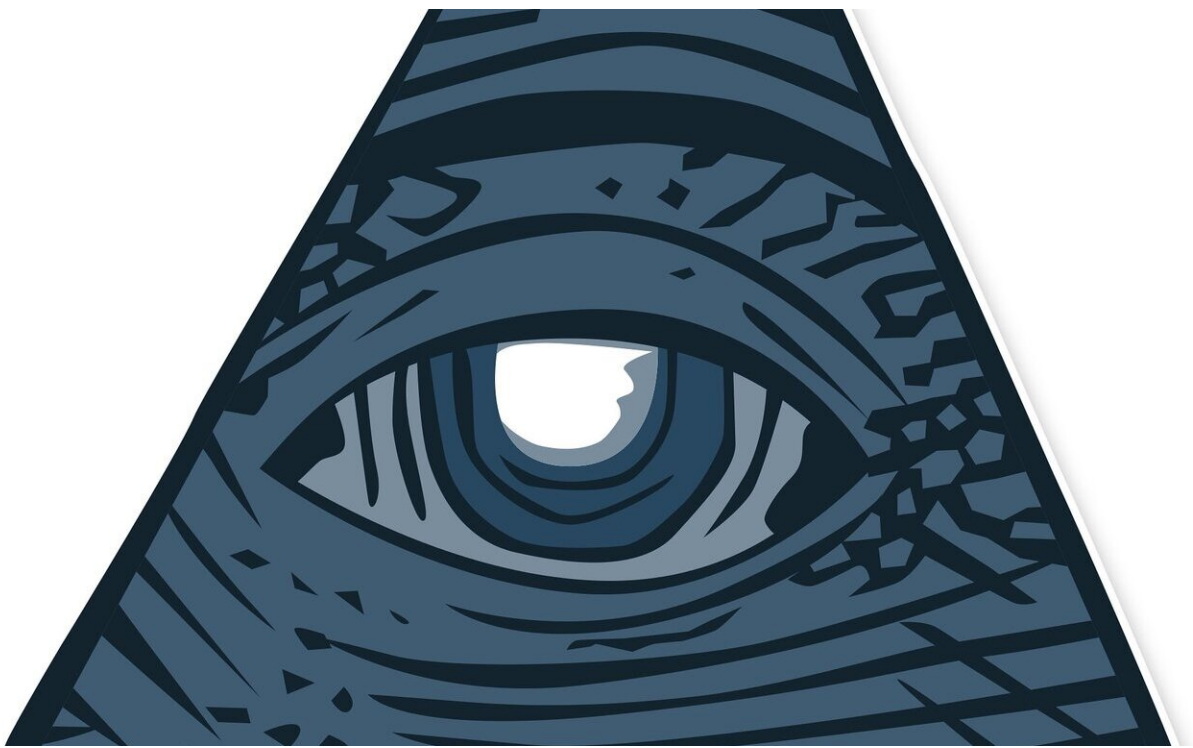


# Americans are bad at recognizing conspiracy theories when they believe they're true, says study

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Conspiracy theorists get a bad rap in popular culture, yet research has shown that most Americans believe conspiracy theories of some sort. Why then, if most of us believe conspiracies, do we generally think of

conspiracy theorists as loony?

New research from the University of Illinois Chicago has found that it's because people are quite bad at identifying what is or isn't a conspiracy theory when it's something they believe. The finding held true whether people self-identified as being liberal or conservative. "Conspiracy blindness" became less pronounced when study participants took more time to consider whether something was a conspiracy theory, and when they were given a definition of conspiracy theories to consider. The research is published in *PLoS ONE*.

"A lot of people believe these things, but it just never occurs to them that they may be a conspiracy theory," said JP Prims, a visiting lecturer in psychology at UIC and the study's author. After all, conspiracy theories aren't always false—think Watergate. Indeed, Prims found their way to this research after realizing that they believed a conspiracy theory: that oil and gas companies deliberately hide information on [climate change](#).

Prims showed that people were bad at labeling their beliefs as conspiracy theories across two studies, each with roughly 250 online participants.

The first study asked participants to read summaries of news articles, half of which came from mainstream outlets that did not contain conspiracies and half from conspiracy news sites that did. The second study was similar but used statements that either did or did not include a conspiracy, as opposed to real articles. Examples of the conspiracies included that [pharmaceutical companies](#) push state governments to require vaccinations or that 5G [wireless networks](#) pose health risks.

Participants then rated how true they thought the article or statement was and whether it contained a conspiracy. In both studies, the more a participant believed the conspiracy article or statement, the more difficulty they had recognizing it as a conspiracy. Participants were also

less likely to correctly identify conspiracy theories when they made their decision quickly.

The second study included an additional element. Half the participants were given a definition of conspiracy theories at the outset. It included three elements: a group of powerful people is working together to accomplish a goal, they are trying to keep this work secret and they are acting at the expense of others. The other participants did not get this definition in advance. Yet all participants were given a checklist of these three items when considering whether each statement contained a conspiracy. Those who had been specifically told this was the definition of a conspiracy theory were more likely to correctly identify conspiracies, Prims found.

Importantly, in this second study, identifying something as a [conspiracy theory](#) did not make people less likely to believe it. This finding is important for those who believe that debunking conspiracy theories will prompt people to change their beliefs—an admirable pursuit given that many conspiracy theories are false and potentially dangerous.

Instead, the goal should perhaps be to make people more aware that they're not alone in their belief in conspiracy theories, Prims said.

"Having your beliefs labeled as conspiracy theories can be very alienating," they said. "Recognizing that this is much more common than we think might address some of that isolation and those feelings of disconnection from society."

**More information:** *PLoS ONE* (2024). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0301601](#). [journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0301601](#)

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