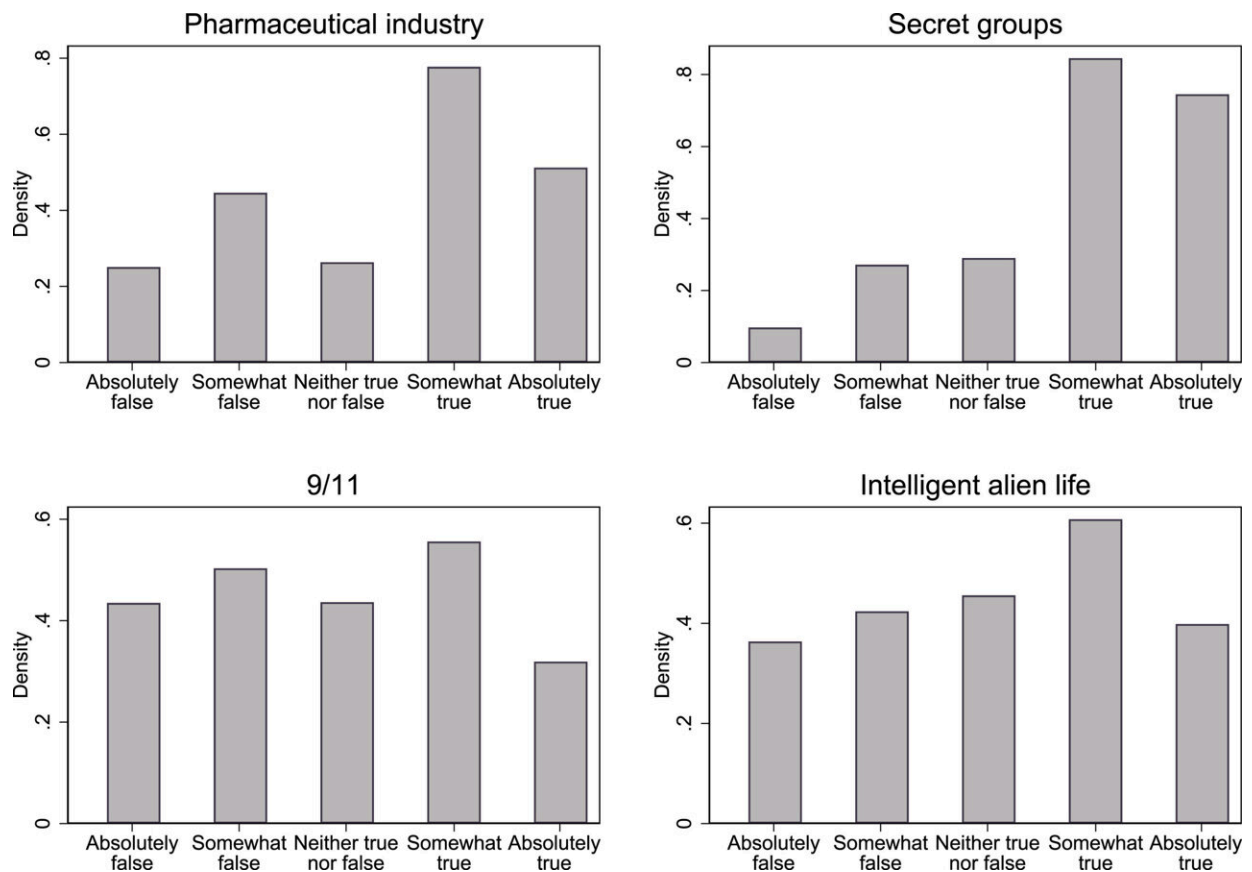


Conspiracy theories cause populism to rise, claims Spanish study

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Distribution of the agreement with four conspiracy theories. Credit: *Electoral Studies* (2022). DOI: 10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102574

Coinciding with the increased support for populist parties that we have witnessed all over the West, the last decade has also seen an increase in

the number of populism-related studies, covering topics such as the causes and consequences of voting for parties that support these ideas, or the reasons for and possible consequences of the emergence and increasing presence of the attitudes on which they are based.

The links between [conspiracy theories](#) and populism have also aroused a great degree of interest. Carolina Galais, a researcher at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona's (UAB) Department of Political Science and Public Law, and Marc Guinjoan, an associate professor and researcher at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya's (UOC) Faculty of Law and Political Science, analyzed these possible links in their study, "I want to believe: The relationship between conspiratorial beliefs and populist attitudes in Spain," which has recently been published in the open-access journal *Electoral Studies*.

Different explanations for the same problem

There are different opinions when it comes to addressing this issue. Some authors believe that there is no clear distinction between conspiracy theory trends and populism because they are very similar or reflect the same mentality. Others, on the other hand, believe that one of these two factors is the trigger and driving force for change. Guinjoan and Galais are two such authors: "In our paper, we argue and empirically prove by means of various methodological strategies—including an experiment—that changes in populist thinking can be explained by conspiracy theories. Exposure to conspiracy theories makes people more likely to believe them, which in turn promotes populist thinking, particularly Manichaeian thinking."

However, this does not mean that the opposite does not happen too, as populist thinking can also promote the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. In fact, evidence has shown that the development of such ideas can be encouraged by the discourse of certain parties. "Both routes are

possible and simultaneous: it will work one way for some people and the other way for others. Our paper focuses on proving the less explored route, according to which exposure to conspiracy theories encourages populist thinking," said the authors.

Two online surveys and an experiment

The authors started their study by carrying out an online survey of 2,887 adults. The aim was to establish if there was a link between those people who believe in four distinct conspiracy theories—those relating to 9/11, those relating to the [pharmaceutical industry](#), those that claim that the world is dominated by secret groups, and those making claims about [alien life](#)—and a set of populist statements such as "many members of government are shameless" or "those who don't agree with my [political views](#) are misinformed." The authors indeed found a correlation: people who embrace conspiracy theories usually have populist attitudes.

The second part of the study involved a survey-based experiment: a group of participants were chosen at random and exposed to a conspiracy theory relating to the 9/11 attacks. Afterwards, they were asked a set of questions to find out their opinion about a number of strongly populist statements. The people who had been exposed to the conspiracy theory were much more likely to agree with them than those in the control group.

A world of good and evil

From among the various dimensions of populism, Manichaeism was the one most strongly affected by exposure to conspiracy theories. Manichaeism views society as split between good and evil, between those who are right and those who are wrong. According to the researchers, this idea fits well with conspiracy theories, which always

involve an overarching plot concealing the truth about certain situations. This is something that we should be very aware of, because Manichaeism is probably behind other worrying phenomena seen in the last few decades, such as rising polarization and support for populist and even anti-establishment parties.

In turn, the other two dimensions of populism seemed unaffected by conspiracy theories. These two dimensions are anti-elitism, which is the rejection of the individuals and institutions in power, and people-centrism, which is based on the idea that popular sovereignty is the epitome of democracy and power should be held by the people.

"Although we had reasons to expect conspiratorial thinking to affect these two dimensions as well, the data showed that, at least in Spain, this isn't the case. Being exposed to conspiracy theories and believing them causes us to see the world in black and white, as a fight between good and evil. People who see things in this way will view any coalition, agreement or compromise between political parties or stakeholders as a serious betrayal, and any concession to the other side will cause outrage and disenchantment," said Guinjoan and Galais.

In Spain, the country focused on by the study, the proportion of people who support conspiracy theories is average and very similar to the figures seen in other countries. As a result, Guinjoan and Galais believe that the results of their study can be extrapolated to other countries. They explained that: "we have no reason to believe that the correlation we found in Spain won't also apply in other contexts, even if we assume they're different in nature. Having said that, we can't provide a definitive answer to this question until an empirical analysis has been carried out in another country of interest."

More information: Marc Guinjoan et al, I want to believe: The relationship between conspiratorial beliefs and populist attitudes in

Spain, *Electoral Studies* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102574](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102574)

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