Who Believes in Conspiracy Theories in Great Britain and Europe?

HUGO DROCHON

From the assassination of JFK to Donald Trump, who launched his political career with the “birther” movement that challenged Barack Obama’s U.S. citizenship, not to mention Roswell, the moon landings and Sandy Hook, are conspiracy theories the preserve of the United States? Two conspiracy theory surveys—the first of their kind—conducted with YouGov in Great Britain in February 2015 (England, Scotland, and Wales excluding Northern Ireland) and across Europe in March 2016 (Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, and Sweden), show that they are not. The British and Europeans are as likely—in some cases even more likely—to believe in at least one conspiracy theory as are the Americans. After all, the British can claim as their own David Icke, who believes the royal family are in fact extraterrestrial “archonic” reptilian beings (lizards); the Holocaust denier-in-chief David Irving; and indeed theories about how—and why—Lady Diana came to pass. On the Continent, Holocaust denial remains rife: we found that 25% of young Polish men believe that “the official account of the Nazi Holocaust is a lie and the number of Jews killed by the Nazis during World War II has been exaggerated on purpose,” while we were not allowed to ask that question in Germany where Holocaust denial is illegal.

These initial findings suggest that the strongest explanatory factor for belief in conspiracy theories is complete exclusion. By this is meant political exclusion, a deep distrust of political institutions and a rejection of the political system as a whole, married to economic exclusion, being poorer financially and in terms of education. Complete exclusion is valid both domestically in Great Britain and in Europe internationally. Poorer and less democratic countries, as measured by indices such as GDP, the Democracy Index, Transparency International, and the Gini coefficient (which measures inequality within a country) return higher levels of conspiracy thinking than those that do better. For example Portugal, which fares worse on these indices, experiences much higher levels of conspiracy thinking than does Sweden, which
does better. So countries in which inequality is higher and democracy is considered not to be functioning as well as it should—that is, where citizens feel excluded politically and economically—will exhibit higher levels of conspiracy thinking.

More research needs to be done to confirm these preliminary findings—the discussion here is not meant to be conclusive so much as to motivate future analysis. The study does reveal, however, a deep malaise at the heart of Western liberal democracies. Conspiracy theories here appear to be more the symptom than the cause of disenchantment with democracy. It is not conspiracy theories that lead to the disenchantment with democracy, rather it is disenchantment with democracy that leads to conspiracy theories. This implies that policies that aim at better political and economic integration will help reduce conspiracy thinking.

American Conspiracy Theories

In 2014 Uscinski and Parent, in American Conspiracy Theories, set about dispelling a number of myths, most prominent among these the notion that there is a rising tide of conspiracy theories in the United States. Their work shows that, apart from peaks in the 1890s and the 1950s, conspiracy thinking has actually remained quite stable over the last century and, the X-Files notwithstanding, has even started to tail off since the 1960s. Other myths they challenge include the idea that American men are more likely than woman to speculate (they are not), or that those who engage in conspiracy thinking tend to live on the political extremes of society (independents are as likely, in their findings, to be prone to catch the bug).

Certain stereotypes, however, seem confirmed: Conspiracy theorists are more likely to be poor, both financially and in terms of education; are more likely to have a narrower group of friends (isolation); and are more likely to see violence as a solution to their problems and those of society. Perhaps one of the most interesting conclusions of their study is that Republicans and Democrats are as likely as one another to be conspiracy theorists. Which one is more prone to start speculating at any given time depends on who is in power. If the Democrats are in power, expect theories from the right (communist takeover plots à la Manchurian candidate), while when it’s the Republicans’ turn, expect the left to cast the allegations (big business in cahoots with the government). In any case, on Uscinski and Parent’s account, conspiracy theories track power: when one is out of it, one is more likely to theorize. Conspiracy theories are therefore a reaction to being away or out of power and fearing the consequences. The link to perceived menace is reproduced on the international stage—foreign threats are a strong trigger for conspiracy thinking.

Uscinski and Parent close their book with a few suggestions for future research. The first and most obvious issue that arises is that their study concentrates solely on the United States. What would our findings be if we ran the same or similar, adapted to their contexts, opinion surveys in Europe? What kind of answers would we get
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across western, eastern, southern and northern Europe? Are conspiracy theories as rife across the European political spectrum? Are European men and women as likely to dip into the well?

British Conspiracy Theories

On the 3rd and 4th of February 2015, YouGov polled a representative sample of 1,759 adults across Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales, but excluding Northern Ireland). We asked our respondents to agree or disagree with a series of statements about conspiracy theories involving AIDS, aliens, Sharia law, 9/11, and global warming. Overall, only a minority of the British public believe in individual conspiracy theories: 8% percent agreed with the statement “The AIDS virus was created and spread around the world on purpose by a secret group or organization”; 14% believe that “Humans have made contact with aliens but this fact has been deliberately hidden from the public”; 11% that “The U.S. government played a deliberate role in making the 9/11 terrorist attacks happen in America on the 11th September, 2001”; 18% think that “Some courts in the U.K. legal system are choosing to adopt Islamic ‘Sharia’ law”; and 18% hold that “The idea of man-made global warming is a hoax that was deliberately invented to deceive people.”

How does this compare with the United States? Working with a different set of conspiracy beliefs, Eric Oliver and Thomas Wood found that 52% of Americans believed in at least one of seven conspiracy theories surrounding the Iraq War, 9/11, Obama’s birthplace, Wall Street, chemtrails, George Soros, and light bulbs. In our case, we found that 55% of respondents agreed with at least one of the statements about the secret group, AIDS, aliens, Sharia law, or climate change. Conspiracy theories are thus not a U.S. speciality: the British are as likely, if not marginally more, to believe in at least one conspiracy theory as are the Americans. Whereas Oliver and Wood found that 19% of Americans believe that 9/11 was an inside job, we found that 11% of British thought it too; and 18% of British believe that climate change is a hoax compared to 13% in the United States.

Two questions we asked, however, returned significantly higher results. Fifty-five percent of respondents agreed with the statement, “The Government is deliberately hiding the truth about how many immigrants really live in this country,” and 52% concurred with the view that “Officials of the European Union are gradually seeking to take over all law-making powers in this country.” Conducted one year before the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom (June 23, 2016), these strongly held views about immigration and the European Union’s encroachment into U.K. sovereignty—the two main arguments made in favor of leaving the European Union—was to presage what was to come. In fact, these numbers mirrored exactly the final Brexit vote. A note of caution here nonetheless: these two questions are not simply tapping into conspiracy thinking in the same manner as questions on aliens
do, but are contained an overarching ideological element and reference to political context, to which we shall return.

For Uscinski and Parent, the essence of conspiratorial thinking revolves around the notion that "powerful groups covertly control events against the common good." As such, the key question we asked in our survey was, "Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments, media organizations, and companies, there is a secret group of powerful people who really control world events like wars and economic crises." Whoever answered yes to that question (secret cabal) we took to be a conspiracy theorist.

Uscinski and Parent found that 27% of American respondents agreed with this statement, and in Great Britain that figure was 34%.\(^2\) If we take into account the fact that a greater proportion of American respondents chose the intermediate "neither agree nor disagree" option, any disparity vanishes. Among those polled who had a firm opinion, 47% of British respondents agreed, compared to 46% of the American respondents.

Again, not much separates the Americans from their cousins across the pond, and our survey reproduced a number of their main findings. Notably, we found that women (35%) are as likely as men (33%) to answer in the affirmative the question concerning the secret cabal. On that same question, those of a lower socioeconomic grade responded positively 41% of the time while only 29% of the higher grade did.

This aligns with Uscinski and Parent’s findings that individuals with lower financial status and levels of education are more prone to speculate. In this regard, far-right UKIP voters—considered to be more on the “extremes” of the political spectrum—were only marginally more likely to agree with the statement than were left-wing Labour voters (considered more mainstream, at least before Jeremy Corbyn took over in September 2015), at 46% and 43% respectively. Indeed, Labour and Conservative voters are almost exactly as likely to believe in at least one conspiracy theory. The percentage for Labour voters stands at 54%, while Conservatives are at 53%. So conspiracy thinking is rife across the political spectrum, and not just limited to its extremes.

But are they more prevalent at the extremes? On questions concerning conspiracy theories surrounding AIDS, aliens, and 9/11, often considered to appeal more to the left side of the political spectrum, UKIP voters find themselves in good company with Labour voters. So to questions such as “The AIDS virus was created and spread around the world on purpose by a secret group or organization,” ‘Humans have made contact with aliens but this fact has been deliberately hidden from the public,” and “The U.S. Government played a deliberate role in making the 9/11 terrorist attacks happen in American on 11th September, 2001,” UKIP voters (18% of respondents) align well with Labour voters (14%).

On questions such as “Some courts in the U.K. legal system are choosing to adopt Islamic ‘Sharia’ law,” “The government is deliberately hiding the truth about how many immigrants really live in this country,” “Officials of the European Union
are gradually seeking to take over all law-making powers in this country,” and “The idea of man-made global warming is a hoax that was deliberately invented to deceive people”—this time thought to be more right-wing—here, UKIP voters find themselves closer to Conservatives, although they feel much more intensely about them. Thus 87% of UKIP voters believe the government is deliberately misleading the public as to the true number of immigrants in the United Kingdom compared to 52% for Conservatives and 57% for Labour (only 37% for the centrist Liberal-Democrats). Regarding the question of an E.U. takeover, 87% of UKIP voters agree with our statement compared to 67% for the Conservatives and 42% and 38% for Labour and Lib-Dem voters respectively.

So, right-wing voters have been against the European Union for some time, which is why Theresa May seems to have no option but to pursue a hard Brexit. Labour has its difficulties, too: a significant number, although not a majority, of its voters are opposed to the European Union, but immigration is a real concern, which is why Jeremy Corbyn and Keir Starmer are trying to square single-market membership with control over immigration.

Caveats surrounding the more highly politicized nature of these questions notwithstanding, these findings tend to suggest that while Uscinski and Parent are correct in underlining how conspiracy theorists exist across the political spectrum, some are nonetheless felt more commonly at the extremes, at least in terms of the far right, and certainly less forcefully at the center. The conspiracy theories backed by UKIP voters are usually thought of as right-wing ones—although they are as inclined as left-wing voters to believe what are usually thought of as left-wing conspiracy theories, and this cross-cutting again suggests that more extreme voters are more receptive to conspiratorial accounts.

As it happens, at the time of the survey both the parties to the left and furthest to the right of the political spectrum—Labour and UKIP—were out of power. At first glance, this thus seemed to confirm Uscinski and Parent’s central claim that conspiracy theories negatively track power: if you’re out of it, you are more likely to speculate. While 43% of Labour voters and 43% of UKIP voters agreed with the key “secret cabal controlling all world events” statement, only 27% did for Conservatives and 17% for the Lib-Dems, the coalition at the time. What is the main explanatory factor here? Being on the political fringes, or being out of power? More research must be undertaken to answer this question.

Our survey found that physical distance from power does not increase one’s propensity to speculate. Levels of conspiracy thinking were relatively stable across the regions of London, Rest of South, Midlands/Wales, and the North. In fact, the area with the lowest returns in terms of conspiracy theorizing was actually Scotland, the furthest from Westminster (although Scotland does have its own parliament). On the question of secret groups running things, the Scottish sample thought it true for 25% of respondents, compared to 34% for London and the Rest of South and 36% for Midlands/Wales and the North. Scotland, of course, has its own
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parliament—but given that the survey was conducted less than half a year after the Scottish independence referendum (September 18, 2014), a higher degree of political turmoil might have been expected (our relatively low sampling size—160 out of 1,749—means we are unable to confirm our findings more broadly).

The Scottish results, however, do give rise to the question of whether we should be concerning ourselves less with physical distance than with perceived distance from power. One could live in London and feel more distant, in a very direct and personal way, from power than someone living further away (on questions of AIDS and 9/11, London actually leads the way). It is perhaps more the experience of feeling closer or excluded from power that is central here. It is this sense of exclusion, this chapter suggests, that is key in understanding conspiracy theories.

European Conspiracy Theories

In March 2016 we extended our survey to six European countries: again in Great Britain, but also in Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Sweden. Our aim was to compare European democracy East/West and North/South. All Continental countries use proportional representation: Germany uses a “mixed-member proportional representation,” where you vote both for a candidate and for a list; and Italy, Poland, Portugal, and Sweden all use the “party list” system, some with minimum thresholds. This would then allow us to test Uscinski and Parent’s hypothesis that countries with proportional representation might return lower levels of conspiracy thinking, because citizens would feel more represented. However, if political exclusion, as suggested in the introduction, is a key factor in conspiracy theorizing, we would expect to find that proportional representation will have no measurable impact on the level of conspiracy thinking, as it only addresses representation within the political system itself. Conspiracy theorists reject the political system as a whole. Indeed, our preliminary pilot findings show that the feeling of being represented has little bearing on whether one is likely to be a conspiracy theorist, which suggests that whether the political system is representative or not will have no impact whatsoever on the prevalence of conspiracy thinking.

Political disenfranchisement is a complicated matter, but there are socioeconomic factors associated with it, too. We might thus expect to find that countries—namely Sweden, in this case—that are richer in terms of GDP and have lower levels of inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient, alongside generally high rankings in Transparency International and Democracy Index and to whom we might impart a higher level of sociopolitical integration, might return lower levels of conspiracy thinking. This addresses the second key factor we identified in the introduction, namely economic exclusion, which might then translate into feelings of higher political integration. Conversely, we would expect to find that countries that are poorer and have higher Gini coefficients, in particular Portugal, which also ranks lower on
the Transparency and Democracy Index scales, would return higher instances of conspiracy thinking than, for example, Sweden, even though it uses almost exactly the same proportional list system (Sweden has minimum thresholds). For comparison: worldwide Sweden is ranked 15th on GDP, 8th on Gini coefficient, 4th by Transparency International, and 3rd on the Democracy Index, whereas Portugal is 42nd, 29th, 29th, and 28th respectively.

And that is indeed what we did find. On the key question of the secret cabal running the world, a whopping 47% of Portuguese agreed, compared to only 10% of Swedes. Indeed, Sweden was the only country in which the answer “None of these [statements concerning conspiracy theories] are true” came out on top, at 49%, whereas in all the other countries the statement “Even though we live in what’s called a democracy, a few people will always run things in this country anyway” came first (70%) in Portugal. Moreover, whereas we found that among all countries at least half of the population believes in at least one conspiracy theory—thus making the Europeans as likely to do so as the Americans—Sweden was the only country in our sample in which a plurality said that none of the statements about conspiracy theories were true (35%), whereas in Portugal 24% of respondents thought that three of the statements were true.

The question “The government is deliberately hiding the truth about how many immigrants really live in this country” yielded some interesting results, too. The view that that is the case remained stubbornly high in Great Britain at 41%—remember, three months later the U.K. would vote to leave the European Union. It was even higher in Germany, at 42%, most probably in reaction to Merkel’s decision the summer before, in 2015, to allow in Syrian refugees. This would lead to the rise of the far-right anti-immigration party “Alternative for Germany,” which for the first time in its history broke into the Bundestag in the general election of September 2017. It was also relatively high in Sweden, at 31%, and we will see whether that has an impact on Swedish elections due in September 2018 and whether such a view will help the nationalist and anti-immigration Swedish Democrats. The level is lower in Italy (29%) where the vast majority of immigrants first land (over 80% for the first half of 2017), and it is the lowest in Portugal at 16%. The difference between place of first arrival and final destination may account for this difference.

Another interesting result was to the question, “Secret plots that harm the nation are more common in this country than in other countries,” which came out high in Poland (31%) and Portugal (29%) whereas in Great Britain, Germany, and Sweden it was all under 10%. Might this continued fear of a foreign enemy interfering in the affairs of the country find its source in the countries’ authoritarian past? Or being beside a bigger and domineering neighbor?

So what are we to conclude from this survey? Do conspiracy theories track power, as Uscinski and Parent argue? At the time of the survey Great Britain, Germany, and Poland had center-right (or in Poland’s case right-wing) governments, while in Italy, Portugal, and Sweden the governments were center-left. In our survey we
found that across Europe, right-wing respondents more readily accepted conspiracy theory statements. Whether conspiracy theories are to be located more to the left or to the right of the political scale is a highly subjective matter, but in asking about conspiracy theories surrounding immigration, global warming, secret plots, AIDS, aliens, and Holocaust denial, we had hoped to have covered the entire spectrum.

In any case, as we saw above, conspiracy theories about the government concealing the number of immigrants there are in the country—one we might clearly identify as being right-wing—are widely believed in countries that have both left-wing governments (Sweden, Italy at 29%) and right-wing ones (Germany, Great Britain); and countries where they are less widely believed—Poland (20%), Portugal—have either a right-wing (Poland) or a left-wing (Portugal) government. So conspiracy theories about immigrants are believed regardless of which party is in power. Indeed, the two countries that have the highest belief in conspiracy theories surrounding immigrants (Germany and Great Britain) both have right-wing governments, which confirms the view that these beliefs are held by right-wing respondents even though their party is in power (and in fact, in Germany many shifted even more to the right—to the AfD—because of immigration).

Like in our pilot, we found that physical distance from power played little to no role in conspiracy theorising. While there seems to be a level of resentment toward Berlin in Germany, a more decentralized regime, we again found no devolution effect for Wales or Scotland in Great Britain.

What about religion? The U.S. example suggested religion might play a role, and we found evidence of it here, too, although not in the manner one might have expected. It won’t have been lost on the reader that the countries that turned out higher degrees of conspiracy thinking are Catholic countries, but it would be a mistake to associate conspiracy theories directly with Catholicism. Instead, religion played a role if it was a minority position within the country. So if one is highly religious in Sweden, Great Britain, Poland, or Germany, then one is more likely to be a conspiracy theorist, thus cutting across confessional lines of Protestant (Sweden, Great Britain, Germany) or Catholic (Poland). Indeed, it is in Sweden where religion is most strongly linked to conspiracy theorizing, such that if you are highly religious in a country that is highly secularized—43% of respondents concurred with the statement that “none of what happens in my life is caused by a ‘higher force’ such as God, fate, or destiny”—then you are more likely to be a conspiracy theorist. Inversely, if you are highly religious in Portugal or Italy, countries somewhat less secular—in these two countries respondents were more likely to believe that “some of what happens in my life is caused by a ‘higher force’ such as God, fate, or destiny”—then you are in fact less likely to be a conspiracy theorist.

Being in a minority brings us back to the issue of exclusion. And indeed the stereotype of the white, working class, middle-aged man as the prototypical conspiracy theorist held true here again—with the sole caveat that it is not only lacking tertiary education that is a strong predictor, but being out of work, that is, being economically
excluded. That was even stronger. Social integration—we asked about membership of church or religious organizations; art, music or cultural organizations; political parties; environmental organizations; organizations providing assistance to people; sports clubs or hobby groups—had, in fact, little impact on conspiracy thinking. Yes, Sweden had the highest participation and Portugal the lowest, but Great Britain, which came second lowest on the cabal question at 13% behind Sweden at 10%, has almost as many people who are not part of any type of organization (60%) as Portugal (64%—in Sweden that figure is 48%). After all, one might be very well integrated into one’s group, but that doesn’t mean that group isn’t excluded from power (think of African Americans in the United States). Nor can we add that being optimistic about the economy, or whether one wanted more or less intervention in the economy, have much predictive power when it came to conspiracy thinking.

**Conclusion**

Attempts to address conspiracy theories have often been made at the individual level, trying to draw conspiracy theorists away from their beliefs by rationally and psychologically pointing out the pitfalls of their theoretical constructs. This has met with some success but has often butted up against the “self-sealing” character of conspiracy theories: if you are trying to convince them otherwise, you must be part of the plot. Our research suggests that conspiracy theories might be addressed at a more structural level too. Policies supporting political and economic integration—policies that address questions of inequality, integration, and political participation—might help in reducing the degree of conspiracy thinking within a country. Education is also a promising route to explore. Sweden ranks higher in the OECD’s PISA test than does Portugal, and within individual countries those with higher education are less likely to believe in conspiracy theories than those with lower educational achievements.

As such, conspiracy theories appear not to be the cause of disenchantment with democracy but rather its symptom, which has to do with political and economic disenfranchisement. Addressing those would surely reduce the number of conspiracy theorists living within our midst. However—and however tempting it might be in the age of Trump, where conspiracy theories and “fake news” played a key role in his election—it would be a mistake to want to eradicate them completely, even if that were possible. As Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule have argued, conspiracy theorists suffer from “crippled epistemologies” in the sense that “they know very few things, and what they know is wrong,” as they put it. But conspiracy theories, once they do not come to dominate entirely the public sphere, are in fact the price to pay for the existence of a critical public sphere. Christopher Hitchens has spoken of conspiracy theories as the “exhaust fumes” of democracy. Yes, conspiracy theorists tend to get it wrong, but the skeptical
mindset they participate in, when used correctly, is essential to the proper functioning of modern democracies. To want to eradicate that completely would be to want to eradicate all dissent.

Of course our survey has focused on relatively stable European liberal democracies, but who believes in conspiracy theories in unstable, authoritarian, or semi-authoritarian regimes? Clearly more research is needed.

We have already extended our survey to Argentina, one of the most unequal societies in the world, where conspiracy theories are rife: 31% believe a secret cabal rules the world; 25% that there are secret plots against it (a legacy of CIA involvement?); 25% that humans have made contact with aliens but this has been covered up; and 21% that the AIDS virus was created on purpose. These last two by far the highest, more than double what one finds in Europe. A recent study of Greece, which is currently going through a difficult period, suggests that up to 80% of the population thinks that “there are secret organizations working behind the scenes and pulling strings”—no doubt linked to the presence of the Troika in the country (European Commission, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund)—and 27% believe in chemtrails. In the Middle East, 78% of respondents think 9/11 was the work either of the CIA or Mossad. If conspiracy theories shift from being a minority to a majority sport, how are we to understand them and the role they play in their societies? That will be for future research to explore.

Notes

2. Uscinski and Parent’s wording was slightly different: “Big events like wars, the current recession, and the outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people who are working in secret against the rest of us.”
3. The nature of our revised survey, which only allowed for binary yes/no answers, instead of the pilot, which allowed for a range from “Definitely true, Probably true, Don’t know, Probably not true, Definitely not True,” where the trues and not trues were tallied up, gave us slightly different results.
5. See Tanya Filer’s chapter in this collection.