

# Beliefs in conspiracy theories may not be increasing

July 20 2022

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“Conspiracy” typed out on a typewriter. Credit: Markus Winkler, Unsplash, CC0 (<https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/>)

A new analysis contradicts popular thinking about beliefs in conspiracy theories, suggesting that such beliefs may not have actually increased

over time. Joseph Uscinski of the University of Miami, Florida, and colleagues present these findings in the open-access journal *PLoS ONE* on July 20, 2022.

Belief in a [conspiracy](#) theory involves holding the opinion that a small group of people has covertly coordinated to cause a certain event or circumstance, despite a lack of appropriate evidence. In recent years, the perception that [beliefs](#) in conspiracy theories have increased has become widespread among the [general public](#), as well as among scholars, journalists, and policymakers, with many blaming social media. However, few studies have examined whether such perceptions actually hold true.

To help clarify whether beliefs in conspiracy theories are increasing, Uscinski and colleagues conducted four different survey analyses. For the first, they investigated whether beliefs in certain conspiracy theories—including theories related to COVID-19 and the Kennedy assassination—have increased among Americans. The second analysis evaluated beliefs in conspiracy theories, such as the idea that human-driven [global warming](#) is a hoax, in six European countries. The third analysis addressed Americans' beliefs in which specific groups are conspiring, and the fourth measured general lines of thought in the U.S. linked to belief in conspiracy theories.

In all four analyses, the researchers found no statistically significant evidence that beliefs in conspiracy theories have increased over time. A greater number of beliefs in specific theories decreased than increased over time, and of those that did increase, none involved the COVID-19 pandemic nor QAnon.

The researchers emphasize the importance of caution in making inferences based on their findings and note that additional research will be needed to confirm the findings and to better understand beliefs in

conspiracy theories, such as their psychological underpinnings and how they are promoted.

Nonetheless, these findings suggest that beliefs in conspiracy theories exist at certain baseline levels that may be concerning, and perhaps these levels are only now becoming more apparent to the public.

Dr. Adam Enders adds that "despite popular claims about America slipping down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole into a state of post-truth, we do not find that conspiracism has increased over time. We examine beliefs in dozens of specific conspiracy theories, perceptions of who is likely to be involved in conspiracy theories, and the general predisposition to interpret events and circumstances as the product of conspiracy theories—in no case do we observe an average increase in conspiracy beliefs."

Dr. Joseph Uscinski adds that "some conspiracy theories are gaining in popularity, but many are not. At any given time, perhaps because of political circumstances, some [conspiracy theories](#) will be more attractive, but at the same time, many other will recede into history."

**More information:** Joseph Uscinski et al, Have beliefs in conspiracy theories increased over time?, *PLoS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0270429](#)

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