

Work package iii

Conspiracy mentality and political orientation across 26 countries

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Task: Read the abstract and summarize the main findings of the paper. Use additional material when available. Reflect what the findings imply with respect to potential interventions to misinformation and conspiracy theories.

Abstract

People differ in their general tendency to endorse conspiracy theories (that is, conspiracy mentality). Previous research yielded inconsistent findings on the relationship between conspiracy mentality and political orientation, showing a greater conspiracy mentality either among the political right (a linear relation) or amongst both the left and right extremes (a curvilinear relation). We revisited this relationship across two studies spanning 26 countries (combined $N=104,253$) and found overall evidence for both linear and quadratic relations, albeit small and heterogeneous across countries. We also observed stronger support for conspiracy mentality among voters of opposition parties (that is, those deprived of political control). Nonetheless, the quadratic effect of political orientation remained significant when adjusting for political control deprivation. We conclude that conspiracy mentality is associated with extreme left- and especially extreme right-wing beliefs, and that this non-linear relation may be strengthened by, but is not reducible to, deprivation of political control.

Zusammenfassung

Menschen unterscheiden sich in ihrer allgemeinen Neigung, Verschwörungstheorien zu unterstützen (d. h. Verschwörungsmentalität). Frühere Untersuchungen ergaben widersprüchliche Ergebnisse über den Zusammenhang zwischen Verschwörungsmentalität und politischer Orientierung, die eine größere Verschwörungsmentalität entweder bei der politischen Rechten (eine lineare Beziehung) oder sowohl beim linken als auch beim rechten Rand (eine kurvenförmige Beziehung) zeigten. Wir haben diese Beziehung in zwei Studien aus 26 Ländern (insgesamt $N=104.253$) erneut untersucht und fanden insgesamt Belege sowohl für lineare als auch für quadratische Beziehungen, wenn auch in geringem

Umfang und in den verschiedenen Ländern unterschiedlich. Wir beobachteten auch eine stärkere Unterstützung der Verschwörungsmentalität unter den Wählern der Oppositionsparteien (d. h. derjenigen, die der politischen Kontrolle beraubt sind). Nichtsdestotrotz blieb der quadratische Effekt der politischen Orientierung signifikant, wenn man den Mangel an politischer Kontrolle berücksichtigt. Wir kommen zu dem Schluss, dass Verschwörungsmentalität mit linksextremen und insbesondere mit rechtsextremen Überzeugungen verbunden ist und dass diese nichtlineare Beziehung durch den Mangel an politischer Kontrolle verstärkt werden kann, aber nicht darauf zurückzuführen ist.

References

Imhoff, R., Zimmer, F., Klein, O., António, J. H. C., Babinska, M., Bangerter, A., Bilewicz, M., Blanuša, N., Bovan, K., Bužarovska, R., et al. (2022). Conspiracy mentality and political orientation across 26 countries. *Nature human behaviour*, 1–12.

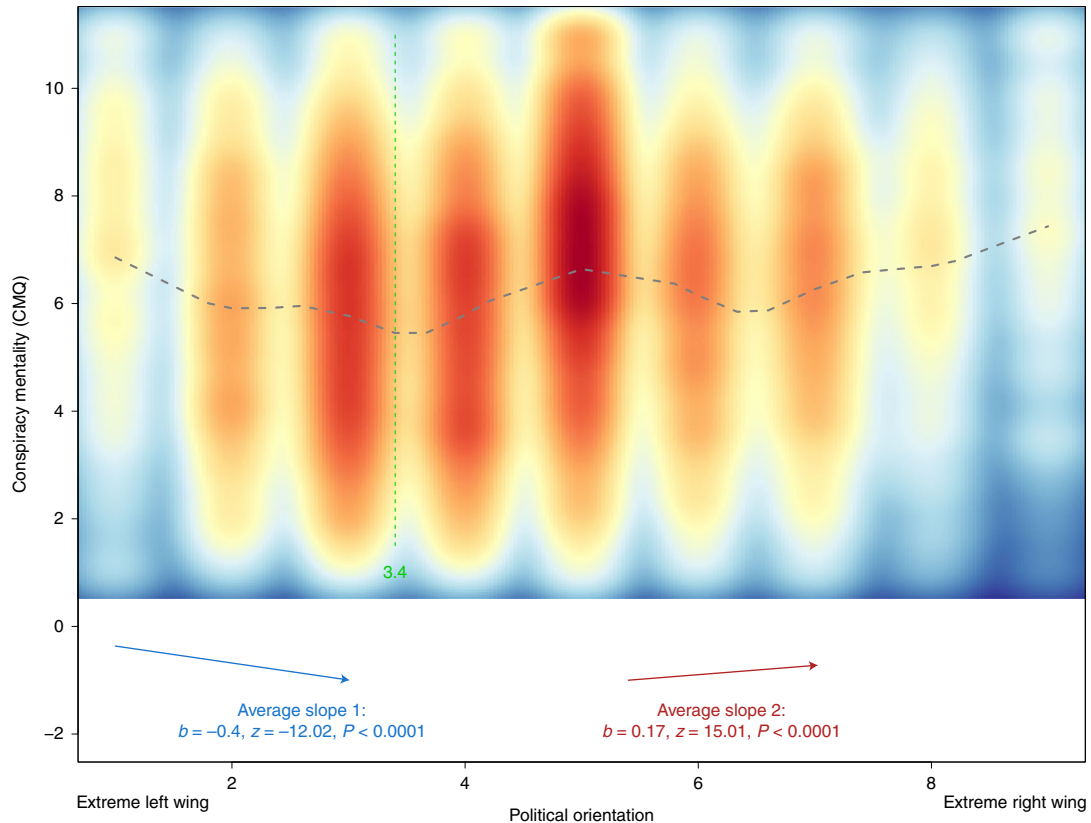


Fig. 3 | U-shaped relationship (tested with two-lines technique) of self-reported political orientation (raw) and conspiracy mentality in study 1 ($N = 37,692$). Higher density of data points is indicated by warmer colours (blue, no data points; red, a lot of data points). The dashed curve represents an unbiased but smoothed estimation of the mean at each position of the x axis. The dashed vertical line represents the break point from negative to positive slopes as estimated by the Robin Hood algorithm.

(sex, age and education) as control variables. Conspiracy mentality was higher for supporters of parties not in power, as well as for less educated people (with those who did not obtain a high-school degree scoring higher than those with a high-school degree, who in turn scored higher than people with a university degree), while sex and age showed inconsistent results (Table 1). Independent of these associations, however, the quadratic term of political orientation (and the linear one in study 1) remained incrementally valid predictors (Table 1). Thus, aggregated across countries, we found support for greater conspiracy mentality at the political extremes, independent of control deprivation or level of education.

On an exploratory basis, we also tested the idea that the effect of political orientation might be attenuated once the preferred party gains power. To do so, we predicted conspiracy mentality with the linear and quadratic terms of standardized political orientation, the coding of whether the preferred party was in power at time of data collection (with random slopes per country for all three variables) and their interaction. In study 1, there was no longer a main effect of party in power ($B = -0.139$, s.e. 0.108, $P = 0.208$, 95% CI -0.350 to 0.071), but an interaction with both the linear ($B = -0.184$, s.e. 0.038, $P < 0.001$, 95% CI -0.259 to -0.109) as well as the quadratic term of political orientation ($B = -0.092$, s.e. 0.026, $P < 0.001$, 95% CI -0.142 to -0.042). These interactions indicate that people at the far right are especially prone to conspiracy mentality when their party is not in power (Fig. 5). Study 2 largely replicated this exploratory finding, also in its shape (Fig. 6). The interaction with both the linear ($B = -0.164$, s.e. 0.029, $P < 0.001$, 95% CI -0.220 to -0.107) as well as the quadratic term of political orientation ($B = -0.138$, s.e. 0.022, $P < 0.001$, 95% CI -0.180 to -0.096) indicated a significant attenuation of the relation between political orientation and

conspiracy mentality for supporters of parties in power. The relation to whether the voted party was in power became substantially weaker (albeit still significant) ($B = -0.497$, s.e. 0.186, $P = 0.017$, 95% CI -0.861 to -0.132).

Analyses based on voting intentions. To address the limitations of self-placement on a political orientation scale, we also inquired about respondents' party preferences by asking which political party they would vote or had voted for if there were an election. We used these hypothetical voting intentions (study 1) or the party that participants had voted for at the last national elections (study 2) to give participants three numerical indicators (general left–right, economic left–right and green alternative libertarian versus traditional authoritarian nationalistic (GAL–TAN)) of their political orientation corresponding to the party they indicated. For each of these (standardized) indicators, we repeated the multi-level analyses to test for linear and quadratic effects of political position on the general, economic and social left–right spectrum, while statistically controlling for sex, age, education and whether the preferred/voted party was in power (for detailed results, see Supplementary Table 17).

For the analyses based on the respective party's stance on the general left–right dimension, both studies suggested a small quadratic relationship to conspiracy mentality as well as a descriptive but non-significant positive linear relation mirroring the results for self-reported political orientation (Table 2). Following up on the quadratic relation with a two-lines technique (that ignores the nested structure of the data and does not include control variables) suggested two significant interrupted regression lines with a sign change, indicating a U-shaped relationship for both studies.