

Deep States, Fake Science, and Rigged Elections: The Psycho-Political Determinants of Conspiracy Belief

Introduction

Conspiracy theories have become a central part of mainstream media and pop culture. Movies such as *The Matrix*, and *Truman Show* are staples that are both shaped by and shape public perception of conspiracy. Given their popularity, major entertainment networks also tap into this source of popularity, as reflected in hit television series *House of Cards* and *Scandal*. Perhaps the most interesting thing about conspiracy theories and the reason behind their virality is their plausibility. The existence of infamous conspiracies that were later proved to be true, such as the Iran-Contra affair and the COVID-19 virus having actually leaked from a lab, offer an even deeper insight into why the public is so eager to engage with mainstream conspiracies. The rise of social media has also contributed to their popularity; short-form video platforms such as TikTok and YouTube are replete with individuals sharing their versions of captivating conspiracies, and audiences are quick to contribute their additional thoughts. Suddenly, there is a plethora of different conspiracies ranging from government involvement in medical experiments to racially charged and xenophobic ideas circulating around the internet at immense speeds.

This paper investigates the relationship between party affiliation, religious affiliation, feelings of political efficacy, propensity for political submission, and belief in conspiracy. It goes beyond the typical Big 5 personality classification to examine the situational factors that influence one's likelihood to believe in conspiracy theories, and examines how one's party affiliation may interact with said beliefs. Using primary data gathered from 332 adults using the Harvard DLABSS surveys, this study explores the interactions between individual psychological predispositions, political context and their effects on conspiracy thinking.

Overall, this paper finds that conspiratorial beliefs are strongly correlated with lower levels of efficacy and to a lesser extent with authoritarian submission. Moreover, Republicans and Independents have higher levels of conspiratorial belief than Democrats, even after controlling for income and age.

Motivation

It is important to study conspiracy theories because of the lasting effects they have. At their most extreme, they can be detrimental to the health of the individual and even population health and well-being at large. For example, conspiracy theories about the harmfulness of vaccines can result in epidemics and breakouts of diseases that have been long eradicated. An example is the recent measles breakout in Texas (World Health Organization, 2025); harmful beliefs about vaccination and the subsequent drop in vaccination rates cost the lives of many individuals. Moreover, they can dramatically influence voting patterns and voting behavior (Prooijen, 2018). The unfortunate truth is that conspiracy theories are also widely relied on by politicians and political figures themselves to gain traction and support from either extremes. Perhaps the most infamous conspiracy theory of the past century was the one propagated by Hitler that Jewish people were secretly controlling the global economy and orchestrating Germany's downfall, resulting in one of the biggest genocides known to day. Understanding conspiracy theories

does not mean having blatant and blind support for authority figures; it means advocating for logical criticism whenever possible without going down the rabbit hole of illogical thought and reasoning, or lack thereof.

There are a variety of definitions of what constitutes a conspiracy theory, but for the purposes of this paper, I will be using the definition endorsed by Prooijen (2018), which is “the belief that a number of actors join together in a secret agreement, in order to achieve a hidden goal which is perceived to be unlawful or malvolent”. Stracevic and Janca (2025) argue that a key dimension of conspiracy theories is the strong emotional responses they tend to elicit, both within those who believe in them and in those who dismiss them.

Douglas et al. (2017) offer three main reasons for why individuals seek conspiracies. First, they argue that epistemic motives and finding rationale to build “internally consistent” understandings and explanations of the world are a natural human tendency. A need for “cognitive closure” propels individuals to seek an answer when there aren’t any plausible explanations readily available (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013). Next, they propose existential motives as a reason for seeking conspiracy theories; individuals have a need for security and feeling of control, albeit superficial. Lastly, they propose social motivations, namely maintaining a positive external image and perception by their friends and peers as a reason why individuals seek conspiracies. This can explain why conspiracy theories are generally geared towards those with power and those perceived to be outsiders and enemies (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Sedek, 2005).

There has been ample research on the collective psychology and sociology of conspiracies, and how they are born and grown in societies. Moreover, previous literature has tried to examine the personality traits and predispositions that make individuals more prone to believing in conspiracies. Some works even go a step further and tie a strong belief in conspiracy theories to Cluster A and B personality disorders, such as schizotypal, narcissistic, and antisocial personalities, while they find a negative correlation between a belief in conspiracy theories and Cluster C personalities, which are characterized by anxious and fearful beliefs and behavior (Furnham and Grover, 2022).

A key variable that is often tied to a strong belief in conspiracy theories is mistrust, and this is not surprising. At their core, conspiracy theories are about a group of individuals “conspiring”, so it would be natural for those with a higher propensity to have outgroup mistrust to show higher conspiracy scores. More interestingly, those who are disconnected from society, feel like they lack agency in the circumstances of their lives, and are dissatisfied with their lives have also been shown to have a stronger belief in conspiracies (Stracevic and Janca, 2025).

Moreover, extreme religiosity or spirituality has also been tied to belief in conspiracies (Stasielowicz, 2022). This could perhaps be explained by a higher value placed on intuition, the supernatural, and what is not observed with the naked eye (Stracevic and Janca, 2025).

Existing literature in the field suggests strong links between personality, demographic status, political ideology, and conspiracy beliefs. This raises the question of whether submission, mainly in a political context toward authority figures, can increase or decrease a belief in conspiracy. Moreover, existing literature has found a correlation between conspiratorial beliefs and a perceived lack of control in one’s life (Douglas et al., 2017). This is different

from submission because it assesses helplessness, while submission measures willingness to delegate power to authority and the level of support for hierarchies of dominance.

This paper contributes to existing literature in the field by distinguishing between political efficacy and authoritarian submission as mechanisms that can contribute to belief in conspiracies. Although these measures have been studied separately, their joint effects are rather unknown. Moreover, this paper provides empirical evidence on the continued effects of partisan identity and party affiliation and its interactions with age and education on conspiratorial belief.

Hypotheses

This paper makes the following hypotheses to be explored and analyzed with the data:

- 1- Lower political efficacy and higher political submission are associated with higher belief in conspiracy theories.
- 2- Political conservatives will exhibit higher endorsement of political system conspiracies.
- 3- Higher levels of education and lower age are associated with lower conspiracy beliefs across all parties.

Data Description

Data was collected through the Harvard Digital Lab for the Social Sciences (DLABSS) in November 2025, using a national online volunteer participant panel. Respondents are mostly U.S. adults. In addition to responding to questions on conspiracy belief, efficacy, and submission, respondents also provide details on gender, race, education, income, religious affiliation, party affiliation and strength, and other demographic features. The dataset includes 332 responses, with 235 respondents including complete answers for the conspiracy, efficacy, submission, age, income, and party questions. The participants' range from 24 to 91. Men were overrepresented in the sample, with 218 participants identifying as male, 103 as female, 3 as other, and 1 preferring not to respond.

The response to each of the conspiracy, efficacy, and submission questions ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with a five-item scale.

Prooijen defines conspiracy theories as having five main key qualities: Patterns, agency, coalitions, hostility, and continued secrecy. Therefore, the questions that were used to examine belief in conspiracy for the data in this paper fulfilled all of these criteria. They were as follows:

1. There is a secret network of powerful people ("a deep state") that controls government policy no matter who is in office.
2. Global warming as perceived currently is a hoax propagated by China to make the U.S. less industrially competitive.
3. Vaccines and Tylenol cause the prevalence of autism in unborn and young children.
4. National elections are mostly a staged performance because corporate donors and party elites secretly decide in advance which candidates are allowed to win.
5. Pharmaceutical companies deliberately create and promote harmful drugs and block real cures so that more people become chronically ill and dependent on their products.

Efficacy was assessed using the following questions, so a higher efficacy score was actually a measure of lack of perceived political efficacy.

1. People like me don't have much of a voice in politics.
2. The system is stacked against people from my background.
3. I don't feel like my views are represented in major news and media.
4. I have to work harder than others for the same or less opportunities and accomplishments because of who I am.
5. Politicians never listen to the people.

Submission was measured using the following questions:

1. Our country would be better off if people simply followed the decisions of strong leaders instead of questioning them.
2. Once authorities decide what is right, people should stop protesting and fall in line.
3. Respect for authority is more important than individual self-expression.
4. Those who cause trouble or spread dangerous ideas should be dealt with firmly, even if that means limiting their rights.
5. People who attack our country's values deserve harsh punishment.

Analytical method

All analyses were done in the statistical software R, version 4.4.2 (R Core Team, 2021). To analyze and test the hypotheses outlined in the previous section, I performed correlational and regression-based visual and statistical analyses using the cleaned dataset.

To analyze the questions, the raw survey data was first cleaned. I selected for the questions that pertained to this study, namely the conspiracy-efficacy-submission matrices, as well as demographic information. Next, to analyze the conspiracy-submission-efficacy questions, responses were remapped to a scale of 1-5, with a higher number showing more agreement. Composite indices for each metric were computed by averaging scores for individual questions. Moreover, incomplete observations without values for the indices, age, income, education, and political affiliation were dropped, reducing the sample size to $N = 235$. This is large enough to provide the necessary statistical power for the hypotheses of interest. I also looked at the distribution of age, gender, and political party in the data to check for balance in the sample. The respondents are majority men, but there is a relatively uniform distribution across the political spectrum.

I first conducted descriptive analyses to understand the data. Density plots were created to visualize the distribution of the three indices of interest. I also computed Pearson correlation coefficients for all index pairs, which helped me understand whether the overall correlations were as expected or not. The resulting exploratory analyses were a correlation matrix and heatmap, and a density plot (Figures 1 and 2).

Next, to perform hypothesis testing, I adopted a different analytical approach specific to the hypothesis of interest. As previously noted, the efficacy index measures a perceived lack of political efficacy.

H1: I calculated the correlation between lack of perceived political efficacy and conspiracy, regressing the conspiracy index on the (lack of) efficacy index and submission index, controlling for income level and age. I performed an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with the following specifications. OLS was used because the three indices of interest are continuous composite scales, and they meet linearity assumptions, so the functional specification is reasonable.

$$Conspiracy_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 LackEfficacy_i + \beta_2 Submission_i + \beta_3 Income_i + \beta_4 Age_i + e_i$$

H2: I graphically examined the distribution of conspiracy belief per party, and regressed the conspiracy index on party identification, controlling for income. I again conducted an OLS regression with dummy-coded party categories with the following specification. Democrats served as the reference category, and the coefficients show the average difference in conspiracy score relative to baseline (Democrats), holding constant age and income in thousands of dollars.

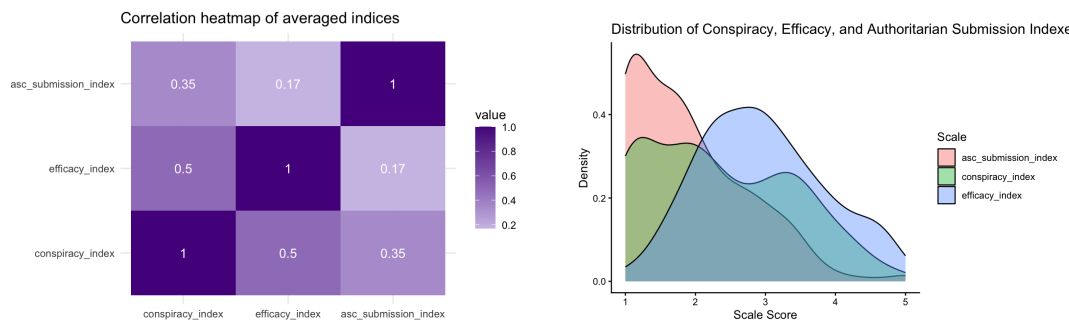
$$Conspiracy_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Independent + \alpha_2 Republican_i + \alpha_3 Income_i + \beta_4 Age_i + e_i$$

H3: I graphically examined the relationship between conspiracy index, education level, and age group for Democrats, Independents, and Republicans. I created cross-tabulated heatmaps showing the mean conspiracy scores for three major party groups (Democrats, Independents, and Republicans). Age groups were also divided into four (18-29, 30-44, 45-59, 60+) for more comprehensible visualizations.

Results and Interpretation

For initial exploratory purposes, I looked at the distribution density of each index, as seen below in Figure 1. The ASC submission index was highly skewed to the right, and the lack-of-efficacy index had a rather uniform distribution in the middle. This highlights that submission is low in general in the sample – this can perhaps be explained by the fact that the DLABSS survey sample includes mostly adults with at least a college education, and one can argue that college and higher education reduce propensity for submission.

I also examined the correlation between each index. Lack of efficacy and conspiracy had the highest correlation at 0.5, while submission and conspiracy had a correlation coefficient of 0.35. The correlation between the lack-of-efficacy index and submission was interestingly the lowest at 0.17, showing that feelings of political helplessness are not highly correlated with authoritarian political submission.



Figures 1 and 2: Correlation heatmap of the three indices and the distribution of the three indices

Hypothesis 1: Lower political efficacy and higher political submission are associated with higher belief in conspiracy theories.

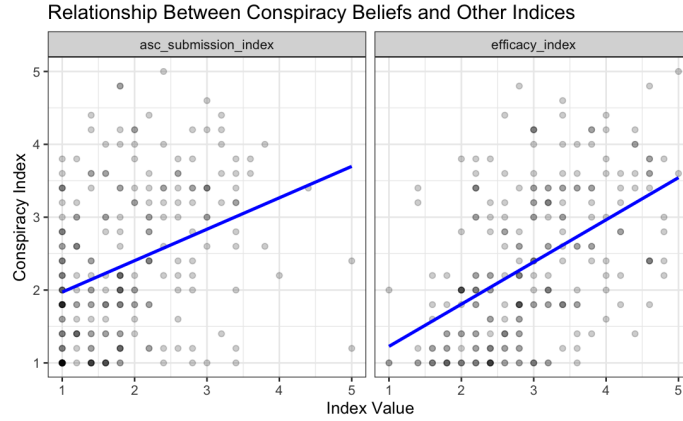


Figure 3: Efficacy and submission indices as predictors of conspiracy;

term <chr>	estimate <dbl>	std_error <dbl>	statistic <dbl>	p_value <dbl>	lower_ci <dbl>	upper_ci <dbl>
intercept	0.168	0.389	0.432	0.666	-0.599	0.935
asc_submission_index	0.335	0.068	4.896	0.000	0.200	0.470
efficacy_index	0.523	0.066	7.880	0.000	0.392	0.654
income	0.000	0.000	-0.795	0.428	0.000	0.000
age	0.001	0.004	0.195	0.845	-0.007	0.009

Table 1: Regression results for hypothesis 1

Regressing the conspiracy index on the submission index, lack-of-efficacy index, income in thousands, and age, I find that a one point increase in the lack-of-efficacy index is associated on average with a 0.523 point increase in the conspiracy index, which is statistically significant with a p-value of 0, controlling for submission index, income, and age. This can be explained by the hypothesis that those with higher levels of hostility, anger, and victim mentality are more likely to believe in conspiracies because they give them an avenue to justify their anger and view themselves as helpless victims against the tyranny of the elite and powerful (Robins & Post, 1997). Moreover, they describe conspiracies as “solace for a wounded ego” (p. 15) for those experiencing paranoia and self-doubt (Robins & Post, 1997). Overall, a belief that things beyond one’s control influence one’s lives when feeling helpless can offer a form of cognitive closure, explaining the high correlation between a perceived lack of efficacy and conspiracy (Hofstadter, 1964).

Furthermore, a one point increase in the submission index is associated on average with a 0.335 point increase in the conspiracy index, holding constant the lack of efficacy index, income, and age. This is again significant with a p-value of 0. This is in line with the findings of Imhoff & Bruder (2014), that right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation are closely tied to conspiracy ideation.

The effects of income and age do not appear to be statistically significant controlling for submission and efficacy indices. This shows that conspiracy theories can be best characterized as the outcome of situational beliefs and personal predispositions, and not demographic factors. This is consistent with the findings of Bordeleau &

Stockemer et al. (2014), who do not find a large statistically significant correlation between age and conspiracy belief in their sample.

Overall, the results indicate that feelings of mistrust, helplessness, and authoritarian belief are significantly positively correlated with authoritarianism belief. Abalakina-Papp et al. (1999) find high levels of authoritarianism, powerlessness, and low-self esteem to be highly related to specific conspiratorial belief.

Given the findings, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant relationship between the efficacy and conspiracy index and submission and efficacy index.

Hypothesis 2: Political conservatives will exhibit higher endorsement of political system conspiracies.

To examine this hypothesis, I first explored the distribution of the of the three indices across the three main party identifications. Interestingly, Democrats have the lowest scores across all three indices. The efficacy index shows the least variation across the three parties; independents are slightly higher than Republicans on average, but all three parties are in the same range, and efficacy values seem to be high compared to the other indices. This can perhaps be explained by the tumultuous economic and political environment at the moment in the United States. Economic turmoil is more likely to make individuals feel helpless, and the economy affects everyone in society even if they are in agreement with the incumbent political party (Duch et al., 2024; Evans & Cassells, 2015). The rather uniform distribution of the efficacy index suggests that feelings of low political control and influence are driven more by situational factors and structural conditions one is exposed to than partisan identity and party affiliation. Furthermore, independents scoring higher than other groups for efficacy is consistent with previous findings that independents tend to be more “negative” (Siev et al., 2024), perhaps due to a perceived lack of efficacy.

Existing literature is divided on whether conspiracy belief is correlated with party identification or not. Although older studies find right-wing political affiliation to be strongly positively correlated with conspiracy thinking, more recent research negates this. Richard Hofstadter’s *The Paranoid Style* (1964) was the literature that initiated the claim that Republicans are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than Democrats (Enders et al., 2022). However, the findings of Enders et al. (2022) show that conspiracy thinking and belief in conspiracy theories depends more strongly on in-group versus out-group thinking. They found that individuals across the spectrum are likely to believe in conspiracy theories that do not align with their partisan beliefs relatively uniformly.

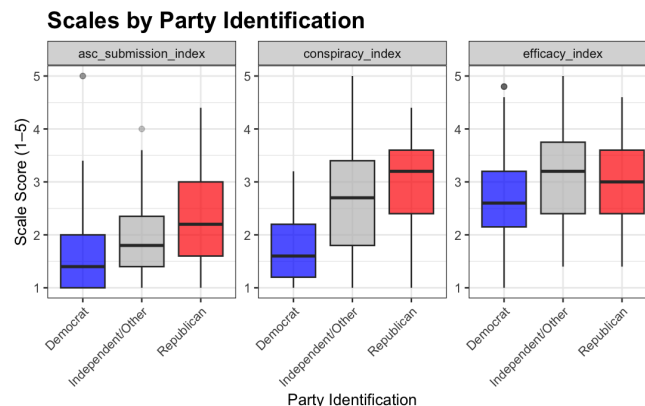


Figure 4: Submission, conspiracy, and efficacy index scores by party identification

Below is a linear regression model examining the relationship between party identification and conspiracy index, controlling for income in thousands and age.

term <chr>	estimate <dbl>	std_error <dbl>	statistic <dbl>	p_value <dbl>	lower_ci <dbl>	upper_ci <dbl>
intercept	2.036	0.304	6.697	0.000	1.437	2.635
party3: Independent/Other	0.876	0.139	6.319	0.000	0.603	1.150
party3: Republican	1.252	0.150	8.359	0.000	0.957	1.547
income_thousands	-0.001	0.000	-1.962	0.051	-0.002	0.000
age	-0.003	0.004	-0.820	0.413	-0.012	0.005

Table 2: Regression results for hypothesis 2 examining the predictive power of party affiliation on conspiracy index

We see that relative to the baseline which are Democrats in this case, identifying as an Independent or with another party increases the conspiracy index score by 0.876 points on average, holding constant age and income. The effect is more dramatic for Republicans with a 1.252 point increase relative to baseline, holding constant age and income. The effect of income is small but statistically significant as well, showing that higher income (by 1000 dollars) is on average associated with a 0.001 point reduction in the conspiracy score index, holding constant age and party affiliation. These results have profound implications for our understanding of conspiracy theories. While more recent literature shows that individuals display confirmation bias with their existing political beliefs and party affiliation when rating conspiracy theories, the results of this paper show that partisan identity and party affiliation are still a statistically significant predictor of conspiracy belief. Even after adjusting for socioeconomic factors and age, Democrats show lower conspiracy scores compared to Republicans and Independents.

Hypothesis 3: Higher levels of education and lower age are associated with lower conspiracy beliefs across all parties.

Next, I looked at the relationship between education, age, and party affiliation and the conspiracy index. The aim was to explore whether higher education could affect conspiracy belief by party. The graph below summarizes the results. As seen before, Democrats have lower conspiracy indices across all age groups and education levels, with lower mean scores for those with more education. Independents have higher conspiracy scores, and higher education overall decreases mean conspiracy belief for all groups. Older individuals tend to have higher conspiracy scores, especially for bachelor's degrees and below.

Republicans have the highest mean conspiracy scores throughout; with education reducing the effect dramatically. High school graduates and those with Associate Degrees who are Republicans have very high conspiracy scores, while the effect is considerably lower for those with professional degrees. The mediating effects of higher education on conspiracy belief are consistent with the findings of Miller et al. (2016), that knowledge and education can lower conspiracy belief and result in a higher likelihood of "endorsing ideologically consistent" beliefs.

Furthermore, the mediating effects of higher education on conspiracy belief can be explained by the findings of Swami et al. (2014), who found that analytical and critical thinking reduces conspiracy mentality and belief. Although higher education is not synonymous with analytical thinking, it can be reasonably argued that individuals with higher education are either self-selected due to their better analytical skills, or get the opportunity to develop such abilities during their higher education.

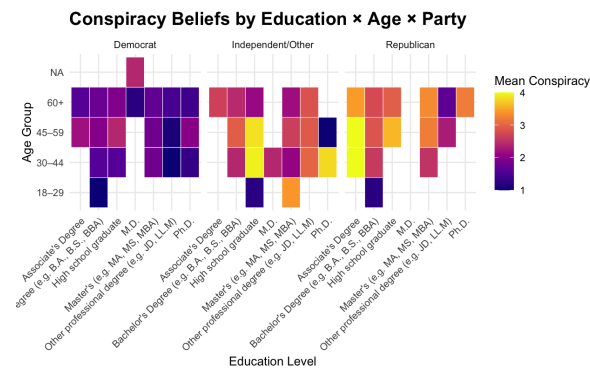


Figure 5: Heatmap of conspiracy beliefs by education, age, and party

Limitations, future research, and conclusion

Although utmost care and attention was devoted to ensuring internal and external validity in this study, there are several limitations to be addressed. First, the results of this study are only valid for a similar population as the one examined—US adults. Individuals in other countries may not display the same patterns based on the same right-left party orientation. Furthermore, the individuals who participate in the DLABSS surveys are those with internet access and interest in political participation; the results are not necessarily generalizable to other populations. Effort was dedicated to ensuring that the questions measuring conspiratorial belief span across the spectrum, including questions that might evoke strong feelings from both the left and right of the spectrum. However, the reason why Republicans show higher conspiratorial beliefs could possibly be due to the nature of the questions. Lastly, a larger sample size could increase the statistical power of the study, as a larger sample size for social science and psychology studies could ensure higher power and accuracy of the results.

Future research could focus on examining a wider range of questions to examine conspiratorial belief. Moreover, questions that examine priming could be used to see how one's responses to efficacy and submission differ after reading about political control, protests, and other emotionally evoking scenarios.

The findings of this study contribute to political psychology by elucidating how psychological orientations can shape political thinking, and potential susceptibility to conspiracy and other forms of misinformation. The results of this study show that feelings of political inefficacy and higher levels of authoritarian submission to be strong predictors of belief in conspiracies. Moreover, partisan identification was a significant predictor. Republicans exhibit higher conspiracy scores than Democrats, controlling for age and income. Lastly, although the effects of education and age vary across the three major party classifications, a common trend was that higher education generally decreases conspiracy belief, most strongly among Republicans and Independents. Older respondents showed higher conspiracy thinking. Overall, these results underscore the fact that conspiracy beliefs are the reflection of deeper psychological predispositions and orientations concerning trust, submission, and agency. The findings of this paper have strong implications for how we understand conspiracy theories. Understanding the dynamics that affect conspiratorial belief is crucial especially since more vulnerable individuals are more prone to them, highlighting the necessity for communication methods and transparency to foster civic inclusion, engagement, and information literacy.

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