Trust Nobody: How Voters React to Conspiracy Theories *

Giovanna Invernizzi† Ahmed Ezzeldin Mohamed ‡

August 27, 2020

Abstract

With the advent of social media, conspiracy theories became integrated into salient political debates, yet the scope of their implications on citizens' political behavior remains unclear. Using an online experiment among US subjects, we show that conspiracy theories decrease voters' trust in political institutions, such as mainstream parties and courts, as well as information providers. Subjects were exposed to conspiracy theories that are completely unrelated to American domestic politics, which further underscores the danger of such narratives. Results, however, suggest that voters do not weigh unrelated conspiracies in their evaluation of politicians' performance. Overall, our findings illustrate that an informational environment permeated by conspiracy theories could impede the functioning of democracy by eroding trust in its institutions, but that voters' capacity to keep politicians accountable is resilient to unrelated information.

Keywords: Accountability, Conspiracy Theories, Scandals, Trust.

---

*We are grateful to Alessandra Casella and Donald Green for their valuable suggestions. We would also like to thank Adam Zelizer, Brendan Nyhan, Andrew Guess, Nikolay Marinov, Robert Shapiro, Kai Ou and audience members at the 2019 MPSA Annual Meeting, 2020 SPSA Annual Meeting and 2020 Harvard Experimental Working Conference for their helpful comments. This research was funded by the Columbia Experimental Laboratory for the Social Sciences (CELSS).

†Department of Political Science, Columbia University, *Email*: gmi2105@columbia.edu

‡Department of Political Science, Columbia University, *Email*: aem2251@columbia.edu

With the advent of social media, the information environment has become permeated by conspiracy theories (hereafter, CTs). While many of these involve politics directly, many other prominent CTs are non-political or do not discuss domestic politics directly.[1] Could these *unrelated* CTs influence voters' attitudes towards domestic politics? We provide experimental evidence from the U.S. that they do. In our experiment, subjects exposed to *unrelated* CTs are less likely to trust American political institutions — including political parties, courts, and law enforcement agencies — as well as information providers.

While the finding that unrelated CTs negatively affect trust is alarming, our results show that the implications for accountability, if any, are mild. That is, despite the erosion of trust and the increased uncertainty generated by CTs, voters' ability to punish (reward) the incumbent after observing negative (positive) performance is not impeded. This finding is encouraging for the well-functioning of political accountability, with the following caveat. Because we study CTs that are unrelated to domestic politics, our results arguably identify a lower bound on the effect of CTs on politics. Today, conspiracy theories are employed by political actors to incite partisanship and uncover nuanced political information about domestic political affairs. These CTs can impede accountability insofar as they diverge voters' attention with false accounts of current political events. What our results suggest is that spreading uncertainty and mistrust is not enough to break democratic accountability.

[1]The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has called attention to several foreign CTs, such as the idea that the virus was intentionally released by China: see Fisher, M. (2020) "Why Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories Flourish. And Why It Matters", *New York Times*, 8 April.

Conspiracy Theories and Political Accountability

In line with recent work (Einstein and Glick, 2015; Miller, Saunders and Farhart, 2016), we define conspiracy theories as *alternative false accounts of events based on some true facts, describing a secret plot by powerful perpetrators.*[2] The literature hints at two mechanisms by which CTs might hinder accountability. First, CTs decrease voters' trust in institutions. Existing work shows that exposure to CTs related to domestic political institutions lowers voters' political engagement (Uscinski and Parent, 2014) and trust in government (Einstein and Glick, 2015; Kim and Cao, 2016). We hypothesize that even exposure to CTs that are *unrelated* to domestic political institutions — providing no information or partisan cues — decreases trust in these institutions **(hypothesis 1)**. This is because CTs — by definition — demonize the powerful and call for doubting their motives. Individuals could derive insights-by-analogy: learning about conspiracies in other contexts could lead individuals to suspect the trustworthiness of their own political institutions.

Second, conspiratorial narratives could hinder accountability by reducing the perceived accuracy of the information received by voters (Bräuninger and Marinov, 2020). Conspiracies cast doubt on mainstream beliefs and narratives. This creates noise and confusion in the information environment, which detracts voters from incorporating new information into their political evaluations and increases

[2]Note that CTs and factual misinformation are certainly related, yet fundamentally distinct. Fake news refer to any incorrect concept that can be verified with fact checking, while conspiracies cannot be verified.

their suspicions towards information providers.[3] We argue that any CT can decrease the value of new information, and hypothesize that unrelated conspiracies reduce the weight voters put on new information and their trust in information providers **(hypothesis 2)**.

How should the trust and information mechanisms affect political accountability? This depends on whether voters receive good or bad news about politicians' performance. The trust mechanism (hypothesis 1) implies that exposure to CTs has a constant negative effect on voters' support for the government: i.e., a decrease in trust in political institutions should always hurt the incumbent, regardless of performance. Conversely, the informational mechanism (hypothesis 2) suggests that voters exposed to CTs should react less to news about the incumbent's performance. Hence, we expect the two mechanisms to go in the same direction of discounting positive information when voters are informed of good news regarding the government. However, when voters are exposed to bad news, the effects on political support will go in opposite directions: positive for the information channel (discounting bad news), and negative for the trust mechanism **(hypothesis 3)**.[4] Hence, exposure to conspiracies can be particularly detrimental to accountability when the government performs well.

[3]Many observers of Trump's political strategies seem to acknowledge this point: see Rosen, J. (2018) "Why Trump is Winning and the Press is Losing", *New York Review of Books online*, 15 April.

[4]All the hypotheses reported in the paper were pre-registered: https://osf.io/esva8/. Additional pre-registered hypotheses are analyzed in the Appendix.

Experiment

We conducted an experiment on MTurk among 2500 U.S. subjects. Details of our sample can be found in the Appendix. The experiment tests whether exposure to unrelated CTs affects voters' (i) trust in political institutions, (ii) perceptions about the informational environment, and (iii) support for the government. The experiment manipulates two factors: subjects' exposure to CTs and the type of political information they evaluate.

After answering a set of background questions, subjects are randomly assigned to watch a video of a conspiracy theory or a placebo. The conspiracy video discusses alternative explanations regarding the burning of Notre-Dame Cathedral in France: in particular, it suggests that the official narrative might be a cover-up by some actors with special interests.[5] The video matches our definition of a conspiracy theory as it provides pieces of true information to build an alternative narrative and casts suspicion on the mainstream official narrative. It also does not directly make any mention of American political debates. Hence, it represents an *unrelated* CT, as it contains no information on the subsequent information that subjects evaluate or clear partisan cues. Subjects in the control condition watch an entertaining placebo video of similar length.[6] To ensure maximum exposure to the conspiracy treatment, subjects are told before the video is displayed that a set of related questions would follow the video, and that the accuracy of the

[5] A link to both videos can be found in the Appendix.

[6] The video discusses several reasons for why humans cannot ride zebras.

responses would affect the amount of the bonus received.[7] To ensure symmetry in the experimental design, subjects watching the placebo video also answer the same number of incentivized questions related to the video's content.

Subjects are then randomly assigned to read one of two articles discussing the performance of the Trump administration. The first article provides a list of political scandals (negative information) that hit the Trump administration. The second article presents a list of achievements (positive information) covering improvements in employment rates and provision of health services, as of October 2019.

The material used in the treatments was selected to resemble online content salient on social media. The conspiracy video was obtained from a YouTube channel that often sponsors conspiratorial explanations of political events. The scandal information was obtained from mainstream media sources, while the achievements' list was mostly collected from governmental sources. In our selection of both forms of information, we avoided partisan-charged articles in favor of a simpler presentation of fact-based arguments, to enable subjects to focus on the informational content.

We focus on three sets of outcome variables to test our main hypotheses.[8] Our first outcome of interest is *trust in political institutions*, measured by an index of subjects' trust in a set of institutions including: courts, supreme court, CIA, FBI, and leaders of both the Democratic and Republican Party.

[7]Subjects' total bonus for answering correctly all the five question was $1.25, in addition to the $0.25 show-up fee. Overall, subjects performed well in this task: the median payment was $1, which corresponds to 4/5 correct answers.

[8]All the outcome variables can be found in the Appendix.

The second set of outcomes evaluates voters' perceptions about the informational environment using two measures. First, after voters read the article on the current administration, they are asked to evaluate its accuracy. This measure gauges whether the treatment reduces the weight voters put on new informational content. The second measure is a summative index of voters' *trust in information providers* including: liberal media, conservative media, alternative media, government think-tanks, non-government think-tanks, universities, social media and online search-engines.

The third set of outcomes evaluates support for the current administration as: willingness to vote for President Trump in the next election, assessment of the administration's performance, opposition to the investigations into the President's misconduct, and opposition to the President's impeachment. These measures capture different forms of support, with the last two being particular to the Trump's administration. We have no reasons to expect different treatment effects on them. We create an index averaging these outcome measures, which we refer to as *political support score*.

Results

The first question we ask is whether exposure to a CT unrelated to domestic politics reduces trust in political institutions and the informational environment. Figure 1 shows that this is the case in both the achievement and scandal conditions. Trust in political institutions and information providers is significantly lower, by about 2 percentage points, for treated subjects. Exposure to conspiracies also reduces the perceived accuracy of the informational content of the article

significantly, by about 5 percentage points. This supports our theoretical propositions that exposure to unrelated CTs can distort the political and informational environments by reducing voters' trust in political and information-providing institutions, as well as, the credibility of new information.

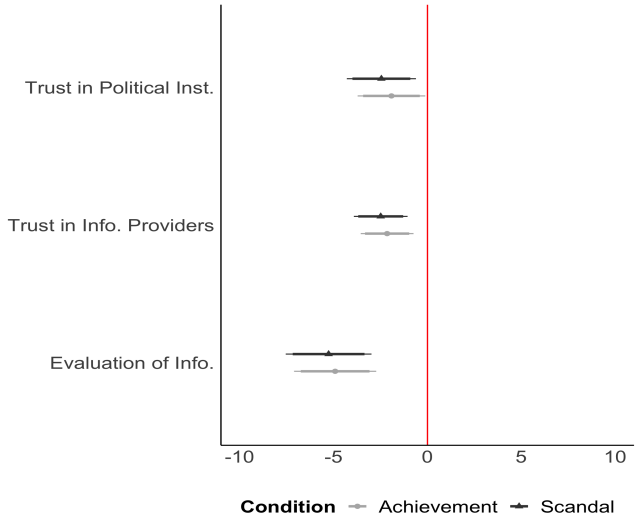

Figure 1 – Trust and Information variables. The plot displays the estimated treatment effect in the achievement condition (light-colored circle) and scandal condition (dark-colored triangle). Confidence intervals are at the 90 and 95 percent levels.

We then test whether CTs affect accountability. Figure 2 displays the political support score, ranging from 0 to 100, for each experimental condition. In the scandal condition (right) we observe no effect for CTs. In the achievements condition (left), CTs seem to have a minor effect on accountability in the predicted negative direction, although the effect is not statistically significant. These re-

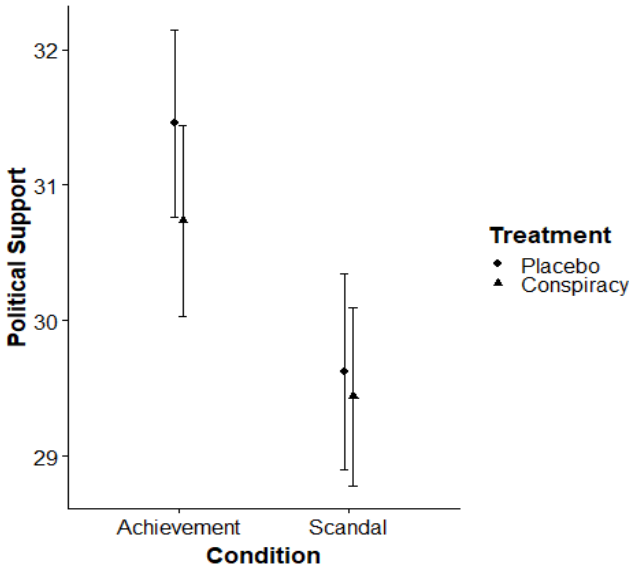

Figure 2 – Political Support score for each experimental condition. The plot displays the control and treatment means in the achievement condition (left) and scandal condition (right). Confidence intervals are at the 90 percent level.

sults suggest that CTs with no informational content or partisan cues related to the evaluated government do not distort voters' political evaluations.[9]

Conclusion

Our most robust finding is that exposure to conspiracy theories decreases trust in political institutions and the information environment. Importantly, we show that mere exposure matters even when the conspiracy theory is completely detached from the political entities evaluated. This finding is alarming. While recent work has shown that exposure to online misinformation is confined to

[9]We find some evidence for heterogeneous treatment effects by partisanship, religiosity, race and political knowledge, which we analyze in the Appendix.

limited circles and remains far below consumption of mainstream media (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler, 2018; Grinberg et al., 2019), our results show that even *minimal exposure to misinformation* — CTs unrelated to salient domestic political events — affects how individuals trust mainstream information providers and process new information. We also find that CTs generate these effects regardless of other features of the informational environment; whether other political information is positive or negative.

Despite that, our results suggest that voters do not weigh "useless" information such as unrelated conspiracies in their evaluation of politicians' performance. This provides an optimistic insight for accountability and the functioning of democracy, by showing that uncertainty and mistrust are not sufficient for politicians to deploy CTs to their advantage. Given the growing interest in how CTs might help politicians evade electoral punishment, our conclusion that mere exposure to conspiracies has no effect on evaluations of bad politicians could guide future work towards exploring other causal mechanisms by which conspiracies operate, including the provision of information about political actors and strengthening partisanship. Political conspiracies might have different implications for voters' behavior, and their effect on accountability remains unknown and a fruitful area for future research.

References

Bräuninger, Thomas and Nikolay Marinov. 2020. "An Informational Theory of Political Conspiracies." *Unpublished manuscript* .

Einstein, Katherine L and David M Glick. 2015. "Do I Think BLS Data Are BS? The Consequences of Conspiracy Theories." *Political Behavior* 37(3):679–701.

Grinberg, Nir, Kenneth Joseph, Lisa Friedland, Briony Swire-Thompson and David Lazer. 2019. "Fake News on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election." *Science* 363(6425):374–378.

Guess, Andrew, Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler. 2018. "Selective Exposure to Misinformation: Evidence from the Consumption of Fake News during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Campaign." *European Research Council* p. 49.

Kim, Minchul and Xiaoxia Cao. 2016. "The Impact of Exposure to Media Messages Promoting Government Conspiracy Theories on Distrust in the Government: Evidence from a Two-Stage Randomized Experiment." *International Journal of Communication* 10:20.

Miller, Joanne M, Kyle L Saunders and Christina E Farhart. 2016. "Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning: The Moderating Roles of Political Knowledge and Trust." *American Journal of Political Science* 60(4):824–844.

Uscinski, Joseph E. and Joseph M. Parent. 2014. *American Conspiracy Theories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.