

How distrust harms society: Examining the common core of populist and conspiracy mentalities

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Populists and adherents of conspiracy theories have something in common: According to a new publication by Isabel Thielmann and Benjamin Hilbig, both have a high tendency for distrust. To arrive at this finding, Isabel Thielmann (a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for

the Study of Crime, Security and Law and a doctor of psychology) and Benjamin Hilbig (Professor of Psychology at Rheinland-Pfälzische Technische Universität Kaiserslautern-Landau) conducted three studies in Germany and the United Kingdom.

According to the definitions used by the researchers, populists believe in a set of ideas that constructs society as divided between "the pure people" and the corrupt and self-serving elites, whereas adherents of [conspiracy theories](#) tend to harbor suspicions that a group of (often powerful) actors join together in secret to achieve malevolent goals.

Both groups share a worldview rooted in simplistic "us-versus-them" and "good-versus-evil" narratives that often directly influences their lives. They isolate themselves, reject science, believe in implausible theses, and fuel societal division—a phenomenon that became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Against this backdrop, a team of researchers from the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Crime, Security and Law in Freiburg (Germany) and Rheinland-Pfälzische Technische Universität Kaiserslautern-Landau (Germany) have been examining a potential shared psychological basis common to both populism and [conspiracy](#) mentalities.

Their research is based on the thesis that populism and conspiracy mentality have a dispositional basis in people's patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behavior, i.e., they are rooted in their personalities. In other words: Populists and adherents of conspiracy theories share the same disposition.

The researchers ran three studies with around 1,900 subjects in Germany and the United Kingdom to explore this common core of populism and conspiracy mentality. The results were recently published in *Political*

Psychology. In a first step, participants were asked to indicate to what degree they agreed to specific statements on a standardized questionnaire (with scales ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") to determine their assumptions and beliefs.

This included statements such as "Politicians are not really interested in what people like me think," "Ultimately, politicians approve anything that ensures they keep their privileges," and "Many important things are happening in the world about which the public is kept in the dark."

The studies proceeded to ask the participants 60 questions to be able to map [personality traits](#) in a structured way. These questions were aimed at capturing what is known as the Dark Factor (the D factor) of Personality, which defines the [basic principles](#) underlying any "dark" (aversive) personality traits as "the general tendency to maximize one's individual utility—disregarding, accepting or malevolently provoking disutility for others."

Individuals with high D factor scores ruthlessly pursue their own interests, even when this harms others—or even for the sake of harming others. This concept of the Dark Factor of Personality was first established and published by Professor Benjamin Hilbig in collaboration with researchers from the universities of Ulm and Copenhagen.

Influenced, controlled, and exploited by other groups

The three studies conducted by Isabel Thielmann and Benjamin Hilbig were able to establish a common core shared by people who lean towards populism and those with a tendency to buy into conspiracy theories: They are characterized by distrust—in others, in society, and in particular in "the elites."

"People with a disposition for distrust lack trust in other people and in

society. They are convinced that others only have their own interests at heart and won't hesitate to take advantage of others," explains Max Planck researcher Isabel Thielmann. These individuals generally view other people as unreliable, exploitative, and self-serving.

"Generalized dispositional distrust is not limited to distrust at a purely interpersonal level but subsumes trust in society and the world more generally. Such a disposition can be detrimental to societal cohesion and the functioning of society," adds Benjamin Hilbig.

The researchers see their findings as indicative of how relevant trust is for the functioning of society. In turn, increasing trust has the potential to reduce both populism and beliefs in conspiracy theories. According to Thielmann and Hilbig, "strengthening generalized trust could be an effective move to combat populism and conspiracy mentalities."

The researchers see transparent communication as the key to building trust and hope that their findings can serve as a baseline for finding ways of bolstering generalized trust and counteracting populism and conspiracy mentalities in a sustainable fashion.

More information: Isabel Thielmann et al, Generalized Dispositional Distrust as the Common Core of Populism and Conspiracy Mentality, *Political Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/pops.12886](https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12886)

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