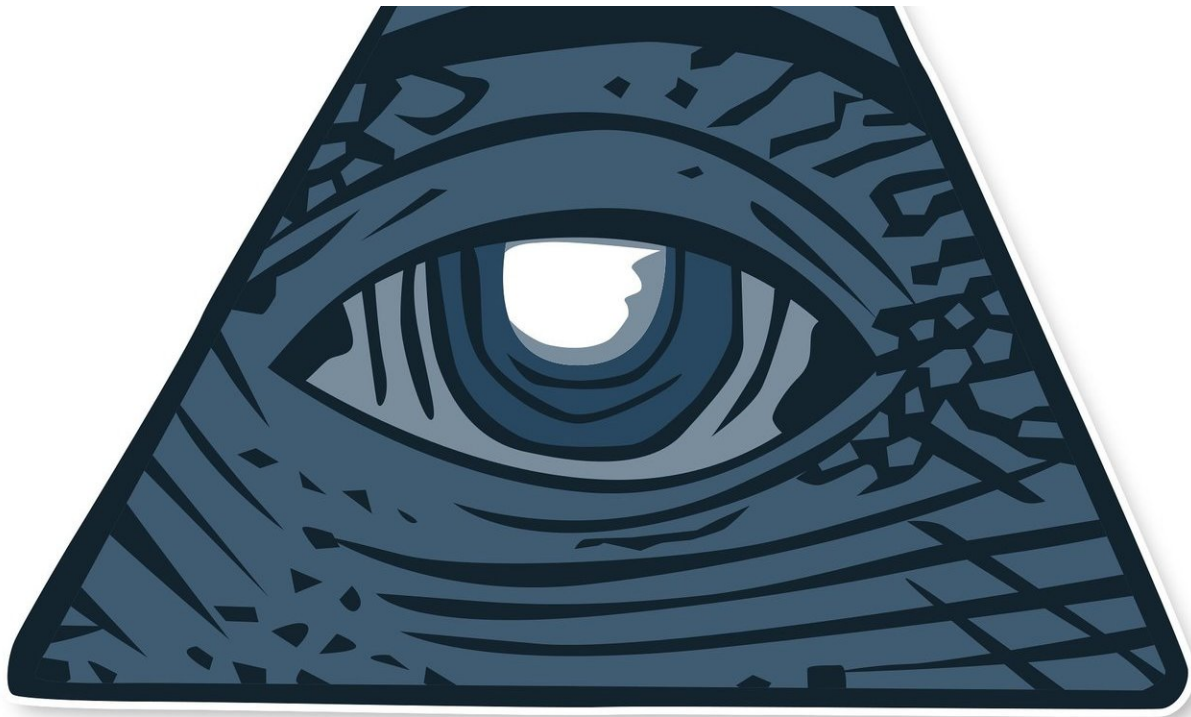


New study shows men are more likely than women to endorse COVID-19 conspiracies

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A study published earlier this year found that in the United States Republicans were more likely than Democrats to believe coronavirus (COVID-19) related conspiracy theories.

The partisan split makes sense, given that one of the reasons people

believe [conspiracy theories](#) is to protect their political worldviews. The current political context is one in which the Republican president is being widely criticized for his handling of the pandemic. So Republicans are more likely to believe that, for example, scientists or the media are exaggerating the seriousness of the virus. If the United States had a Democratic president who was being criticized for his/her handling of the pandemic, more Democrats would believe these COVID-19 [conspiracy](#) theories, said the study's author, Joanne Miller, a professor in the University of Delaware's Department of Political Science and International Relations.

But a new study published in *Politics & Gender* and co-authored by Miller and fellow professor Erin Cassese found that [gender](#) matters just as much as political affiliation. In a survey of more than 3,000 people conducted in April, men were more likely than women to endorse COVID-19 conspiracy theories.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an easy target for conspiracy theories. Most of us are engulfed in worries over health, finances, jobs or our children's education and feel a lack of control.

"During a global pandemic, it's kind of the perfect storm of uncertainty," Miller said. "And so when we feel a lack of control, uncertainty or powerlessness, we seek out explanations for why the event occurred that's causing us to feel that way. And what this can do is it can lead us to connect dots that shouldn't be connected because we're trying to seek out answers. And sometimes those answers are conspiracy theories."

Working with Carleton College's Christina Farhart, Miller and Cassese used previous research as a jumping off point: Men and women are experiencing the pandemic differently. For example, men are more vulnerable to the virus, but women are more likely to be frontline workers and experience more of a burden as the primary caregivers at

home.

Those findings raised questions as to whether gender also influenced conspiracy theory beliefs.

To find out, the team ran a survey using 11 popular conspiracy theories, including claims that China or the U.S. accidentally released the virus; that 5G cell towers are causing the virus; that Bill Gates is plotting to somehow inject us with a vaccine; and that scientists are trying to make Donald Trump look bad by exaggerating the seriousness of the pandemic.

Among Democrats, there were statistically significant gender gaps for all 11 conspiracy theories; among Republicans, there were gender gaps for nine of the 11. The average gender gap among Democrats was 10.18% points (32.45% males to 22.27% females endorsed the theories), compared to 10.09% points among Republicans (48.9% males vs. 38.81% females). The gender differences were notable, researchers said, given that gender gaps in [public opinion](#) tend to be much smaller in magnitude, and the results were surprising, given that past work has not found a consistent association between gender and conspiracy theory beliefs.

So why men? Two dispositional factors are connected to the gender gap. Learned helplessness, which is a feeling like everything's out of your control and any actions that you try to take are basically pointless; and conspiratorial thinking, which is a tendency to think about major political events and problems in conspiratorial terms without having any connection to, in this case, COVID-19.

The key factor is learned helplessness, which is experienced by both men and women. Miller described the process: Some people, when faced with repeated failures at trying to affect positive change in their lives, come

to believe that they are helpless to control the things that they want to control.

The resulting general sense of learned helplessness can lead to conspiracy [theory](#) beliefs, Miller said.

"What we're finding in this research is that men are more likely to score higher on learned helplessness," Miller said. "And that might be a boost that's happening just as a result of the pandemic itself, that they're feeling more of this because they can't control what's going on right now. That leads to these beliefs that, well, maybe there's a secret group of people controlling these things behind the scenes."

Cassese added, "It's something that both men and women can experience, but in our study we're finding that it's men who are really feeling this more at this moment, and it's influencing how they feel about COVID. Learned helplessness and a predisposition toward conspiratorial thinking explain about half of the gender difference that we find. But there's still more for us to do to try to understand this phenomenon."

Miller and Cassese said they hope to use their findings to affect positive change in public health. Recent research has found that women were more likely than men to engage in protective behaviors that have been recommended by scientists and health officials, such as wearing masks and social distancing.

"So there may be some connection here between engaging in those activities and belief in conspiracy theories that we plan on exploring in future research," Miller said.

More information: Erin C. Cassese et al. Gender Differences in COVID-19 Conspiracy Theory Beliefs, *Politics & Gender* (2020). [DOI: 10.1017/S1743923X20000409](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000409)

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