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# A Birther and a Truther: The Influence of the Authoritarian Personality on Conspiracy Beliefs

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*I find that 10 percent of Americans believe in both “trutherism” and “birtherism.” Even among citizens who say they like Bush or Obama, or are from the same party, many still believe in conspiracies implicating the presidents. It is crucial to understand why so many Americans believe obviously erroneous conspiracies that denigrate a president who otherwise has their support. I predict that the authoritarian personality creates a predisposition to believe in conspiracies based on the tendency of those high in this trait to have greater anxiety and cognitive difficulties with higher order thinking. Using 2012 American National Election Study data, I find a clear and robust relationship between the authoritarian personality and conspiratorial beliefs. In all models, authoritarianism is a chief predictor for a predisposition toward both conspiratorial beliefs. This suggests that psychological propensities are an important explanation of why so many citizens believe in conspiracy theories.*

**Keywords:** Voting Behavior, Party Identification, Belief in Conspiracy Theories, The Authoritarian Personality, Political Psychology, Conspiracies Implicating Presidents, United States, American Politics, Partisan Bias, Birther Narrative, Truther Narrative, Cognitive Biases, Inconsistent Political Beliefs.

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American National Election Studies. 2017. <http://www.electionstudies.org/Right Wing Authoritarianism Scale. n.d. http://personality-testing.info/tests/RWAS/>

*Se encuentra que el 10 por ciento de los estadounidenses creen tanto en el “trutherismo,” o movimiento de verdad del 9/11, como en el “birtherismo,” que niega que Barack Obama tenga ciudadanía estadounidense por nacimiento. Incluso entre los ciudadanos que afirman ser partidarios de Bush u Obama, o son del mismo partido, muchos todavía creen en conspiraciones que implican a los presidentes. Es crucial entender por qué tantos estadounidenses creen conspiraciones obviamente erróneas que denigran a un presidente que de otro modo tiene su apoyo. Predigo que una personalidad autoritaria crea una predisposición a creer en conspiraciones basadas en la tendencia de individuos con este rasgo a tener mayor ansiedad y dificultades cognitivas de pensamiento de orden superior. Utilizando los datos del Estudio de la Elección Nacional Americana de 2012, encuentro una relación clara y sólida entre la personalidad autoritaria y las creencias conspiratorias. En todos los modelos, el autoritarismo es un predictor principal de una predisposición hacia ambas creencias conspiratorias. Esto sugiere que las propensiones psicológicas son una explicación importante de por qué tantos ciudadanos creen en las teorías de la conspiración.*

本文发现，百分之十的美国人既相信出生阴谋论，又相信政府主导一切阴谋论。甚至在声称喜欢布什或奥巴马或来自同一党派的人士中，依然有许多人相信暗示总统的相关阴谋。试图去理解为何诸多美国人相信如此明显的错误阴谋至关重要——这些阴谋贬低了他们所拥护的总统。本文预测，权威性人格产生了一种倾向，这种倾向使人相信基于明显阴谋论特征倾向的阴谋，从而产生更多焦虑、认知障碍和高阶思维。通过使用2012年美国国家选举研究数据，本文发现，权威性人格和阴谋论信念之间存在清晰稳定的关系。在所有模型中，权威主义都是阴谋信念倾向的主要预测物。这说明心理倾向是解释为何诸多公民相信阴谋论的重要原因。

Why do citizens believe in conspiracy theories? I find that 10 percent of a nationally representative sample of American adults from 2012 believes in both trutherism and birtherism. “Trutherism” is the belief that Bush had foreknowledge of the 9/11 attacks and that they were allowed or even surreptitiously committed by the United States. “Birtherism” is the belief that Obama was not born in the United States and therefore is barred from the

presidency. Even among citizens who say they like Bush or Obama, or are from the same party, many still believe in conspiracies implicating the presidents. For example, 32 percent of Republicans believe that it is probably or definitely true that senior Bush administration officials knew about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 before they happened, and 10 percent of Democrats believe that it is probably or definitely true that Obama was born in another country (see below for a detailed explanation of these data).

These counterintuitive findings can be best explained by these citizens having predispositions to hold conspiracy beliefs.<sup>1</sup> There is a large literature that documents how psychology creates predispositions to hold conspiracy beliefs (see e.g., Barkun 2003; Brotherton, French, and Pickering 2013; Darwin, Neave, and Holmes 2011; Imhoff and Bruder 2014). For example, Oliver and Wood (2014a, 2014b) show that conspiracy beliefs often rest on having prepositions to believe in metaphysical ideas, such as belief in end-times eschatology. Other common explanations—such as explanations based on out-group animus or expressive responses—are less plausible because trutherism and birtherism are ideologically antithetical beliefs attacking the conservative Republican Bush and the liberal Democrat Obama, respectively. These conspiracy theories have been thoroughly debunked, but many Americans still believe that both theories are true, even against presidents they support. Since these are relatively large groups, it is crucial to understand why they believe conspiracies even when the president whom they support is denigrated. The key task is to specify which psychological propensity causes citizens to believe in these conspiracies.

Specifically, I posit that having an authoritarian personality creates a propensity to believe in conspiracies, even to the detriment of one's own side, based on the tendency of those high in this trait to have greater anxiety and cognitive difficulties with higher order thinking (for a classic exposition of the trait, see Altemeyer 1981). Authoritarianism has been correlated with many other conspiracy theories in the past (see e.g., Altemeyer 1996; Bruder *et al.* 2013; Butler 2013; Grzesiak-Feldman and Irzycka 2009; Heaven, Ciarrochi, and Leeson 2011; Swami 2012). To test the predictions derived from this theory, I analyze 2012 American National Election Study (ANES) data to determine why respondents believe in trutherism and birtherism. The 2012 ANES has excellent questions on both conspiracies, and it measures authoritarianism with the standard Social Conformity Autonomy (SCA) scale (Feldman 2003). Using a seemingly unrelated regression model (SURM) that controls for other known correlates of opinion toward conspiracies, I find a clear and robust relationship between the authoritarian personality and both conspiratorial beliefs. I also test models split by support for each president, and find that for individuals who support Bush or are Republicans, SCA is correlated with trutherism, and for those who are Democrats or support Obama, SCA correlates with birtherism.

<sup>1</sup> For a recent explanation of these ideas, see Uscinski and Parent (2014).

In all models, authoritarianism is a key predictor for holding conspiratorial beliefs. This suggests that psychological propensities are an important explanation of why so many citizens believe in conspiracy theories.

The analysis of 2012 data on Bush and Obama conspiracy theories is important for the understanding of voting behavior—electoral campaigns now and in the future—because it suggests that even if enough social pressure and advocacy was placed on the respondents to force them to give up these two particular beliefs, they will still have a propensity to believe future conspiracies. This suggests that debunking conspiracies will have to be a near-constant effort for democracies, but there are currently no permanent governmental institutions doing this and only a few nongovernmental organizations, such as Snopes.com. Perhaps public education should make resisting conspiracy theories a standard part of civic education. Until we can find ethical ways to quickly and thoroughly debunk conspiracy theories, we can expect that conspiracies will be a major force in democratic politics because the underlying personality traits that create the propensity to believe will be present at some level.

### **Why Do Conspiracy Theories Exist?**

Three major perspectives exist on why individuals hold conspiracy beliefs. The first set of research suggests that sociological distance creates the likelihood of truly believing in a conspiracy (see e.g., Kosloff *et al.* 2010; Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel 2007). From this perspective, survey responses are truthfully what respondents believe and are predicated on some type of out-group animus, which may or may not be explicitly political (see e.g., Devos and Ma 2012). For the example used in this research, Pasek and others (2015) find strong evidence that birtherism is due to Republican partisanship, conservatism, and antiblack affect (see also Berinsky 2011). That suggests that conspiracies are similar to concepts such as scapegoating and are believed because they match prior negative beliefs about the out-group.

Second, expressive responses may exist by which individuals do not truly believe in a conspiracy but they will endorse it for their own reasons (Jerit and Barabas 2012). Researchers often explain the high amount of expressed belief in conspiracies as being not truthful responses; that is, they are “expressive responses” (Fischle 2000). An expressive response occurs when a survey respondent chooses an answer they believe is false because it permits them to express something else that they would like to say (Berinsky 2004). For example, if asked on a survey whether the mayor is corrupt, someone who does not like him or her will answer “yes” despite not really believing it. The answer arises out of simple dislike of the mayor. In this case, the respondent is expressing dislike through his or her survey response (Hollander 2010). In the highly partisan-polarized America of the Bush and Obama presidencies, during which political elites may have attacked each other more viciously than was previously acceptable, it may seem amusing or satisfying to denigrate a politician from

the other side by implicating them in conspiracies. The key point is that they do not actually believe what they are saying to the surveyors.

Third, there are theories about propensity (Abalakina-Paap *et al.* 1999), which are based on some people simply having characteristics that make them more likely to believe conspiracies (see e.g., Darwin, Neave, and Holmes 2011; Howell 2012; Imhoff and Bruder 2014; Oliver and Wood 2014a). The key point is that the actual nature of the conspiracy is not so important, they have a tendency to believe in all conspiracies. These respondents truly believe in the conspiracy and are not merely expressing themselves. I now explicate a new way to measure the psychological propensity to believe in conspiracies separate from expressive responses or sociological distance.

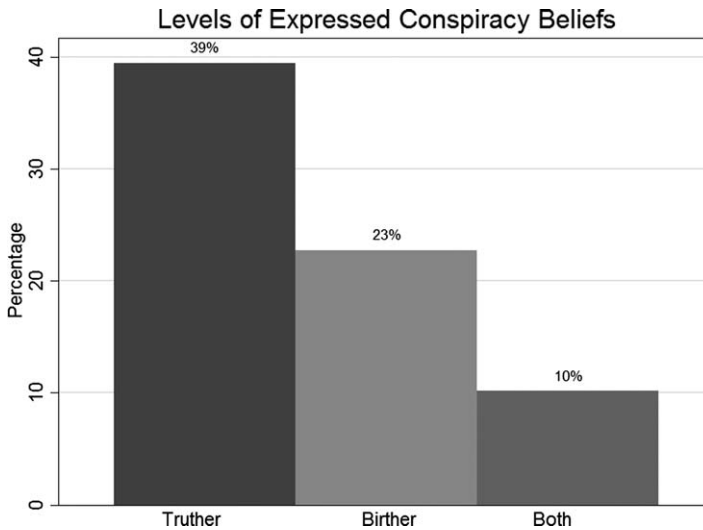
### **A New Approach to Measure Conspiracy Beliefs**

The insight of my research here is that theories about propensity would best explain belief in conspiracies that implicate politicians that respondents liked or are from the same party. The key difference between propensity and sociological distance or expressive responses theories is that the conspiracies are not necessarily directed at an out-group or political enemy. Because of their underlying propensity to believe any conspiracy, they may believe conspiracies even directed against their own side.

Potential bias from expressive responses hinders the analysis of conspiracy theories because the data do not necessarily convey what a respondent actually believes (Prior, Sood, and Khanna 2013). As Bullock and others (2015, 523) say, “[a] key task for researchers is thus to understand when survey responses reflect real attitudes and when they reflect these more expressive tendencies.” Since survey responses are inconsequential for respondents—they face no punishment for lying—they do not have to answer openly or honestly. In the survey research methodology literature, expressive response bias is well documented (Gaines *et al.* 2007). In an age of high partisanship and polarization, the temptation to express one’s self through survey responses may be great. We need to create a way to separate expressive responses from truthfully ones, to adjudicate any idea about propensity to believe in conspiracies.

I aim to bypass this potential bias from expressive responses in two ways; first, by estimating simultaneous belief in both birtherism and trutherism, and second, by examining why some Bush supporters are truthers and some Obama supporters are birthers. I also create models examining similarity in party identification, looking at why some Republicans are truthers and some Democrats are birthers. Under the simple assumption that most expressive responses will be due to either supporting a preferred president or attacking the nonpreferred one, finding citizens who select responses that are critical of their own side will allow me to examine citizens who have underlying propensities to believe conspiracies. These people are truly conspiratorial and not merely attacking the out-group or expressing themselves.

**Figure 1.**  
**Percentage of Americans Who Believe in Trutherism, Birtherism, or Both**



*Source:* Data from ANES 2012.

A somewhat similar approach was used by Wood, Douglas, and Sutton (2012), who found that the more likely someone was to believe that Osama bin Laden was already dead before the U.S. military killed him, the more likely they were on a subsequent survey to support a contradictory conspiracy that bin Laden is still alive. As such, Wood, Douglas, and Sutton (2012) show that there must be some propensity to support conspiratorial ideas, even if the contradict previously stated beliefs. And McClosky and Chong (1985) showed the far right-wingers and far left-wingers were both more likely to believe in various conspiracies than moderates.

Figure 1 shows the percentages of the 2012 ANES sample of individuals who probably or definitely believe in trutherism, birtherism, and those who believe in both. A large proportion of the population believes in one or the other. Almost 40 percent of Americans think that it is probably or definitely true that the Bush administration had some knowledge of the 9/11 attack before it happened. As distressing as this may initially seem, it is highly plausible that some of these respondents are merely attacking Bush. Similarly, the 13 percent of the population that believes in birtherism, but not trutherism, may simply be due to hatred of Obama. Since it is impossible to know for sure what the respondents really believe, I study the people who either simultaneously believe in both conspiracies or believe in a conspiracy theory that implicates the president they like. To do so, I examine a potential psychological factor in the propensity to believe in conspiracies, namely, the authoritarian personality.

### The Authoritarian Personality

Authoritarianism has a long history in political science, perhaps one of the richest of all of social science concepts. The idea that there is a group of citizens who need a strong leader to protect them from a scary world has had a profound impact on academia (Smith 1997). Repeatedly and consistently across multiple measures, scales, and samples, authoritarianism has correlated with the worst in democratic citizenry (Sibley and Duckitt 2008). And beyond political areas, it damages many areas of social life. From bullying, to anti-Semitism, to spousal abuse, authoritarians cause problems (respectively, see Blumenstein 2009; Dunbar and Simonova 2003; Knafo 2003).

What is fascinating about American authoritarianism is that the name implies obedience to an authoritarian regime, yet this group of citizens is actually often antigovernment or at least more distrustful of government than typical citizen (Altemeyer 1996). And the theoretical insight here is to suggest that this deep skepticism that makes them susceptible to conspiracy theories. What makes conspiracy theories so robust and resistant to debunking for authoritarians, is that their dogmatism, overconfidence, and general insecurity makes them resistant to hear that they are wrong (Martin 2001).

Deeply insecure about admitting mistakes and at the same time highly overconfident, authoritarians have particular difficulty with cognitive problems. Research on motivated reasoning shows that people are resistant to hear they are wrong. But the group most resistant to changing their beliefs contains those that are psychologically insecure, such as authoritarians have been repeatedly shown to be. *The combination of distrust in the system combined with a difficulty with cognitive problems and a general resistance to correct false beliefs would make authoritarians highly susceptible holding conspiracy beliefs.*

Authoritarianism is not limited to conservatives. In fact, in the National Election Study (NES) data below that I use, there is only about two-thirds of a standard deviation difference between the mean SCA score for the most liberal (1) to the most conservative (7) ideological groups. Even in the most liberal group (1), 7 percent this group would be considered highly authoritarian: that is, having a SCA score higher than two standard deviations above mean. So, this is not merely a story of conservatives. The authoritarian personality is a latent distribution which is applicable to all human beings at some level.

In fact, the latest research on authoritarians in political science shows that external events that increase the threat level will increase the level of the authoritarian personality across all groups (Merolla and Zechmeister 2009). This happens not only with authoritarians but by those who were previously not authoritarians (Hetherington and Weiler 2009). In other words, if the national political context becomes more threatening, the distribution of authoritarianism across the entirety of the population moves in a more authoritarian direction.



## Predictions

I now detail a cognitive theory of the authoritarian personality and its relationship to conspiracy theories. It involves how two well-founded aspects of this trait, (1) low cognitive ability and (2) fear of threatening change, explain an inability and a deep desire to explain change. It is often more useful to think of authoritarianism as an ideological variable that moves in response to threat and other environmental features, than a quasi-permanent trait that is basically unchanging (see Merolla and Zechmeister 2009).

For (1) low cognitive ability, start by noting that authoritarian personalities often have trouble with cognitively complex tasks (Heaven, Ciarrochi, and Leeson 2011). For example, for the first time, the 2012 ANES included an IQ test. This WordSum IQ<sup>2</sup> test is basically a very high-level vocabulary test, but it correlates strongly with the more traditional IQ tests. Without getting into the endless debates over the validity or immutability of IQ, WordSum is certainly a good test of current cognitive skills. And here, we see a strong negative correlation between SCA and WordSum ( $-.335$ ,  $p\text{-value} = .000$ ). This matches other findings over the relative difficulty that authoritarians have with distal concepts. Thus, it is well established that authoritarians have trouble with cognitively complex ideas.

From this, we can see that radical change such as the 9/11 attack or the election of the first black president combined with the second worst economic crisis in history will be severely challenging to understand for authoritarians (Oesterreich 2005; Perrin 2005). They would have great cognitive difficulty to grasp the complex ideas behind the explanations of these changes (Wahabism, Post-Racialism, Credit Default Swaps, and so forth), and so the authoritarian has to search for explanations from outside themselves. Thus, they will be more willing to accept conspiracy theories because they cannot figure it on their own, and they will not have the critical thinking skills to debunk conspiracy theories.

For (2) Anxiety<sup>3</sup> over change, this trouble with understanding change is augmented tremendously by the inherent fear that authoritarians have over threatening change (Butler 2013). Again 2012 NES data show a relationship between authoritarianism and anxiety (correlation  $.076$ ,  $p = .000$ ). While threat is scary for most people, for authoritarians, it is even more so (Doty, Peterson, and Winter 1991). And when you have trouble with critical thinking and are intensely afraid, you may be more needing and accepting of possible

<sup>2</sup> The Wordsum IQ test is a vocabulary test that correlates at a very high level with traditional IQ tests and is an accepted measure of cognitive ability (see Miner 1957). Here, it is measured by a sum of the respondent's correct answers, which could range from 0 to 10.

<sup>3</sup> Anxiety is measured with a question that asks "We're interested in how you see yourself. Please mark how well the following pair of words describes you, even if one word describes you better than the other: Anxious, easily upset." This was coded as 1. Extremely poorly; 2. Somewhat poorly; 3. A little poorly; 4. Neither poorly nor well; 5. A little well; 6. Somewhat well; 7. Extremely well.

explanations of the change. Thus, those who are not going to be able to critically unpack the assumptions that undergird to conspiracy theories and thereby debunk them by themselves are exactly the ones who most need an explanation. Altogether, we should expect authoritarians to be greatly susceptible to conspiracy theories in times of change.

From this cognitive theory of the authoritarian personality, we can derive some simple predictions for the data. The first prediction is that those respondents higher in authoritarian personality will be more likely to believe in both conspiracy theories simultaneously. The second prediction is that authoritarian supporters of presidents will be more likely to believe conspiracy about them than nonauthoritarian supporters. These tests allow us to get around expressive response bias. As authoritarianism is thought to derive from early childhood experiences and indeed the SCA scale measures attitudes toward parenting, authoritarianism is not likely to be caused by birtherism or trutherism.

### **Data**

I use ANES survey data from 2012 to test these predictions. The data, questionnaires, response rates, and detailed information on the survey methodology are available at the ANES website. The sample universe was U.S. eligible voters and the number of waves were 2 (pre-election, post-election). The modes used were face-to-face and online and the number of respondents was 5,860. ANES 2012 describes the data collection process thus: “Data collection for the ANES 2012 Time Series Study began in early September and continued into January, 2013. Pre-election interviews were conducted with study respondents during the two months prior to the 2012 elections and were followed by post-election re-interviewing beginning November 7, 2012.”

### **Dependent Variables**

Trutherism is measured with the following question: “Did senior federal government officials definitely know about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 before they happened (3), probably knew about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 before they happened (2), probably did not know about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 before they happened (1), or definitely did not know about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 before they happened (0)?” Birtherism is measured with the following question: “Was Barack Obama definitely born in the United States (0), probably born in the United States (1), probably born in another country (2), or definitely born in another country (3)?”

These are not perfect versions of these questions. It may be the fact that supporters of Obama are merely answering the Birther question as a knowledge question (and failing), rather than knowing that not being a natural born citizen

means that he cannot be president. Also, of course, being born outside the United States to an American mother does not mean that the person is not a natural-born citizen. More problematic is that there were in fact pieces of information known or highly suspected about the potential of terrorists to use airplanes to attack the United States by the U.S. government before the 9/11 attacks. As such, the question wording does not clearly specify the main point of trutherism, which is that the attack was intentionally allowed or sponsored by the government.

These conspiracy theories have endless variations and no single survey question could ask about the minutiae of all sects and factions. However, these questions generally summarize the main characteristics of the beliefs, and any birther or truther would answer affirmatively to either one. One issue is that while the birther question directly mentions Obama, the truther question only mentions senior federal government officials. However, George W. Bush was president during these attacks and senior federal government officials would be working directly for him, and trutherism is generally associated with him.

### ***Social Conformity Autonomy***

Authoritarianism is sometimes measured through Stenner's (2005) and Feldman's (2003) SCA scale. It focuses on differences in parenting styles, and specifically the tension between the competing desires for children to conform to group norms (such as obedience) and to possess individual autonomy (such as self-reliance). It correlates highly with the most standard measure Altemeyer's (1996) Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), with a typical correlation with RWA at about .71 (see Feldman 2003, 57). It is measured by asking, "Although there are a number of qualities that people feel that children should have, every person thinks that some are more important than others. I am going to read you pairs of desirable qualities. Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: Independence or respect for elders; curiosity or good manners; obedience or self-reliance; being considerate or well behaved." The respondents choose one of the traits as desirable for children; those choosing more conformity traits are deemed more authoritarian. From this scale, I create a principal component analysis (PCA),<sup>4</sup> which loaded on one component with an eigenvalue of 1.85.<sup>5</sup> I use this component as a measure of authoritarianism in this sample.

<sup>4</sup> Due to concerns about the measurement of authoritarianism, I also created versions of the models that use an additive index of different aspects of authoritarianism. The results are substantively and statistically similar to the PCA. This is due to the extremely high correlation between the additive scale and the PCA, at .996. Essentially, there is no meaningful difference between the two specifications of SCA.

<sup>5</sup> The factors load about equally on all four variables. Respect for elders was .4832, manners .5469, obedience .5371, and well behaved .4231.

### *Control Variables*

I also control for other known determinants of conspiracy beliefs (Federico and Tagar 2014; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009). Trust in government will likely decrease conspiracy beliefs and may also negatively correlate with authoritarianism, threatening the hypothesis testing. The governmental trust variable I use here is created with a PCA of three questions pertaining to government waste, corruption, and control by special interests. It loads on one factor with an eigenvalue of 1.599. Patriotism may also lower antigovernmental conspiracy beliefs and may also correlate with authoritarianism, also threatening hypothesis testing. The patriotism variable I use here also derives from a PCA of three questions centering on feelings of love toward America, happiness when seeing the American flag, and the importance of being an American to one's identity. It loads on one factor with an eigenvalue of 2.181.

Political knowledge is a necessary control variable because lacking knowledge may increase the likelihood of holding conspiracy beliefs, and authoritarians often have less of it. Political knowledge is measured by the number of correct answers in a ten-question open-ended quiz on the topic in the 2012 ANES. Less life satisfaction may correlate with more ill will toward the political establishment, and thereby increase conspiracy beliefs. Life satisfaction is measured with a question that asks, "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Would you say that you are: Extremely satisfied (4), Very satisfied (3), Moderately satisfied (2), Slightly satisfied (1), or Not satisfied at all (0)?"

I also include control variables on ideology (measured on a 7-point scale), partisan identification (measured on a 7-point scale), and demographic variables on age, being female, being black, being Hispanic, income, and education, which have been found to influence conspiracy theory beliefs.

### **Simultaneous Conspiracies Results**

The key to interpreting multiple regression results is to understand the joint nature of the prediction. The prediction is valid if authoritarianism is positive and significant on both dependent variables, which is what Table 1 shows. This shows that even when other known determinants of conspiracy theory beliefs are controlled for, authoritarianism simultaneously correlates with both birtherism and trutherism. These simultaneous changes are substantively large, as model 1 shows that a one standard deviation change in SCA leads to about a ninth of a standard deviation change in trutherism, while one standard deviation change in SCA leads to about one-fourth of a standard deviation change in birtherism.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> These calculations (and the ones below) were made with the margins command in Stata 14 (Stata Corp., College Station, TX) from model 1 in Table. Models 2 and 3 show about half as large marginal effects, as the coefficient is smaller in these models.

**Table 1. Determinants of Simultaneously Being a Truther and a Birther**

Variable	1	(S.E.)	2	(S.E.)	3	(S.E.)
<b>Truther</b>						
SCA	.086***	.010	.048***	.010	.026*	.011
Gov. trust					-.120***	.011
Political knowledge					-.057***	.007
Life satisfaction					-.086***	.014
Modern racism					.015	.010
Patriotism					-.049***	.009
Wordsum					-.007	.007
Age			-.025***	.004	-.010*	.004
Female			.030	.026	.010	.027
Income			-.010***	.002	-.004*	.002
Education			-.090***	.013	-.041**	.014
Black			.084*	.042	.147***	.045
Hispanic			.084	.043	.133**	.043
Intercept	2.281***	.013	2.827***	.054	3.129***	.074
<b>Birther</b>						
SCA	.173***	.010	.179***	.010	.100***	.011
Gov. trust					-.103***	.010
Political knowledge					-.041***	.006
Life satisfaction					-.027*	.013
Modern racism					.177***	.009
Patriotism					-.004	.009
Wordsum					-.025***	.007
Age			.008*	.004	.015***	.004
Female			.037	.026	.027	.026
Income			-.002	.002	-.000	.002
Education			-.083***	.013	-.015	.013
Black			-.634***	.041	-.275***	.043
Hispanic			-.295***	.043	-.179***	.042
Intercept	1.857***	.013	2.163***	.054	2.288***	.072
N	4,841		4,474		4,347	
$\chi^2$	79.343***		275.098***		584.489***	

Notes: Cells represent unstandardized coefficients, standard errors of SURMs. Data are weighted from the 2012 NES.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

In addition to authoritarianism, I also find that education, life satisfaction, and trust in government reduce conspiratorial beliefs, and these models have significant chi-square tests showing that the model predicts the dependent variables well. Of note with these 2012 ANES data—which oversamples blacks and Hispanics—is that blacks and Hispanics are much more likely to believe in trutherism and less likely to believe in birtherism, suggesting partisan animus by race and ethnicity. While these correlations are expected, the models show that in addition to these theoretically expected effects, the psychological disposition of authoritarianism is impactful on both conspiracies beliefs.

**Table 2. Determinants of a Bush Supporter Being a Truther**

Variable	1	(S.E.)	2	(S.E.)	3	(S.E.)
SCA	.227***	.037	.198***	.040	.148***	.042
Gov. trust					-.237***	.040
Political knowledge					-.161***	.024
Life satisfaction					-.169***	.050
Modern racism					.003	.039
Patriotism					-.055	.040
Wordsum					-.037	.026
Age			-.049***	.013	-.018	.015
Female			.107	.088	.050	.093
Income			-.020**	.006	-.008	.007
Education			-.119**	.045	-.015	.048
Black			.024	.211	.215	.232
Hispanic			.468**	.174	.545**	.182
cut1	-1.127***	.054	-2.099***	.204	-3.175***	.282
cut2	.751***	.050	-.119	.197	-1.096***	.271
cut3	2.562***	.087	1.766***	.209	.831**	.278
N	1,932		1,791		1,743	
$\chi^2$	38.686***		96.742***		198.385***	

*Notes:* Cells represent unstandardized coefficients, standard errors of ordered logistic regression models. Data are weighted from the 2012 NES.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### Own-Side Candidate Results

Now, I try a split model approach, in which I split the sample into those who have a thermometer score for either Bush or Obama above 50. These are respondents who say they like Bush or Obama. I run separate ordered logistic regression models using the same variables as before for just those who say they like Bush predicting trutherism, and just those who say they like Obama predicting birtherism.

Table 2 shows the results for the Bush supporters' model and has a significant chi-square test showing that the model predicts the dependent variable. In this model, authoritarianism predicts being a birther, even for those people who say they like Bush. This finding strongly suggests that animus is not solely driving expressed conspiracy theory beliefs. In the same survey, shortly after saying they like Bush, they indicate they believe Bush's administration knowingly allowed the deaths of 3,000 Americans on 9/11. These impacts are also substantively large, as model 1 shows that a one standard deviation change in SCA leads to about one-sixth of a standard deviation change in trutherism. The type of coherency that would be required for the expressive response hypothesis to be supported is not shown in these data. To be sure, the other partisan predictors such as party identification and ideology do in fact show partisan animus

**Table 3. Determinants of an Obama Supporter Being a Birther**

Variable	1	(S.E.)	2	(S.E.)	3	(S.E.)
SCA	.282***	.030	.262***	.036	.101*	.040
Gov. trust					-.026	.034
Political knowledge					-.226***	.024
Life satisfaction					-.059	.048
Modern racism					.243***	.035
Patriotism					-.052	.031
Wordsum					-.094***	.025
Age			-.043**	.013	.001	.015
Female			.221*	.087	.107	.092
Income			-.024***	.006	-.011	.006
Education			-.241***	.044	-.053	.049
Black			-.612***	.117	-.388**	.131
Hispanic			-.273*	.130	-.277*	.135
cut1	.794***	.041	-.508**	.175	-1.523***	.251
cut2	2.414***	.068	1.197***	.181	.282	.253
cut3	4.011***	.139	2.809***	.224	1.907***	.284
N	2,932		2,672		2,581	
$\chi^2$	94.409***		203.067***		396.001***	

*Notes:* Cells represent unstandardized coefficients, standard errors of ordered logistic regression models. Data are weighted from the 2012 NES.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

in these beliefs. Individuals who are Democratic or liberal are more likely to express support for these beliefs. But, in addition to partisan animus, there is a psychological component to conspiracy theories.

Table 3 shows the results for birtherism for the respondents who say they like Obama. This model confirms the results from the truther model with a different political subgroup and has a significant chi-square test showing that the model predicts the dependent variable well. Here, we see authoritarians are more likely to believe in birtherism even though they say they like Obama. We also again find partisan animus because conservatives and Republicans were more likely to express these beliefs. These impacts are also substantively large, as model 1 shows that a one standard deviation change in SCA leads to about one-ninth of a standard deviation change in birtherism.

Table 4 shows the results for trutherism for the respondents who identify as Republican and again SCA is a robust predictor. Note that the p-value for SCA in model 3 is  $p = .051$ . To avoid belaboring exposition, I will omit detailed analysis of the effect sizes or control variables in Tables 4 and 5, as they are very similar to the above models. Table 5 shows the results for birtherism for the respondents who identify as Democratic and again SCA is a robust predictor. Tables 4 and 5 show that even for those in the same party, SCA increases the propensity to believe in these conspiracies.

**Table 4. Determinants of a Republican Being a Truther**

Variable	1	(S.E.)	2	(S.E.)	3	(S.E.)
SCA	.220***	.037	.172***	.040	.117**	.043
Gov. trust					-.280***	.044
Political knowledge					-.192***	.024
Life satisfaction					-.165**	.052
Modern racism					.026	.040
Patriotism					-.091*	.039
Wordsum					-.045	.029
Age			-.023	.014	.006	.015
Female			.072	.093	.009	.097
Income			-.021**	.007	-.007	.007
Education			-.181***	.046	-.047	.049
Black			.101	.403	.083	.412
Hispanic			.368	.202	.443*	.208
cut1	-1.140***	.057	-2.177***	.209	-3.373***	.297
cut2	.690***	.052	-.256	.200	-1.304***	.285
cut3	2.420***	.087	1.503***	.211	.529	.289
N	1,724		1,608		1,582	
$\chi^2$	35.690***		80.330***		216.524***	

*Notes:* Cells represent unstandardized coefficients, standard errors of ordered logistic regression models. Data are weighted from the 2012 NES.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 5. Determinants of a Democrat Being a Birther**

Variable	1	(S.E.)	2	(S.E.)	3	(S.E.)
SCA	.307***	.032	.326***	.039	.163***	.044
Gov. trust					-.053	.037
Political knowledge					-.250***	.027
Life satisfaction					-.200***	.051
Modern racism					.306***	.038
Patriotism					-.099**	.034
Wordsum					-.085**	.027
Age			-.045**	.014	.008	.016
Female			.209*	.094	.084	.100
Income			-.019**	.006	-.000	.007
Education			-.263***	.048	-.059	.053
Black			-.856***	.126	-.560***	.144
Hispanic			-.596***	.145	-.606***	.153
cut1	.845***	.044	-.575**	.195	-1.906***	.279
cut2	2.177***	.066	.845***	.198	-.357	.277
cut3	3.700***	.127	2.326***	.227	1.151***	.297
N	2,574		2,354		2,272	
$\chi^2$	96.725***		214.662***		443.636***	

*Notes:* Cells represent unstandardized coefficients, standard errors of ordered logistic regression models. Data are weighted from the 2012 NES.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



## Conclusion

Ten percent of Americans simultaneously believe in both birtherism and trutherism, and many say they like Bush and Obama or are from their same party, yet still believe in conspiracies implicating them. These facts suggest the likelihood of deeper propensities for believing in conspiracies. SURM and ordered logistic regression models of an ANES 2012 nationally representative sample show that a dominant factor that predicts belief in both birtherism and trutherism is the authoritarian personality trait. People with high authoritarian traits are more likely to believe in conspiracies. Replicating the results with Republicans and Democrats and Bush-supporters and Obama-supporters, two distinct subsets of the population, clearly shows that the authoritarian personality is an important predictor of holding conspiracy theory beliefs.

There are potential problems with this research that need to be addressed by future researchers. These questions were not the best wordings for testing the dependent variable, and future research should verify these simultaneous effects using more specific measures of birtherism and trutherism. In addition, it is worth testing the simultaneous beliefs in these two conspiracies as well as testing other ones that may be less plausible to hold simultaneously. There is an additional problem concerning the possibility that individuals with authoritarian psychological dispositions may be more likely to give expressive responses, which is therefore not testable with these correlational survey data.

Despite these potential problems, these results show that authoritarianism presents yet another problematic component for modern democratic societies. Authoritarianism has consistently been found to correlate with aspects that undermine modern liberal democracy. Conspiracy theories threaten the fundamental legitimacy of democratic discourse. Democracy revolves around disputes whereby people are allowed to openly disagree with each other, which may facilitate an eventual resolution. But it also requires that the arguments are over aspects of a shared reality. Conspiracy theories poison the public sphere and prevent a reasoned and open discourse whereby disagreements occur within the context of reality.

I also find that other expected predictors reduce conspiracy theories. Education is a primary factor that diminishes these ideas, as is political knowledge and intelligence. This suggests that greater civic education early in life, supporting reasoned discourse, rationality, and critical thinking, will help move the distribution away from conspiracy theories. What is troubling about the Internet is that, while it has great potential to spread political knowledge, it lacks any sort of editorial gatekeeping, and conspiracy theories can gain wide distribution. Perhaps most troubling is that the ease of creating websites could permit manipulative elites to intentionally spread conspiratorial ideas to achieve political goals. As such, an important role for social science in the future is to continue to study, monitor, and evaluate conspiracy theories.

### About the Author

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