

# Conspiracy mentality around the globe tends to be particularly pronounced on the political fringes

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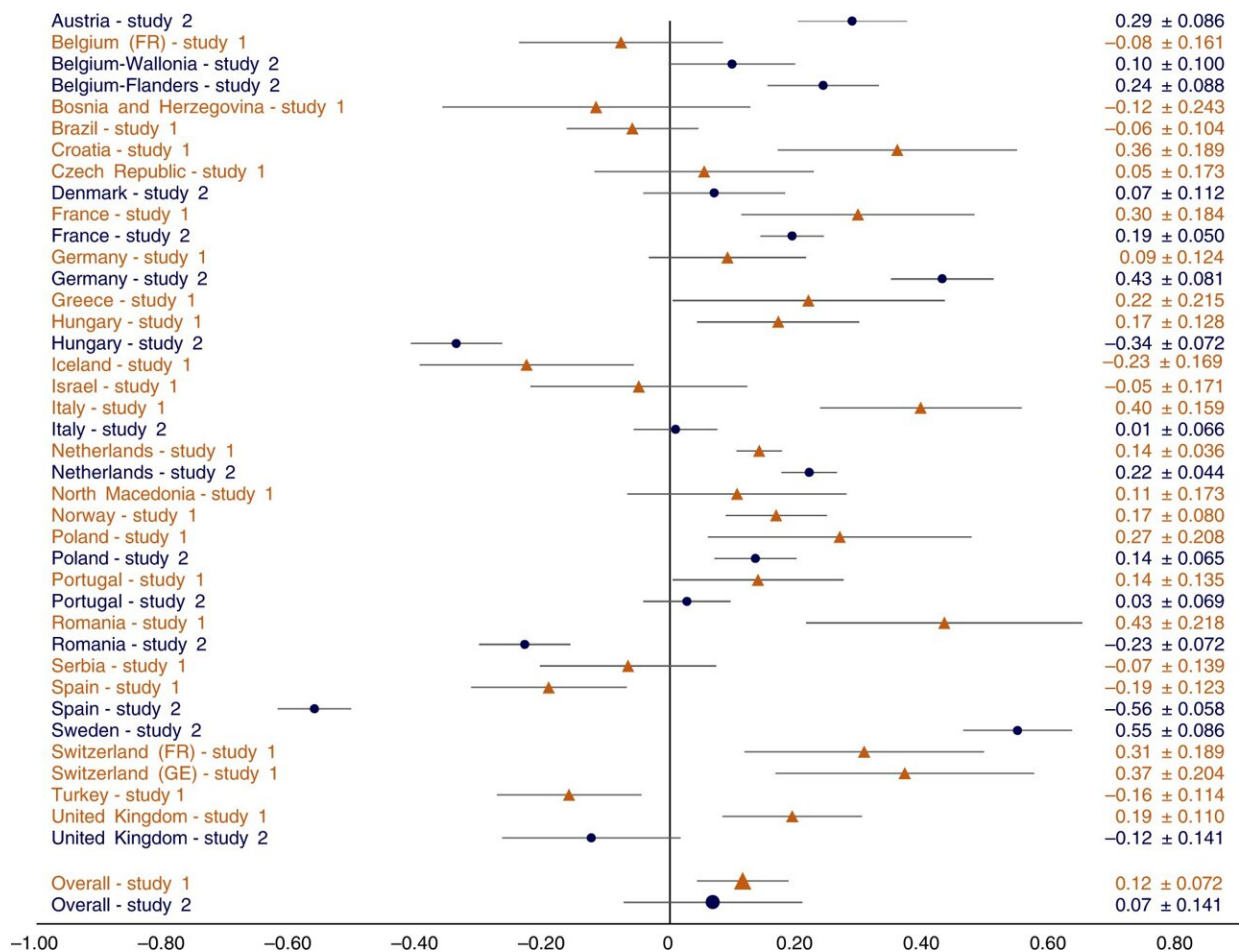


Fig. 1: Linear relation of political orientation and conspiracy mentality (with 95% CI) in all samples separately and overall in multi-level models for both studies (controlling for quadratic relation). Data from study 1 (orange triangles) and study 2 (blue circles). Numbers denote change in scale point on conspiracy

mentality per change in political orientation in unit of standard deviation (N = 104,253). Credit: DOI: 10.1038/s41562-021-01258-7

Conspiracy theories have circulated at all times, in all cultures, and among all populations. They routinely appear in conjunction with major incidents, such as those that today take the form of terrorist attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and presidential elections. As two recent surveys undertaken in 26 countries have demonstrated, an individual's belief in conspiracies tends to go hand-in-hand with his or her predilection for the political extremes.

This seems to be the case in those with far-left views and it is even more the case in supporters of the far- right. "We also observed a greater inclination to adopt a [conspiracy mentality](#) among those who vote for opposition parties because they feel they have been deprived of their personal influence and consider they have little social impact," said Professor Roland Imhoff of Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU), who coordinated the surveys. The two surveys constitute the largest investigation of the subject of conspiracy mentality conducted to date, both in terms of their size with around 100,000 responders and the fact that they were undertaken in 26 different countries. The results have been published in *Nature Human Behaviour*.

## **Relationship between conspiracy mentality and political orientation**

The term "conspiracy mentality" is used to describe the mindset of an individual who is convinced that hidden, malevolent forces are at work somewhere. "Those who endorse conspiracy theories believe that a group of people are colluding in secret to promote some kind of sinister outcome," is how Roland Imhoff, Professor of Social and Legal

Psychology at JGU, describes this worldview. The political sector provides a particularly fertile substrate for the proliferation of conspiracy mindsets. In this context, conspiracy theories are inseparable from the provocative rhetoric employed by populist political figures.

The aim of the international research team headed by Imhoff was to explore a possible relationship between [political orientation](#) and conspiracy mentality with the aid of the two surveys. The first survey produced a unique dataset based on the information provided by 33,431 respondents living in 23 countries, including non-European nations such as Brazil and Israel. Also considered was whether a perceived lack of political control—because, for example, an individual's preferred political party has been excluded from government—influenced the link between political orientation and conspiracy mentality; this outcome might be expected due to the effects of what psychologists call "control deprivation."

The second [survey](#), with its 70,882 respondents, supplemented the first in the form of additional data for 13 European countries. The surveys were conducted using the standardized Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire. The respondents' political orientation was determined by two methods: Respondents themselves were asked to rank whether their political views tended to the right or to the left on an appropriate scale and, in addition, to state their preferences in terms of parties. The political position of these parties on the left-right spectrum was identified by a team of international experts.

In general, the results revealed a correlation between political views and the tendency to endorse conspiracy theories. "Respondents at the extreme ends of the political continuum expressed more pronounced beliefs that the world is governed by secret forces operating in the dark," write the authors in their paper for *Nature Human Behaviour*. In addition, the two surveys show that a conspiracy mentality is particularly

pronounced in those who support the far-right, above all among those individuals who vote for traditional, nationalist, and authoritarian parties.

The researchers also found some differences between countries: While in countries in Middle and Western Europe—such as Belgium (Flanders, in particular), Germany, France, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, and Sweden—supporters of the political right exhibit a more marked disposition to embrace conspiracy [theory](#), the conspiracy mentality is more prominent among those rooted in the political left in southern European countries such as Romania, Spain, and Hungary.

## **"Conspiracy theories are for losers"**

Conspiracy theories are generally more readily accepted by individuals who are close to parties that do not form part of the government, so that supporters see themselves as bereft of political control. This factor notably plays a role again in the case of individuals at the extreme right of the political scale. During the analysis of results, it was further discovered there was a greater disposition toward a conspiracy mentality in those with a lower level of education.

The results of both surveys substantiate the view that "conspiracy theories are for losers," as U.S. scholar Joseph Uscinski has succinctly put it. However, the authors, headed by Imhoff, stress that the identification of cause and effect here is by no means clear. It might simply be that voters who find themselves on the losing side following an election are more likely to find conspiracy theories attractive. It is also quite possible that parties that are outside the mainstream and thus have little chance of electoral success have a special appeal for those with a conspiracy mentality; in other words, those individuals drawn to [conspiracy theories](#) will also have a tendency to vote for parties that lose elections.

**More information:** Roland Imhoff et al, Conspiracy mentality and political orientation across 26 countries, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2022). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-021-01258-7](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01258-7)

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