



RESEARCH ARTICLE  

# Trust Nobody: How Voters React to Conspiracy Theories

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## Abstract



How does exposure to conspiracy theories affects voters' political attitudes? Using an online experiment among US subjects, we show that exposure to conspiracy theories decreases voters' trust in the domestic informational environment. Subjects were exposed to conspiracy theories that are entirely unrelated to American domestic politics, which further underscores such narratives' danger. However, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that voters do not weigh unrelated conspiracies in their evaluation of politicians' performance and domestic political institutions. Overall, our findings illustrate that an informational environment permeated by conspiracy theories could impede the functioning of democracy by eroding trust in information providers and undermining the credibility of political information.

**Keywords:** Accountability; conspiracy theories; trust

The proliferation of conspiracy theories (hereafter, CTs) in the online sphere and the endorsement of some by mainstream party leaders have amplified the political significance of these narratives. In this political environment, voters are exposed to different types of CTs. Some are highly partisan and focus on salient domestic political affairs: prominent US examples include QAnon and Pizzagate. Other CTs are non-partisan and less domestically salient, such as popular CTs from foreign countries (e.g., the death of Princess Diana or the burning of the Notre-Dame Cathedral). This article focuses on the second class of CTs and asks whether and how CTs that are unrelated to domestic politics influence voters' attitudes toward their domestic information environment and politics.

We argue that exposure to CTs unrelated to partisan domestic political issues can raise uncertainty toward the domestic information environment and increase mistrust of domestic political institutions. By definition, CTs cast doubt on mainstream beliefs and narratives. Hence, regardless of the domestic relevance of their content, CTs would create noise and confusion in the information environment,

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  This article has earned badges for transparent research practices: Open Data and Open Materials. For details see the [Data Availability Statement](#).

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undermining the credibility of new information and boosting suspicions toward sources of information. CTs also call for suspecting the motives and sincerity of those in power, which might increase mistrust of domestic political institutions.

To test the effects of exposure to CTs, we run an online experiment among US subjects who identify as Republicans and Democrats. Subjects in the conspiracy treatment watch a video that is completely unrelated to the political object of their evaluation. The video discusses alternative explanations regarding the burning of Notre-Dame Cathedral, suggesting that it was not an accident. Subjects in the control condition watch a placebo video of similar length. The second experimental treatment alters whether subjects are exposed to positive or negative information involving the current government, to investigate how exposure to CTs shape voters' interaction with the informational environment. After watching the conspiracy video, subjects read some good news (achievement condition) or some scandals (scandal condition) involving the current government. Finally, subjects proceed to answer a set of questions regarding trust in various institutions and their support for the government.

The results provide strong evidence that conspiracy theories undermine voters' trust in the informational environment. Subjects in the conspiracy treatment are significantly less likely to trust information providers and the credibility of new information both in the achievement and scandal conditions. While the finding that unrelated CTs negatively affect trust in information providers is alarming, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that CTs do not affect accountability (i.e., evaluations of the incumbent government). Today, CTs are employed by political actors to fuel political polarization and present non-mainstream political information about domestic political affairs. We suggest that CTs can hurt democratic institutions insofar as they diverge voters' attention with false accounts of current political events and erode their trust in the domestic informational environment.

## Hypotheses

In line with recent work (Einstein and Glick 2015), we define conspiracy theories as *false explanations of events based on some true facts, describing a secret plot by powerful perpetrators*.<sup>1</sup> The literature hints at two mechanisms by which CTs might affect politics. First, conspiratorial narratives could reduce the perceived accuracy of the information received by voters (Bräuninger and Marinov 2022). Conspiracies challenge mainstream beliefs and narratives and question their credibility. This could detract voters from incorporating new information into their political evaluations and increase their suspicions toward information providers. We argue that any CT can decrease the value of new information and hypothesize that unrelated CTs reduce the weight voters put on new information and their trust in information providers.

### **Hypothesis 1**

*Subjects exposed to CTs report lower trust in the information environment.*

Second, CTs could decrease voters' trust in institutions. Existing work shows that exposure to CTs related to domestic political institutions lowers voters' political

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<sup>1</sup>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 CTs cannot be verified.

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.

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 their own political institutions' trustworthiness.

### **Hypothesis 2**

*Subjects exposed to CTs report lower trust in political institutions.*

How should the trust and information mechanisms affect political accountability? The answer depends on whether voters receive good or bad news about politicians' performance. The trust mechanism (Hypothesis 2) implies that exposure to CTs has a constant negative effect on voters' support for the government: that is, a decrease in trust in political institutions should always hurt the incumbent, regardless of performance. Conversely, the informational mechanism (Hypothesis 1) 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. Hence, exposure to conspiracies could be particularly detrimental to accountability when the government performs well.

### **Hypothesis 3**

- (i) *Trust Mechanism: Subjects exposed to CT report lower political support when receiving good and bad news about politicians' performance.*
- (ii) *Information Mechanism: Subjects exposed to CT report lower (higher) political support when receiving good (bad) news about politicians' performance.*

All the hypotheses reported in the paper were pre-registered. Section 6 in the Appendix reports additional pre-registered hypotheses, including heterogeneous treatment effects by partisanship, race, religion, and political knowledge.

## **The experiment**

To test the effects of exposure to CTs, we run an online experiment among US subjects who identify as Republicans and Democrats.<sup>2</sup> Because we are primarily interested in the fundamental features of conspiratorial narratives that might alter voters' attitudes, our experiment exposes subjects to a CT that is completely unrelated to the political object of their evaluation. This design choice contrasts with the

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<sup>2</sup>The experiment is conducted on MTurk among 2089 subjects. Details on the experimental procedure and materials can be found in the Appendix.

literature which studies the effect of domestically salient political CTs on political attitudes (Butler, Koopman, and Zimbardo 1995; Einstein and Glick 2015; Kim and Cao 2016). The rationale behind this choice is simple: we are interested in knowing the fundamental *modus operandi* of CTs. To do it, we need to extrapolate from the political context, which likely brings about partisan reactions to the conspiratorial narrative.

The experiment employs a 2×2 between-subjects factorial design. After answering a set of background questions, subjects are randomly assigned to watch a CT or a placebo video. The CT 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.<sup>3</sup> The video matches our definition of a CT as it provides pieces of factual 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 following information that subjects evaluate or clear partisan cues. Subjects in the control condition watch an entertaining placebo video of similar length.<sup>4</sup> 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 responses would affect the amount of the bonus received.<sup>5</sup> 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.

Second, to understand how exposure to CTs affects voters' interaction with the information environment, we also manipulate whether subjects receive positive or negative information about the current government. After watching the video, subjects are 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 more straightforward presentation of fact-based arguments, to enable subjects to focus on the informational content.

We focus on the following sets of outcome variables to test our hypotheses. First, we evaluate voters' perceptions about the informational environment using two

<sup>3</sup>A link to both videos can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>4</sup>The video discusses several reasons why humans cannot ride zebras.

<sup>5</sup>Subjects' total bonus for answering correctly all the five questions 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.

<sup>6</sup>The experiment was conducted during late October and early November of 2019.

measures. The first is an 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 second gauges whether the treatment reduces the weight voters put on new informational content, by asking subjects to evaluate the accuracy of the article they read on the current administration. The second outcome of interest is *trust in political institutions*, measured by an index of subjects' trust in a set of institutions including the FBI, CIA, district courts, the Supreme Court, and leaders of both the Democratic and Republican Party.<sup>7</sup> Finally, to evaluate support for the current administration we create an index of *political support score*, which includes subjects' 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.<sup>8</sup>

## Results

Does exposure to a CT unrelated to domestic politics reduce trust in the domestic informational environment and political institutions? How does the effect of CTs interact with the information environment? To present our results, we estimate the treatment effects and accompanying standard errors with linear regression analysis, comparing outcomes in the treatment groups to those in the control group as in:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta C_i + \gamma S_i + \delta C_i \times S_i + \varepsilon_i,$$

where  $Y_i$  refers to the outcome of interest – for example, the perceived accuracy of the article and trust in information providers –,  $C_i$  stands for the conspiracy treatment and  $S_i$  for the scandal treatment.

Table 1 summarizes the results. We find support for our theoretical proposition that exposure to unrelated CTs can distort the informational environment by reducing voters' trust in information providers and the credibility of new information. In columns (1) and (2), we first estimate the results without interaction effects. The conspiracy treatment decreases trust in information providers by 1.7 percentage points.<sup>9</sup> This is a substantively meaningful shift. For example, Republican subjects are less likely to trust information providers by about 9.4 percentage points compared to Democrats. So, the effect of exposure to CTs is equivalent to about 17 percent of the difference between Republicans and Democrats on this outcome. Similarly, subjects with college education have significantly higher levels of trust in information providers by 2.8 percentage points; hence, the effect of exposure to

<sup>7</sup>Both measures of trust (information providers and political institutions) are averages with equal weights for the constituent items. They have Cronbach's alpha of 0.73 and 0.7, indicating their reliability and internal consistency. Details on all the experimental outcomes and results can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>8</sup>All the individual outcomes are measured with the same scale (0–100). All the indices group together items that are conceptually and theoretically related to each other, allowing us to avoid testing for multiple hypotheses. The indices for trust in information providers, trust in political institutions, and political support have means of 44, 47, and 31, and standard deviations of 16, 19, and 37, respectively.

<sup>9</sup>Since all outcomes range from 0 to 100, the coefficients present changes in the outcomes in percentage points.

*Table 1*  
**Treatment Effects on Attitudes toward the Informational Environment and Political Institutions**

	Trust Info. Providers	Article Accuracy	Trust Institut.	Trust Info. Providers	Article Accuracy	Trust Institut.
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Conspiracy	-1.65 [0.71]	-15.72*** [1.26]	-0.61 [0.84]	-1.48 [1.00]	-16.33*** [1.77]	-0.83 [1.18]
Scandal	-0.48 [0.71]	8.76*** [1.26]	-1.34 [0.84]	-0.32 [1.00]	8.15*** [1.78]	-1.56 [1.18]
Scan x Consp.				-0.33 [1.42]	1.23 [2.52]	0.45 [1.68]
Control	45.38*** [0.60]	65.52*** [1.07]	48.12*** [0.71]	45.31*** [0.69]	65.81*** [1.22]	48.22*** [0.81]

Notes: OLS estimations; coefficients reported. Number of observations is 2089. Standard errors are indicated in brackets. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

conspiracies amounts to 60 percent of the gap between those with a college education and the less educated on the same outcome.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, exposure to CTs is associated with a 16 percent drop in the perceived accuracy of new information (i.e., the news article received after watching the video), which is equivalent to a 25 percent decrease from the baseline control condition. The interaction between the Conspiracy and Scandal treatments is statistically insignificant in columns (4) and (5), showing that these effects do not depend on whether subjects receive positive or negative information about politicians. The CT treatment decreases trust in political institutions by approximately 0.8 percentage points; however, the estimate is not statistically significant.

We do not find substantive results that CTs affect accountability: we fail to reject our null hypothesis that voters do not weigh CTs in their evaluation of the incumbent administration. Note that we do not claim that there is no effect of exposure to CTs on trust in political institutions or the evaluation of the incumbent administration. Given our data, we cannot arbitrate that statement.<sup>11</sup> Section 4 in the Appendix reports the estimated treatment effects of CTs on the evaluation of the incumbent’s administration.

In additional exploratory analyses reported in the Appendix, we provide evidence for the heterogeneity of treatment effects. Most notably, we find that the negative effects of exposure to CTs on trust in the informational environment, the perceived

<sup>10</sup>In the Appendix, we present the treatment effects on trust in different information providers constituting this index. Albeit there are differences in the magnitudes of the treatment effects, the treatment still has a consistent negative effect on most components, and in particular on search engines, government think tanks, universities, social media, and alternative media outlets.

<sup>11</sup>Using the two one-sided test (TOST) procedure to test for equivalence (Schuirmann 1987), we fail to reject the null of statistical difference, rendering our results inconclusive on the presence of null effects on these outcomes.

credibility of new information, and trust in political institutions are more concentrated among Democrats and racial minorities. Given the timing of our study during the Trump's administration, this suggests that conspiracy theories might be more effective among groups that feel more politically alienated, in accordance with the existing literature (e.g., Goertzel 1994; Uscinski and Parent 2014)

## Conclusion

Conspiracy theories permeate the information environment and often interact with positive and negative information affecting political actors. We provide experimental evidence that exposure to CTs creates distortions in the informational environment by reducing the credibility of new information and voters' trust in democratic institutions such as information providers, regardless of the type of information that voters consume.

Our findings contribute to a recently growing literature seeking to explain the political consequences of exposure to conspiracy theories. While previous psychological studies find that individuals who are already prone to conspiratorial thinking are less likely to trust domestic institutions, we show that mere exposure matters, in line with recent experimental work (Einstein and Glick 2015; Kim and Cao 2016).

We also demonstrate that CTs can affect attitudes toward domestic politics, even when the CT is entirely detached from the political entities evaluated and regardless of other features of the informational environment (whether other political information is positive or negative). In this sense, our treatment effects identify a *lower bound* of what we expect to be the effect of political CTs: narratives linked to the current government could arguably trigger a more prominent effect, being directly related to the events evaluated by voters. Analogously, it seems reasonable to conjecture that persistent exposure to CTs could have a far-reaching impact on political evaluations. We believe this is a promising area for future research.

**Supplementary Material.** To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2022.11>

**Data Availability Statement.** The data, code, and any additional materials required to replicate all analyses in this article are available at the Journal of Experimental Political Science Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: doi: [10.7910/DVN/OSEXBV](https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/OSEXBV).

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**Conflicts of Interest.** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

**Ethics Statement.** The experiment was approved by Columbia IRB, with protocol number IRB-AAAS3434. The research adheres to APSA's Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research. Section 1 in the supplemental Appendix describes in detail the experimental procedures employed.

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