



# The winner knew it all? Conspiracy beliefs and hindsight perspective after the 2016 US general election

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## ABSTRACT

The political campaigns preceding the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election received worldwide media attention that many people followed with great interest. Before the election, there were rumors of how the outcome of this election might be rigged, there was additional suspicion that individuals who were not eligible to vote were seen at voting booths, and other assumptions that might be connected to a conspiracy mentality. In this contribution, we report the results of one case study ( $N = 173$ ) regarding inter-individual differences in conspiracy mentality, uncertainty, and hindsight perceptions of inevitability and foreseeability between voters of the major parties' candidates, namely, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. In line with previous research, we demonstrate that higher levels of conspiracy mentality can predict voting behavior for the more conservative party's candidate. Furthermore, and for the first time, we show that the hindsight perceptions of foreseeability of the election outcome are related to conspiracy mentality.

## 1. Introduction

The 2016 U.S. presidential election was a topic of huge interest with massive media coverage across the globe and particularly in the Western world. Many rumors and conspiracy theories circulated about the candidates and the election itself (Uscinski, 2016). Some people claimed that the Democratic Party hired Donald Trump to destroy any chance of a Republican victory (e.g., Smith, 2016). Others asserted that Hillary Clinton and her husband killed Vince Foster, a former White House counsel who committed suicide (Borchers, 2016). Thus, populism and conspiracy theories played an important role in the media coverage of the whole election process in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. But what is their potential role regarding the voting behavior of U.S. citizens?

In the present paper, we examine the role of conspiracy beliefs in voting behavior. While previous research has already identified higher scores on *right-wing authoritarianism* and *social dominance orientation* in U.S. voters to predict voting intentions (Choma & Hanoch, 2017), our study is the first to address the role of *conspiracy beliefs* in self-reported voting behavior in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Previous studies indicate a high correlation between ideology (*liberal-conservative*) and party affiliation (*Democratic-Republican*; e.g., Napier & Jost, 2008). Based on these results and links between conservatism and endorsement of conspiracy theories (Blanuša, 2009; Van Prooijen, Krouwel, &

Pollet, 2015), we expected to find higher levels of conspiracy mentality to predict voting of the Republican (vs. Democratic) candidate.

## 2. Conspiracy theories and political attitudes

Conspiracy theories are highly prevalent across society and time (Miller, Saunders, & Farhart, 2015). According to a poll from 2013, 28% of the U.S. American population believe that a power elite wants to rule the world through a New World Order, 37% thought that global warming is a hoax (Public Policy Polling, 2013), and the majority of U.S. Americans (55%) believe in at least one conspiracy theory (Oliver & Wood, 2014). They are also prevalent in other societies: Following a poll from 2008, 43% of Egyptians believe that Israel is responsible for the 9/11 attacks (worldpublicopinion.org, 2008) and 18% of the German population think that airplanes spray chemicals in order to influence the climate (Schultz, 2017).

What makes a belief in a certain conspiracy theory even more important is that it rarely stands for itself. People who believe in one conspiracy theory are more likely to believe in others as well, even if these theories appear to contradict each other (Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012). Past research has shown that the strongest predictor for the belief in specific conspiracy theories is the belief in unrelated ones (Swami & Coles, 2010). Therefore, the belief in conspiracy theories can be understood as a *monological belief system* (Goertzel, 1994). The inter-

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individual and stable tendency to which an individual believes in conspiracy theories has been framed as *conspiracy mentality* (e.g., Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah, & Imhoff, 2013), a generalized distrust against people or societal groups that are perceived as powerful (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014).

As indicated above, conspiracy theories are often part of politics and elections and influenced political debates. Past research has shown that conspiracy theories have the power to change attitudes and opinions – from the intention to vote to the engagement in political actions (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Jolley & Douglas, 2014). Stronger conspiracy beliefs have been linked to stronger political cynicism, distrust, and anomia (Bruder et al., 2013; Lamberty & Imhoff, 2017; Swami et al., 2011).

We are not aware of any study examining the effect of endorsing conspiracy beliefs on individuals' voting behavior. There is only indirect evidence: Conservatives are more prone to endorse conspiracy theories compared to liberals (e.g., 34% of Republicans believe in the New World Order threat compared to 15% of Democrats, Public Policy Polling, 2013) – especially when these theories are consistent with individuals' ideologies – as a recent study suggests for the U.S. American context (Miller et al., 2015). Other studies showed that the perception that the economic and political systems are rigged – as one proxy of the conspiracy mentality mindset – is linked to self-reported voting behavior for Trump (Democracy Fund Voter Study Group, 2017).

In addition to this indirect evidence, there are theoretical reasons to hypothesize stronger beliefs in conspiracy theories to predict voting for the conservative candidate in an election. Additionally, stronger feelings of uncertainty can be found among conservatives (Jost, et al., 2003), which have been identified as belonging to the key drivers of conspiracy beliefs (Van Prooijen & Acker, 2015; Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2012; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Conspiracy theories are a way of dealing with a world full of uncertainty, an attempt to make sense of the world (Krekó, 2015). Consequently, it is reasonable to hypothesize that higher levels of conspiracy mentality can predict voting of the conservative party's candidate.

Political conservatism has also been linked to other variables like identification with the own group. Regarding political attitudes towards individuals' identification with their nationality, there is the psychological distinction between attachment and glorification (Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006). Comparable to patriotism, attachment can be described as identification with the essence of a nation – without the devaluation of other nations. Glorification – in contrast to attachment – has a competitive component and refers to the belief of the own group's superiority and comes along with derogation of other groups. This process leads to more critical evaluations of outgroups and their actions (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). We thus also assessed and tested the extent to which conspiracy mentality predicted voting behavior beyond peoples' glorification of and attachment to their own nation.

### 3. Knew it all along? The cognitive roots of conspiracy beliefs

Following Shermer (2010, 2011), the belief in conspiracy theories is based on three cognitive biases: Illusory correlations, confirmation bias, and hindsight bias. Past research confirmed a link between conspiracy beliefs and illusory correlations (Van Prooijen, Douglas, & De Inocencio, 2016) as well as the confirmation bias (Leman, & Cinnirella, 2007). To the best of our knowledge, however, the third postulated cognitive foundation of conspiracy theories, the hindsight bias, has not been the subject of empirical research yet (see Collins, 2012; Douglas & Sutton, 2008).

Hindsight bias is the tendency to overestimate after the fact what was known in foresight (e.g., Hawkins & Hastie, 1990). Researchers have begun to distinguish between three different components of hindsight bias: Perceptions of inevitability (e.g., “It had to happen”), perceptions of foreseeability (e.g., “I knew it would happen”), and memory distortions (recollecting one's prediction as being closer to the actual outcome than it had been; Blank, Nestler, von Collani, & Fischer,

2008). In the present study, we focus on hindsight perceptions of inevitability and foreseeability in the present study. Memory distortions would have required a longitudinal design.

Hindsight bias in terms of increased impressions of inevitability results from peoples' motivation to understand the world and to be able to explain what happens in the world (e.g., Nestler, Blank, & von Collani, 2008). Once an event occurred, however, the search for an explanation is biased by knowledge of that event: people selectively focus on event-consistent antecedents while ignoring or underweighting event-inconsistent antecedents (e.g., Fischhoff, 1975). According to Shermer (2011), the very same process may contribute to the emergence of conspiracy beliefs. As anecdotal evidence, Shermer (2011) points to the belief that President Roosevelt knew about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor long before it occurred. Consider the information that U.S. intelligence intercepted a message to a Japanese agent in Hawaii to monitor warship movements around Pearl Harbor in October 1941. Knowing that Japan eventually attacked Pearl Harbor and ignoring the many more other intercepted messages, which did not address Pearl Harbor (e.g., fifty-eight messages involving ship movements hinting towards an attack on the Philippines) strongly suggests that President Roosevelt knew about the attack beforehand. Thus, a retrospective focus on and overweighting of event-consistent information may foster beliefs in conspiracy theories. Therefore, we expect heightened hindsight perceptions of inevitability to be positively linked to conspiracy beliefs.

Claiming foreseeability in retrospect has its boundaries because it does not occur for undesirable self-relevant events (e.g., failures; Mark & Mellor, 1991; Pezzo & Beckstead, 2008). Of course, negative events of a group one is favoring (e.g., sports team, political party) are self-relevant as well (Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992). Accordingly, Blank and Nestler (2006) found that participants, who favored the Leipzig candidacy for the Summer Olympics 2012, perceived its failure as *unforeseeable* in retrospect (reversed hindsight bias). Perceptions of inevitability, in contrast, were increased with the benefit of hindsight in these authors' study.

#### 3.1. The present study

Based on previous research, we hypothesized that stronger conspiracy mentality ( $H_1$ ) and higher degrees of uncertainty ( $H_2$ ) are significant predictors of voting behavior for the conservative (vs. liberal) party's candidate. We also tested whether glorification and attachment were related to voting behavior. We argue that conspiracy mentality should be a significant predictor of voting behavior – even when controlled for attachment and glorification ( $H_3$ ). In addition, we hypothesized that hindsight perceptions of inevitability are positively related to beliefs in conspiracy theories ( $H_4$ ). For our exploratory analyses regarding hindsight perceptions that relate to participants' evaluations after the election, we regard voting behavior as potential predictor of differences in individuals' hindsight perspectives.

### 4. Method

#### 4.1. Availability of the material

All materials of the study as well as the data including the syntax used and additional material are online at the Open Science Framework (osf; [https://osf.io/ywp7c/?view\\_only=a580265059204d8599ed5d43942843ec](https://osf.io/ywp7c/?view_only=a580265059204d8599ed5d43942843ec)).

#### 4.2. Participants

One hundred and ninety-four respondents voluntarily participated in an online survey on the 2016 US election. The link to the study was distributed via social network sites and through sites listing online studies (e.g., John H. Krantz's page *Psychological Research on the Net*).

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