

Studies find link between belief in conspiracy theories and political engagement

March 31 2020



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Some political movements, particularly those extremist in nature, are associated with belief in conspiracy theories. Antisemitic demagogues, for example, have long referred to The Protocols of the Elders of Zion to support their cause, in effect using for their purposes a conspiracy theory that is still widely believed although it has long been known that the text

itself is a literary forgery. However, the role that a belief in conspiracies actually plays in political extremism and the willingness to use physical force has to date been disputed by psychologists. Researchers at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU) have now investigated the possible link on the basis of two studies undertaken in Germany and the USA. The study subjects were asked to assume that the world is controlled by powerful secret societies. Faced with the prospect that practically all areas of society are dominated by such conspiratorial groups, the subjects declared themselves less willing to become involved in lawful political activities. Instead, they would resort to illegal, violent means.

Contradictory data on the political outlook of adherents of conspiracy theories

Researchers at the JGU Institute of Psychology had noticed that the views expressed by the specialists in this field differ widely on the relation between conspiracy beliefs and political engagement. On the one [hand](#), it is postulated that conspiracy-based views could have a motivating influence and that the corresponding adherents are more likely to become actively involved in politics in order to bring about change. On the other hand, however, others propose that a belief in conspiracies tends to lead to disaffection and even withdrawal from politics.

The Mainz-based team headed by Professor Roland Imhoff decided to investigate this contradiction and examined whether and in what form there is a connection between belief in conspiracies and active political engagement. To this end, 138 study participants in Germany and 255 in the USA were asked to imagine three scenarios: They live in a society that is secretly governed by powerful groups, they live in a society in which it is possible that certain conspiracies exist, or they live in a

society in which there is no real reason to suspect underhand machinations. They were then required to stipulate what sort of political stance they would take on the basis of 20 different suggestions. For example: "I would participate in an election by voting" or "I would try to influence the outcome of an election by hacking computers" or "I would carry out a violent attack on a person in a position of power".

The evaluation of the results showed how the apparent contradictions outlined above can be explained: There is a connection between the—in this case hypothetical—belief in conspiracy theories and the individual's political outlook, which when expressed in graph form produces an inverted U shape. This means that the willingness to engage in political activity reaches its peak among the mid-level adherents of conspiracy theories. Thereafter, the interest decreases again, especially when it comes to becoming actively engaged in legal means of political expression. Where there is an increasing conviction of being betrayed by the government, the tendency to resort to illegal, violent means increases. These tendencies were apparent in Germany as well as in the USA, although somewhat weaker in the US.

The results, as the authors write in their article in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, point to a real danger of conspiracy worldviews. "Once people are convinced of them, there is no need to pay allegiance to any form of social contract, as codified in laws and regulations or implicitly agreed on in forms of trust in epistemic authorities like quality media or university scientists." The social psychologists point out that there are clear limitations with regard to the two studies, most obviously with regard to the fact that the participants were asked to give hypothetical reactions to a hypothetical scenario. Thus, the conclusion that can be drawn is that belief in [conspiracy](#) theories may be associated with an attitude that assumes violent extremism to be an acceptable option.

Acceptance of an option will not necessarily result in concrete action

"We are by no means saying that [belief](#) in conspiracies leads to [violent extremism](#)," emphasized Professor Roland Imhoff. "Rather, what we are saying is that you might consider such an attitude acceptable even if as an outsider you put yourself in this world of thought." This is the first time that an experimental investigation has shown that political extremism and violence could be an almost logical conclusion if one is convinced that secret conspiratorial powers control the world.

More information: Roland Imhoff et al, 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* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/1948550619896491](#)

Provided by Universitaet Mainz

Citation: Studies find link between belief in conspiracy theories and political engagement (2020, March 31) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-03-link-belief-conspiracy-theories-political.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--