

Conspiracy beliefs could increase fringe political engagement, shows new study

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Conspiracies abound in society and can have real world impacts when it leads some people to act, whether that means becoming more engaged politically, or less engaged. Previous research linking conspiracy beliefs and political actions provide mixed results. Some studies show people with a conspiracy worldview are more likely to disengage politically, while others show they are more engaged.

New research appearing in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* finds that when studying an [average person](#), conspiracy beliefs lead to more willingness for engagement in "non-normative" roles, like illegally blocking a public entryway, while avoiding more typical political engagement, such as voting.

"Once regular people accept the basic premises of a conspiracy worldview, they come the conclusion that violent means of political engagement are a plausible consequence." Says Roland Imhoff, a professor of social and legal psychology at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Germany. Imhoff is lead author of the study, conducted together with Lea Dieterle (University of Cologne) and Pia Lamberty (Johannes Gutenberg University).

"This finding, together with the observation that many radical and terrorist groups employ conspiracy rhetoric in their pamphlets, might suggest that seeing the world as governed by hidden and illegitimate forces is a driving force for radical violent action as it a) seems justified and b) non-violent means seem futile," says Imhoff.

The researchers conducted two experiments, one in Germany (194 people) and another with Mturk workers based in the United States (402 people).

In both experiments, people were assigned to imagine being in a particular type of society. Some were assigned a conspiracy-focused description that suggested a few powerful groups controlled the fate of millions, others read an intermediate scenario where people wondered if the media and politicians could be trusted, and another group read about a world view that governments and the media were trustworthy and transparent.

Each person was then asked a set of follow-up questions about what political actions they'd be willing to engage in, from "normative" actions like voting, participating in rallies, or contacting media or politicians, to "non-normative" actions such as destroying property, harming others, or other illegal behaviors.

In both studies they found people who were presented with a high conspiracy scenario were more likely to engage in the non-normative political actions than those presented with a low conspiracy scenario. Political engagement for normative actions. Was higher for those reading about low conspiracy scenarios compared to the other two groups."

Imhoff notes that these are hypothetical situations, and understanding how things might play out in the real world need further research.

For future research, Imhoff suggests "we still lack a grip on the likely relevant differentiation between those who like or endorse conspiracies on social media or when we ask them to what extent they agree and those who actively produce, invent and disseminate conspiracy theories. Whether the latter category is of a similar psychological makeup as the

former or just utilized [conspiracy](#) rhetoric for political goals is still not understood."

More information: Roland Imhoff, Lea Dieterle, Pia Lamberty. Resolving the puzzle of conspiracy worldview and political activism: Belief in secret plots decreases normative but increases non-normative political engagement. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. Expected online March 2020.

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

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