values can change based on updated evidence. The harm in conspiratorial thinking comes when the intentions ascribed to those in power become more sinister and resistant to counterevidence (Bost & Prunier, 2013).

Political conspiracies, opposed to other types of conspiracies, are distinguished by their focus on the role of powerful government agents in planning, controlling, and maintaining clandestine activities. They also tend to be what Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) refer to as "self-sealing," that is, arising and finding justification within particular ideologically-motivated groups that in turn makes it difficult for outsiders to comprehend or challenge. And though not a necessary condition, many political conspiracies reinforce the political views of a group by derogating the views of a rival party (Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, & Braman, 2011; Miller, Saunders, & Farhart, 2015; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). This self-sealing characteristic helps explain why it is possible to predict which political conspiracies people might believe in based on their ideological or partisan identifications. Rather than haphazard, people tend to endorse conspiracies that are consistent with their ideological worldview (Goertzel, 1994) and hold these beliefs tenaciously, though these types of belief can change under some circumstances (Berinsky, 2017; Huang, 2017; Nyhan, Reifler, & Ubel, 2013).

Although endorsing a political conspiracy is often motivated by

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ideological or social identity factors, the appeal is far from absolute. People generally want to hold accurate beliefs (Kunda, 1990), yet political conspiracies, by their very nature, are based on unsubstantiated and often times dubious evidence (Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Kramer, 1998). Believers may understand this inconsistency at some level and experience an internal conflict. For those who eschew political conspiracies, there is also a conflict. Although nonbelievers have satisfied the desire to hold accurate opinions, they are acting against the pull of strong partisan or ideological worldview forces to do otherwise. Thus, many political conspiracies represent a struggle for believers and nonbelievers alike. Nonbelievers struggle with the partisan or ideological appeal of political conspiracies while believers struggle with accuracy and self-presentation biases.

We present an experimental method that taps into the underlying motivations involved in political conspiratorial thinking. We focus on the subtle temptations, often working at a hidden level, that might be involved in disavowing or endorsing political conspiracies. By using the dynamics of decision-making in computer-mouse trajectories, we show that when participants disavow political conspiracies, subtle properties of their decision movements reveal that the conspiracy – as a function of their party identification – may have momentarily tempted them toward endorsement. Likewise, for (the fewer) partisans who explicitly endorse political conspiracies, we also find competing motivations, such that properties of their movements reveal a momentary reluctance to endorse. In other words, our results suggest that conspiracy shapes cognitive processes to such an extent that their effects can be detected in the overt movements of participants, even if they disavow them.

### 1.1. The attraction and resistance to political conspiratorial thinking

There is a unique complexity to political conspiracy beliefs: at one level they hold a certain appeal as sense-making narratives for political protest, and at another level, there is a repulsion in that they are factually dubious and often associated with negative, exclusionary sentiments. As far as their appeal, there are several contributing cognitive and emotional factors that have come to light in recent years. Such beliefs appear to provide a greater sense of meaning, control, and reduced anxiety, reframing the uncertainty associated with complex and ambiguous events into more familiar and ordered narratives (Furnham, 2013; Miller, 2002; Sunstein, 2014). In the case of political conspiracies, they also provide a means for engaging in protest against perceived abuses of governmental power. This protest allows a greater sense of personal empowerment against larger political-social forces (Bost & Prunier, 2013). For these reasons, conspiratorial thinking taps into a natural protection mechanism against potential threats. However, what constitutes a threat will also vary based on ideological motivations, which tend to be reinforced by, but not necessarily beholden to, one's racial, social, or political group identification (Abalakina Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999; Kramer & Gavrieli, 2005). This helps explain why people appear to be more predisposed to ideologically-aligned political conspiracies when they identify with the political party out of power (Miller et al., 2015; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Uscinski, Parent, & Torres, 2011). The increased powerlessness exaggerates potential threats and distrust in government, and in turn, people are more likely to seek out worldview-confirming responses, ignoring or downplaying evidence that is incongruent or insufficient (Miller et al., 2015). Such behavior is consistent with motivated reasoning biases, whereby partisans critically evaluate and counter-argue ungenerous information and uncritically accept arguments that are congruent with partisan values (Lodge & Taber, 2006).

Conversely, for what makes conspiracy theories unattractive, there are equally compelling but aggravating reasons. Because conspiracy theories are not based on overt activities or natural causes for explanation (Douglas & Sutton, 2008), the accuracy of the beliefs, at least from the criteria of scientific reasoning, often cannot be determined. This can violate people's accuracy biases and need for informational

integrity (Kunda, 1990), and in doing so, reinforce a view that conspiracy theories are for those that can be easily manipulated and who are weak-minded (Kramer, 1998; Shermer, 1997). Indeed, when scientific accuracy is held in high esteem, even justifiable conspiratorial thinking is often looked upon with derision (Bale, 2007). The endorsement of a conspiracy theory can call into question a person's judgment, an invitation to not only have one's particular worldview labeled as incorrect (e.g., you're crazy for thinking that) but also one's identity (e.g., you're a kook). Accuracy biases, therefore, intersect with one's self-presentation biases to avoid being seen as paranoid and illogical by others (Leary, 1995), creating a deterrent to endorsement.

It remains an open question as to how the countervailing forces that make political conspiracies both appealing and unappealing will interact when an opportunity to endorse is encountered. No matter the choice, there is likely to be competing, covert influences from the alternative option. For example, nonbelievers of political conspiracies may be tempted by threat protection needs and motivated reasoning biases. If the political conspiracy statement cast the opposing party in a particularly bad light, the implicit appeal might be quite pronounced, even as the nonbeliever ostensibly finds the statement wildly inaccurate. Similarly, for believers of political conspiracies, they may be tempted by accuracy and self-presentation biases. Even if enthusiastically endorsed, an underlying awareness that the conspiracy is inconsistent with other knowledge and values will compete with the explicit response.

### 1.2. Predictions based on political identification and power differentials

We expect that the strength of the above competition effects to be modulated by party identification (Republican and Democrat). Political parties are social identities (Huddy, Mason, & Aarøe, 2015; Nicholson, 2012) that make up polarized categories (Heit & Nicholson, 2010, 2016), and as has been previously described, act to modulate the cognitive and emotional factors that contribute to the appeal of political conspiracy theories. Thus, we can make the prediction that the greatest implicit competition will be experienced by partisans encountering political conspiracies concordant with their party. This prediction also implies that conspiratorial ideation is not a general trait, but is selectively experienced (Swami, 2012; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010). This selectively leads to a second prediction that there will be comparatively less competition for partisans when deciding on how to endorse other types of conspiracies, either those originating from the opposing party or those that are non-partisan in nature.

Moreover, based on previous research showing that conspiratorial ideation strongly depends on what is occurring in a larger political context (Oliver & Wood, 2014; Uscinski et al., 2011), the relative differences in political power between parties at the time responses are given must be taken into consideration. Since party identifiers are more likely to feel threatened and are more susceptible to motivated reasoning biases when their party is out of power (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Miller et al., 2015), we predict greater response competition for these partisans. For the current study, data were collected during a timespan in which a Democrat, Barack Obama, held the presidency and during a time when many Democrat-aligned causes were being enacted (e.g., the passage of the Affordable Care Act, mainstreaming of marriage equality). Thus, for conspiracy nonbelievers, Republicans were predicted to show greater competition toward an endorsement response compared to Democrats; and for conspiracy believers, Republicans were predicted to show less competition toward a disavowal response compared to Democrats.

Lastly, we take a novel experimental approach to capture the time course of competition with explicit responses. Presumably, understanding the strength of underlying biases is to capture its onset, amount, and persistence over time – the temporal dynamics. These dynamics tend to be obscured when collapsed to a single item (i.e., reaction time), as is typically done with other methods. We address this

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