Appendix for: Trust Nobody: How Voters React To Conspiracy Theories

May 12, 2022

Contents

1. Experimental Procedure

This experimental protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The implementation started after the approval was obtained, to adhere to the best practices of ethical research.

All subjects were financially compensated for participation. Participants were paid on average $\$1.28$ (with a $\$0.25$ show-up fee and a bonus of $\$1.25$ maximum), which is above standard rates on MTurk. Bonuses were provided based on subjects' answers to five questions, with each right answer receiving $\$0.25$. On average, subjects got 4 out of 5 questions right, and were compensated accordingly. Since the experimental task takes about 10 minutes, this compensation scheme is fair. No complaints from participants were received regarding the payment scheme or any other matter.

Subjects were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk platform. All subjects joined the study voluntarily. They were aware of the compensation scheme before participation. All subjects were informed that they were participating in an academic research study.

A consent form was provided to all potential subjects before participation to explain the project and the compensation scheme. Subjects were allowed to participate after they provided their voluntary and informed written consent by agreeing to the terms presented in the consent form. The study posed no risk to subjects and involved no deception.

2. Experimental Material

2.1. Outcome Variables

Political Support. Some people think that the current administration is doing well, while others disagree. For each of the following statements, enter a number between 0 and 100 expressing how much you agree with the statement ($100 =$ strong agreement; $0 =$ strong disagreement).

1. There should be further investigation into President Trump's collusion with foreign countries (like Russia and Ukraine). [Investigation (reversed)]

2. Even if I disagree with some policies of the Trump's administration, the overall performance of the current administration is satisfactory. [Performance]

3. I will vote for president Trump in the upcoming presidential election. [Vote]

4. Even if I agree with some of the criticisms to the Trump's administration, I object to the impeachment of President Trump. [Impeachment]

Trust in Information Providers. Some people think that the following institutions are trustworthy, while others disagree. For each of the following institutions, enter a number between 0 and 100 indicating your level of trust in that institution ($100 =$ greatly trust; $0 =$ no trust).

1. The liberal mainstream media (like The New York Times)

2. The conservative mainstream media (like Fox News)

3. The non-mainstream (alternative) media (like online blogs, the Corbett Report, 21st Century Wire)

4. Online search engines (like Google)

5. Social media platforms (like Facebook and Twitter)

6. Academics at major universities

7. Government think tanks

8. Non-government think tanks

Trust in Political Institutions. Some people think that the following institutions are trustworthy, while others disagree. For each of the following institutions, enter a number between 0 and 100 indicating your level of trust in that institution ($100 =$ greatly trust; $0 =$ no trust).

1. Republican Party leaders

2. Democratic Party leaders

3. District Court

4. US Supreme Court

5. FBI

6. CIA

Media Accuracy. Some people think that the media is generally a high-quality source of information, while others disagree.

To what extent do you believe the argument presented in the video you just watched? ($100 =$ completely believe; $0 =$ do not believe at all).

How accurate do you think the information was in the article you just read? ($100 =$ completely accurate; $0 =$ not accurate at all)

2.2. Achievements Condition Article

The administration of President Donald Trump has brought several accomplishment over the last years. Here are the some of the most important accomplishments that characterized the Trump administration:

Almost 4 million jobs have been created since the last election

More Americans are now employed than ever recorded before in the US history. More than 400,000 manufacturing jobs have been created since the last election. Manufacturing jobs are growing at the fastest rate in more than three decades.

New unemployment claims recently hit a 49-year low

Median household income has hit highest level ever recorded. African-American unemployment has recently achieved the lowest rate ever recorded. Hispanic-American unemployment is at the lowest rate ever recorded. Asian-American unemployment recently achieved the lowest rate ever recorded. Women's unemployment recently reached the lowest rate in 65 years. Youth unemployment has recently hit the lowest rate in nearly half a century. Lowest unemployment rate ever recorded for Americans without a high school diploma. Under Trump's Administration, veterans' unemployment recently reached its lowest rate in nearly 20 years.

FDA approves most generic drugs ever

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the highest number of generic drugs in its history during fiscal year 2018 in order to combat rising prescription drug costs, according to Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar. "[This is] a huge advance for competition and lowering drug prices," Azar said on Thursday during an interview with FOX Business' Charles Payne.

Secured $6 billion in NEW funding to fight the opioid epidemic

President Donald J. Trump has mobilized Federal resources to combat the opioid crisis that has devastated so many American communities. During Trump's first year in office, high-dose opioid prescriptions have been reduced by 16 percent.

2.3. Scandals Condition Article

The administration of President Donald Trump brings a new scandal or controversy nearly every day. Here are the some of the biggest scandals that rocked the Trump administration:

Trump Profited from His Presidency

Trump, a wealthy businessman who operates country clubs and resorts, has reportedly profited from at least 10 foreign governments during his time as president. The include the Kuwaiti Embassy, which booked the Trump hotel for an event; a public-relations firm hired by Saudi Arabia that spent $270,000 on rooms, meals and parking at Trump's hotel in Washington; and Turkey, which used the same facility for a government-sponsored event. Trump's acceptance of payments from foreign governments violates the Foreign Emoluments Clause, which bans elected officials in the United States from accepting gifts or other valuables from foreign leaders. Dozens of lawmakers and several

entities have filed suit against Trump alleging violations of the clause, including the Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington.

Obstructing Investigations into the Russia Probe

Trumped fired FBI Director James Comey in May 2017 and blamed senior Justice Department officials for the move. At the time of his firing, Comey was directing the investigation into Russians interference in the 2016 presidential election and whether any of Trump's advisers or campaign staff had colluded with them. Trump's firing of the FBI director was seen as a way to halt the investigation, and Comey later testified under oath that Trump asked him to drop his investigation of the former national security adviser, Michael Flynn. Flynn had misled the White House about his conversations with the Russian ambassador to the United States. Critics of Trump clearly believe Trump's firing of Comey, which was unexpected, was a clear attempt to interfere with the FBI's investigation of Russian interference with the 2016 election.

Ivanka Trump conducted government business with a private, unsecured email account.

White House adviser Ivanka Trump regularly used a private email account using a domain shared with her husband Jared Kushner for official government business, sending "hundreds" of mainly logistical and scheduling emails to other officials from the private email address. "She was the worst offender in the White House," a former senior government official familiar with the review of Ivanka's emails said about her email usage, which could violate the Presidential Records Act. While Trump frequently attacked his opponent Hillary Clinton for her use of a private email address and server while she was secretary of state, he defended his daughter Ivanka's conduct.

Trump used his Charitable Foundation for business and political purposes

The Donald J. Trump Foundation, the President's personal charitable foundation, was used to settle its namesake's personal debts, benefit his business and boost his presidential campaign in violation of the state tax code, according to a lawsuit filed in June by New York's attorney general. Trump agreed to shut it down under an agreement with the state that called for the charity's remaining $1.7 million in assets to be given away.

Michael Cohen pleaded guilty to lying to Congress about Trump's business deals with Russia

Trump's longtime personal lawyer and "fixer" Michael Cohen pleaded guilty in a federal court in Manhattan to a series of felony crimes involving Trump. Cohen entered guilty pleas to five counts of tax evasion, one count of bank fraud, one count of making an unlawful corporate contribution, and one count of making an illegal campaign finance contribution on October 27, 2016 — the day a $130,000 payment to adult-film star Stormy Daniels was finalized. During his plea entry, Cohen said he had made the illegal campaign and corporate contributions "at the direction of the candidate" and with the "purpose of influencing the election." He did not identify said candidate by name, but the criminal complaint, which refers to said candidate as "individual 1," said that person became President of the United States in January 2017 — meaning it can be only be President Donald Trump.

Staff secretary Rob Porter resigned after his two ex-wives accused him of domestic violence.

Rob Porter, a White House staff secretary and right-hand man to chief of staff John Kelly, resigned after two of his ex-wives came forward with allegations of domestic abuse, sending the West Wing into chaos. Many of Porter's White House colleagues stuck by him even as the women came forward with

disturbing accounts of physical assault, photographs of black eyes, and protective orders they filed against Porter. The allegations were considered serious enough to deny Porter a security clearance, according to reports. While Kelly publicly stated he was "shocked" by the claims, multiple news reports asserted the White House was aware of the allegations for months before they became public.

2.4. Treatment Videos

The link to the treatment video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQL8uv--hn0
The link to the placebo video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMpMxaX3Kdg

3. Sample Characteristics

Note on the variables: The variable Education takes four values, corresponding to the highest level of education attained: 0 = middle school/high school, 1 = some college, no degree, 2 = college degree, 3 = postgraduate degree.

Table 1 – Descriptive Statistics of the Full Sample

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Median	Max
Age	2,089	38.3	12.5	18	35	81
Education	2,089	1.7	0.8	0	2	3
Female	2,089	0.5	0.5	0	1	1
White	2,089	0.8	0.4	0	1	1
Republican	2,089	0.3	0.5	0	0	1
Trust in Information Providers	2,089	44.3	16.2	0	46.2	100
Article Accuracy	2,089	62.1	30.1	0	70	100
Trust in Pol. Institutions	2,089	47.2	19.1	0	48.3	100
Political Support	2,089	31.2	37.1	0	10.8	100
Trust in Search Engines	2,089	51.6	26.4	0	50	100
Trust in Social Media	2,089	30.2	25.1	0	25	100
Trust in Gov. Think Tanks	2,089	40.4	26.3	0	50	100
Trust in Non-gov. Think Tanks	2,089	43.6	25.7	0	50	100
Trust in Liberal Media	2,089	54.0	33.8	0	60	100
Trust in Converv. Media	2,089	30.6	29.7	0	20	100
Trust in Alternative Media	2,089	42.0	27.6	0	50	100
Trust in Academic Inst.	2,089	62.2	28.8	0	70	100
Trust in FBI	2,089	56.6	29.3	0	60	100
Trust in CIA	2,089	54.0	30.0	0	60	100
Trust in Republican Leaders	2,089	29.1	29.2	0	20	100
Trust in Democratic Leaders	2,089	46.1	30.8	0	50	100
Trust in Courts	2,089	47.7	31.4	0	50	100
Trust in Supreme Court	2,089	49.4	32.4	0	50	100
Investigation	2,089	29.3	39.1	0	0	100
Performance	2,089	34.8	37.4	0	20	100
Vote	2,089	26.9	40.0	0	0	100
Impeachment	2,089	33.7	41.6	0	0	100

Table 2 – Descriptive Statistics of the Achievement Condition

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Median	Max
Age	1,057	38.4	12.8	18	35	76
Education	1,057	1.7	0.8	0	2	3
Female	1,057	0.5	0.5	0	1	1
White	1,057	0.8	0.4	0	1	1
Republican	1,057	0.3	0.5	0	0	1
Trust in Information Providers	1,057	44.6	16.1	0	46.2	100
Article Accuracy	1,057	58.1	31.1	0	60	100
Trust in Pol. Institutions	1,057	47.8	19.2	0	49.2	100
Political Support	1,057	33.5	37.7	0	12.5	100
Trust in Search Engines	1,057	51.9	26.2	0	50	100
Trust in Social Media	1,057	29.8	24.9	0	25	100
Trust in Gov. Think Tanks	1,057	41.3	26.1	0	50	100
Trust in Non-gov. Think Tanks	1,057	44.5	25.9	0	50	100
Trust in Liberal Media	1,057	54.0	34.1	0	60	100
Trust in Converv. Media	1,057	31.2	30.0	0	20	100
Trust in Alternative Media	1,057	41.0	27.6	0	50	100
Trust in Academic Inst.	1,057	63.2	28.6	0	70	100
Trust in FBI	1,057	57.3	28.7	0	60	100
Trust in CIA	1,057	54.9	29.4	0	60	100
Trust in Republican Leaders	1,057	31.0	30.0	0	20	100
Trust in Democratic Leaders	1,057	46.0	31.0	0	50	100
Trust in Courts	1,057	47.9	31.3	0	50	100
Trust in Supreme Court	1,057	50.0	32.4	0	50	100
Investigation	1,057	31.5	40.0	0	5	100
Performance	1,057	38.8	37.7	0	25	100
Vote	1,057	28.7	40.7	0	0	100
Impeachment	1,057	34.9	42.1	0	1	100

Table 3 – Descriptive Statistics of the Scandal Condition

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Median	Max
Age	1,032	38.2	12.2	18	35	81
Education	1,032	1.7	0.9	0	2	3
Female	1,032	0.6	0.5	0	1	1
White	1,032	0.8	0.4	0	1	1
Republican	1,032	0.3	0.5	0	0	1
Trust in Information Providers	1,032	44.0	16.4	0	45.6	93.1
Article Accuracy	1,032	66.1	28.5	0	74.5	100
Trust in Pol. Institutions	1,032	46.5	19.0	0	47.7	92
Political Support	1,032	28.8	36.3	0	7.5	100
Trust in Search Engines	1,032	51.4	26.6	0	50	100
Trust in Social Media	1,032	30.6	25.4	0	25	100
Trust in Gov. Think Tanks	1,032	39.5	26.4	0	50	100
Trust in Non-gov. Think Tanks	1,032	42.7	25.5	0	50	100
Trust in Liberal Media	1,032	54.0	33.6	0	60	100
Trust in Converv. Media	1,032	30.0	29.4	0	20	100
Trust in Alternative Media	1,032	42.9	27.5	0	50	100
Trust in Academic Inst.	1,032	61.2	29.0	0	70	100
Trust in FBI	1,032	55.9	29.8	0	60	100
Trust in CIA	1,032	53.0	30.5	0	58.5	100
Trust in Republican Leaders	1,032	27.1	28.3	0	20	100
Trust in Democratic Leaders	1,032	46.3	30.5	0	50	100
Trust in Courts	1,032	47.5	31.6	0	50	100
Trust in Supreme Court	1,032	48.9	32.4	0	50	100
Investigation	1,032	27.1	38.2	0	0	100
Performance	1,032	30.7	36.6	0	10	100
Vote	1,032	25.1	39.1	0	0	100
Impeachment	1,032	32.5	41.0	0	0	100

Factorial design. The following table describes how subjects were assigned to each experimental condition.

	Conspiracy Video	Placebo Video
Scandal Article	538	494
Achievement Article	498	538

Table 4 – Experimental Design: each subject is assigned to one of these four condition using simple random assignment, which produced the number of subjects reported within each cell for each experimental condition.

4. Treatment Effects on Political Support

In this section, we test our pre-registered hypotheses (1) and (2) concerning the implications of exposure to conpiracy theories on support for politicians.[1] According to hypothesis (1), exposure to conspiracy theories increases subjects' evaluations of politicians involved in the scandal. Hypothesis (2) states that exposure to conspiracy theories reduces subjects' evaluations of achieving politicians. In Table 5, we take a weighted summative index (Cronbach's alpha of 0.95) of the four variables (investigation, impeachment, performance, and vote) as the outcome. We do not find support for either hypothesis.

[1]Note that these do not coincide with hypotheses (1) and (2) in the main text, where we only focus on the effects of the CT treatment on trust in institutions and information providers.

Table 5 – OLS Regression Estimates of the Effects of Conspiracy and Scandal on Political Support

	(1)	(2)
Conspiracy	0.053	0.853
	(1.621)	(2.280)
Scandal	-4.655^{***}	-3.851^{*}
	(1.621)	(2.285)
Conspiracy x Scandal		-1.618
		(3.243)
Control	33.469^{***}	33.092^{***}
	(1.371)	(1.565)
Observations	2,089	2,089

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

5. Treatment Effects on Disaggregated Outcomes

In this section, we present the main treatment effects on the separate components of our three main indices: trust in information providers, trust in political institutions, and political support for the incumbent.

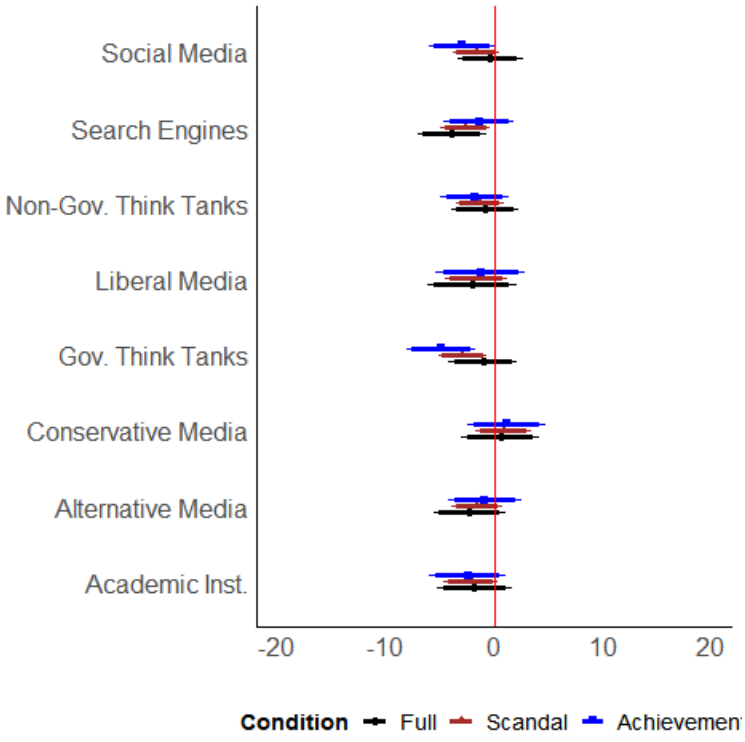

Figure 1 – Treatment effects on trust in different information providers. The plot displays the estimated coefficient of the conspiracy treatment for the achievement condition (square), scandal condition (triangle), and the full sample (dot). Confidence intervals are at the 90 and 95 percent levels.

Table 6 – Treatment Effects on Trust in Different Information Providers (No Interaction Effects)

	Outcome							
	Search Engines	Social Media	Gov. Tanks	Non-gov. Tanks	Liberal Media	Conserv. Media	Alt. Media	Academic Instit.
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Conspiracy	-2.68^{**}	-1.65	-2.95^{**}	-1.33	-1.67	0.87	-1.61	-2.15^{*}
	(1.16)	(1.10)	(1.15)	(1.13)	(1.48)	(1.30)	(1.21)	(1.26)
Scandal	-0.40	0.85	-1.67	-1.71	0.08	-1.17	1.96	-1.83
	(1.16)	(1.10)	(1.15)	(1.13)	(1.48)	(1.30)	(1.21)	(1.26)
Control	53.16^{***}	30.58^{***}	42.69^{***}	45.14^{***}	54.78^{***}	30.75^{***}	41.78^{***}	64.17^{***}
	(0.98)	(0.93)	(0.97)	(0.95)	(1.25)	(1.10)	(1.02)	(1.07)
Observations	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 7 – Treatment Effects on Trust in Different Information Providers (with Interaction Effects)

	Outcome							
	Search Engines	Social Media	Gov. Tanks	Non-gov. Tanks	Liberal Media	Conserv. Media	Alt. Media	Academic Instit.
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Conspiracy	-3.90^{**}	-0.39	-1.04	-0.86	-2.08	0.56	-2.31	-1.84
	(1.63)	(1.55)	(1.61)	(1.58)	(2.09)	(1.83)	(1.70)	(1.78)
Scandal	-1.62	2.12	0.26	-1.23	-0.33	-1.47	1.25	-1.51
	(1.63)	(1.55)	(1.62)	(1.59)	(2.09)	(1.84)	(1.70)	(1.78)
Conspiracy x Scandal	2.47	-2.54	-3.87^{*}	-0.96	0.83	0.62	1.42	-0.64
	(2.31)	(2.20)	(2.30)	(2.25)	(2.97)	(2.61)	(2.41)	(2.52)
Control	53.74^{***}	29.99^{***}	41.79^{***}	44.92^{***}	54.98^{***}	30.90^{***}	42.12^{***}	64.03^{***}
	(1.12)	(1.06)	(1.11)	(1.09)	(1.43)	(1.26)	(1.17)	(1.22)
Observations	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

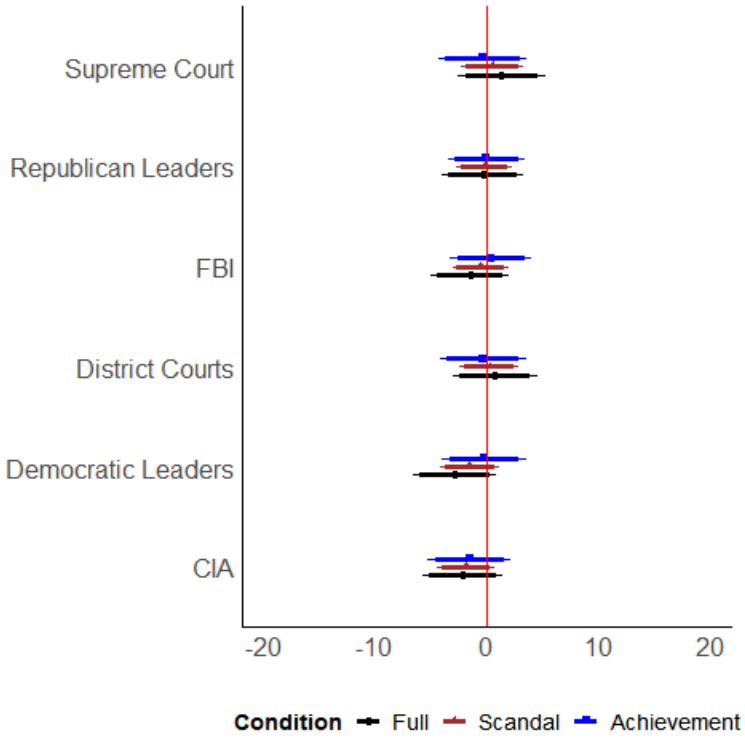

Figure 2 – Treatment effects on trust in different political institutions. The plot displays the estimated coefficient of the conspiracy treatment for the achievement condition (square), scandal condition (triangle), and the full sample (dot). Confidence intervals are at the 90 and 95 percent levels.

Table 8 – Treatment Effects on Trust in Different Political Institutions (No Interaction Effects)

	Outcome					
	FBI	CIA	Rep. Leaders	Dem. Leaders	District Courts	Supreme Courts
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Conspiracy	−0.59	−1.89	−0.24	−1.59	0.18	0.46
	(1.28)	(1.31)	(1.28)	(1.35)	(1.38)	(1.42)
Scandal	−1.31	−1.77	−3.82***	0.37	−0.42	−1.07
	(1.28)	(1.31)	(1.28)	(1.35)	(1.38)	(1.42)
Control	57.56***	55.78***	31.10***	46.72***	47.83***	49.74***
	(1.08)	(1.11)	(1.08)	(1.14)	(1.16)	(1.20)
Observations	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 9 – Treatment Effects on Trust in Different Political Institutions (with Interaction Effects)

	Outcome					
	FBI	CIA	Rep. Leaders	Dem. Leaders	District Courts	Supreme Courts
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Conspiracy	−1.53	−2.19	−0.40	−2.90	0.71	1.31
	(1.80)	(1.85)	(1.80)	(1.90)	(1.94)	(2.00)
Scandal	−2.25	−2.08	−3.98**	−0.94	0.11	−0.22
	(1.81)	(1.85)	(1.80)	(1.90)	(1.94)	(2.00)
Conspiracy x Scandal	1.89	0.62	0.32	2.63	−1.08	−1.72
	(2.57)	(2.62)	(2.56)	(2.70)	(2.75)	(2.84)
Control	58.01***	55.92***	31.17***	47.33***	47.58***	49.35***
	(1.24)	(1.27)	(1.23)	(1.30)	(1.33)	(1.37)
Observations	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

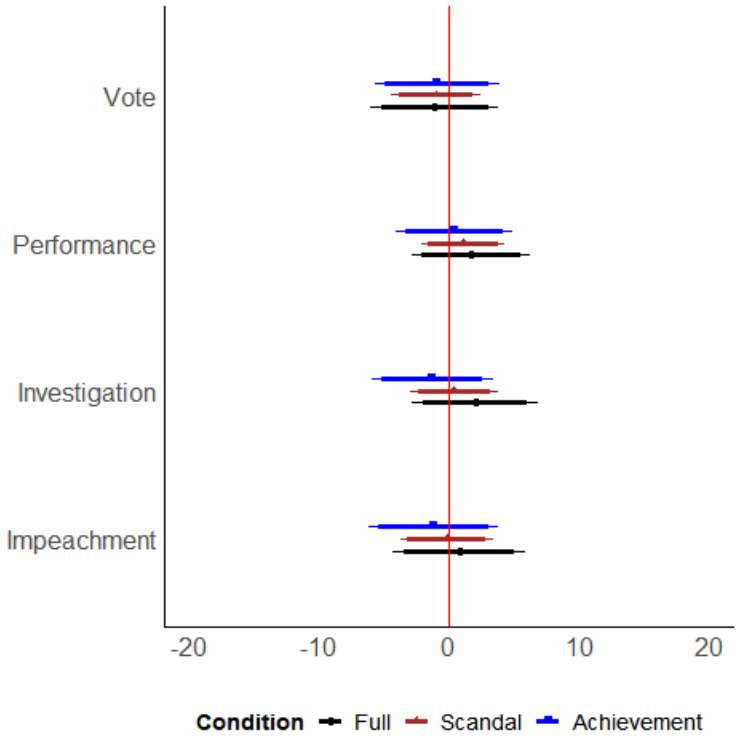

Figure 3 – Treatment effects on different items composing the political support score. The plot displays the estimated coefficient of the conspiracy treatment for the achievement condition (square), scandal condition (triangle), and the full sample (dot). Confidence intervals are at the 90 and 95 percent levels.

Table 10 – Treatment Effects on Different Items Composing the Political Support Score

	Outcome							
	Invest.	Perfom.	Vote	Impeach.	Invest.	Perfom.	Vote	Impeach.
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Conspiracy	0.37	1.07	−1.02	−0.20	2.01	1.73	−1.11	0.78
	(1.71)	(1.63)	(1.75)	(1.82)	(2.41)	(2.29)	(2.46)	(2.56)
Scandal	−4.44***	−8.21***	−3.55**	−2.41	−2.80	−7.54***	−3.64	−1.42
	(1.71)	(1.63)	(1.75)	(1.82)	(2.41)	(2.29)	(2.47)	(2.57)
Scandal x Conspiracy					−3.31	−1.35	0.19	−1.99
					(3.43)	(3.26)	(3.50)	(3.64)
Control	31.31***	38.33***	29.19***	35.04***	30.54***	38.02***	29.24***	34.57***
	(1.45)	(1.38)	(1.48)	(1.54)	(1.65)	(1.57)	(1.69)	(1.76)
Observations	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

6. Additional Pre-registered Hypotheses

Our pre-analysis plan contains additional hypotheses that are not presented in the main text due to space constraints. This set of hypotheses build on the existing literature on conspiratorial thinking to argue that the treatment effects will be larger under certain conditions, as detailed in our pre-analysis plan. The following sections present the results from testing these hypotheses, as well as additional exploratory analysis.

6.1. Partisan Differences

In this section, we investigate whether the treatment effects differ pending on subjects' partisanship. To that end, we interact the treatment variable with a dummy for Republican subjects. In the plots below, the gray squares and the black triangles denote respectively the estimated coefficients of the treatment variable and the interaction term (i.e., the difference between the estimated treatment effect of conspiracy theories for Republicans and Democrats) for the achievement condition, scandal condition, and the full sample.

This analysis indicates that the treatment effects depend on partisanship, as shown in Figure 4. Across the three samples, the negative effects of CTs on trust in information providers and the perceived credibility of new information are stronger among Democrats, as indicated by the positive estimates of the coefficients associated with the interaction between the CT treatment and Republicans (black squares).

A similar pattern also holds when we look at trust in institutions, albeit the effects are weaker. With regard to effects on political support, the partisan differences are only apparent in the scandal condition, where the treatment

increases subjects' evaluations of politicians more for Democrats than Republicans. This result is in line with our pre-registered hypothesis (1.a).

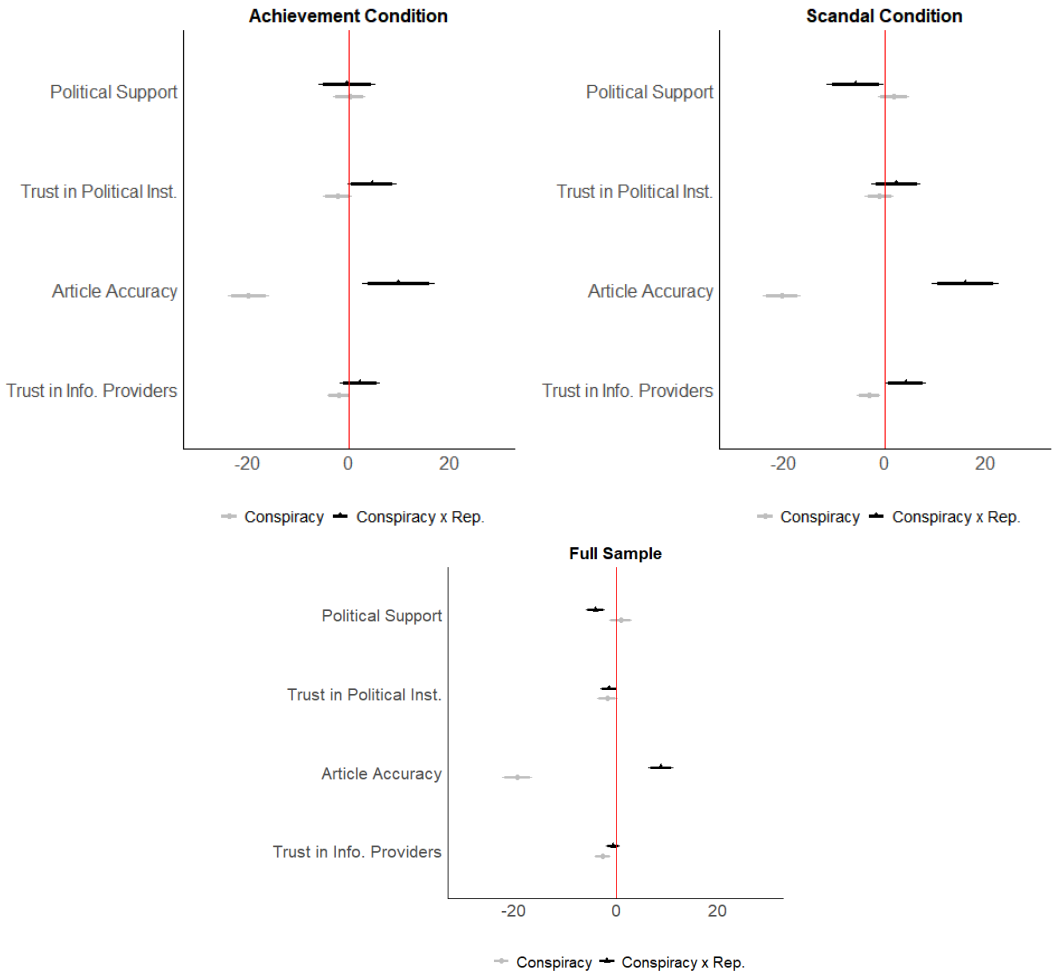

Figure 4 – The plots present the coefficients on the conspiracy treatment and its interaction with partisan orientation (Republicans) in the achievement condition (top left), the scandal condition (top right), and the full sample (bottom). Confidence intervals are at the 90 and 95 percent levels.

Table 11 – OLS Analysis of Treatment Effects by Partisanship

	Outcome							
	Trust Info. Providers	Article Accuracy	Trust Instit.	Political Support	Trust Info. Providers	Article Accuracy	Trust Instit.	Political Support
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Conspiracy	−2.61***	−19.39***	−1.69*	0.93	−2.06*	−19.95***	−2.32	0.06
	(0.84)	(1.54)	(1.02)	(1.16)	(1.18)	(2.04)	(1.44)	(1.65)
Scandal	−0.56	8.84***	−1.36	−4.01***	0.66	23.24***	−1.14	−4.01**
	(0.68)	(1.26)	(0.83)	(0.95)	(1.18)	(2.03)	(1.44)	(1.64)
Rep	−10.88***	−4.59**	−5.92***	65.13***	−9.51***	16.76***	−5.34***	65.00***
	(1.02)	(1.88)	(1.24)	(1.42)	(1.40)	(2.42)	(1.71)	(1.95)
Scandal x Conspiracy					−1.18	−0.54	1.16	1.65
					(1.67)	(2.89)	(2.04)	(2.33)
Scandal x Rep					−2.92	−45.48***	−1.24	0.27
					(2.05)	(3.53)	(2.49)	(2.85)
Conspiracy x Rep	2.97**	11.02***	3.29*	−3.23	2.06	9.80***	4.53*	−0.42
	(1.45)	(2.66)	(1.77)	(2.02)	(2.03)	(3.50)	(2.48)	(2.83)
Consp. x Scandal x Rep					2.01	6.13	−2.32	−5.51
					(2.90)	(5.00)	(3.53)	(4.04)
Control	49.03***	67.01***	50.10***	11.58***	48.45***	60.26***	49.99***	11.58***
	(0.67)	(1.23)	(0.82)	(0.93)	(0.81)	(1.39)	(0.98)	(1.12)
Observations	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

6.2. Racial Differences

In this section, we test whether treatment effects differ by race (Hypothesis 7): *conspiracy treatment effects are higher for subjects from racial minority groups.* We interact the treatment with a dummy variable for white subjects and report the coefficients on the treatment and the interaction term (the difference between the estimated treatment effect of conspiracy theories for whites and racial minorities) for the achievement condition, scandal condition, and the full sample.

In Figure 5, we notice that there are statistically distinguishable differences in the treatment effects by race for some variables. Racial minorities are less likely to trust the informational environment and political institutions after their exposure to the CT treatment, compared to their white counterparts. This holds for the full sample and under the achievement condition. These results provide some support for the presence of heterogeneous treatment effects by race.

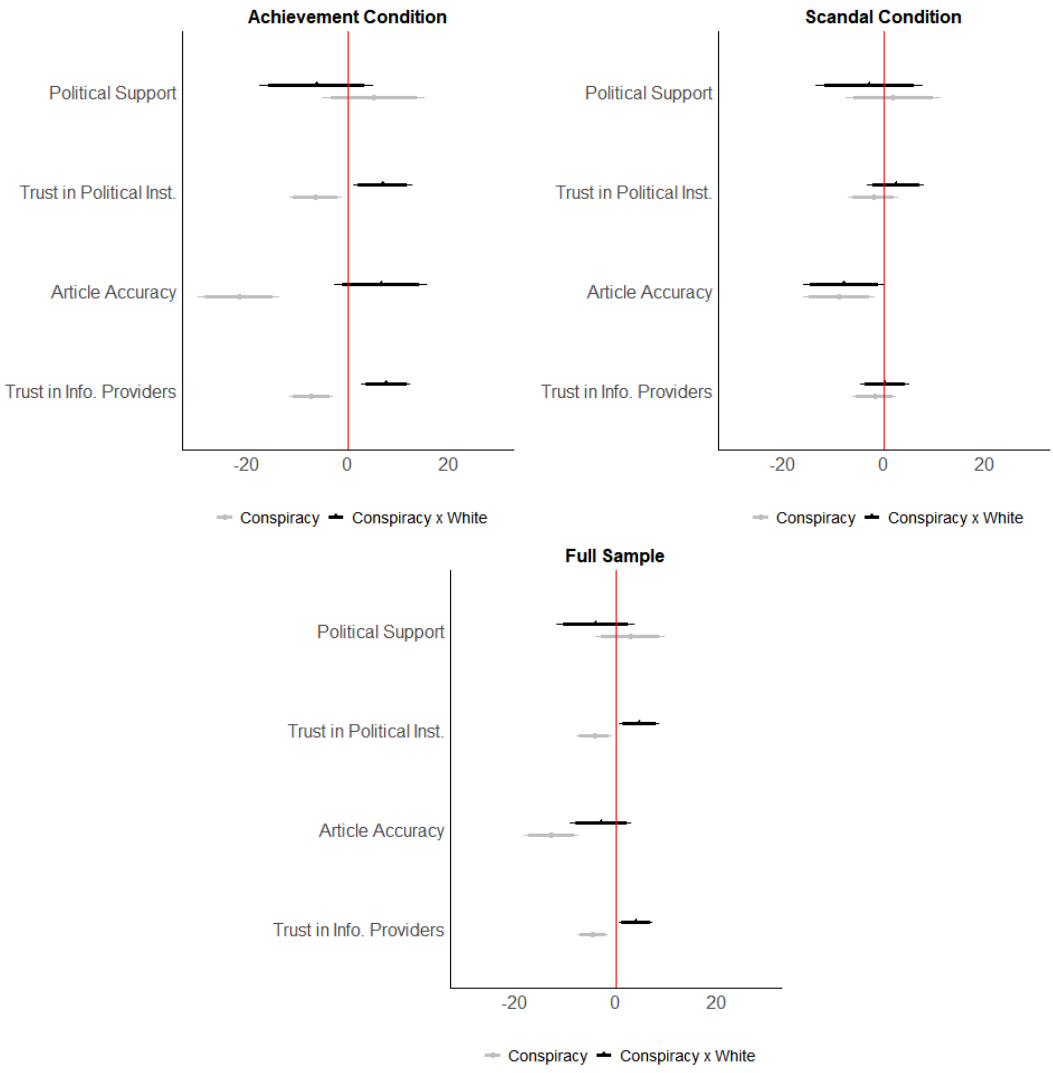

Figure 5 – The plots present the coefficients on the conspiracy treatment and its interaction with racial identity (White) in the achievement condition (top left), the scandal condition (top right), and the full sample (bottom). Confidence intervals are at the 90 and 95 percent levels.

Table 12 – OLS Analysis of Treatment Effects by Race

	Outcome							
	Trust Info. Providers	Article Accuracy	Trust Instit.	Political Support	Trust Info. Providers	Article Accuracy	Trust Instit.	Political Support
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Conspiracy	-4.64^{***}	-14.19^{***}	-4.17^{**}	3.53	-7.32^{***}	-21.71^{***}	-6.47^{**}	5.10
	(1.54)	(2.75)	(1.82)	(3.50)	(2.25)	(4.00)	(2.66)	(5.11)
Scandal	-0.45	8.71^{***}	-1.21	-4.55^{***}	-3.73^{*}	8.65^{**}	-2.96	-2.01
	(0.71)	(1.26)	(0.84)	(1.61)	(2.14)	(3.81)	(2.53)	(4.86)
White	-4.79^{***}	0.09	0.23	14.52^{***}	-6.82^{***}	0.39	-0.56	15.77^{***}
	(1.20)	(2.15)	(1.42)	(2.73)	(1.62)	(2.89)	(1.92)	(3.68)
Scandal x Conspiracy					5.36^{*}	12.75^{**}	4.34	-3.30
					(3.12)	(5.55)	(3.68)	(7.08)
Scandal x White					4.51^{*}	-0.64	1.78	-2.80
					(2.42)	(4.31)	(2.86)	(5.49)
Conspiracy x White	3.85^{**}	-1.91	4.44^{**}	-4.67	7.53^{***}	6.48	6.85^{**}	-6.24
	(1.74)	(3.10)	(2.05)	(3.94)	(2.51)	(4.47)	(2.97)	(5.70)
Consp. x Scandal x White					-7.42^{**}	-14.46^{**}	-4.55	3.31
					(3.50)	(6.23)	(4.14)	(7.95)
Control	49.11^{***}	65.48^{***}	47.88^{***}	22.08^{***}	50.55^{***}	65.50^{***}	48.66^{***}	20.97^{***}
	(1.11)	(1.98)	(1.31)	(2.51)	(1.42)	(2.53)	(1.68)	(3.23)
Observations	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

6.3. Religious Differences

In this section, we test whether treatment effects differ by religiosity (Hypothesis 8): *conspiracy treatment effects are higher for more religious subjects.* We interact the treatment with a 5-level continuous variable for subjects' religiosity based on their church attendance. We report the coefficients on the treatment and its interaction with religiosity.

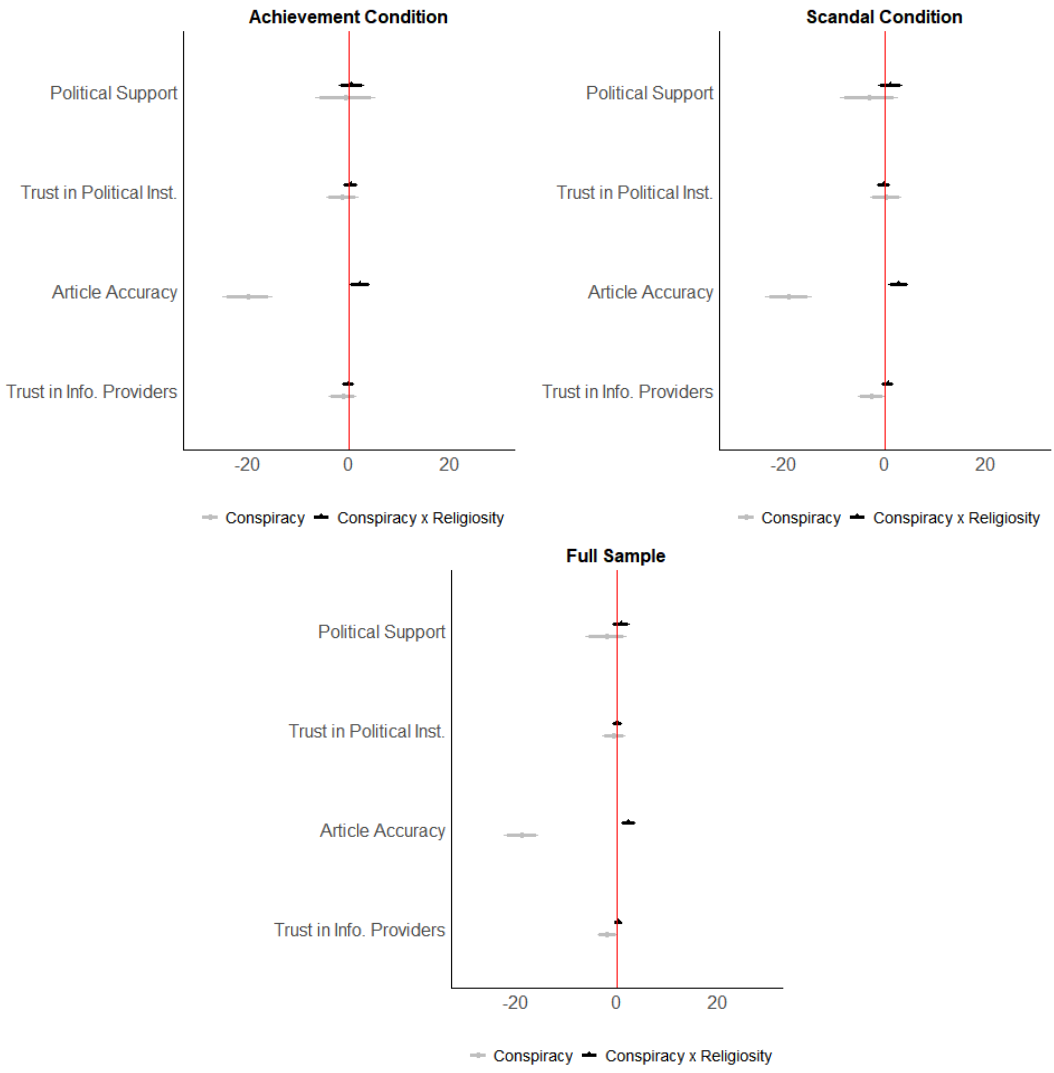

Figure 6 – The plots present the coefficients on the conspiracy treatment and its interaction with religiosity in the achievement condition (top left), the scandal condition (top right), and the full sample (bottom). Confidence intervals are at the 90 and 95 percent levels.

In Figure 6, we see that there are no statistically distinguishable differences in the treatment effects by religiosity for most specifications. The only exception is the treatment effect on the perceived accuracy of information. Here, we

see that the treatment effects are weaker among more religious subjects, while the less religious are more affected by the negative effects of the treatment. Overall, this evidence fails to support our hypothesis and even contradicts it for some outcomes.

Table 13 – OLS Analysis of Treatment Effects by Religiosity

	Outcome							
	Trust Info. Providers	Article Accuracy	Trust Instit.	Political Support	Trust Info. Providers	Article Accuracy	Trust Instit.	Political Support
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Conspiracy	-1.99^{**}	-19.41^{***}	-0.58	-1.94	-1.25	-20.14^{***}	-1.37	-0.74
	(0.99)	(1.75)	(1.16)	(2.14)	(1.40)	(2.46)	(1.65)	(3.04)
Scandal	-0.47	8.79^{***}	-1.33	-4.37^{***}	0.21	15.33^{***}	-1.40	-2.34
	(0.71)	(1.26)	(0.84)	(1.54)	(1.38)	(2.42)	(1.62)	(2.98)
Religiosity	0.16	-0.72	0.25	6.40^{***}	0.32	1.47^{**}	0.29	6.79^{***}
	(0.30)	(0.53)	(0.35)	(0.65)	(0.41)	(0.73)	(0.49)	(0.90)
Scandal x Conspiracy					-1.46	0.95	1.52	-2.45
					(1.97)	(3.47)	(2.33)	(4.28)
Scandal x Religiosity					-0.33	-4.56^{***}	-0.09	-0.81
					(0.60)	(1.05)	(0.70)	(1.30)
Conspiracy x Religiosity	0.19	2.23^{***}	-0.04	0.75	-0.16	2.13^{**}	0.29	0.46
	(0.42)	(0.74)	(0.49)	(0.91)	(0.59)	(1.04)	(0.70)	(1.28)
Consp. x Scandal x Relig.					0.70	0.53	-0.63	0.60
					(0.84)	(1.47)	(0.99)	(1.81)
Control	45.12^{***}	66.65^{***}	47.72^{***}	23.22^{***}	44.79^{***}	63.45^{***}	47.76^{***}	22.24^{***}
	(0.77)	(1.36)	(0.90)	(1.66)	(0.95)	(1.68)	(1.12)	(2.07)
Observations	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

6.4. Differences in Political Knowledge

In this section, we test whether treatment effects differ by political knowledge (Hypothesis 9): *conspiracy treatment effects are higher for less politically knowledgeable subjects.* Unfortunatley, due to concerns over subjects' fatigue, we did not include political knowledge questions in the survey. Thus, we use education as a proxy for political knowledge to test this hypothesis. We interact the treatment with a 4-level continuous variable for subjects' educational attainment. We report the coefficient of the treatment and its interaction with education.

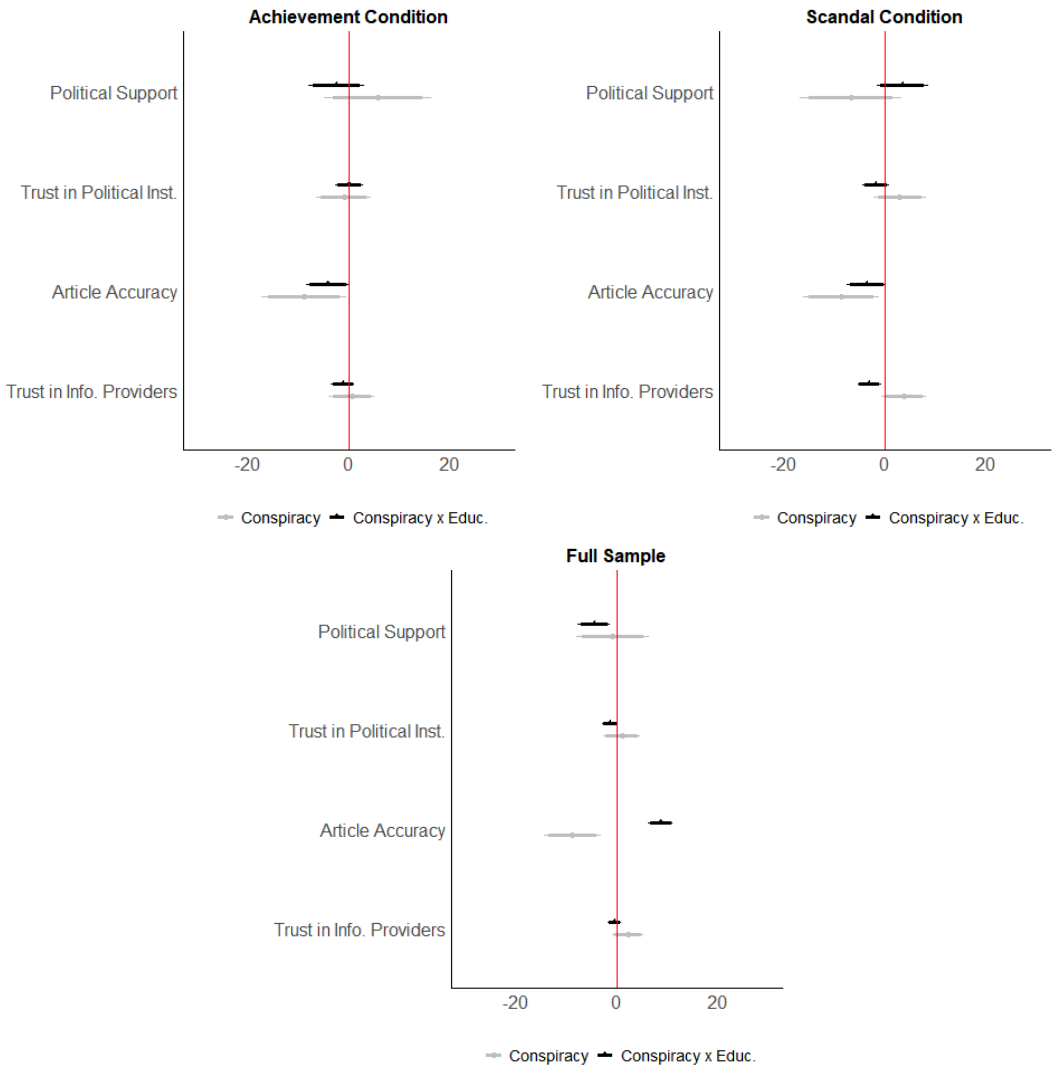

Figure 7 – The plots present the coefficients on the conspiracy treatment and its interaction with educational attainment in the achievement condition (top left), the scandal condition (top right), and the full sample (bottom). Confidence intervals are at the 90 and 95 percent levels.

The results in Figure 7 provide no support for our hypothesis. Even the presence of heterogeneous treatment effects for the evaluations of the article's accuracy, where conspiracies decrease evaluations more for more educated

subjects, contrasts our prediction. Note that this might also be an artifact of our employment of education as a proxy for political knowledge.

Table 14 – OLS Analysis of Treatment Effects by Political Knowledge (Educational Attainment)

	Outcome							
	Trust Info. Providers	Article Accuracy	Trust Instit.	Political Support	Trust Info. Providers	Article Accuracy	Trust Instit.	Political Support
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Conspiracy	2.16	−8.86***	0.95	−0.89	0.51	−8.89**	−1.01	5.68
	(1.62)	(2.89)	(1.91)	(3.71)	(2.32)	(4.13)	(2.73)	(5.30)
Scandal	−0.57	8.64***	−1.38*	−4.61***	−1.93	8.29**	−3.50	−1.72
	(0.71)	(1.26)	(0.84)	(1.62)	(2.23)	(3.97)	(2.63)	(5.10)
Educ.	2.64***	1.30	2.52***	−3.09**	2.23***	1.38	2.03**	−2.58
	(0.58)	(1.03)	(0.68)	(1.32)	(0.81)	(1.44)	(0.95)	(1.85)
Scandal x Conspiracy					3.20	0.15	3.88	−12.50*
					(3.25)	(5.79)	(3.83)	(7.43)
Scandal x Educ.					0.83	−0.13	1.02	−1.11
					(1.16)	(2.06)	(1.37)	(2.65)
Conspiracy x Educ.	−2.23***	−3.93***	−0.95	0.61	−1.25	−4.24**	−0.02	−2.54
	(0.84)	(1.49)	(0.99)	(1.92)	(1.20)	(2.14)	(1.42)	(2.75)
Consp. x Scandal x Educ.					−1.90	0.58	−1.82	5.99
					(1.68)	(2.99)	(1.98)	(3.84)
Control	40.90***	63.35***	43.82***	38.76***	41.55***	63.49***	44.81***	37.43***
	(1.15)	(2.05)	(1.36)	(2.63)	(1.52)	(2.71)	(1.80)	(3.48)
Observations	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

6.5. Differences by the Strength of Partisanship

In this section, we test whether treatment effects differ by the strength of partisanship (Hypothesis 10): *conspiracy treatment effects are higher for moderate partisans.* We interact the treatment with a dummy variable for subjects self-identifying as strong partisans, rather than moderate partisan. We report the coefficients on the treatment and the interaction term (the difference between the estimated treatment effect of conspiracy theories for moderate and strong partisans.)

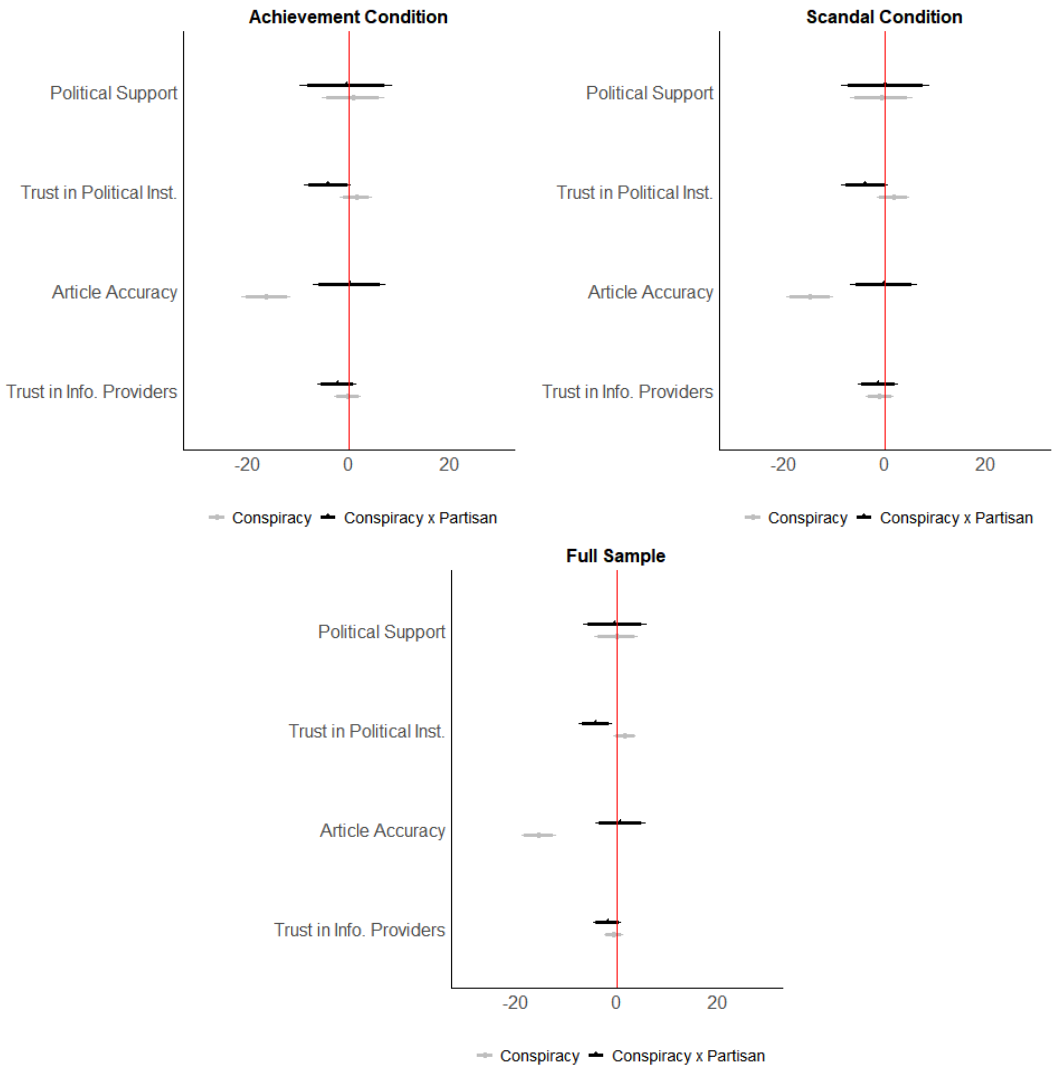

Figure 8 – The plots present the coefficients on the conspiracy treatment and its interaction with partisanship strength (a dummy for subjects who identify as strong partisans) in the achievement condition (top left), the scandal condition (top right), and the full sample (bottom). Confidence intervals are at the 90 and 95 percent levels.

As shown in Figure 8, we find no support for the presence of heterogeneous treatment effects by the strength of partisanship in most specifications. One

exception is regarding the treatment effects on trust in political institutions. Yet, the negative interaction term contradicts our theoretical prediction.

Table 15 – OLS Analysis of Treatment Effects by the Strength of Partisanship

	Outcome							
	Trust Info. Providers	Article Accuracy	Trust Instit.	Political Support	Trust Info. Providers	Article Accuracy	Trust Instit.	Political Support
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Conspiracy	−0.67	−15.80***	1.52	−0.02	−0.27	−16.46***	1.38	0.74
	(0.98)	(1.74)	(1.15)	(2.23)	(1.36)	(2.42)	(1.60)	(3.10)
Scandal	−0.55	8.74***	−1.40*	−4.45***	−0.59	5.60**	−0.34	−4.34
	(0.71)	(1.26)	(0.83)	(1.62)	(1.40)	(2.50)	(1.65)	(3.20)
Partisan	3.80***	0.45	5.70***	−6.43***	3.57***	−1.97	6.91***	−6.94**
	(1.00)	(1.78)	(1.17)	(2.27)	(1.37)	(2.44)	(1.61)	(3.12)
Scandal x Conspiracy					−0.83	1.52	0.23	−1.56
					(1.96)	(3.49)	(2.31)	(4.47)
Scandal x Partisan					0.49	5.17	−2.56	1.09
					(2.00)	(3.56)	(2.35)	(4.56)
Conspiracy x Partisan	−1.85	0.20	−4.24**	−0.27	−2.36	0.06	−4.23*	−0.62
	(1.42)	(2.53)	(1.67)	(3.23)	(2.00)	(3.57)	(2.36)	(4.57)
Consp. x Scandal x Part.					0.94	−0.35	0.21	0.63
					(2.84)	(5.06)	(3.34)	(6.48)
Control	43.55***	65.31***	45.34***	36.53***	43.57***	66.77***	44.85***	36.48***
	(0.77)	(1.38)	(0.91)	(1.76)	(0.96)	(1.70)	(1.12)	(2.18)
Observations	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089	2,089

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

6.6. The Effect on Conspiratorial Beliefs

In this section, we test whether exposure to conspiracy theories increases subjects' beliefs in other conspiracy theories (Hypothesis 6). We measure beliefs in conspiracy theories as a summative score of believing in six conspiracies: 911 conspiracy, the flat earth, the birther, faking the moon-landing, Jewish control of the media, and manipulation by pharmaceutical companies. As shown in Table 16, we find no support for this hypothesis.

Table 16 – Treatment Effect on Believing in Conspiracy Theories

	Conspiracy Index	
	(1)	(2)
Conspiracy	−0.39	−0.15
	(0.74)	(1.04)
Scandal	0.97	1.22
	(0.74)	(1.04)
Scandal x Conspiracy		−0.49
		(1.48)
Control	18.61***	18.50***
	(0.63)	(0.71)
Observations	2,089	2,089

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

7. Pre-Analysis Plan

7.1. Motivation

The history of the United States is loaded with conspiracy theories from its inception (Butter and Reinkowski, 2014; Uscinski and Parent, 2014). In its early days, the fear of an "Illuminati conspiracy" justified the Alien and Sedition Acts, signed by President Adams in 1798 (Johnson, 1983). Recently, the Birther conspiracy has been debated for three consecutive American electoral cycles from 2008 till 2016. With the advent of social media, conspiracy theories became more integrated into the political rhetoric of both parties. Instead of being narratives propagated through obscure online platforms, some of today's political conspiracy theories are openly accepted, propagated, or even created by mainstream politicians.

Exposure to conspiracies is also related to voters' response to other forms of political information, e.g. political scandals (Einstein and Glick, 2013; Moore, 2018). From Monica Lewinsky to the Russian electoral meddling, scandals and conspiracy theories spread together. *Does exposure to conspiracy theories help politicians evade punishment for scandals? If so, how?* This project investigates this overlooked aspect of electoral accountability by experimentally studying the relationship between conspiracy theories and voters' evaluations of politicians.

7.2. Conspiracy theories and Accountability

Before proceeding to the experimental design, it is useful to define the main components of our theoretical framework and to lay out the mechanisms we hypothesize are at work. We define a *scandal* as *salient negative information*

involving a politician. The literature has already provided evidence that scandals affect voters' behavior and preferences for politicians (Green, Zelizer and Kirby, 2016; Maier, 2010). Our focus is on the interaction between political scandals and conspiracy theories, and its effect on the well-functioning of political accountability. Uscinski and Parent (2014)'s definition of *conspiracy theory* is

> a proposed explanation of events that cites as a main causal factor a small group of persons (the conspirators) acting in secret for their own benefit, against the common good.

We propose a minimal definition for the purpose of our experiment: a conspiracy theory is a *false narrative based on true facts*.[2] Our argument is that conspiracy theories hinder accountability by reducing the perceived accuracy of the information received by voters.

The mechanism can be formalized as follows: suppose a voter has certain prior beliefs about honesty of a politician, and let's denote honesty by θ. Suppose that voters believe that θ is distributed as a Normal with the following parameters: $\theta \sim \mathcal{N}(\mu, \sigma_\theta^2)$. Now, suppose voters read about a scandal involving the politician: this amounts to receiving a signal about the state of the world θ. We can denote this signal by: $s = \theta + \epsilon$ with $\epsilon \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_\epsilon^2)$. Bayesian updating on the true value of θ now takes a particularly convenient form. Voters' posterior beliefs are that θ is distributed normally with mean $m = \lambda s + (1 - \lambda)\mu$ and variance $\sigma^2 = \lambda\sigma_\epsilon^2$, where λ represents the relative weight that the voter gives to the observed signal as opposed to the prior belief. This weight depends on

[2] As an example, the presence of condensation trails (fact) does not imply that the government uses chemicals for political purposes (false narrative).

the initial uncertainty about the parameter of interest θ, and the signal's precision: $\lambda = \frac{\sigma_\theta^2}{\sigma_\theta^2+\sigma_\epsilon^2}$. Intuitively, the greater the initial uncertainty about honesty of the politician (i.e the greater the variance σ_θ^2), the more weight voters will put on the scandal when they have to decide how to process information (i.e. the higher λ will be). On the other hand, when voters are almost sure about θ beforehand, they will discard evidence of the scandal (indeed, as $\sigma_\theta^2 \to 0$, $\lambda \to 0$ as well).

Introducing a conspiracy theory in this framework corresponds to exogenously decreasing the signal precision λ via an increase in σ_ϵ^2 by a factor of c. That is, with a conspiracy theory the error term of the signal is now: $\epsilon \sim \mathcal{N}(0, c \cdot \sigma_\epsilon^2)$. When $c = 1$ there is no conspiracy theory and the signal has its original precision. As $c \to \infty$, the signal becomes non-informative.

We hypothesize that — by reducing the precision of the information received — conspiracy theories increase voters' uncertainty about the credibility of scandals, thus helping politicians involved to avoid electoral punishment. If it is the case that conspiracies increase the level of uncertainty about scandals, then "tainted" politicians might benefit from spreading conspiracies that are not necessarily related to the scandal itself, creating noise and confusion.

More precisely, our hypothesis is that *unrelated conspiracies* - defined as conspiracy theories that do not include information about the scandal - can trigger uncertainty and mistrust towards informational sources and ultimately help the politician to avoid accountability. The idea is that if this uncertainty is triggered by conspiracies is general, then it will influence politicians' evaluations

regardless of the informational content of the conspiracy. In other words, if conspiracies increase uncertainty about the credibility of the scandal, then irrelevant information might be influential precisely because it does not keep the voter's focus on the scandal.

This mechanism has one further implication. If conspiracies lead voters to give less weight to *all* information, then politicians might also be rewarded less for positive outcomes. This suggests that conspiracy theories might be doubly detrimental to political accountability by helping bad politicians evade punishment, while rendering positive performance less politically rewarding.

7.3. Experimental Design

Subject Pool. In order to answer these questions, we plan to conduct an online experiment involving around 2000 Amazon Mechanical Turk workers. Participants in the experiment will self-report their party identification before the experiment. Subjects that self-identify as independent will be excluded from the study. Then, subjects will be randomly assigned to the treatments, described below.

Experimental Treatments. The experiment adopts a (2x2) factorial design with two treatments. In the first conspiracy treatment (T1.1), subjects are exposed to a short video about a conspiratorial explanation to the burning of Notre-Dame Cathedral in France with no connection to American politics. In the conspiracy control condition (T1.2), subjects watch a scientific video as a placebo. After watching the video, subjects are asked a set of questions about the video's content. To ensure maximum exposure to the treatment, subjects are paid for each correct answer.

Subjects are then asked to read an article containing the second treatment (T2). In the first condition (T2.1), the article covers a set of scandals involving the Trump's administration. In the second condition (T2.2), the article covers a set of accomplishments of the Trump administration. Therefore, the four conditions are: (conspiracy+scandal), (conspiracy+achievements), (no conspiracy+scandal), and (no conspiracy+achievements).

Outcomes. At the end, subjects are asked to answer a set of questions covering three main outcomes. First, subjects evaluate their perceived accuracy of the information provided on the scandals (or government's achievements). Second, they report their evaluation of the Trump's administration, support for investigating the administration's connection to Russia, and intended voting for President Trump. Third, subjects are asked to report their level of trust in various political institutions and the media. Finally, subjects are asked to evaluate how far they believe a set of conspiracy theories as a measure for conspiratorial thinking.

Pre-Treatment Covariates. We also ask subjects to report their: gender, age, education, race, religiosity, and strength of partisanship. We also ask subjects a set of questions to measure their political knowledge. These variables will be used to analyze the heterogeneity of treatment effects among subjects.

External Validity. Notice that the experiment employs real online material on conspiracies, scandals and achievements, resembling the content to which subjects might be exposed in their online activities. In addition, the timing of the study coincides with the 2020 presidential campaigns which allows us

to study the relevance of conspiracy theories close to actual elections. These are times when voters are more attentive to political information and careful about their political decisions. These factors contribute to the external validity of the study.

7.4. Hypotheses

7.4.1. Treatment Effects on Political Accountability

Our two main hypotheses evaluate the negative implications of exposure to conspiracy theories on accountability.

Hypothesis (1): Exposure to conspiracy theories increases subjects' evaluations of politicians' involved in the scandal.
Hypothesis (2): Exposure to conspiracy theories reduces subjects' evaluations of achieving politicians.

These hypotheses directly follow from the framework introduced above, which formalizes how conspiracies decrease the precision of the information received by voters (either positive or negative), therefore reducing the weight voters put on new information.

Furthermore, we expect that conspiracy theories have different effects on accountability based on partisanship. More precisely, we hypothesise that

Hypothesis (1.a): In the scandal condition, exposure to conspiracy theories increases subjects' evaluations of politicians more for Democrats than republicans.
Hypothesis (2.a): In the achievements condition, exposure to conspiracy the-

ories reduces subjects' evaluations of politicians more for Democrats than Republicans.

The rational behind these hypothesised heterogeneous treatment effects is the conjecture that Republicans weight their prior on the president and current government's performance more than Democrats, or in other words they are less responsive to new information.

7.4.2. Mechanisms

The second set of hypotheses explore the potential mechanisms by which conspiracy theories could influence political accountability.

Hypothesis (3): Exposure to conspiracy theories reduces subjects' evaluations of the accuracy of the scandal/achievement information.
Hypothesis (4): Exposure to conspiracy theories reduces subjects' trust in sources of knowledge (e.g., the media).
Hypothesis (5): Exposure to conspiracy theories reduces subjects' trust in political institutions.

Related to political accountability, exposure to conspiracy theories could affect subjects' belief system in other ways.

Hypothesis (6): Exposure to conspiracy theories increases subjects' beliefs in other conspiracy theories.

7.4.3. Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

The last set of hypotheses build on the existing literature on conspiratorial thinking to argue that the treatment effects will be larger under certain

conditions. The literature points out that racial minorities and religiosity are determinants of endorsement of conspiracy theories (Goertzel, 1994). We also hypothesize that subjects with weaker priors are more susceptible to the conspiracy effect.

Hypothesis (7): The conspiracy treatment effects are higher for subjects' from racial minority groups.
Hypothesis (8): The conspiracy treatment effects are higher for more religious subjects.
Hypothesis (9): The conspiracy treatment effects are higher for less politically knowledgeable subjects.
Hypothesis (10): The conspiracy treatment effects are higher for moderate partisans.

References

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