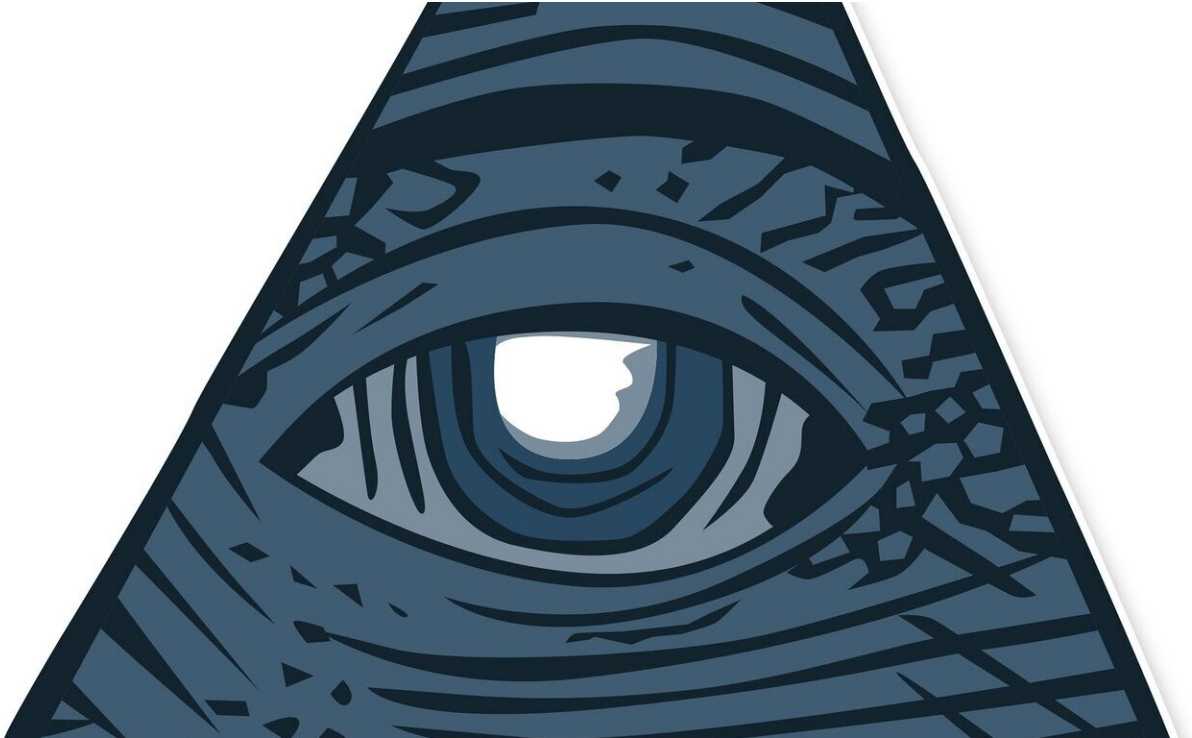


# Which conspiracy theory do you believe in?

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Joe Biden is the new president of the United States, although half of the country's Republicans believe he stole the election. A lot of people believe conspiracy theories on the other side of the Atlantic. But they aren't only found there.

Conspiracy theories are not exclusive to people who storm the U.S.

Capitol.

"Everyone believes at least one [conspiracy theory](#)," says Asbjørn Dyrendal, a professor in NTNU's Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies who specializes in conspiracy theories.

The more conspiracy theories you bring up, the more people answer yes to one of them.

That fact leads American conspiracy researcher Joseph Uscinski at the University of Miami to posit that all people believe in at least one conspiracy [theory](#). Dyrendal basically agrees, but he modifies Uscinski's statement slightly, saying all people believe some conspiracy theory "a little."

Maybe you don't think that the Earth is flat or that the Moon landings were faked and kept under wraps by all 400,000 individuals involved. Maybe you don't believe that vaccines cause autism and that the authorities are doing this on purpose, or that 5G is messing up your head, even if you're not exactly alone in that case.

We are all more vulnerable to believing what we think is right, especially when our identity is at stake and emotions are strong. It can be a bit like the emotions associated with football.

These examples activate the same mechanisms that come into play when our thoughts build on themselves and turn into more entrenched conspiracy beliefs.

"Maybe you think the referee is out to get your football team, especially when one of your team's players gets fouled in the box and no penalty is called," says Dyrendal.

Maybe you even think a lot of referees are against your team, especially if you believe you're seeing a pattern, like your team never or only rarely getting a penalty kick.

This thinking doesn't usually amount to a conspiracy theory in and of itself. But the same mechanisms come into play when thoughts build on themselves and turn into more entrenched conspiracy beliefs.

People can have degrees of conspiracy thinking as well. There's a difference between yelling at the ref in a heated moment and believing that the Earth is flat.

You can find people who believe in the most unusual conspiracy theories everywhere, perhaps even in your own mirror.

"But several common characteristics recur," says Dyrendal.

Conspiracy theorists typically:

- tend to have a little less education.
- more often live in societies that have less successful democracies, which influences trust in others and in the authorities.
- belong to groups that feel they should have more power and influence.
- belong to special political organizations or [religious groups](#) a little more often.
- more often use intuition—their "gut feeling"—when making decisions.
- see connections more often than most people do, also where such connections do not exist, and they are more likely to see intention as the cause of events.
- are a little more narcissistic and paranoid than others.

- more often obtain their information from [social media](#).

"We've noticed that conspiracy theorists are somewhat more likely to find their news sources on social media," says Dyrendal.

This has a bit to do with how social media works.

Social media can create echo chambers. The media is structured in such a way that you mostly hear from friends and other sources that you already agree with. "Likes" and posts that you click on influence what you see later. This makes it easy to confirm suspicions and perceptions that you already have. And you'll always find a community of other individuals who feel and think a little like you do.

However, just blaming Twitter and Facebook for this phenomenon is a gross oversimplification. It may seem as if more people than ever before believe in the strangest conspiracy theories, but in fact we don't know if this is true.

You may think that men are conspiracy theorists more often than women, but that's actually not true.

"When we look at a large number of different conspiracy theories, we find no reliable gender differences in the average scores," says Dyrendal.

But who believes in which theories can be different, although the differences don't necessarily revolve exclusively around gender. They may have more to do with dominance.

"People who dislike equality and prefer hierarchy see themselves and their group as superior to others and believe more in conspiracy theories that are specifically about social out-groups," Dyrendal says.

This kind of preference for clear social ranking expresses itself in general prejudices against groups that are seen as lower in the social hierarchy or which are perceived as a threat to the social hierarchy.

"These individuals tend to believe more easily in conspiracies like immigration, Jewish dominance, Muslims or the like, and this preference is a little stronger in men," Dyrendal says.

The most prominent characteristic of conspiracy theorists is that they are often part of various groups that distrust the government and the way most of us live today.

"If you belong to a group that already believes in doomsday scenarios and a future saviour, it's probably easier to believe in some of the conspiracy theories," Dyrendal says.

Evangelical Christians in the United States, for example, will find it easier to adopt conspiracy theories that fit with their other beliefs. If you're convinced that the world as we know it will soon end with the battle between good and evil at Armageddon, it's not that big a jump to believe that politicians in recent decades are actually emissaries of Satan himself.

Among people who stormed the U.S. Capitol were members of QAnon. This is a group that believes Donald Trump has been fighting a secret war against a powerful group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles, which includes Hillary Clinton.

But the followers of QAnon aren't as numerous as many people some media might suggest, at least in proportion to the population of the United States. QAnon may seem widespread because many of the [conspiracy](#) theories adopted by QAnon were already well established and far more popular before.

"But in a country with 330 million inhabitants, numbers quickly grow to a good size anyway," Dyrendal says.

Conspiracy researcher Uscinski in Miami has studied QAnon for a long time and believes the group hasn't grown in recent years. He should know, since he's been asking people about it since about the group's beginnings.

But most of the individuals who stormed the Capitol were completely different people. And when half of the Republicans allege electoral fraud that was overwhelmingly rejected by election officials, we're not exactly talking about belonging to some extremist group.

These aren't just poor people who believe the powers-that-be and the rich are looking to oppress them, either. The connections are tangled.

"Conspiracy beliefs are also about a lot of people wanting more. Trump supporters may be less educated than the average population, but they have higher salaries," says Dyrendal.

The media often portray most Trump supporters as slightly backward, disadvantaged people from rural areas, but this is simply not true.

Most of us aren't as far out as the strangest few are. Ninety-six per cent of Norwegians vaccinate their children.

Dyrendal admits he hasn't yet forgiven the referee in the match between Leeds and Bayern Munich in 1975.

Bayern Munich won the European Cup final 2-0 after the referee disallowed Peter Lorimer's goal, when he ruled Billy Bremner offside and twice failed to call a penalty against Bayern Munich.

French judges. They hate British teams, everyone knows that. And they're really easy to bribe, right?

**More information:** Asbjørn Dyrendal et al, Predictors of belief in conspiracy theory: The role of individual differences in schizotypal traits, paranormal beliefs, social dominance orientation, right wing authoritarianism and conspiracy mentality, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2021.110645](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.110645)

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