

**Supplemental Appendix:**  
**“Are All ‘Birthers’ Conspiracy Theorists?:  
On the Relationship Between Conspiratorial  
Thinking and Political Orientations”**

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# 1 Variable coding/wording for ANES variables

- Was Barack Obama definitely born in the United States, probably born in the United States, probably born in another country, or definitely born in another country?

(nonmain\_born)

0. Definitely born in the U.S.
1. Probably born in the U.S.
2. Probably born in another country
3. Definitely born in another country

- Does the health care law passed in 2010 definitely authorize government panels to make end-of-life decisions for people on Medicare, probably authorize government panels to make end-of-life decisions for people on Medicare, probably not authorize government panels to make end-of-life decisions for people on Medicare, or definitely not authorize government panels to make end-of-life decisions for people on Medicare?

(nonmain\_endlife)

0. Definitely does not authorize
1. Probably does not authorize
2. Probably authorizes
3. Definitely authorizes

- Did senior federal government officials definitely know about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 before they happened, probably knew about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 before they happened, probably did not know about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 before they happened, or definitely did not know about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 before they happened? (nonmain\_govt911)

0. Definitely did not know

1. Probably did not know

2. Probably knew

3. Definitely knew

- Some people say that when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in the summer of 2005, the federal government intentionally breached flood levees in New Orleans so that poor neighborhoods would be flooded and middle-class neighborhoods would be spared. Do you think the federal government definitely did this, probably did this, probably did not do this, or definitely did not do this? (`nonmain_hurric`)

0. Definitely did not do this

1. Probably did not do this

2. Probably did this

3. Definitely did this

- 7-point Party ID (`pid_x`)

-3-3, where -3 strong Democrat, 3 strong Republican

- Barack Obama feeling thermometer (`ft_dpc`)

0-100, where 0 corresponds to “cold” feelings, 100 corresponds to “hot” (very favorable)

- George W. Bush feeling thermometer (`ft_gwb`)

0-100, where 0 corresponds to “cold” feelings, 100 corresponds to “hot” (very favorable)

## 2 Variable coding/wording for MTurk variables

- Was Barack Obama definitely born in the United States, probably born in the United States, probably born in another country, or definitely born in another country?
  0. Definitely born in the U.S.
  1. Probably born in the U.S.
  2. Probably born in another country
  3. Definitely born in another country
  
- Did senior federal government officials definitely know about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 before they happened, probably knew about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 before they happened, probably did not know about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 before they happened, or definitely did not know about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 before they happened?
  0. Definitely did not know
  1. Probably did not know
  2. Probably knew
  3. Definitely knew
  
- On November 22, 1963, U.S. President John F. Kennedy was fatally shot by Lee Harvey Oswald as part of a presidential motorcade in Dallas, Texas. Which of the following best represents your opinion about this?
  0. Lee Harvey Oswald definitely acted alone in assassinating John F. Kennedy
  1. Lee Harvey Oswald probably acted alone in assassinating John F. Kennedy
  2. Lee Harvey Oswald probably did not act alone in assassinating John F. Kennedy
  3. Lee Harvey Oswald definitely did not act alone in assassinating John F. Kennedy

- In national politics, events never occur by accident.

0. Strongly disagree
1. Somewhat disagree
2. Neither agree nor disagree
3. Somewhat agree
4. Strongly agree

- Politicians rarely lie.

0. Strongly disagree
1. Somewhat disagree
2. Neither agree nor disagree
3. Somewhat agree
4. Strongly agree

- Unseen patterns and secret activities can be found everywhere in politics.

0. Strongly disagree
1. Somewhat disagree
2. Neither agree nor disagree
3. Somewhat agree
4. Strongly agree

- Government institutions are largely controlled by elite outside interests.

0. Strongly disagree
1. Somewhat disagree

2. Neither agree nor disagree

3. Somewhat agree

4. Strongly agree

- 7-point Party ID

-3-3, where -3 strong Democrat, 3 strong Republican

- 7-point Ideology

-3-3, where -3 extremely liberal, 3 extremely conservative

- Knowledge questions

0. Incorrect

1. Correct

- Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: INDEPENDENCE or RESPECT FOR ELDERS

0. Independence

1. Respect for elders

- Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: CURIOSITY or GOOD MANNERS

0. Curiosity

1. Good manners

- Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: OBEDIENCE or SELF-RELIANCE

0. Self-reliance

1. Obedience

- Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: BEING CONSIDERATE or WELL BEHAVED

0. Considerate

1. Well-behaved

- Education

0-5, where 0 no high school, 5 postgrad

- Black

0. Non-black/African American

1. Black/African American

- Latino

0. Non-Latino

1. Latino

- Age            Age in years

- Female

0. Male

1. Female

### 3 Correlations Between Specific Conspiracy Beliefs

**Table A1:** Correlations between beliefs in specific conspiracy theories, 2012 ANES.

|                  | (1)    | (2)    | (3)   | (4)   |
|------------------|--------|--------|-------|-------|
| (1) Birther      | 1.000  |        |       |       |
| (2) Truther      | 0.091* | 1.000  |       |       |
| (3) Death Panels | 0.389* | 0.134* | 1.000 |       |
| (4) Levee Breach | 0.020  | 0.370* | 0.103 | 1.000 |

Cell entries are Pearson correlation coefficients.

\* $p < 0.05$  level with respect to a two-tailed test.



## 4 Exploratory Factor Analysis Results

**Table A2:** Exploratory factor analysis of four specific conspiracy items, unrotated.

|                                | Factor 1 | Factor 2 |
|--------------------------------|----------|----------|
| <b>Factor Loadings:</b>        |          |          |
| Birther                        | 0.480    | -0.422   |
| Death Panels                   | 0.548    | -0.328   |
| Truther                        | 0.498    | 0.369    |
| Levee Breach                   | 0.446    | 0.445    |
| <b>Eigenvalue:</b>             | 0.977    | 0.618    |
| <b>Variance Accounted For:</b> | 59.7%    | 37.8%    |

Note: Method of estimation is iterated principal factors.  $n = 4814$ .

While all conspiracy items have strong positive loadings on the first factor, they also have strong loadings on the second factor<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, the second factor loadings for what could be considered the Republican conspiracies – the “birther” and “death panel” theories – are negative, whereas the loadings for what could be considered the Democratic conspiracies – the “truther” and “levee breach” theories – are positive. A two dimensional solution is also more appropriate than a unidimensional one given the high proportion of variance – approximately 38% – accounted for by the second factor<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Though it is impossible to say what exactly constitutes a “strong” loading, the most common rule of thumb is that any loading of 0.30 or greater should be considered non-trivial at least, and “strong” at best.

<sup>2</sup>We also examined a scree plot of the eigenvalues versus the number of factors and conducted a parallel analysis, both of which suggested that a two-factor solution best accounted for the underlying structure in the responses to the four conspiracy items.

## 5 Explanation and Distribution of Conspiratorial Thinking Items

Conspiratorial thinking is a style of reasoning about the political world and our place in it (Hofstadter 1964). A conspiracy theory is often understood to be an explanation of a given event (or a set of events) by referencing the secret plan of a small collection of unknown individuals (or groups) that have the intention (often disguised) to assume more power (Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah & Imhoff 2013, Keeley 1999). Rather than focusing on filling out the specifics of any one conspiracy, the more fruitful direction is to study the prevalence of this “narrative form” or “style” of thinking (Barkun 2003, Fenster 2008, Hofstadter 1964). The proper starting point of any conspiracy theory is suspicion toward epistemic authority – the official account of what happened and why (Brotherton, French & Pickering 2013, Bruder et al. 2013, Keeley 1999, Uscinski & Parent 2014). Therefore, the first question we ask respondents is their level of (dis)agreement with a statement that politicians lie:

1. Politicians often lie, deflect blame, and find other ways to look innocent.

*(Politicians Lie)*

This is, perhaps, a low bar; we have long known that the vast majority of the American population does not think highly of politicians or their representatives and, as previous research shows, trust is a consistently negative predictor of conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig & Gregory 1999, Goertzel 1994, Swami, Coles, Stieger, Pietschnig, Furnham, Rehim & Voracek 2011, Swami, Pietschnig, Tran, Nader, Stieger & Voracek 2013). However, we argue that this cynical assumption masks a genuine and pervasive suspicion of authority. Indeed, though we often excuse this assumption that politicians lie, the belief that other epistemic authorities routinely lie is often considered to be quite troubling. For example, recent findings that sizeable proportions of individuals are increasingly skeptical or distrustful of the authoritative claims of the scientific community and of

science’s role in public policy has made many question the belief in a rational, deliberative public sphere altogether (Blank & Shaw 2015, Bolsen, Druckman & Cook 2015, Kraft, Lodge & Taber 2015). While questioning epistemic authorities (be they politicians or scientists) is certainly a sign of a suspicious belief system, it does not necessarily mean that someone is wholly a “conspiracy theorist.” Instead, we should conclude the reverse: The belief that politicians lie is a logically necessary belief for conspiracy theorists, but not a logically sufficient one.

The second question we ask follows previous research in suggesting that another aspect of conspiratorial thinking is the belief that the democratic machinery has broken down and been overtaken by elite interests:

2. Government institutions are largely controlled by elite outside interests. (*Outside Interests*)

American political populism cannot survive without this belief in a powerful elite (Hofstadter 1964, Fenster 2008), and it is at the core of Uscinski and Parent’s (2014) finding of widespread conspiratorial thinking. Again, we do not argue that someone who believes that a small and powerful elite controls our governmental institutions is necessarily a conspiracy theorist, but rather that the “paranoid style” requires this belief (Hofstadter 1964, Fenster 2008, Keeley 1999, Pigden 2007, Uscinski & Parent 2014).

Recent research shows that individuals who believe in conspiracy theories are more likely to commit the “conjunction fallacy” in reasoning about the probability of two independent events occurring. For this reason, conspiracy theorists often believe that everything is connected, or that there are no accidents (Barkun 2003, Brotherton & French 2014, Keeley 1999). In order to tap this peculiar psychological process, we ask individuals the extent to which they (dis)agree that there are “accidents” in national politics:

3. In national politics, nothing happens by accident. (*No Accidents*)

Again, though individuals who do not believe in conspiracy theories are also prone to make the same erroneous probability calculations, it is more prevalent among conspiracy believers largely because they necessarily posit a world where there are no accidents, where the world is potentially wholly discernible.

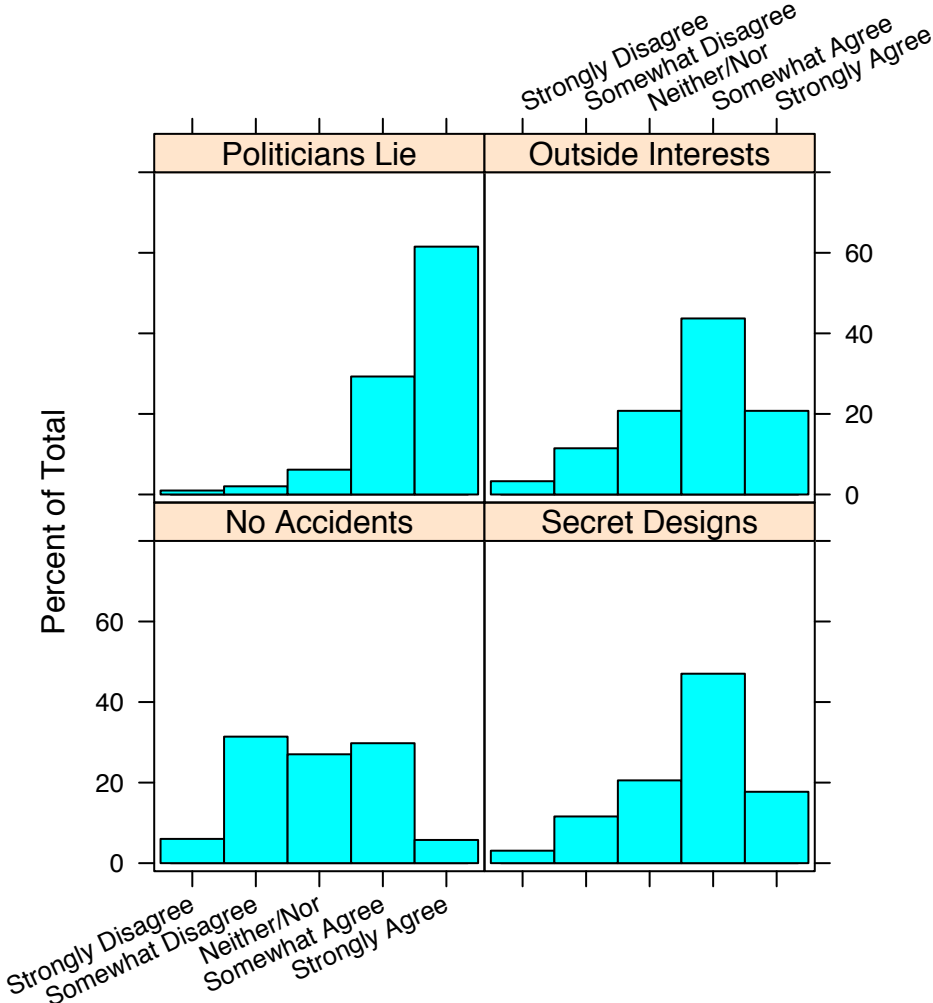
Finally, the paranoid style culminates in the belief that not only are there no accidents, but also that the individual can “see” or uncover the (otherwise) secret plots or plans of others. The idea that every act has a cause blossoms into a stronger belief that every act has an intentional cause. This phenomenon is called “intentionality bias,” and individuals who believe in conspiracies are more prone to believe that an act is intentional than not. This intentionality bias is akin to Oliver and Wood’s (2014) “unseen forces” aspect of the paranoid style. Our last question asks the extent to which the respondent (dis)agrees that she can see the secret patterns or designs around her:

4. You can see patterns, designs, and secret activities everywhere once you know where to look. (*Secret Designs*)

This last aspect of suspicion is the peak of the “paranoid style,” a habit of thinking in which everything has a (known) cause and, moreover, is caused by a lying elite. This last question takes the concept of suspicion to its natural conclusion that the surface of a matter is a cleverly designed deception.

The distributions of responses to these items appear in Figure 1A.

**Figure A1:** Distributions of responses to MTurk conspiratorial orientation items.



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