

What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions

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Abstract

Why do people believe in conspiracy theories? This study breaks from much previous research and attempts to explain conspiratorial beliefs with traditional theories of opinion formation. Specifically, we focus on the reception of informational cues given a set of predispositions (political and conspiratorial). We begin with observational survey data to show that there exists a unique predisposition that drives individuals to one degree or another to believe in conspiracy theories. This predisposition appears orthogonal to partisanship and predicts political behaviors including voter participation. Then a national survey experiment is used to test the effect of an informational cue on belief in a conspiracy theory while accounting for both conspiratorial predispositions and partisanship. Our results provide an explanation for individual-level heterogeneity in the holding of conspiratorial beliefs and also indicate the conditions under which information can drive conspiratorial beliefs.

Keywords

conspiracy theory, partisanship, media bias, belief systems

Recent polls show that conspiratorial beliefs are not only common, but that most Americans believe in one conspiracy theory or another (Miller, Saunders, and Farhart, 2015; Oliver and Wood 2014a). For example, about 25 percent believe in some form of the “Birther” theory—that President Obama is hiding his true place of origin—and an equal number believe the “Truther” theory—that President Bush orchestrated or knew in advance about the 9/11 attacks (Cassino and Jenkins 2013). These beliefs appear to be sincere (Berinsky 2013). Why do so many people believe in conspiracy theories?

To answer this question, researchers across fields have expended much effort to understand who is most likely to believe in which conspiracy theories (e.g., Lewandowsky, Oberauer, and Gignac 2013), how informational cues can affect belief in conspiracy theories (e.g., Einstein and Glick 2015), and why conspiratorial beliefs are so hard to reverse (Nyhan, Reifler, and Ubel 2013). Although past studies have provided needed insight, they fail to generate a comprehensive theoretical understanding for why *some* people will subscribe to a particular conspiracy theory while others will not. For example, under what conditions does information suggesting a conspiracy lead people to believe in that conspiracy theory? What role do predispositions play in the acceptance of conspiracy theories? With all of the discussion of conspiracy theories in the news media (Nyhan 2013) and advocacy for conspiracy theories

on the Internet (Kata 2010), it is imperative to understand the conditions under which people will be affected by information and believe in a conspiracy theory.

We suggest drawing on traditional theories of public opinion which incorporate predispositions into explanations of information reception (Berinsky 2007; Zaller 1992). In writing about information, predispositions, and opinion, Zaller (1992, 6) argues, “Every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition: information to form a mental picture of the given issue, and predisposition to motivate some conclusion about it.” He goes on to state (Zaller 1992, 22) that “[Citizens] possess a variety of interests, values, and experiences that may greatly affect their willingness to accept—or alternatively, their resolve to resist—persuasive influence.” In this paper, we test the idea that belief in conspiracy theories depends not only on exposure to information suggesting a conspiracy but also on two other factors: (1) the political cues associated with that information vis-à-vis each individual’s political

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predispositions and (2) each individual's predisposition toward seeing the world in conspiratorial terms.

Prior works have alluded to portions of such a framework (Berinsky 2012, 8; Goertzel 1994, 13; Lewandowsky, Miller, Saunders, and Farhart, 2015 Oberauer, and Gignac 2013; Oliver and Wood 2014a, 964; Uscinski and Parent 2014, 17–20, 75; M. J. Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2012, 771); however, it has yet to be more fully elucidated and tested. For example, a series of recent works use experiments to ascertain the effect that exposure to information suggesting a conspiracy has on belief in that conspiracy theory (e.g., Einstein and Glick 2013). Some of these works account for political predispositions, that is, partisanship (Einstein and Glick 2015), *or* for predispositions toward seeing conspiracy theories (Nyhan et al. forthcoming); however, many do not, and instead they look only at average effects across study participants (e.g., Bost and Prunier 2013; Jolley and Douglas 2014b; Mulligan and Habel 2013). We are unaware of any extant studies that experimentally test the effect of information on conspiratorial beliefs accounting for *both* political and conspiratorial predispositions.

Conspiracy theories have long been of interest to scholars, particularly in the American setting. Historians, most prominently Richard Hofstadter (1964) and other scholars that followed (Davis 1972; Rogin 1988; G. S. Wood 1982), show how conspiracy beliefs significantly affected particular episodes in history. In the 1990s, both cultural and historical accounts built upon these earlier historical treatments (Bratich 2004; Knight 2002; Melley 2000; Pipes 1997; Robins and Post 1997; Olmsted 2008). In the post-9/11 era, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, and many others have invested greatly into the topic (Moore 2015), bringing with them a greater use of survey and experimental methods to the research agenda (e.g., M. J. Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2012).

It is important to understand why people believe in conspiracy theories because such beliefs may help explain negative political, social, and public health outcomes. Researchers have argued that conspiratorial beliefs lead to risky sexual activities (Bogart and Thorburn 2005), decreased rates of child vaccination (Jolley and Douglas 2014a), and poor medical decisions (Oliver and Wood 2014b). Socially, conspiratorial beliefs make people less willing to address global warming (Jolley and Douglas 2014b), more accepting of violent behavior (Uscinski and Parent 2014), and more likely to support the use of conspiracy to achieve personal ends (Douglas and Sutton 2011). Researchers have also provided evidence suggesting that conspiratorial beliefs lead to lower levels of trust in government (Einstein and Glick 2015), lower levels of political efficacy (Jolley and Douglas 2014b), negative attitudes toward civil liberties and human rights (Swami et al. 2012), and lower levels of voting, donating, and volunteering (Uscinski and Parent 2014).

We begin with definitions and by reviewing the literature on how information, political ideology, and conspiratorial predispositions drive conspiratorial beliefs. Then we discuss our data, including a parsimonious method for capturing underlying conspiratorial predispositions. Then we test the role of information, political ideology, and predispositions toward conspiratorial thought in a nationally representative randomized survey experiment. The experiment demonstrates the conditions under which people will respond to information purporting a conspiracy theory; the results suggest that traditional models of opinion formation (e.g., Zaller 1992) can be used to better understand conspiratorial beliefs.

Definitions

We define *conspiracy* as a secret arrangement between a small group of actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hide vital secrets, or illicitly cause widespread harm. We define *conspiracy theory* as a proposed explanation of events that cites as a main causal factor a small group of persons (the conspirators) acting in secret for their own benefit, against the common good (Keeley 1999). While *conspiracy* refers to an act, *conspiracy theory* refers to an accusatory perception (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 33).

We define *conspiratorial belief* as an individual's belief in a specific conspiracy theory and *conspiratorial predispositions* or *thinking* as an individual's underlying propensity to view the world in conspiratorial terms. All else equal, individuals with strong conspiratorial predispositions are more likely to believe in specific conspiracy theories (Imhoff and Bruder 2014).

The term *conspiracy theory* and its derivatives are often used as pejoratives, implying that devotees are not reasonable interlocutors (Husting and Orr 2007). However, we use these terms because they are common and intend no offense. Scholars often stake a claim on the veracity of the conspiratorial beliefs they study, labeling them “mistruths,” “myths,” or “false beliefs” (e.g., Nyhan 2010). Because we are interested in how underlying predispositions drive beliefs, issues of veracity are peripheral to our analysis (e.g., Kahan 2014), and we stake no claim on whether any conspiracy theory is true.

The study of conspiracy theories is multidisciplinary; psychologists, philosophers, historians, sociologists, and political scientists have suggested many causes for conspiratorial beliefs (for a review, see Uscinski and Parent 2014, 9–16). Perhaps because of their sometimes outlandish nature and seemingly bizarre claims, researchers have chosen to treat conspiratorial beliefs as a unique species of opinion. In opposition to such approaches, we argue that traditional models of opinion that account for predispositions and elite–mass linkages (Berinsky 2009; Zaller 1992) could best explain the major contours of

conspiracy beliefs. We therefore suggest that conspiracy beliefs are just one of many “domains” that “can be treated as simply another context in which citizens formulate responses on the basis of the ideas that have reached them and been found acceptable” (Zaller 1992, 2). The following sections discuss how information, political ideology, and conspiratorial predispositions drive conspiratorial beliefs.

Information

In recent years, scholars have attempted to reverse individuals’ conspiratorial views with disconfirming evidence; however, these attempts are often unsuccessful (Berinsky 2015; Lewandowsky et al. 2012; McHoskey 1995; Nyhan 2010, 2013; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Nyhan, Reifler, and Ubel 2013). Noting the “stickiness” of conspiratorial beliefs, other scholars have sought to specify the mechanisms that make it so difficult to dissuade believers (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009).

A contrasting line of research attempts to understand how information induces conspiratorial beliefs. Such studies show that popular movies (Butler, Koopman, and Zimbardo 1995; Mulligan and Habel 2013), documentary films (Banas and Miller 2013), news reports, and other forms of information (Bost and Prunier 2013; Raab et al. 2013; Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel 2007; Swami et al. 2013) can drive audiences to adopt conspiratorial beliefs. However, when researchers account for respondents’ predispositions, they find a wide variance in effect sizes across groups. Einstein and Glick (2015) find that Republicans were far more likely than Democrats to respond to information suggesting that President Obama’s administration faked labor statistics to gain reelection. Nyhan et al. (forthcoming) show that those with an above average predisposition toward conspiratorial thinking were more likely than those with below average levels of conspiratorial thinking to see a conspiracy when presented with any information surrounding the downed TWA Flight 800. Thus, previous findings suggest that informational cues can drive conspiratorial beliefs, but that predispositions determine how likely those cues are to be accepted the same way the acceptance of informational cues about other political topics is conditional on predispositions (Zaller 1992). Two predispositions—partisan predispositions and conspiratorial predispositions—that prior literature points to as important to the acceptance of information suggesting a conspiracy are explored.

Partisan Predispositions

Partisan attachment has long been known to drive opinions on specific issues (Campbell et al. 1960; see more recently Hajnal and Lee 2011), and the extant literature

suggests that the impact of partisanship is no different with conspiratorial beliefs. We suspect that partisan identification drives conspiracy beliefs because of how it affects one’s personal identity and fosters a sense of group belonging (i.e., Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004). Many researchers have found that belief in specific conspiracy theories is tied to partisanship (Barreto et al. 2012; Berinsky 2015; Furnham 2013; Hofstadter 1964; Lipset and Raab 1978; Miller, Saunders, and Farhart, 2015; Pasek et al. 2014; Tesler and Sears 2010). These studies show that partisan attachments can explain (1) the propensity of partisans to accuse opposing partisans of conspiracy and (2) the propensity of partisans to resist theories positing conspiratorial behavior by co-partisans. For example, those believing President Obama is a foreign-born usurper are far more likely to be Republican than Democrat, and those believing Bush was complicit in the 9/11 attacks are more likely to be Democrat than Republican (Cassino and Jenkins 2013). While most previous studies examine conspiracy theories that appeal mainly to members of one political party or the other, McClosky and Chong (1985) examine the underlying propensity toward seeing conspiracies and find that Republicans and Democrats are equally disposed toward conspiratorial thinking (a point we will return to later). In this study, we operationalize partisanship using a standard 7-point measure.

Partisanship therefore provides leverage to explain which set of partisans is more likely to believe in particular conspiracy theories when those conspiracy theories contain a partisan element; however, a more nuanced explanation is needed. To begin, not all partisans subscribe equally to conspiratorial theories. For example, Birthers tend to be Republicans, but not all Republicans are Birthers. And, Truthers tend to be Democrats, but not all Democrats are Truthers (Cassino and Jenkins 2013). In addition, previous surveys suggest that independents subscribe to conspiratorial thinking as well (Cassino and Jenkins 2013) and partisan identification would not explain the propensity of independents to believe in conspiracy theories.

Conspiratorial Predispositions

Over the last few decades, many scholars have suggested that beliefs in specific conspiracy theories are the product of an underlying predisposition toward viewing events and circumstances as the product of conspiracy (e.g., M. J. Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2012, 771), and many recent studies have attempted to measure this predisposition directly (Brotherton, French, and Pickering 2013; Bruder et al. 2013; Dagnall et al. 2015; Imhoff and Bruder 2014; Lewandowsky, Gignac, and Oberauer 2013; Swami et al. 2011). Collectively, these studies suggest

that this predisposition (1) occupies its own dimension of opinion and (2) is consequential, predicting the amount of conspiratorial beliefs as well as social and political behaviors. This disposition can be thought of as driving people to be biased against powerful actors in a way that leads them to accuse those actors of collusion. Just as individuals are conceived of as falling along a left–right ideological continuum, individuals are distributed along a continuum in regard to the strength of their predispositions toward conspiratorial thinking. The varying strengths of conspiratorial predispositions explain why some people resist conspiracy theories and believe in few, while other people accept conspiratorial logic and believe in many. All else equal, the more predisposed people are toward conspiratorial thinking, the more likely they will be to accept a specific conspiracy theory when given an informational cue that makes conspiratorial logic explicit.

A unique predisposition toward seeing conspiracies would explain why many people believe in conspiracy theories that logically contradict each other, that is, believing both that Osama Bin Laden was dead before the Navy Seals raided his compound and that Osama Bin Laden is still alive (M. J. Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2012). It would also explain why authoritative evidence has a limited effect in reversing conspiratorial beliefs (Nyhan, Reifler, and Ubel 2013). As conspiratorial beliefs are often undergirded by strong conspiratorial predispositions, logic and information have little impact on them.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to determine the factors that drive the predisposition toward conspiratorial thinking. But, we suggest that political socialization and psychological traits are likely the most important influences. It is worth noting that elite political thought in the United States is generally skeptical of conspiratorial logic (Bratich 2004), and there appears to exist a mainstream norm of anticconspiracy thinking. Most people are socialized into the political system and begin to trust political institutions at an early age (e.g., Sears 1990). This being the case, mainstream American citizens should be generally resistant to conspiratorial logic. Nevertheless, many citizens—to one degree or another—are not socialized to mainstream political values (e.g., Avery 2006) and others have psychological traits that overwhelm mainstream socializing influences (Dagnall et al. 2015, Miller, Saunders, and Farhart, 2015).

Predictions

We posit a set of general expectations, drawing on the work of Zaller (1992), who suggests that information is interpreted in relation to predispositions. But instead of examining how one predisposition influences the reception of information, this current study examines how two predispositions (partisan predispositions and conspiratorial

predispositions) influence the reception of an informational cue.

First, we expect that partisans will be more likely to perceive a conspiracy when opposing partisans and their supposed coalitions are the alleged conspirators, as opposed to when co-partisans are the alleged villains. Second, we expect that within partisan groups, the perception of a conspiracy will increase with heightening predispositions toward conspiratorial thinking. Third, and in regard to expressly partisan conspiracy theories, the relationship specified in our second expectation should be strongest among the party accused of conspiring and Independents because these two groups do not have partisanship pushing them to be a priori suspicious of the accused. In other words, conspiratorial predispositions should have the least impact on individuals whose partisanship is already driving them to believe in a conspiracy theory. Fourth and finally, we expect that political independents—those lacking partisan motives for perceiving or resisting a partisan conspiracy—should be most responsive to informational cues suggesting the existence of a conspiracy.

Data and Method

Participants

A total of 573 men and 657 women participated in the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES; Ansolabehere 2013; Mann 2012). This survey was conducted online by YouGov and contained a pre- and post-election wave.¹

Preelection Study Measure of Conspiratorial Predispositions

Although scholars have for decades suggested the existence of an underlying conspiratorial disposition, there is not yet consensus on how to measure it. Some scholars, for example, develop summary measures of responses to questions tapping belief in specific conspiracy theories (i.e., Goertzel 1994; Lewandowsky, Gignac, and Oberauer 2013; Oliver and Wood 2014b). Although the number of conspiracy theories a person believes in is likely positively correlated with that person's level of underlying conspiratorial predispositions, the specifics of the conspiracy theories asked about may frustrate the resultant measure. For example, respondents may not be familiar with the specific conspiracy theories, or the conspiracy theories asked about might invoke partisanship or other attitudes. Consider a researcher attempting to determine the strength of respondents' conspiratorial predispositions by asking about conspiracy theories involving black helicopters, Barack Obama, and communists. The likely

result is that Republican respondents would show strong conspiratorial predispositions whereas Democrats would look sound and savvy. To avoid the sorts of idiosyncrasies that could be induced by using questions about specific conspiracy theories, it is advantageous to tap underlying conspiratorial predispositions with survey instruments that do not name specific villains or plots and do not trigger partisanship or other attitudes.

With this in mind, four statements designed to tap underlying conspiratorial predispositions adapted from McClosky and Chong's (1985) work were provided to respondents in the preelection CCES survey. Agreement with each statement was measured on a 5-point scale running from 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*. We created a summary measure of each respondent's disposition toward conspiratorial thinking using a factor analysis to extract a single dimension based on agreement with the following statements (factor loadings in parentheses): "Much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places" (.85), "Even though we live in a democracy, a few people will always run things anyway" (.77), "The people who really 'run' the country, are not known to the voters" (.83), and "Big events like wars, the current recession, and the outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people who are working in secret against the rest of us" (.73). This factor was the only one with an eigenvalue of 1 or higher (2.55), and explained 64 percent of the variance in the four survey questions. The factor scores were rescaled to run between 0 and 1 ($\bar{x} = .55$, $SE = 0.01$), where higher values indicate a stronger predisposition toward conspiratorial thought.

We assess the validity of our summary conspiratorial predispositions measure by comparing it with responses to a series of other questions. If the measure predicts attitudes and behaviors consistent with previous literature, then we will determine that the measure is appropriate for our purposes. To begin, the preelection survey asked respondents how much they agreed with the statement, "The government can be trusted most of the time." Responses were measured on a 5-point scale running from 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*. Based on previous literature (e.g., Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999), we expect those higher on the conspiratorial predispositions measure to show less trust in government. And, this is precisely what we find: individuals with a higher score on the conspiratorial thought measure were less likely to trust the government ($r = .25$, $p < .001$).

We then asked respondents to select from a list which groups they felt "work in secret against the rest of us." The list included "corporations and the rich," "Republicans or other conservative groups," "Democrats or other liberal groups," "communists and socialists," "the government," "foreign countries," "international organizations (e.g., United Nations, International Monetary Fund,

World Bank)," "the Freemasons, or some other fraternal group," "labor unions," and "some other group." In accord with previous findings (e.g., Bruder et al. 2013), we expect that if our measure of conspiratorial predispositions is valid, those higher on the conspiratorial predispositions measure will identify more groups. A bivariate negative binomial regression analysis indicates exactly this: our conspiratorial thought measure is positively correlated with the number of groups selected ($b = 1.18$, $p < .001$). Substantively, an increase in the predisposition measure from its minimum to its maximum is correlated with an increase of more than three groups (Figure 1).

Finally, just as those with strong predispositions toward thinking conspiratorially are inclined to distrust government and believe more groups are conspiring against them, the previous literature has found that individuals with stronger conspiratorial beliefs are also less likely to be politically active (e.g., Jolley and Douglas 2014b). Our data show this as well: the postelection study shows that respondents who did not turn out to vote in the 2012 general election scored significantly higher ($t_{911} = 2.36$, $p = .02$) on the presurvey conspiratorial predisposition measure ($\bar{x} = .61$, $SE = 0.03$) than those who did turn out to vote ($\bar{x} = .54$, $SE = 0.01$). Likewise, data from the postelection study show that respondents who did not donate money to a "candidate, campaign, or political organization" during the 2012 election cycle scored significantly higher ($t_{963} = 4.41$, $p < .001$) on the conspiratorial thought measure ($\bar{x} = .57$, $SE = 0.01$) than those who did make a donation ($\bar{x} = .50$, $SE = 0.01$). Taken together, these findings suggest that our measure is a valid measure of conspiratorial predispositions.

Preelection Study Measure of Partisanship

In the preelection survey respondents also reported their partisanship. Respondents first indicated whether they were a Democrat, Republican, or Independent. Self-identified Democrats and Republicans were then asked whether their identification is "strong" or "not very strong." Self-identified Independents were asked whether they think of themselves as "closer to the Democratic or the Republican Party" (i.e., partisan "leaners"). The resulting partisanship scale is 7 points, running from 1 = *Strong Democrat* to 7 = *Strong Republican*.

In line with McClosky and Chong (1985) and as shown in Figure 2, our measure of conspiratorial thought is not correlated with partisanship ($r = -.02$, $p = .51$). Both Republicans and Democrats appear equally predisposed toward conspiratorial thinking. This suggests that the predisposition to see conspiracies is orthogonal to partisan affiliation. Also in line with McClosky and Chong, Republicans and Democrats are equally likely to accept conspiracy theories that denigrate their political

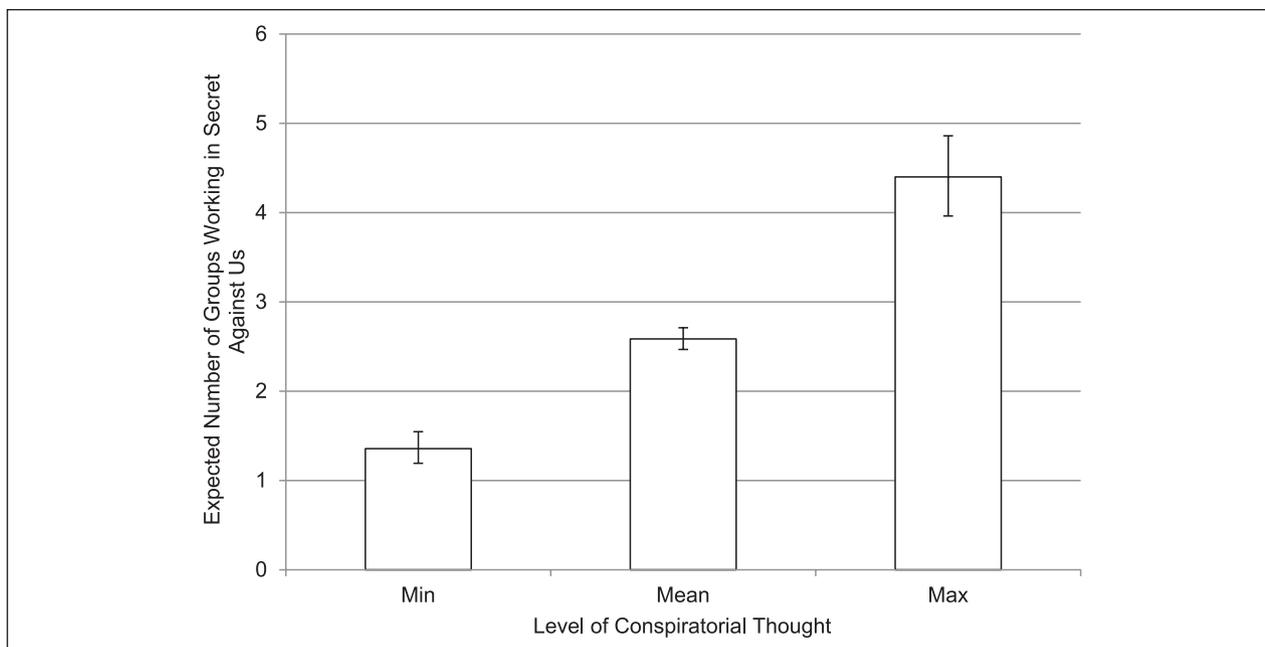


Figure 1. Estimated relationship between conspiratorial thought and perception that groups are working in secret against the rest of us ($\pm 95\%$ confidence interval).

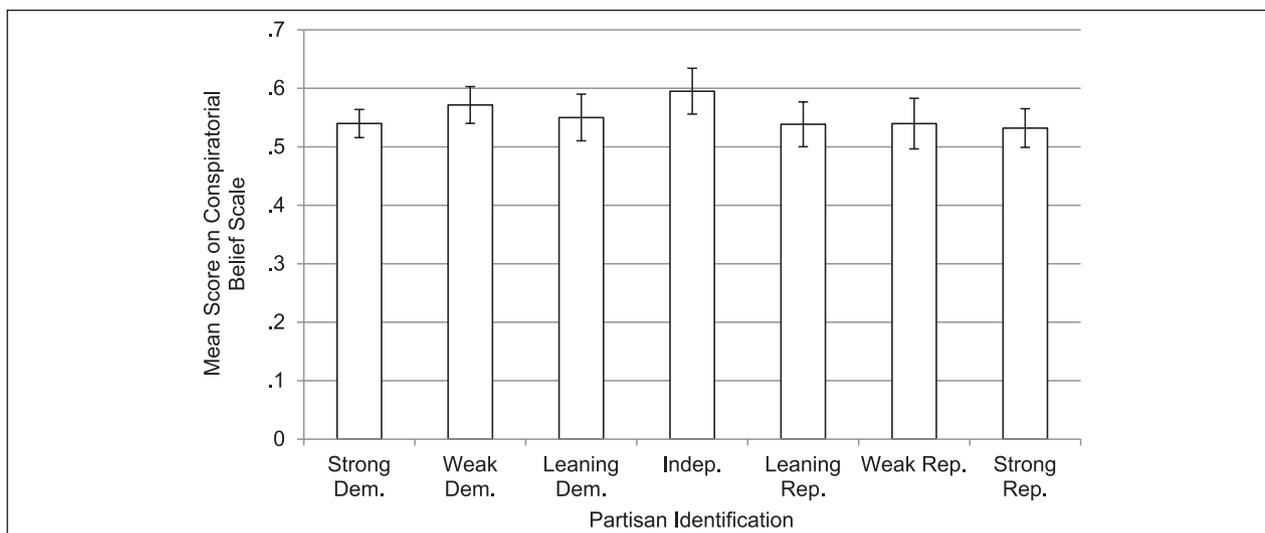


Figure 2. Mean score on conspiratorial thought scale by partisan identification ($\pm 95\%$ confidence interval).

rivals. For example, Republicans are more likely to believe that “Democrats and other liberal groups” are working in secret against the rest of us, and Democrats are more likely to believe that “Republicans and other conservative groups” are engaged in the same (Figure 3). The symmetry between the left- and right-hand halves of Figure 3 suggests that partisanship drives the direction of conspiratorial beliefs, but not the amount or levels of those beliefs.

Postelection Conspiracy Cue Survey Experiment

To examine how conspiratorial and partisan predispositions affect the reception of an informational cue suggesting the existence of a conspiracy, we embedded a survey experiment in the postelection CCES questionnaire. Respondents were assigned randomly to either receive or not receive a one-word informational cue (“conspiracy”)

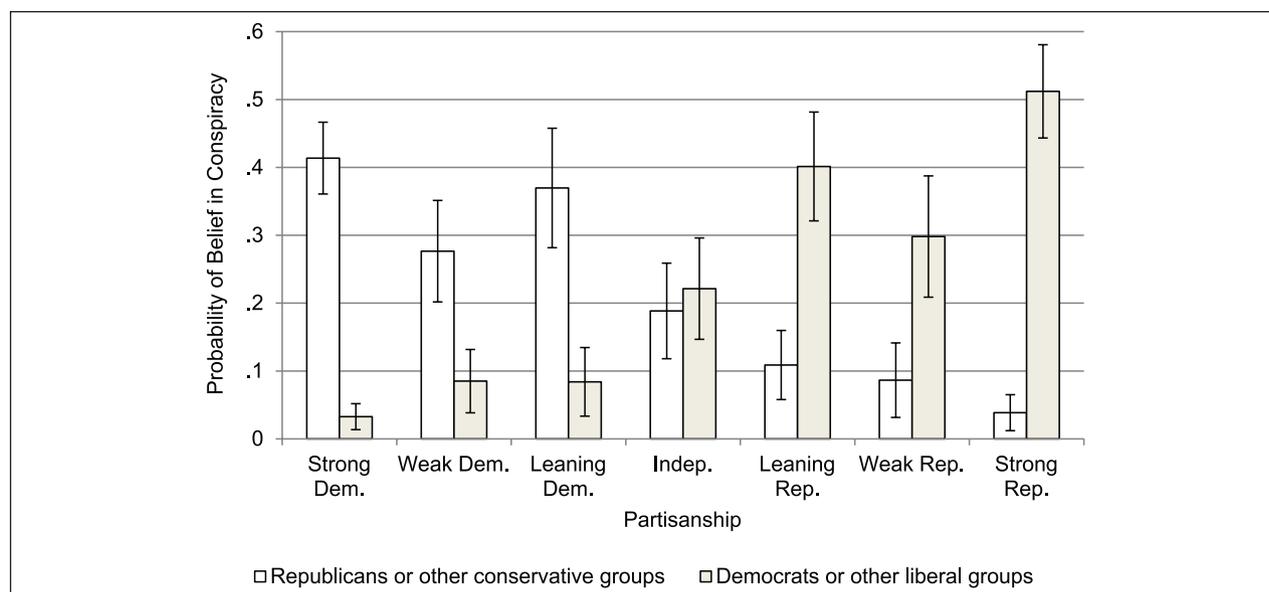


Figure 3. Belief in liberal and conservative conspiracy theories by partisan identification ($\pm 95\%$ confidence interval).

suggesting that a conspiracy was afoot during the 2012 presidential campaign.

To incorporate an overtly partisan element into the design, we focused the experiment on perceptions of media bias. Republican elites have long complained about liberal media bias and collusion (Alterman 2003; Russo 1971–1972; Watts et al. 1999). Given this, and in keeping with traditional models of opinion formation (e.g., Berinsky 2009; Zaller 1992), we therefore expect that Republican identifiers will have beliefs about the media that mirror that of their party’s elites. Survey evidence supports this expectation. Leading up to the 2012 presidential election, polls showed that twice as many Republicans as Democrats said the media were unfair in its coverage of the candidates (Morales 2011; Pew 2012). Our CCES survey data find this as well: we presented respondents with the statement, “Much of the news we get from mainstream news sources is deliberately slanted to mislead us”; respondents could respond on a 5-point scale running from 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*. Results show that as respondents’ identification with the Republican Party increased, their belief that the media are deliberately slanting the news also increased ($r = -.43, p < .001$). In other words, Republican identifiers can be expected to believe in media conspiracies because they are Republicans, and not necessarily because they have a conspiratorial mind-set. Democrats, on the contrary, have not received consistent signals from their party elites suggesting that the media as a whole are biased—as a result, Democrats trust the media more than do Republicans and believe less that the news is biased. Because Democrats are not a priori likely to distrust the

media, a conspiratorial mind-set has more room to affect the likelihood of Democrats believing in a media conspiracy.

For the experimental design, respondents were first asked:

The media coverage in the lead up to the election was the subject of much discussion. Many believed that the media was biased due to [a conspiracy ($N = 503$)/poor journalism ($N = 512$)]. Do you believe the media was biased in favor of one of the presidential candidates?

Respondents could answer “yes,” “no,” or “don’t know.” If the respondent chose “yes,” they were asked a follow-up question, “What factor do you think most likely caused biased media coverage?” Respondents could select “conspiracy” or “poor journalism.” Respondents were coded into four categories based on their responses to the two questions: “Yes, the media are biased due to a conspiracy” ($n = 316$), “Yes, the media are biased due to poor journalism” ($n = 238$), “No, the media are not biased” ($n = 282$), and “Don’t know if the media are biased” ($n = 175$).

The experimental manipulation is very subtle, simply substituting the word “conspiracy” for the phrase “poor journalism.” We choose this manipulation for three reasons. First, the cue suggesting a conspiracy (“conspiracy”) directly indicates a conspiracy was afoot, and requires little interpretation on the part of the respondent. Second, the one-word manipulation keeps the results of the two survey questions as similar as possible to isolate the cause of our experimental results. This type of subtle

manipulation is common in the survey experiments literature (e.g., Burden and Klobstad 2005; Schuman and Presser 1981; Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski 2000; Zaller 1992). Third, the manipulation provides a difficult test of our expectations. This is because prior literature suggests that in general most Americans view conspiracy theories (as an abstract concept) and the people who espouse them with derision and skepticism (DeHaven-Smith 2013; Husting and Orr 2007). Therefore, the overt use of the term *conspiracy* as our manipulation could also be expected to lead some respondents—particularly those without strong conspiratorial views—to reject the notion that a conspiracy is driving bias in the media.

Method of Analysis

The survey respondent is the unit of analysis. Analyses were conducted using Stata/MP (v.11.2; stata.com). To make the results more representative of the American public, the data were weighted with the sample weight provided by YouGov. We use multinomial logistic regression to assess the relationship between partisanship, conspiratorial predispositions, our experimental treatment, and the willingness to believe that the media are biased due to a conspiracy:

$$R_i = C_i + P_i + E_i. \quad (1)$$

Here, i indicates the respondent and R is one's response to the experiment. More specifically, the analysis is specified to assess whether the respondent indicates that the media are biased due to a conspiracy rather than believing that the media are not biased (the base category in the multinomial logit model). C is the respondent's score on the conspiracy predisposition scale. P is the respondent's self-reported partisanship. E is an indicator of whether the respondent was exposed to the media conspiracy cue in the survey experiment.

To assess the possible interactions between the dependent variables in equation (1), an additional multinomial logit analysis was conducted:

$$R_i = C_i + P_i + E_i + C_i \times P_i + C_i \times E_i + P_i \times E_i + C_i \times P_i \times E_i. \quad (2)$$

Here, $C_i \times P_i$, $C_i \times E_i$, and $P_i \times E_i$ represent the two-way interactions between conspiratorial thought, partisanship, and the experimental treatment. $C_i \times P_i \times E_i$ represents the three-way interaction between these three variables.

As multinomial logistic regression coefficients are not readily interpretable, we assessed the substantive meaning of the results in equations (1) and (2) by estimating the predicted probability of believing the media conspiracy (as opposed the belief that the media are not

biased) using Clarify in Stata (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000; Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 2001).

Results

The results of the regression analyses are presented in Table 1. Given our interest in conspiratorial beliefs, we present the results for believing that media bias was caused by a conspiracy rather than believing that the media were not biased (i.e., the base category in analysis). The positive *Conspiratorial thought* coefficient in the first column of Table 1 indicates that individuals with stronger conspiratorial predispositions were more likely to believe in the media conspiracy. For example, in comparison with individuals who scored the minimum on the conspiratorial thought measure, individuals who scored the maximum are estimated to be 28 percentage points more likely to believe that the media are biased due to a conspiracy (minimum score predicted probability: .12, $SE = 0.03$; maximum score predicted probability: .40, $SE = 0.04$). Likewise, the positive *Partisan identification* coefficient in the first column of Table 1 indicates that individuals who identify more strongly with the Republican Party were more likely to believe in the media conspiracy. For example, in comparison with Strong Democrats, Strong Republicans were 44 percentage points more likely to believe that the media are biased due to a conspiracy (Strong Democrat predicted probability: .11, $SE = 0.01$; Strong Republican predicted probability: .55, $SE = 0.03$). The statistically insignificant *Conspiracy cue* coefficient in the first column of Table 1 indicates that once partisanship and conspiratorial thought are accounted for in the analysis, the experimental treatment did not have an effect on whether the respondent believes in the media bias conspiracy.

The second column of Table 1 examines the interaction effects between conspiratorial thought, the conspiracy cue experimental treatment, and partisanship. The substantive meaning is presented in Figures 4 to 6. Figure 4 shows that among Strong Democrats, the willingness to believe in the media bias conspiracy increases quite dramatically with increasing conspiratorial thought, but the conspiracy cue treatment does not influence this relationship. Figure 5 shows the same for partisan independents. However, comparing Figures 4 and 5 also indicates a trend where as conspiratorial thought increases Independents may be more likely to believe in the media bias conspiracy due to the conspiracy cue treatment than Strong Democrats. The results in Figure 6 indicate that for Strong Republicans, conspiratorial predispositions have the weakest impact on belief in conspiracy of the three partisan groups—Republicans show the flattest slope between the estimates for the minimum, mean, and maximum levels of conspiratorial predispositions. And as with the Democrats in Figure 4 and Independents in

Table 1. Regression Analysis of Belief that Media Are Biased Due to a Conspiracy.

Conspiratorial thought	2.10*** (0.45)	3.55** (1.42)
Conspiracy cue (1 = yes, 0 = poor journalism cue)	0.01 (0.19)	-1.67 (1.40)
Partisan identification (7-point Democrat–Republican)	0.60*** (0.05)	0.81*** (0.19)
Conspiratorial Thought × Conspiracy Cue	—	2.25 (2.12)
Conspiratorial Thought × Partisan Identification	—	-0.43 (0.32)
Conspiracy Cue × Partisan Identification	—	0.30 (0.31)
Conspiratorial Thought × Conspiracy Cue × Partisan Identification	—	-0.32 (0.49)
Intercept	-3.43*** (0.36)	-4.20*** (0.90)
χ^2	249.92***	266.76***
Pseudo- R^2	.10	.11
N	920	920

Cells are multinomial regression coefficients; robust standard errors are given in parentheses. Base category is the belief that the media are not biased.

*** $p \leq .01$. ** $p \leq .001$.

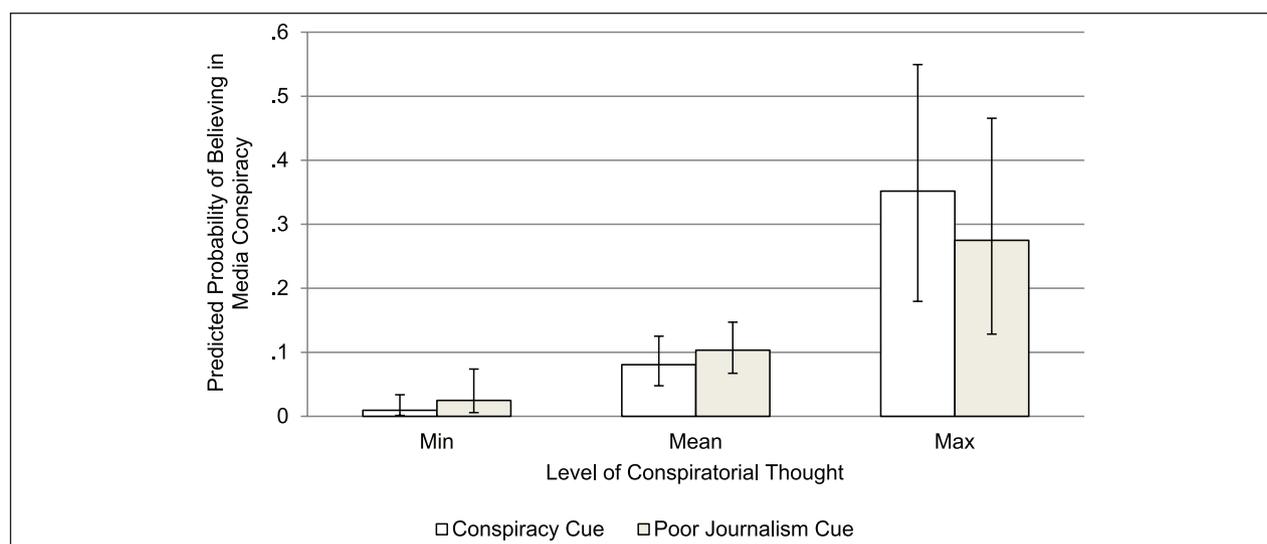


Figure 4. Estimated relationship between conspiratorial thought, exposure to the conspiracy cue treatment, and belief in media bias conspiracy ($\pm 95\%$ confidence interval) among Strong Democrats.

Results are based on the second column of Table 1.

Figure 5, the conspiracy cue treatment does not influence this relationship. However, comparing Figures 5 and 6 indicates a trend where as conspiratorial thought increases, Independents may be more likely to believe in the media bias conspiracy due to the conspiracy cue treatment than Strong Republicans.

In total, Figures 4 to 6 support this study's four expectations. First, Republicans are the most likely to believe in the media conspiracy followed by Independents and Democrats.

This is because Republicans have for decades been told by their elites that the media are biased and potentially corrupt. Second, strong conspiratorial predispositions increase the likelihood that an individual will believe in the media conspiracy. This is evident across all three groups. Third, conspiratorial predispositions have the strongest impact on Democrats and the weakest on Republicans. This is likely because messages from Republican elites drive belief in media conspiracy theories (Watts et al. 1999), without

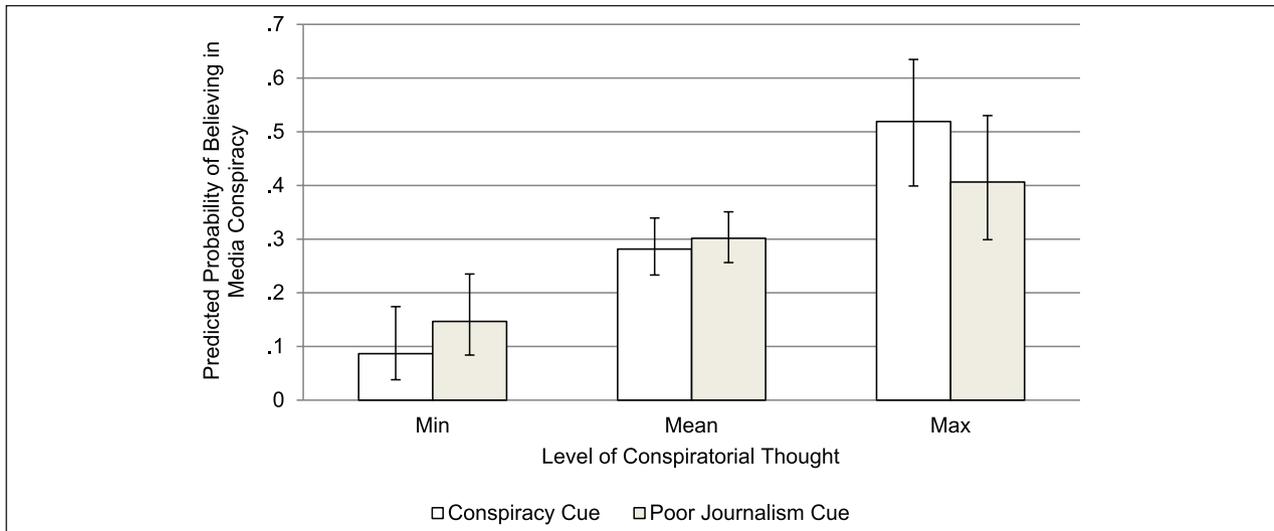


Figure 5. Estimated relationship between conspiratorial thought, exposure to the conspiracy cue treatment, and belief in media bias conspiracy ($\pm 95\%$ confidence interval) among partisan Independents. Results are based on the second column of Table I.

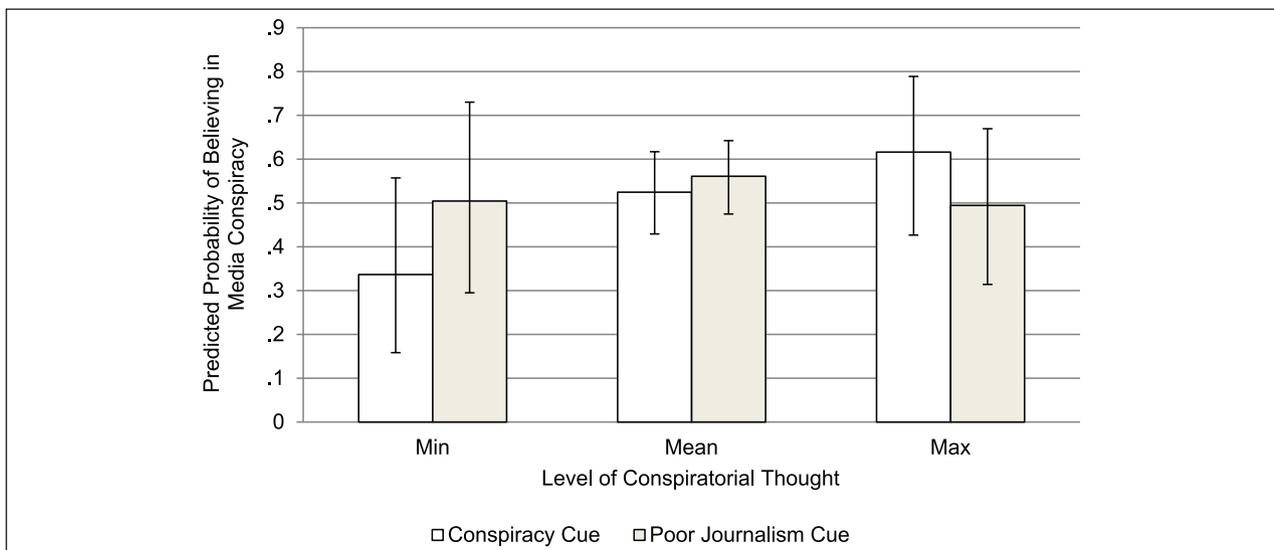


Figure 6. Estimated relationship between conspiratorial thought, exposure to the conspiracy cue treatment, and belief in media bias conspiracy ($\pm 95\%$ confidence interval) among Strong Republicans. Results are based on the second column of Table I.

much room for conspiratorial predispositions to exert an influence. Democrats, on the contrary, are generally more trusting of the media (McCarthy 2014) and therefore only willing to believe in a media conspiracy when they are highly conspiratorial. Fourth, a trend suggests that Independents may be the most receptive to the cue indicating a conspiracy. Because Democrats and Republicans both have partisan priors Independents are left as those most likely to be influenced by the cue.

To examine this trend in greater detail, we estimated equation (2) a second time, substituting the 7-point

partisan identification scale for a dichotomous indicator of whether the respondent identified as nonpartisan (0 = Republican or Democrat, 1 = Independent, “other,” or “not sure”). The results of this analysis show statistically significant results for conspiratorial thought ($b = 2.16$, $SE = 0.68$, $p = .001$), the interaction between the conspiracy cue treatment and the nonpartisan indicator variable ($b = -2.43$, $SE = 1.15$, $p = .034$), and the three-way interaction between conspiratorial thought, the conspiracy cue, and the nonpartisan indicator variable ($b = 4.84$, $SE = 1.80$, $p = .007$). These results are presented

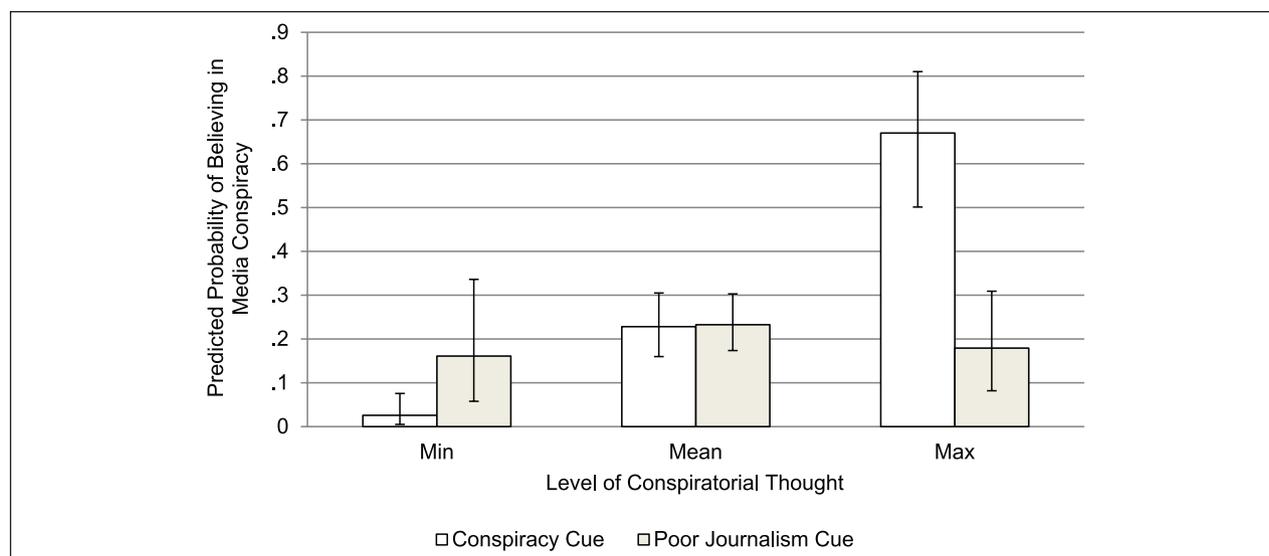


Figure 7. Estimated relationship between conspiratorial thought, exposure to the conspiracy cue treatment, and belief in media bias conspiracy ($\pm 95\%$ confidence interval) among nonpartisans.

graphically in Figure 7. The right-hand side of the figure indicates that nonpartisans with strong conspiratorial thoughts were significantly more likely to believe the media bias conspiracy if they were exposed to the conspiracy cue treatment. That is, individuals with weak partisan priors, and strong conspiratorial priors, were the most responsive to the suggestion that a media conspiracy was afoot during the 2012 election.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the last decade, scholars have put forward many explanations for conspiratorial beliefs. For the most part, conspiracy beliefs have been treated as distinct from other political opinions. A large body of research in psychology suggests that conspiracy beliefs are driven by anxiety, paranoia, and feelings of powerlessness (e.g., Grzesiak-Feldman 2013). It may be true that these and other factors contribute—to one degree or another—to conspiratorial beliefs; however, this does not suggest that such beliefs should be treated as separate and distinct from other species of opinion. This current research argues that traditional theories of opinion formation (e.g., Zaller 1992) can explain much of the variance in conspiratorial beliefs.

The results shed light on three important questions. To begin, what is the possibility for information suggesting a conspiracy to affect belief in conspiratorial explanations? Our results suggest that information indicating a conspiracy can affect those receiving that information—but that the effects are highly dependent on an individual's predispositions. In this study, the cue suggesting a conspiracy significantly predicted belief in the media conspiracy only among those who did not have

strong priors about the conspiracy in the first place—in this case, nonpartisans.

The conspiracy theory in this experiment involved media bias, which has long been a part of partisan political discourse—in other words, partisans likely have priors about media bias and media conspiracies. With this said, and in keeping with Zaller (1992), we suspect that information may also exhibit strong effects on low-information partisans in the case of new conspiracy theories coming to the fore. For example, as the Benghazi investigation became more salient in the media in 2013, we would have expected low-information Republicans to respond to the increased media coverage by becoming more likely to view the Obama administration as conspiring to cover up important information regarding that attack.

Although there is great concern that heightened discussion of conspiracy theories in the media and on the Internet may drive the public to erroneously believe in conspiracy theories (e.g., Nyhan 2013), such informational cues are likely to increase conspiratorial beliefs only for people who are both predisposed to accept conspiratorial logic *and* whose other predispositions are in accord with the conspiracy theory being proffered. Our findings also shed light on why information appears to only have limited success in reversing conspiratorial beliefs (Nyhan, Reifler, and Ubel 2013): it is not information that drives conspiratorial beliefs, instead it is predispositions.

Second, what is the role of partisanship in shaping conspiratorial beliefs? Our results buttress recent surveys (e.g., Cassino and Jenkins 2013; Nyhan 2009) and show that partisanship strongly affects the propensity to see a

conspiracy when the conspiracy theory has a partisan element. In this experiment, Republicans were more likely to see a conspiracy behind media coverage than either Independents or Democrats. This is because suspicion of liberal media bias has been mainstream belief of Republican elites for decades; such suspicion has not generally been a part of Democratic rhetoric. Moving forward, researchers should consider that a person may hold conspiracy beliefs because they have a conspiratorial mind-set *or* because they are told by trusted elites that a conspiracy exists. For example, consider climate change conspiracy theories: Republican elites frequently claim that a cabal of scientists, communists, and Democratic politicians are engaged in a hoax of epic proportions (e.g., Inhofe 2012). But conspiratorial predispositions are not a very strong predictor of climate change conspiracy theories—Republicanism is (Dixon and Jones 2015; Lewandowsky, Gignac, and Oberauer 2013). Thus, Republican climate skepticism—much like Republican suspicions about media bias—could likely be explained by accounting for elite–mass linkages (Zaller 1992).

Although it is potentially unhealthy that partisans view their opposition with such suspicion, the upside to this is that partisanship also limits the possibilities for conspiratorial beliefs to overtake public opinion and/or policy. Partisans are less willing to adopt conspiracy theories that accuse their own coalition, and as such, conspiracy theories are often largely concentrated on one side or the other. Returning to the Birther and Truther theories, despite their popularity in the media, at their apex these theories only polled about 30 percent each. For a conspiracy theory with a political element to overtake the nation, it has to get people to accept that their own party is behind a conspiracy. This is a difficult task; for example, during Watergate when information suggesting a conspiracy came to light, many Republicans refused to accept a conspiracy had taken place until well into the hearings.

Finally, is there a disposition toward seeing or not seeing conspiracies behind events and circumstances? Our results suggest yes, there seems to be a predisposition that makes one more likely to see specific conspiracy theories. This predisposition appears independent of partisanship. On one hand, those predisposed toward conspiratorial thinking are likely to hold a worldview filled with conspiratorial plots, even with lacking evidence. On the other hand, those without a strong predisposition toward conspiratorial thinking are likely to reject conspiratorial thinking in absence of a partisan disposition.

We should point out that, although statistically insignificant, Figures 4 to 7 show that respondents at the minimum and mean levels of conspiratorial predispositions, regardless of partisan affiliation, appeared less likely to believe in the media conspiracy when given the conspiracy

cue as opposed to the “poor journalism” cue. Only respondents at the maximum levels of conspiratorial dispositions were more likely to believe in the media conspiracy when given the conspiracy cue as opposed to the “poor journalism” cue. We suggest the degree to which people with non-conspiratorial mind-sets actively reject conspiratorial information as one area that should guide future research.

Our results suggest a number of different avenues for future studies. To wit, further studies are needed to test the generalizability of our results. We chose to focus the experiment on media bias conspiracies, which are propagated primarily, but not exclusively, by conservatives. Future studies should seek to replicate our results with conspiracies that are favored by the left or by both sides of the political spectrum. That said, more elaborate treatments are needed. For example, survey questions that suggest a conspiracy with richer sets of information rather than the word “conspiracy” could be used to test whether a cue that excludes the specific word “conspiracy” can influence people to declare a belief in a conspiracy. Finally, researchers should expand on the results here by using different experimental designs, for example, designs with one question rather than the two-question design used in this experiment.

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Note

1. Human subjects research approval was granted by the University of Miami (protocol number 20120757). YouGov maintains panels of individuals who volunteer to complete surveys over the Internet.

Supplemental Material

Replication data for this article can be viewed at prq.sagepub.com/supplemental or at joeuscinski.com.

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