CONSPIRACY THEORY AND PARTISAN POLITICS

By

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ABSTRACT

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While research on conspiracy theories and those who believe them has recently undergone an empirical renaissance, there still exists a great deal of uncertainty about the measurement of conspiratorial beliefs and predispositions, and the consequences of a conspiratorial mindset when it comes to expressly political attitudes and behaviors. Unfortunately, current strategies for measuring the latent trait that informs conspiratorial beliefs are affected by error attributable to partisan motivated reasoning, social desirability concerns, and the peculiar content and context of specific conspiracy theories. In this project, I first demonstrate, using data from the 2012 American National Election Study, that beliefs in a variety of specific conspiratorial thinking and partisanship. I further find, using survey data gathered via Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform, that the level of partisan content ingrained within conspiracy theories varies tremendously across conspiracy theories, including even inherently "political" conspiracies.

Next, I use unique data gathered via a module on the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) and reigning theory on the characteristics of conspiratorial thinking to construct and validate a cumulative, unidimensional scale of conspiratorial thinking. I find that a substantial proportion of the population is highly suspicious of governmental authority. In addition to being related to other constructs and attitudes such as authoritarianism, trust, and perceptions of governmental corruption, the conspiratorial thinking scale strongly predicts conspiratorial attitudes about genetically-modified foods, the link between childhood vaccines and autism, the birthplace of Barack Obama, governmental knowledge about the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Finally, I demonstrate the effects of conspiratorial thinking on a variety of political phenomena of normative interest to political scientists. First, I consider the moderating role of a conspiratorial mindset when it comes to traditional relationships like the one between partisanship and attitudes about the role of government. More specifically, I demonstrate that as one's level of conspiratorial thinking increases, the ties between partisanship and feelings about the federal government, attitudes about the scope and reach of government, preferences about the level of governmental spending and production of services, and support for the Tea Party simultaneously dissolve. Second, I find that conspiratorial thinking is negatively related to approval of major governmental institutions, including the president, Congress, and the Supreme Court. Lastly, I corroborate recent work showing the negative relationship between conspiratorial thinking and participation in campaign activities, and extend this work by demonstrating the negative effect of conspiratorial thinking on the probability of identifying as a partisan and the positive relationship between conspiratorial thinking and Tea Party support.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Is the genetic modification of food a safe and cost-effective method for producing large quantities of nutritious food, or is it simply a ploy by large corporations to regulate food production, protect their profits, and control average consumers? Do vaccines really protect children from potentially devastating illnesses, or do they merely replace ostensibly extinct diseases with lifelong conditions like autism? Recent research reveals that a potent type of misinformation non-trivially influences the formation of mass attitudes toward relevant political topics ranging from healthcare practices and policies to opinions about the birthplace of highly visible political figures (e.g., Nyhan & Reifler 2010, Nyhan, Reifler & Ubel 2013). Yet, a great deal of the work attempting to examine the characteristics of people who subscribe to a conspiratorial style of thinking suggests that these beliefs are held by only a discontented and highly-suspicious few. These individuals are in the grip of the "paranoid style" (Hofstadter 2008).

According to Hofstadter, the "paranoid style" is a "way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself" by "more or less normal people" that has the "qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" (2008, 3-4). While belief in, and propagation of, conspiracy theories is often considered an activity of those who occupy the fringes of society, a general suspicion toward government and authorities has been a hallmark of American democracy since its very inception – it is the bedrock of the American Creed (Bailyn 1992, Hofstadter 2008, Wood 1993). Indeed, suspicious or conspiratorial thinking surround some of the most important historical events of the 20th and 21st centuries, from the first human steps on the moon to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and from the terror-

ist attacks of September 11, 2001 to the denial of the massacres at Sandy Hook Elementary School and Umpqua Community College.

Furthermore, the paranoid style underwriting mass belief in certain conspiracy theories can be of serious practical consequence to both the conspiracy theorist and those around her. Consider, for instance, the belief that childhood vaccinations are linked to autism (Goertzel 2010). Such a belief can, and does, in fact, suppress individual willingness to vaccinate one's children (Jolley & Douglas 2014*a*, Nyhan, Reifler, Richey & Freed 2014). Widespread refusal to vaccinate children from diseases such as measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) could lead to a resurgence of the harmful diseases that the vaccines were created to control. Conspiracy theories about birth control (Bird & Bogart 2003), HIV/AIDS (Bogart & Bird 2006, Bird & Bogart 2005), and even healthcare reform (Nyhan, Reifler & Ubel 2013) can similarly result in serious public health consequences.

Even though serious practical reasons why we should understand conspiracy theorists abound, empirical research on these types of individuals and the mindset that colors their view of the world around them is in early stages. As will be discussed at great length below, the very starting point from which sound empirical inquiry must begin – the measurement of key concepts – is exceedingly disjointed across individual studies and, more broadly, social scientific disciplines. As such, we have no way of determining the sources of disparate findings. Are they do to measurement strategy? Or, perhaps, cultural setting? Qualities of the survey sample? Even more disconcerting, we cannot even be confident that we are capturing conspiracy theorists or the predisposition to think in a conspiratorial way with current measurement strategies because, with very few exceptions (Brotherton, French & Pickering 2013, Oliver & Wood 2014), such strategies have neither been constructed with theory in mind, nor empirically validated.

In this project, my broad goal is twofold: first, to investigate the problematic properties of the modal measurement strategy employed in the burgeoning literature on conspiracy theory with a particular focus on the role partisanship in conspiracy belief, and, second, to propose, execute, and validate a superior strategy for measuring conspiratorial thinking that circumvents the problems plaguing existing efforts. As a by-product of these central goals I will also extend current knowledge on the effects of conspiratorial thinking, with a focus on the potential attitudinal and behavioral consequences of conspiratorial thought when it comes to engagement with establishment partian politics.

1.1 Organization

The project is comprised of three central, substantive chapters. The second chapter focuses on the relationship between beliefs in specific conspiracy theories, the latent predisposition to view the world through a lens of conspiracism, and partisan attachments. In this chapter I employ latent variable modeling techniques and data from the 2012 American National Election Study on beliefs in four specific conspiracy theories to demonstrate that the such beliefs are simultaneously the product of partisan motivated reasoning and a general predisposition toward conspiratorial thought. By constraining one of two estimated latent factors to capture partisan attachments, I am able identify the second factor as conspiratorial thinking and confirm it as such using the retained individual factor scores and traditional methods of validation. Next, I employ unique data gathered via Amazon' Mechanical Turk platform to investigate the potential partisan nature of a larger battery of specific conspiracy theories. I find that while some conspiracy theories have a substantial – if not overwhelming – partisan component, many are not widely perceived as being attached to a certain political party. Furthermore, I find that partisans are largely willing to accept ownership of specific conspiracy theories that members of their party perpetuate.

In the third chapter I further document the problems associated with using questions about beliefs in specific conspiracy theories to estimate conspiratorial thinking, propose an alternative measurement strategy, and validate the proposed measurement strategy. Although I have documented, by this point, the problem of partianship when it comes to estimating conspiratorial thinking using survey questions about beliefs in specific conspiracy theories, there are other problems with such a strategy. Major additional problems include social desirability bias, and differences in the socio-political content and cultural/temporal context of specific conspiracy theories. In light of all these sources of error taken together, I use the theoretical literature on conspiratorial thinking to guide the construction of several questions designed to serve as indicators of the general conspiratorial thinking trait. Upon estimation of this trait, I establish the reliability and validity of the measure using scaling techniques and beliefs in specific conspiracy theories, respectively.

In the final substantive chapter, I use the different measures of conspiratorial thinking developed in earlier chapters to demonstrate the effects of conspiracism on a variety of political attitudes and behaviors. More specifically, I show that conspiratorial thinking and partisanship are, for the most part, at odds with eachother. Indeed, I find that the robust effects of partisanship on attitudes about highly partisan and ideological topics such as the role of government and the appropriate balance between governmental spending and the provision of public services are greatly attenuated as levels of conspiratorial thinking rise. Relatedly, I find that as conspiratorial thinking increases, the predisposition to identify with one of the the two major parties decreases, as does participation in campaign activities, while support for an anti-establishment party – the Tea Party – increases. Finally, I discuss the normative consequences – both positive and negative – of conspiratorial thinking, and outline future directions for research on this topic.

Chapter 2: How are Conspiratorial Thinking and Partisanship Related?

Today, a substantial proportion of the mass public endorses at least one specific conspiracy theory (Brotherton, French & Pickering 2013, Hargrove 2006), and these conspiratorial attitudes appear to be politically motivated. For example, Republicans are more likely to believe both that Barack Obama was born outside of the U.S. (Pasek, Stark, Krosnick & Tompson 2015) and that global warming is a hoax (Blank & Shaw 2015, McCright & Dunlap 2011) despite the release of a birth certificate and widespread scientific consensus, respectively. The intimate connection between partisanship and conspiratorial thinking highlights problems with the conceptual and empirical distinctions between partisan motivated reasoning and the predisposition to subscribe to conspiracy theories. Are, for example, all conspiracy theorists partisan motivated reasoners? Or is it possible to be a "birther" or a 9/11 "truther" without being partisan?

I contend that much of this conceptual and empirical opacity is due to the measurement strategy most frequently employed to investigate these topics: survey questions about beliefs in specific conspiracy theories¹. Inferences about the psychological characteristics of conspiracy theorists from stated beliefs in specific conspiracy theories are severely complicated by the influence of partian motivated reasoning. In light of this problem, I argue that to better understand the nature, frequency, and influence of conspiratorial thinking

¹This is not to say, however, that questions about beliefs in specific conspiracy theories are the only measurement devices employed in this literature. Indeed, some scholars have begun to propose and test strategies for measuring conspiratorial thinking using more general sentiments that might be indicative of a conspiratorial mindset (e.g., Brotherton, French & Pickering 2013, Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah & Imhoff 2013, Uscinski & Parent 2014). Ultimately, however, these fairly few examples are still much more the exception to the rule, and I know of no such alternate strategy that has been agreed upon as of the writing of this manuscript.

when it comes to the American mass public, we must first separate both conceptually and empirically conspiratorial thinking from other known psychological processes – in particular, partisanship.

Below I demonstrate that responses to questions about beliefs in specific conspiracy theories found on the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES) are the simultaneous product of both a general conspiratorial thinking trait and partisanship. Both exploratory and confirmatory latent variable models are used to explore and, ultimately, estimate the effect of these two concepts on stated beliefs in specific conspiracy theories. Although beliefs in such overtly partisan conspiracies as "birtherism" are found to be heavily influenced by partisanship, a more general conspiracy theory trait also substantively affects responses to each of the specific conspiracy theory questions employed.

Finally, I employ unique survey data gathered via Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform to explore just what specific conspiracy theories are thought of as partisan by average individuals. On the one hand, I find that some conspiracies – such as those surrounding the Iraq War and climate change – are widely perceived as being systematically perpetuated by one party or another. On the other hand, I find that other conspiracies – such as those surrounding the assassination of JFK or about the vapor trails left by aircraft – are not widely perceived as having any partisan content. Furthermore, I observe that partisans "own" their respective conspiracy theories. In other words, Republicans, for example, overwhelming recognize the idea that climate change is a hoax as being perpetuated by fellow Republicans.

2.1 Background

Partisans are increasingly conspiratorial: recent research into conspiratorial thinking in the mass public reveals that partisans increasingly assent to conspiracy belief. Miller, Saunders, and Farhart (forthcoming), for instance, find that conspiratorial beliefs about topics and events such as the birthplace of Barack Obama, the inclusion of a "death panels" provision in the 2010 Affordable Care Act, and lies on the part of the Bush administration with

respect to the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq are all substantially driven by partisan motivated reasoning. In a similar vein, Pasek, Stark, Krosnick, and Tompson (forthcoming) find that "birther" beliefs that Barack Obama was born outside of the U.S. are informed by partisan motivated reasoning. Indeed, they demonstrate that partisanship, ideological self-identifications, racial resentment toward blacks and negative feelings toward Barack Obama are all significantly and substantively related to "birther" beliefs. Finally, Hartman and Newmark (2012) find – via Implicit Association Testing – that conservatives, Republicans, and those who simply did not like Barack Obama are more likely than others (particularly liberals and Democrats) to register erroneous beliefs that he is a Muslim.

One reason partisanship may be driving conspiracy beliefs is that partisanship is largely a process of "motivated reasoning." Motivated reasoning is a decision-making mechanism by which individuals differentially process and integrate information based on their prior beliefs, attitudes, and emotions, and it pervades the psychology of individuals' reasoning about political phenomena and stimuli (Kunda 1990, Lodge & Taber 2013). Indeed, the effects of partisan motivations in attitude formation and expression have been extensively documented with respect to many different phenomena (e.g., Bartels 2002, Bullock, Gerber, Hill & Huber forthcoming, Taber & Lodge 2006). Kraft, Lodge, and Taber (2015) and Blank and Shaw (2015) even demonstrate that partisan motivations extend to the (mis)interpretation of facts produced by non-partisan figures, namely scientists and other types of experts.

Of course, there is an alternative explanation for the rise and centrality of seemingly partisan conspiracies: a general inflammation of what Richard Hofstadter called the "paranoid style" (Hofstadter 2008). Following Hofstadter's "paranoid style," conspiratorial thinking is best understood as a style of reasoning about the political world and our place in it (Hofstadter 2008). Numerous empirical studies on conspiratorial thinking largely agree that a conspiracy theory is an interpretation of an event or public action centering on a secret plan of a small group of individuals or groups, whose goals and intentions are partially hidden, though usually directed at assuming power (Brotherton, French & Pickering 2013, Bruder et al. 2013, Keeley 1999, Moscovici 1987). Like partisanship, conspiratorial thinking is a "perceptual screen" through which information is sifted and the world is interpreted (Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes 1960). Indeed, according to Goertzel (1994), conspiratorial thinking is a "monological" belief system, where an individual differentially assesses (or ignores) evidence that counters prior beliefs. A monological belief system is one containing consistent and coherent beliefs, but at the expense of maintaining them against countervailing evidence. Empirical studies on conspiracism or the paranoid style present a general psychological profile of individuals who practice such conspiratorial thinking: these individuals are more authoritarian, less trusting in government, less educated and politically sophisticated, more religious, and oftentimes belong to socio-economic and -demographic minority groups (e.g., Brotherton & French 2015, Douglas & Sutton 2010, Fenster 2008, Jolley & Douglas 2014*b*, Oliver & Wood 2014, Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham 2010, Swami, Pietschnig, Tran, Nader, Stieger & Voracek 2013, Wood, Douglas & Sutton 2012).

This type of thinking is largely a sign of *dis*-identification with mainstream politics, which makes it a prime candidate for an alternative explanation to the partisan motivated reasoning view. It could, in other words, be the case that the influx of conspiracies today is due to the rise in the paranoid style, or conspiracism, and not simply partisan polarization. Perhaps the most important aspect of the paranoid style is that conspiratorial thinking directly relates to a feeling of being branded a political outsider (Hofstadter 2008). Indeed, while the specific conspiracy theories employed in previous studies have varied widely in their content and socio-political context (Brotherton et al. 2013), none of them have uncovered a relationship between partisan attachments and a predisposition toward conspiratorial thought. This is not to say that partisans cannot subscribe to a *specific* conspiracy (as Miller, Saunders, and Farhart [forthcoming], for instance, show), but it does raise the important question as to the primary psychological motivation behind that belief: partisan affect or conspiratorial suspicion?

Of course, neither view necessarily entails denying the other: an individual may hold

a conspiracy belief because of partisanship and conspiracism. And, while this perspective seems most likely (especially in the case of conspiracy theories involving highly partisan figures), current models of conspiratorial thinking exclude one or the other. Miller and colleagues (forthcoming), for example, explore the correlates of a two-factor model of conspiracies where the two factors represent liberal and conservative conspiracies. Under this conceptualization and measurement strategy, then, it is no surprise that ideological motivated reasoning is found to heavily influence beliefs in specific conspiracy theories². The same is true for recent work done by Pasek at al. (2015) which shows that partisanship and symbolic racism are the most important influences on beliefs that Barack Obama was born outside of the U.S. Put simply, the careful first step of *empirically* differentiating, and subsequently modeling, the sources of beliefs in specific conspiracy theories has not been made. Without this differentiation, we lose potentially valuable insight into the nature of both conspiratorial thinking and partisanship, promulgate confusion regarding the sources of conspiratorial beliefs, and draw potentially misleading inferences about various political behaviors from misspecified statistical models.

2.2 Study 1: Sources of Specific Conspiracy Beliefs

In order to reveal the dynamic relationship between partisanship and conspiratorial thinking, I use the four conspiracy items included on the 2012 ANES post-election survey. These questions ask about the extent to which respondents believe in conspiracies about the birthplace of Barack Obama (henceforth referred to as the "birther" theory), the inclusion of a provision authorizing the creation of panels to make end-of-life decisions for people on Medicare in the 2010 Affordable Care Act (henceforth referred to as the "death panel" theory), the amount of related knowledge the federal government possessed prior to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (henceforth referred to as the "truther" theory), and the role of the

 $^{^{2}}$ I also note that the idea of ideological motivated reasoning in the context of specific conspiracy beliefs about overtly *partisan* figures and objects seems highly suspect. Although general ideological selfidentifications are highly correlated with partisan ones, I see little reason why ideological orientations should be more of an influence than partisan group identifications, which are omitted from their models.

federal government in breaching the flood levees in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina (henceforth referred to as the "levee breach" theory)³. The responses to these questions are coded such that higher values denote more conspiratorial attitudes.

The distributions of responses to these questions – stratified by Democratic and Republican partisanship – are presented in Figure 1⁴. Though the exact shapes of these distributions varies, each of the distributions, on average (across partisan orientations, that is), exhibit some degree of positive skew, denoting that less than half of individuals believe – probabilistically or certainly – any of these specific conspiracy theories⁵. Even so, however, the degree of support for these conspiracy theories varies tremendously, with non-trivial proportions of individuals either fully supporting or exhibiting uncertainty about a given conspiracy.

The shape of the distributions also vary – heterogeneously – by partisanship. Although Democrats may be slightly more likely to ascribe to beliefs in the "truther" and "levee breach" conspiracy theories, there are clearly visible differences between partisans when it comes to the "birther" and "death panel" conspiracy theories. More specifically, Republicans are significantly more likely than Democrats to ascribe to conspiracy beliefs regarding the birthplace of Obama and death panels. This is a first piece of evidence for the partisan nature of specific conspiracy theories (at least, those employed here), but with the added nuance that the strength of the partisan content can vary between conspiracy theories.

The remainder of my empirical analysis proceeds as follows. First, I propose a theoretical model of responses to the specific conspiracy questions found on the 2012 ANES.

 $^{^{3}}$ I admit that these conspiracy theories are fairly "political" (i.e., about government and politics) in nature, and, in that sense, are not fully representative of all possible types of conspiracy theories. Regardless, political conspiracy theories are the ones that have the most apparent real world consequence and which receive the most attention in the conspiracy theory literature, with other types of conspiracies (i.e., those about extraterrestrials) considered to be quite different in their general nature (Brotherton et al. 2013).

⁴For interpretation of the references to color in this and all other figures, the reader is referred to the electronic version of this thesis (or dissertation).

⁵Individuals who participated in the internet version of the ANES survey were slightly more likely to express more conspiratorial attitudes than those individuals in the face-to-face sample, likely because of social desirability bias. In other words, individuals may be less likely to disclose conspiratorial beliefs when sitting across from another individual who may judge them. In spite of these slight discrepancies, we see no reason why the relationship between specific conspiracy beliefs, or between specific conspiracy beliefs and other constructs would differ by survey mode. Regardless of our hunch, we further address and test for survey mode effects below.



Figure 2.1: Distributions of responses to ANES specific conspiracy items, by partisan identity.

At the core of my perspective is that both partianship and a general predisposition toward conspiratorial thinking influence beliefs about specific conspiracy theories. I test this theoretical model using latent variable modeling familiarly known as structural equation modeling (SEM). Next, I validate the measure of conspiratorial thinking produced from this measurement approach by examine correlations between conspiratorial thinking and a host of criterion variables known to be related to conspiracism. These variables include: trust in government, liberal-conservative ideological self-identification, religiosity, knowledge, interest in politics, campaign activity, authoritarianism, efficacy, attitudes about the level of

corruption in government, education, and age.

Finally, I use regression techniques to examine the interaction between partisanship and conspiratorial thinking when it comes to feelings about the government very generally, and attitudes about the role of government, more specifically. Indeed, I estimate a series of interactive OLS models with multiplicative terms designed to capture the moderating impact of conspiratorial thinking on partisanship's effect on attitudes about the size and scope of the federal government, the tension between government spending and the production of governmental services, affect toward the federal government, and even support for the antiestablishment Tea Party. The question wording and coding procedure associated with each of the variables employed in the following analyses can be found in the Appendix.

2.2.1 Empirical Results

I begin my analysis by examining the extent to which the observed responses to the four ANES conspiracy items are simultaneously the product of two latent traits: conspiratorial thinking and partisanship. In particular, I conduct an exploratory factor analysis of the four items in order to better understand the latent sources of variance shared by responses to these survey items⁶. Such an analysis could produce several different results. On the one hand, if the registered beliefs in these specific conspiracy theories really are the products of *only* a "monological" belief system as most conspiracy research theorizes (Goertzel 1994, Wood, Douglas & Sutton 2012, Oliver & Wood 2014, Uscinski & Parent 2014), then we would expect that a single factor captures most of the variance in the responses to the items. On the other hand, if responses to the conspiracy items are strictly partisan in nature, we might expect a single factor with both positive and negative factor loadings, assuming – as others have (e.g., Miller, Saunders & Farhart forthcoming) – that both Democratic and Republican conspiracies are represented in this set⁷. Finally, the exploratory factor analysis

 $^{^{6}}$ A matrix of Pearson pairwise correlations between responses to the conspiracy items can be found in the Appendix to this chapter.

⁷Relatedly, we could also find a multi-factor structure where each factor corresponds to a different party (e.g., one factor for Democratic conspiracy theories, and one for Republican ones.

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

 Table 2.1: Exploratory factor analysis of four specific conspiracy items.

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

could produce a solution where more than one factor is required to accurately describe the underlying structure in the specific conspiracy data.

The results of the exploratory analysis are presented in Table 1. The estimates are suggestive of a combination of the the first and second scenarios described above. Indeed, while all conspiracy items have strong positive loadings on the first factor, they also have strong loadings on the second factor⁸. 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 factor⁹.

In order to provide a formal test of the structure in the specific conspiracy belief data I turn to a latent variable modeling framework. My theoretical model of the sources of variation in the responses to the conspiracy items is presented in Figure 2. According to

⁸Though 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.

⁹I 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.

Figure 2.2: Two-factor model of the competing sources of variation in specific conspiracy beliefs: conspiratorial thinking and partian motivated reasoning.



both my theoretical expectations as well as the results of the exploratory factor analysis, two latent variables produce beliefs in all four of the specific conspiracy theories: conspiratorial thinking and partisanship. All estimates associated with the conspiratorial thinking factor appear in blue, while those associated with partisanship appear in red. In addition to the four specific conspiracy items, I include three additional items related to partisanship in the partisanship factor only: partisan identification (measured via the standard seven-point scale), feelings toward Barack Obama, and feelings toward George W. Bush (both of which are measured via the familiar feeling thermometer ["FT"] items).

The estimates of the model in Figure 2 are presented in Table 2¹⁰. Every factor loading for both the conspiratorial thinking and partisanship factors is statistically significant at the p < 0.001 level (assuming a two-tailed test). Perhaps more importantly, traditional measures of fit suggest that this model accounts for the underlying structure in the data very well. Indeed, the Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is 0.052 and the large p-value associated with this estimate (0.345) suggests that I cannot reject the

¹⁰Though the paths from conspiratorial thinking factor to the "birther" item and from the partisanship factor to the partisan identification item are used to scale the respective factors, non-1 values appear in Table 2. This is because I present standardized factor loadings, which allow a comparison of effects of the latent factors on the observed variables.

null hypothesis that the true RMSEA is equal to or less than 0.05. Since RMSEAs of 0.05 or less are most desirable (e.g., Browne & Cudeck 1992, Kline 2011), I have a first piece of promising evidence for an appropriate model. The Standardized Root Mean Residual (SRMR) also demonstrates superior model fit as it is quite a bit lower than the suggested 0.08 cutoff for good fit (Hu & Bentler 1999). Both the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) provide confirmatory evidence of a superior model fit as well. The rule of thumb regarding these fit indices is that values greater than 0.95 suggest very good model fit (Hu & Bentler 1999). The values for both indices surpass this cutoff. Although the chi-squared test for equivalence of the observed and model-implied covariance matrices is statistically significant, the chi-squared test is known to be particularly sensitive to sample size (among other peculiarities of the data), and I employ an unusually large sample here (4790 individuals). Thus, it does not worry me that this measure of fit does not fully comport with the other indicators.

2.2.2 Validating the Conspiratorial Thinking Factor

Though I can be quite certain of the interpretation of the partisanship factor due to the identification strategy I employed, I must take a slightly different approach with the conspiratorial thinking factor. In order to validate that this factor really can be interpreted as a generalized conspiratorial thinking trait, I correlate the individual factor scores with a host of variables known to be related to conspiracy beliefs, as well as some previously unexplored variables such as attitudes about the proportion of governmental officials who are corrupt and efficacy.

Of course, a question remains of whether symbolic political predispositions, such as party identification and liberal-conservative self-identification, are related to the general predisposition toward conspiratorial thinking captured in the first factor. According to the theoretical distinction between conspiratorial thinking and partisanship made above, as well as the fact that the better model of specific conspiratorial beliefs was one where the conspiratorial think-

	Conspiratorial		
	Thinking		Partisanship
Factor Loadings			
Birther	0.248		0.683
	(0.016)		(0.013)
Death Panels	0.309		0.464
	(0.017)		(0.014)
Truther	0.572		-0.074
	(0.022)		(0.017)
Levee Breach	0.627		-0.195
	(0.024)		(0.017)
Party Identification			0.678
			(0.015)
Obama Thermometer			-0.816
			(0.013)
Bush Thermometer			0.629
			(0.016)
Fit Statistics			
χ^2 (7 df), p-value		97.412,0.000	
RMSEA		0.052	
$Prob(RMSEA \le 0.05)$		0.345	
SRMR		0.019	
CFI		0.992	
TLI		0.975	
n		4790	

Table 2.2: Structural equation model estimates and fit statistics.

Standardized MLE coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. All estimates statistically significant at the p < 0.001 level with respect to a two-tailed test.

ing and partisanship factors were constrained to not covary, I know that partisanship is not a correlate of the general predisposition toward conspiratorial thinking. When it comes to ideology, however, it could be the case that conservatives are more prone to conspiratorial thinking. It is, after all, part of the conservative mantra to distrust government.

I also consider whether trust in governmental institutions is related to conspiratorial thinking. More specifically, I hypothesize that generalized trust in government and conspiratorial thinking are negatively related such that as trust decreases, the propensity toward conspiratorial thinking increases (e.g., Goertzel 1994, Miller, Saunders & Farhart forthcoming). I also suspect that conspiratorial thinking will be related to attitudes about the perceived level of governmental corruption. The 2012 ANES fielded a question about how many of the people running the government the respondent thinks are corrupt, with response options ranging from all to none. I hypothesize that there will be a positive relationship between conspiratorial thinking and attitudes about governmental corruption such that as conspiratorial thinking increases, the perceived proportion of corrupt governmental officials increases.

Next, I hypothesize that educational attainment and knowledge may be related to conspiratorial thinking. I expect that education/knowledge and conspiratorial thinking are negatively related such that as educational attainment and knowledge about politics increases, the propensity to think conspiratorially decreases. This is largely due to my expectation that higher levels of education and knowledge about the political process tend to reduce the errors in reasoning that theoretically underwrite the propensity toward conspiratorial thinking (Brotherton et al. 2013). Recent work also suggests that conspiratorial thinking is negatively related to participation in politics (e.g., Einstein & Glick 2015, Jolley & Douglas 2014b), a sentiment I endorse here. Participation is operationalized by an additive index of campaign activities an individual participated in during the 2012 election season. I also consider the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and external efficacy. More specifically, I hypothesize that the more conspiratorial one is, the lower the likelihood they will believe that public officials care what they think. This relationship would be consistent with the idea that conspiracy theorists believe that politics is really run by secret groups, and that politicians are liars that are constantly scheming on their own behalves (Brotherton 2015). For similar reasons, I expect that interest in politics is negatively associated with conspiracism.

Finally, I examine whether religiosity, authoritarianism, and age are related to the conspiratorial thinking factor. Some have found that "supernatural" or "paranormal" thinking is related to beliefs in particular conspiracies (Newheiser, Farias & Tausch 2011, Oliver & Wood 2014). Thus, religiosity – operationalized as the frequency of attendance at a place of worship – may be positively related to conspiratorial thinking. There is also some evidence that older individuals are more prone to conspiratorial thinking (Goertzel 1994, Uscinski & Parent 2014) – an expectation I share. Finally, one of the longest standing correlates of conspiratorial thinking is authoritarianism (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig & Gregory 1999, Goertzel 1994, Imhoff & Bruder 2014, McHoskey 1995). This work notes that those with authoritarian predispositions are more likely to blame socio-political "others" for their disadvantaged positions in life and possess heightened levels of aggression and hostility. Belief in conspiracies about certain individuals and groups, it is hypothesized, provides an outlet for these tendencies, resulting in a positive relationship between conspiratorial thinking and authoritarianism.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
 (1) Conspiratorial Thinking (2) Trust in Government (3) Lib-Con Ideology (4) Authoritarianism 	1.000 -0.090* 0.008 0.201*	1.000 -0.170* 0.003	$1.000 \\ 0.210^*$	1.000								
(5) Religiosity	0.036^{*}	0.065^{*}	0.243^{*}	0.214	1.000							
(6) Knowledge	-0.269^{*}	-0.095^{*}	0.040^{*}	-0.306^{*}	-0.033*	1.000						
(7) Interest	-0.130^{*}	0.038^{*}	0.037^{*}	-0.134^{*}	0.056^{*}	0.340^{*}	1.000					
(8) Campaign Activity	-0.044^{*}	0.029	-0.023	-0.082^{*}	0.089^{*}	0.246^{*}	0.351	1.000				
(9) Education	-0.222^{*}	-0.012	-0.035^{*}	-0.334^{*}	0.025^{*}	0.421^{*}	0.216^{*}	0.158^{*}	1.000			
(10) Age	-0.127^{*}	0.003	0.117^{*}	0.006	0.106^{*}	0.210^{*}	0.229^{*}	0.175^{*}	0.009	1.000		
(11) Corruption	0.260^{*}	-0.354^{*}	0.095^{*}	0.078^{*}	-0.025	-0.078^{*}	-0.072^{*}	-0.070^{*}	-0.121^{*}	-0.093*	1.000	
(12) External Efficacy	-0.153^{*}	0.352^{*}	-0.070^{*}	-0.068^{*}	0.043^{*}	0.022^{*}	0.111^{*}	0.122^{*}	0.118^{*}	0.007	-0.309^{*}	1.000

 Table 2.3: Correlations between conspiratorial thinking and theoretically related variables.

Cell entries are Pearson correlation coefficients. * = p < 0.05 level with respect to a two-tailed test

A matrix of pairwise Pearson correlations between all of the aforementioned variables comprises Table 3. Most important to consider is the first column which displays the correlations between conspiratorial thinking and all other variables. All correlation coefficients are correctly signed except for the one associated with liberal-conservative ideology, which also happens to be the only statistically insignificant relationship in the set. Thus, all of the hypothesized relationships hold, providing strong evidence that my labeling of this factor as "conspiratorial thinking" is appropriate. There are particularly strong relationships between conspiratorial thinking and knowledge, education, and authoritarianism. Additionally, the two new criterion variables – attitudes about governmental corruption and external efficacy – exhibit fairly strong linear relationships with conspiratorial thinking, especially given the nebulousness of the concepts and their operationalizations¹¹.

This operationalization of conspiratorial thinking will be employed in Chapter 4 where I demonstrate the effects of conspiratorial thinking on various political behaviors and attitudes. In keeping with the theme of the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and partisanship, I turn now to a second study where I investigate the partisan nature of set of common conspiracy theories as determined by individuals in general, and self-described partisans in particular.

2.3 Study 2: What Conspiracies Are Partisan?

In the previous study I demonstrated that beliefs in some types of specific conspiracy theories are the simultaneous product of both partisan orientations and conspiratorial thinking. Of course, however, I was limited by the number and type of conspiracy theories included on the 2012 ANES. Unsurprisingly given the dataset, the specific conspiracy theories included on the ANES could very well be more partisan in nature than other conspiracy theories, even

 $^{^{11}}$ I do not intend to suggest that concepts such as efficacy – or trust or interest in politics, for that matter – are unimportant, but to note that measuring these multi-faceted concepts is more difficult than measuring something like general feelings about the president. As such, models of these variables have historically accounted for fairly little variance in the concepts, suggesting that the relationships I observe here, while indeed somewhat weak, are par for the proverbial course.

other ones about the government or politics. Thus, the relationship between partial sanship and conspiratorial thinking observed above may characterize some types of conspiracy theories much better than others.

In this second study, I build on the former by exploring just which of several well-known conspiracies are popularly conceived of as partisan in some way. To examine the potential partisan content of conspiracy theories I asked survey respondents to indicate which of the major political parties, if either, was more likely to promote a given conspiracy theory. The full prompt is as follows:

"Below is a list of controversial ideas related to American politics. Please indicate whether you think each idea is more likely to be promoted by Democrats, Republicans, or neither Democrats nor Republicans."

Following the prompt was a list of 8 statements which summarized the central thrust of conspiracy theories that have been widely employed in the scholarly literature to date. The full list of conspiracies and the statements describing them are presented in Tables 5 and 6 below.

The data employed in this study comes from a sample of 1543 U.S. adults gathered via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (heretofore "MTurk") platform. Individuals where offered \$0.80 to complete a 6-8 minute survey in which they would be asked about their "opinions about politics and the news." As is customary with MTurk samples, individuals in this study tended to be a bit more liberal/Democratic, have higher levels of educational attainment, and be younger than the average adult U.S. population. Table 4 below lists the codings/ranges, means, and standard deviations of a couple of key demographic characteristics of the individuals in this sample.

Regardless of the slight unrepresentativeness of the sample, I have little reason to believe that these individuals think about conspiracy theories in fundamentally different ways than a more representative sample might. Furthermore, I have no reason to believe that the partisans in this sample would behave in significantly different ways than more "average"

Demographic Variable F	oding/	Mean/	Standard
	Range	Proportion	Deviation
Party Identification (3=Strong Republican) Ideology (3=Extremely conservative) Education (5=Advanced degree) Age (in years) Female (1=female) Black (1=black) Hispanic (1=hispanic)	-3-3 -3-3 1-5 18-78 0-1 0-1 0-1	$\begin{array}{c} -0.759 \\ -0.884 \\ 3.565 \\ 34.587 \\ 0.439 \\ 0.069 \\ 0.052 \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} 1.898\\ 2.017\\ 0.864\\ 10.831\\ 0.496\\ 0.254\\ 0.222 \end{array}$

 Table 2.4:
 Demographic composition of MTurk sample.

Total n = 1,543.

partisans. As an additional check on this claim, I display in Figure 3 the distributions of responses to the two specific conspiracy belief questions in this survey that overlapped with those on the 2012 ANES, stratified by partisanship. The question wording and available response categories for these items are exactly the same across the two surveys.

The distributions of question responses in the MTurk sample are nearly identical to those in the 2012 ANES sample. On average, the individuals – across partisan identifications – in the MTurk sample are less likely to believe either the "birther" or "truther" conspriacy theories than those in the ANES sample, though the difference is fairly minor. More importantly, the shape of the distributions, for the whole sample and by partisanship, are extremely similar. Indeed, the distribution of responses to the question about "birther" beliefs is strongly positively skewed, with Democrats being much less likely to express belief in the theory than Republicans. As with the ANES sample, the distribution of beliefs in the "truther" theory are slightly positively skewed for all individuals, with very minor differences between members of partisan groups. I take these similarities as a strong indicator that neither the results presented below nor the conclusions I make from them would not be substantially altered had I employed a more representative sample.



Figure 2.3: Distributions of responses to MTurk specific conspiracy items, by partisan identity.

2.3.1 Empirical Results

The first step of my analysis entails an investigation of the potential partian nature of conspiracy theories as stated by all individuals. Thus, I present, in Table 5, a tabulation of responses to the question outlined above into four categories. Since we know so little about how individuals think about conspiracy theories, whether they subscribe to them or not, I also include the proportion of individuals who stated that they either didn't know which political party was more likely to propagate a given conspiracy theory, or that neither political party was more or less likely than the other to promote the theory. Each of the rows of the table should sum to approximately 100, with minor deviations being attributable to rounding error.

A cursory glance at Table 5 reveals a wide variance in the direction and strength of

partisan content ascribed to certain conspiracy theories. Conspiracies about the birthplace of Barack Obama (1), global warming (8), and death panels (6) are overwhelming viewed by individuals as conspiracy theories most often promoted by Republicans. Approximately 86% of the individuals perceive the "birther" conspiracy as being an inherently Republican one, with nearly 74% and 60% of individuals saying the same with respect to the global warming and death panel conspiracies, respectively. Though I expected that these three conspiracies would likely be perceived as Republican-"owned," the proportion of individuals who concur – in the face of both social desirability and endorsements by one of modern politics' most unlikeable Republican presidential candidates – is quite remarkable.

While some of the conspiracy theories confronting respondents were perceived as more Democratic than Republican, the proportion of such beliefs is much lower than that with respect to Republican conspiracies. Conspiracy theories regarding the 9/11 terror attacks (3), invasion of Iraq (5), and Hurricane Katrina (7) are all perceived as being more likely to be promoted by Democrats than Republicans. The "most" Democratic conspiracy theory (regarding the Iraq war), however, was considered primarily Democratic by only 45% of respondents, a figure shy of a majority and substantially lower than the Republican conspiracy theories. Each of the Democratic conspiracy theories also had much higher "neither" and "don't know' rates than did the majority Republican conspiracy theories. Indeed, the combined "neither" and "don't know" rates (43%) for the most overtly Democratic conspiracy theory – about the Iraq war – nearly equalled the rate of individuals perceiving the conspiracy theory as primarily Democratic (45%).

Though it may be tempting to conclude from these numbers that Republicans are more conspiratorial – or, at least, more willing to "use" conspiracy theories – than are Democrats, such a conclusion cannot be made from these results. There are at least two reasons why the Democratic conspiracy theories may be "less" Democratic than the Republican ones are Republican. The first reason regards the survey sample. Since the MTurk sample includes more Democrats than Republicans, the aggregate results may reflect an unwillingness of

Table 2.5:	Percentage of respondents	attributing a given	conspiracy t	theory to	Democrats,
Republicans	, or neither party.				

=

Conspiracy Theory	Democrats	Republicans	Neither	Don't Know
1) Barack Obama was born outside of the U.S.	2.72	86.39	7.19	3.69
2) Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in assassinating John F. Kennedy.	12.70	11.54	53.73	22.03
3) Senior officials had knowledge of the $9/11$ terror attack before they occurred.	28.13	13.03	45.43	13.42
4) Vapor trails left by aircraft are actually chemical agents deliberately sprayed in a secret program directed by government officials.	14.71	14.65	53.86	16.79
5) The U.S. invasion of Iraq was not part of a campaign to fight terrorism, but was driven by oil companies and Jews in the U.S. and Israel.	45.24	11.28	31.89	11.60
6) The healthcare law passed in 2010 authorized the use of death panels to make end of life decisions for people on Medicare.	9.66	59.78	17.11	14.45
7) The federal government intentionally breached flood levees in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina so that poor neighborhoods would be flooded and middle class neighborhoods would be spared.	34.80	9.59	40.96	14.65
8) Global warming is a hoax, perpetuated by environmental scientists who have their own political agenda.	3.95	73.56	15.94	6.55

self-described Democrats to (implicitly) claim ownership of conspiracy theories. Also with respect to sampling (albeit of a different type), I may have inadvertently chosen for inquiry conspiracy theories that are more overwhelming Republican than Democratic.

The second reason why I am cautious in concluding that Republicans are more conspiratorial than Democrats is due to the "conspiracies are for losers" hypothesis (Uscinski & Parent 2014). Uscinski and Parent hypothesize – though, do not empirically confirm – that conspiracy theories are used by partisans to punish, in some way, members of the partisan outgroup. Take, for example, the past 8 years under the presidency of Barack Obama. According to Uscinski and Parent's hypothesis, we would expect to see a growth in Republican-lead conspiracy theories about the (Democratic) president and his policies, driven primarily by a desire to discredit and register disapproval of an outgroup member with total political power. Thus, the overwhelming extent to which the Republican conspiracy theories are regarded as Republican could be do to a real growth in and increasing prominence of such conspiracy theories. Of course, this phenomenon could also be sensitive to partisan polarization, a state of politics which has only increased in intensity over the past decade or so.

In also appears that some conspiracy theories simply do not contain much partisan content, and, therefore, are not perceived as particularly partisan in nature. Such conspiracies include theories about both aircraft vapor trails (4) and the assassination of JFK (2). Fewer individuals felt confident in assigning a particular political party to either of these conspiracy theories than did individuals who simply had no opinion on them. Perhaps this is to be expected when it comes to the vapor trail conspiracy, as the prompt is void of any explicit or widely understood partisan content. This is not the case, however, with the JFK conspiracy. John F. Kennedy was, of course, a Democratic president; so, if individuals were using only partisan content (as opposed to "nature of the times" information) to assign conspiracy theories, it should have been perceived as primarily Republican in nature. This finding provides some additional nuance to the explanations regarding the causes of partisan attachments to

	Dem	ocrats	Republicans	
Conspiracy Theory	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
1) Barack Obama was born outside of the U.S.	2.98	97.02	3.57	96.43
2) Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in assassinating John F. Kennedy.	51.11	48.89	57.42	42.58
3) Senior officials had knowledge of the $9/11$ terror attack before they occurred.	64.50	35.50	74.24	25.76
4) Vapor trails left by aircraft are actually chemical agents deliberately sprayed in a secret program directed by government officials.	44.10	55.90	59.32	40.68
5) The U.S. invasion of Iraq was not part of a campaign to fight terrorism, but was driven by oil companies and Jews in the U.S. and Israel.	76.96	23.04	82.83	17.17
6) The healthcare law passed in 2010 authorized the use of death panels to make end of life decisions for people on Medicare.	11.76	88.24	17.93	82.07
7) The federal government intentionally breached flood levees in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina so that poor neighborhoods would be flooded and middle class neighborhoods would be spared.	77.07	22.93	79.12	20.88
8) Global warming is a hoax, perpetuated by environmental scientists who have their own political agenda.	4.32	95.68	6.68	93.32

Table 2.6: Percentage of self-identified Democratic and Republican respondents attributinga given conspiracy theory to Democrats or Republicans.

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conspiracy theories; indeed, it seems that relevance (cultural or simply temporal) may be at play as well.
Lastly, I consider the distribution of responses to these questions stratified by partisanship. Table 6 includes the proportion of Democrats and Republicans who attribute the specific conspiracy theories to fellow Democrats and Republicans. This analysis can reveal, in some sense, the strength of partisanship relative to the conspiracy theory label. If, for instance, one of the provided conspiracy statements was perceived more so as a crazy conspiracy belief, members of the party to which the conspiracy is attached may be less willing to claim ownership of the conspiracy. If, on the other hand, partisan conspiracy theories are used by partisans as political tools for discrediting members of partisan outgroups, we might observe that partisans are willing to claim ownership of the conspiracies attached to their party.

The proportions in Table 6 are more supportive of the latter possibility than the former. Each of the partisan conspiracy theories in the total sample retain, directionally, the same partisan attachment when the sample is stratified by Democrats and Republicans. The strength of the partisan valence is also preserved in this analysis. In other words, the "birther" and global warming conspiracy theories are still the most partisan – the biggest discrepancy between partisan attachments is still associated with these conspiracy theories, with the primarily Democratic conspiracy theories being less strongly divided along partisan lines. Finally, the aircraft vapor trail and JFK conspiracy theories are still attributed to both parties equally.

That members of partisan groups are so willing to admit their own party's culpability in promoting certain conspiratorial ideas is telling of the true nature of the "conspiratorial" element of the theories. If the "birther" or global warming conspiracy theories were recognized as being truly conspiratorial, rather than simply partisan, members of the attached political groups (Republicans in this case) would likely attempt to distance themselves and their party from such a crazy and radical idea. However, we observe just the opposite. The overwhelming partisan content of many of the conspiracy theories inquired about here serves as a piece of evidence against the truly conspiratorial element of the ideas, and for the primarily partian content of the ideas.

2.4 Conclusion

Labeling someone who ascribes to a particular conspiracy theory either a "conspiracy theorist," suffering from a heated paranoid psychopathology, or simply a "partisan," driven by group-based partisan affect, is to miss the nuance of the relationship between the general psychological predispositions that are conspiratorial thinking and partisan motivated reasoning. I confirmed that both partisan motivated reasoning and conspiratorial thinking play systematic and substantial roles in the formation of beliefs in specific conspiracy theories about the birthplace of Barack Obama, death panels, the truth behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the role of the government in disasters related to Hurricane Katrina.

I also found that not all conspiracy theories are created equally. That is to say, not only are there a number of heterogeneities across specific conspiracy theories which we can regard as error to be averaged out of our measurements via multiple item measures, but there are systematic sources of variance – namely, partisanship – which must be considered more deliberately. Although some conspiracy theories such as those about vapor trails, the assassination of JFK, and the role of official negligence in the 9/11 terrorist attacks are not perceived as partisan in nature, other conspiracy theories such as those about the birthplace of Barack Obama or the dubiousness of climate change very much so are. What is more, partisans are quite willing to claim ownership of these overtly partisan conspiracy theories, affirming in some sense that such beliefs have much less to do with a predisposition toward conspiracism than they do with partisan allegiances.

These findings are important for a number of reasons. First, that beliefs in specific conspiracy theories are so significantly the product of latent predispositions beyond the assumed conspiracism should cause conspiracy researchers to strongly reconsider the measurement strategies they employ and how they employ them. Indeed, previous work has either assumed the domineering effect of partisanship over conspiratorial thinking (e.g., Miller et al. forthcoming, Pasek et al. 2015), or just the opposite – not even including it in the various models of conspiracy belief (e.g., nearly all work on the topic conducted by social psychologists). As such, the empirical relationships reported in work using conspiratorial thinking as operationalized by "raw" questions about beliefs in specific conspiracy theories are suspect. More than any statistical problems associated with this measurement strategy, I wish to emphasize that the resultant theoretical opacity is of much greater consequence. Future research should, minimally, both theoretically and empirically provide for the effects of non-conspiratorial attitudes, traits, and predispositions on beliefs in specific conspiracy theories, and, maximally, consider alternate measurement strategies. It is this later goal that conspiracy researchers have just begun to advance (e.g., Brotherton et al. 2013, Uscinski and Parent 2014), and the task to which I turn in the next chapter.

APPENDIX

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
- How many of the people running the government are corrupt? (trustgov_corrpt)
 - 0. None
 - 1. A few
 - 2. About half
 - 3. Most
 - 4. All
- 7-point Party ID (pid_x)

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

7-point Ideology (libcpre_self)
-3-3, where -3 extremely liberal, 3 extremely conservative

- Importance of religion (relig_import)
 0-3, where 0 not at all important, 3 very important
- Church attendance (relig_churchoft)
 0-5, where 0 never, 5 more than once a week
- Political Interest (interest_attention)
 0-3, where 0 Hardly at all, 3 Most of the time
- During the campaign, did you talk to any people and try to show them why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates? (mobilpo_rmob)

0. No

1. Yes

• Did you go to any political meetings, rallies, speeches, dinners, or things like that in support of a particular candidate? (mobilpo_rally)

0. No

- 1. Yes
- Did you wear a campaign button, put a campaign sticker on your car, or place a sign in your window or in front of your house? (mobilpo_sign)

0. No

1. Yes

• Did you do any (other) work for one of the parties or candidates? (mobilpo_otherwork)

0. No

1. Yes

• During an election year people are often asked to make a contribution to support campaigns. Did you give money to an INDIVIDUAL CANDIDATE running for public office? (mobilpo_ctbcand)

0. No

1. Yes

 During an election year people are often asked to make a contribution to support campaigns. Did you give money to a POLITICAL PARTY running for public office? (mobilpo_ctbpty)

0. No

1. Yes

• During an election year people are often asked to make a contribution to support campaigns. Did you give money to a ANY OTHER GROUP running for public office? (mobilpo_ctboth)

0. No

1. Yes

Knowledge questions (preknow_prestimes, preknow_sizedef, ofcrec_speaker_correct, ofcrec_vp_correct, ofcrec_pmuk_correct, ofcrec_cj_correct)

0. Incorrect

1. Correct

• How often can you trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right? (trustgov_trustgrev)

0. Never

- 1. Some of the time
- 2. About half the time
- 3. Most of the time
- 4. Always
- How much do public officials care what people like you think? (efficpo_carerev)
 - 0. Not at all
 - 1. A little
 - 2. A moderate amount
 - 3. A lot
 - 4. A great deal
- Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: INDEPEN-DENCE or RESPECT FOR ELDERS (auth_ind)
 - 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 (auth_cur)
 - 0. Curiosity
 - 1. Good manners
- Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: OBEDIENCE or SELF-RELIANCE (auth_obed)
 - 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 (auth_consid)
 - 0. Considerate
 - 1. Well-behaved
- Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.
 - 0. Disagree strongly
 - 1. Disagree somewhat
 - 2. Neither agree nor disagree
 - 3. Agree somewhat
 - 4. Agree Strongly
- Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.
 - 0. Agree strongly
 - 1. Agree somewhat
 - 2. Neither agree nor disagree
 - 3. Disagree somewhat
 - 4. Disagree Strongly
- Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve.
 - 0. Agree strongly

- 1. Agree somewhat
- 2. Neither agree nor disagree
- 3. Disagree somewhat
- 4. Disagree Strongly
- It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.
 - 0. Disagree strongly
 - 1. Disagree somewhat
 - 2. Neither agree nor disagree
 - 3. Agree somewhat
 - 4. Agree Strongly
- 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)
- Education (dem_edugroup_x)
 0-5, where 0 no high school, 5 postgrad
- Age (dem_age_r_x)

Age in years

Correlations Between Specific Conspiracy Beliefs

_

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

Table 2.7: Correlations between beliefs in specific conspiracy theories, 2012 ANES.

Cell entries are Pearson correlation coefficients.

 $^{\ast}p < 0.05$ level with respect to a two-tailed test.

Chapter 3: Constructing a Better Measure of Conspiratorial Thinking

In this chapter, I advance the study of suspicious thinking through the construction and subsequent validation of a scale capturing the latent suspicion that drives belief in particular conspiracies. In the first section of the chapter, I argue that the modal measurement device used to assess conspiratorial thinking – survey questions asking respondents if they endorse a specific conspiracy theory – biases our understanding of the number, nature, and general characteristics of conspiracy theorists. More precisely, I contend that questions regarding the endorsement of specific conspiracy theories are error-laden measures of conspiratorial thinking for three reasons: heterogeneous biases due to the varying content and context of individual conspiracies, contamination via partisan motivated reasoning, and social desirability bias.

In the second part of the chapter, instead of relying on this problematic measurement strategy, I operationalize the components of frequently employed and largely agreed upon definitions of conspiratorial thinking to create a reliable, valid, and theoretically sound multiitem measure of the underlying trait that I label "suspicion." Indeed, I establish the validity of the scale through both its strong relationships with theoretical variables of interest and its ability to predict specific conspiratorial attitudes. As expected, I find that suspicious thinking is positively associated with the belief in the link between childhood vaccinations and autism, that genetically modified foods (GMOs) are dangerous because corporate interests control the process, and that presidents are greatly influenced by political motives when allocating disaster relief.

3.1 Background

Much of the literature investigating conspiratorial thinking focuses on individuals' beliefs in particular conspiracies in order to record the frequency of such heterodox beliefs and to measure their correlations with other psychological predispositions and personality traits. Early literature also suggested that conspiratorial thinking was a trait of the socioeconomically disadvantaged, confirming much of Richard Hofstadter's "pathology model" (Hofstadter 2008, Fenster 2008). Most empirical studies of conspiratorial thinking found that these fringe or marginalized individuals who believe in certain conspiracies are largely distrustful and prone to feelings of powerlessness, and likely to subscribe to conservative social ideologies like right-wing authoritarianism (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999, Goertzel 1994, Darwin, Neave & Homes 2011, Swami, Coles, Stieger, Pietschnig, Furnham, Rehim & Voracek 2011, Swami et al. 2013). Taken together, these findings suggest that conspiratorial thinking is a phenomenon found only among peculiar, isolated individuals.

However, the empirical examination of conspiracy theories is more important than merely tallying the frequency of who believes in what conspiracy. A major normative thrust of the study of conspiratorial beliefs is to gain a better theoretical and empirical understanding of the nature of conspiratorial thinking and those who engage in it (Uscinski & Parent 2014, Goertzel 1994). Yet, recent work has has been hamstrung by a faulty measurement strategy that fixates on measuring beliefs in particular conspiracies, creating significant inferential problems about the nature of conspiratorial thinking. In the following section I discuss three sources of bias in the modal measurement strategy: partisan motivated reasoning (and responses), conspiracy-specific heterogeneities, and social desirability bias.

Recent research suggests that self-reported beliefs in particular conspiracies are heavily influenced by partisan motivated reasoning (e.g., Hartman & Newmark 2012, Miller, Saunders & Farhart forthcoming). Motivated reasoning is the unconscious tendency to seek out, process, and integrate information in such a way that prior beliefs are preserved (Kunda 1990, Lodge & Taber 2013, Taber & Lodge 2006). Partisan motivated responses thus threaten the validity of recent findings since individuals may record an affirming response to a particular conspiracy if that conspiracy taps into negative affect directed toward a political out-group. That is, belief in a specific conspiracy theory may be due exclusively to partisan allegiances, rather than any general predisposition toward conspiratorial thinking. Miller and colleagues (forthcoming) demonstrate, using questions about the "birther" and "death panel" conspiracy theories, respectively, that ideological motivated reasoning does, in fact, influence beliefs about those specific conspiracy theories. Similarly, Pasek and colleagues find that Republicans and those who possess negative attitudes toward blacks are more likely than others to endorse the "birther" conspiracy (Pasek et al. 2015). Finally, Oliver and Wood (2014) unearth a partisan component to questions asking about the "birther" conspiracy, as well as the allegedly secret cabal being planned by liberal billionaire George Soros. This inferential source of error¹ was explored at great length in the previous chapter.

Differences in the content and context of specific conspiracy theories also make this general measurement strategy suspect. These differences in the general topics and foci of specific conspiracy theories can lead some people to be more likely to believe a given conspiracy theory than others, regardless of the individuals' general predisposition toward conspiratorial thought. For example, believing in the existence of aliens is a different question than believing in Area 51 (Brotherton, French & Pickering 2013). Specific conspiracy theories are bound by time, place, socio-political context, and culture, which makes arriving at generalizable conclusions exceedingly difficult, especially given the seemingly arbitrary choice by the investigator as to what specific conspiracy theories should be included in the study in the first place (Brotherton, French & Pickering 2013, Bruder et al. 2013). Material in the Appendix demonstrates the differing characteristics of those registering beliefs in the various

 $^{{}^{1}}$ I am referring to the effect of partisanship as "error" in this component of the manuscript because my focus has shifted to understanding the nature of conspiratorial thinking, exclusively. Thus, what was previously conceived of a a theoretically interesting source of variance in the previous chapter is now being referred to as measurement error. In other words, the only real difference in my reference to partisanship between chapters is a shift in analytical goals.

conspiracy theories included on the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES). Indeed, the effects of key predictor variables such as party identification, religiosity, the cognitive need to evaluate, political sophistication, age, and race confirm that all conspiracy theories are not created alike.

Finally, questions about beliefs in specific conspiracies can be plagued by social desirability bias. Social desirability bias is the bias in the recorded survey response due to respondents' proclivity to alter their stated answer according to their beliefs about what is socially (un)acceptable (Edwards 1957). Since conspiracy theories and those who believe in them have long been considered paranoid, delusional, or generally crazy, it's quite easy to imagine why questions asking respondents whether or not they endorse specific conspiracy theories are particularly prone to this sort of bias (Fenster 2008, Hofstadter 2008, Robins & Post 1997). Indeed, the combined "don't know" and refusal rate for the conspiracy belief questions on the 2012 ANES were as high as 14%, substantially higher than even other questions that are notoriously sensitive in nature such as those about race and racism (Berinsky 1999).

For these three reasons, I argue that previous findings drawn from beliefs in specific conspiracy theories likely bias and obscure our understanding of the extent to which a general tendency toward suspicious or conspiratorial thinking exists in the mass public, and potentially mischaracterize the specific nature of those of a conspiratorial predisposition. While many have recognized the need for a measure of the general conspiratorial thinking trait that is more congruent with accepted theory about conspiracy theorists (e.g., Goertzel 1994, Oliver & Wood 2014), only a handful of such studies have attempted to estimate this general, "context-free" trait (Brotherton, French & Pickering 2013, Imhoff & Bruder 2014, Oliver & Wood 2014, Uscinski & Parent 2014). And, while I appreciate the direction of this research, these few previous attempts have serious limitations.

Brotherton and colleagues, for instance, employ 75 separate questions in an effort to exploratorily unearth a unidimensional conspiracy trait (2013). Unfortunately, as the authors themselves note, they estimate a much less parsimonious, and theory-incongruent, five-dimensional construct (13). Furthermore, the daunting question battery was fielded on a small convenience sample of British college students, prompting concerns about generalizability to the broader population and across cultures. Oliver and Wood suggest that their findings of conspiratorial thinking may be indicative of an elusive "central organizing principle behind public belief" (2014, 13), though they find that conspiratorial thinking is akin to a paranoid belief in the supernatural and paranormal – both of which suggest that they are capturing something other than merely conspiratorial thinking (indeed, supernatural and paranormal beliefs are separate factors in Brotherton et al. [2013]'s five-factor solution). Furthermore, the factor analysis they present reveals that partian motivated reasoning pervades many of the responses to questions about beliefs in the specific conspiracies about which they inquire, namely those involving the birthplace of Barack Obama and the secret designs of billionaire liberal George Soros. Finally, efforts by Uscinski and Parent (2014), while turning up a seemingly unidimensional measure of conspiratorial thinking, are neither empirically validated nor used to examine potential causes or consequences of conspiratorial thinking. Given the inadequacies of these few previous attempts, I turn next to my own proposal for carrying out this lofty task.

3.2 Estimating Suspicion in the Mass Public

Conspiratorial thinking is a style of reasoning about the political world and our place in it (Hofstadter 2008). 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 et al. 2013, Keeley 1999). Rather than debating the details of any one conspiracy, the more fruitful scholarly direction is to study the prevalence of this "narrative form" or "style" of thinking (Barkun 2003, Fenster 2008, Hofstadter 2008). While the theoretical structure of how conspiratorial tendencies guide our thinking about politics is well documented, it has only been partially examined empirically, and no previous studies have sought to validate a

scale that traces the general trait in the American mass public. 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 I 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 et al. 1999, Goertzel 1994, Swami et al. 2011, Swami et al. 2013). However, I argue that this cynical assumption masks a genuine and pervasive suspicion of authority. Indeed, though we might 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 portions 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 I 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. (Out-

side Interests)

American political populism cannot survive without this belief in a powerful elite (Hofstadter 2008, Fenster 2008), and it is at the core of Ucisnski and Parent's (2014) finding of widespread conspiratorial thinking. Again, I 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 2008, 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, I ask individuals about 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 (Brotherton & French 2015). This intentionality bias is akin to Oliver and Wood's (2014) "unseen forces" aspect of the paranoid style. My 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.

My main hypotheses regarding the proposed measure are as follows: First, these items all relate to a single underlying dimension, what I call *suspicion*; second, I hypothesize that these items discriminate systematically between those individuals with more suspicion and those with less. This cumulative ordering would confirm precisely my intuition that these items not only can be aggregated into a reliable measure of suspicion, but also that they reveal, step-by-step, the levels of the "paranoid style." Ultimately, an operational definition of a fully suspicious or conspiratorial person captures someone who believes that things happen due to a secret plan, that nothing happens by accident, that elites have usurped traditional avenues of legitimate power, and that epistemic authorities are unreliable.

3.3 Data and Analytical Strategy

I fielded each of the questions outlined above, in addition to ones capturing beliefs in several types of specific conspiracy theories, via a group content module of the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES)². The CCES is a large-scale, national stratified sample survey fielded online by Yougov/Polimetrix. The data I employ were collected during the pre-election wave of the survey in October 2014. The distributions of responses to the four suspicion questions appear in Figure 1.

Though I am more interested in a summary measure of these individual items which will provide a much more reliable measure of conspiratorial thinking (Ansolabehere, Rodden

²Special thanks go to Christopher Hare for procuring this data for me.





& Snyder 2008), the distributions uniformly possess a notable characteristic: a fairly pronounced negative skew. While it may not (and probably should not) come as a surprise that a vast majority of individuals believe to some extent that politicians lie (94%), it is remarkable that approximately 78% of individuals agree to some extent that one can see patterns, designs, and secret activities once one knows where to look. Additionally, 85% of individuals agree that government institutions are largely controlled by elite outside interests, and 83% agree that nothing happens by accident in national politics. The overwhelmingly positive support for these propositions lends some descriptive evidence for seemingly high levels of suspicion in the American mass public.

There are three components to the empirical analysis presented below. First, I conduct a non-parametric item response theory (IRT) analysis of the responses to the four questions designed to serve as indicators of a general predisposition toward suspicious thinking. My intention is to decipher whether the items serve as indicators of a single cumulative trait, and, thus, meet the standards of construct validity. Furthermore, I consider the distribution of individual scale scores in order to obtain a picture of the electorate's overall level of conspiratorial thinking.

Second, I empirically validate the newly constructed suspicion scale. For this component of the investigation, I use information about the respondent's symbolic political predispositions (i.e., party identification and liberal-conservative ideology), level of trust in government, level of political sophistication, educational attainment, religiosity, and other demographic characteristics to assess criterion validity. I also use the suspicion scale, along with appropriate control variables, to predict beliefs in three more specific conspiracy theories regarding the link between childhood vaccines and autism, the dangerous corporate control of geneticallymodified foods, and the extent to which presidential disaster relief efforts are governed by political concerns, respectively.

Finally, after the suspicious thinking scale has been validated, I consider potential consequences of suspicious thinking for various forms of political engagement. More specifically, I investigate whether suspicion is related to the strength of traditional partisan identities as measured by the folded party identification scale, strength of a non-traditional political identity as measured by support for the Tea Party, and participation in common campaign activities as measured by an additive index of campaign activities undertaken during the 2012 presidential election. The coding scheme and exact question wording associated with each of these variables can be found in the Appendix.

3.4 Empirical Results

The four survey items I employ to capture suspicious thinking in the mass public were designed with two specific theory-derived empirical hypotheses in mind: that they should tap a single trait, and that the trait should be cumulative. A "single trait" can be operationalized simply as a finding of unidimensionality when it comes to the latent variable that the four suspicion items are measuring. Unidimensionality could be assessed via one of several types of dimensional exploration/reduction techniques such as exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, or one of many more scaling methods (e.g., unfolding analysis). The operationalization of the cumulative property is slightly more involved.

By "cumulative," I mean that both respondents and items probabilistically follow a Guttman-style scalogram such that I can arrange both subjects and items onto a single dimension representing the relationships between the respondents and items in a theoretically meaningful way. Take the example of general spelling ability. Say, for instance, that students in a given grade school grammar class are given three types of words to spell: three-letter words, five-letter words, and seven-letter words. We would probably assume that students who could spell five-letter words could also spell most three-letter words, and that students who could spell the seven-letter words could spell most five- and three-letter words. If this is empirically true, then I can meaningfully arrange both the students and the words onto a single continuum such that the relationship between each pair of objects tells us about the relative ability of the students or the relative difficulty of the word.

This example of spelling ability parallels the suspicious thinking construct I am attempting to capture. Although the suspicion items contain ordinal response categories rather than the dichotomous correct/incorrect responses in the spelling example, the basic principle is the same. I am asking whether some indicators of suspicious thinking tap higher levels of general suspicion than others, just as I suggested when outlining the reasoning behind the particular suspicion questions. In order to test this cumulative model, I turn to the non-parametric IRT model developed by Mokken (1971). Non-parametric IRT allows me to investigate systematically whether the cumulative pattern described above (probabilistically) exists to the extent that I can comfortably assert unidimensionality and the joint scalability of respondents and items.

The first criterion of validating the suspicion scale is the magnitude of the Loevingers H coefficient, which summarizes in a single value the extent to which the data fit a cumulative pattern. According to the rules of thumb developed by Mokken (1971), an H value between 0.40 and 0.50 indicates a "good" fit of the data to a Guttman-style cumulative pattern. The empirically-derived Loevinger's H coefficient for a scale of the four suspicion items I employ here is a strong 0.425, suggesting that with minor error (to be expected in a large dataset), the data fit a cumulative response model. Furthermore, the scale is quite reliable, just as I would expect from a carefully crafted multiple-item measure (Ansolabehere, Rodden & Snyder 2008). Indeed, the Molenaar-Sijtsma reliability estimate for the scale is 0.707, which indicates that more than 70% of the variance in the observed scale scores is shared with the true – but unobserved – distribution of locations along the latent continuum of suspicious thinking³. Finally, a diagnostic examination of all assumptions of the probabilistic cumulative model revealed no significant model violations. All evidence take together, I can comfortably conclude that the items form a strong unidimensional, cumulative scale⁴.

Before subjecting this suspicion scale to criterion validation via multivariate analysis, I consider the properties of the scale alone. First, I consider the "difficulty" ordering of the four suspicion items along the latent suspicion continuum, as operationalized by the suspicion scale. Item difficulty is simply an estimate of how suspicious one (on average) must be to agree to the suspicious proposition in a given item. Thus, a more difficult item is one that

³The Molenaar-Sijtsma coefficient is a more appropriate estimate of the reliability of a *cumulative* scale than is Cronbach's alpha. That said, the Cronbach's alpha is also 0.70.

⁴Both confirmatory and exploratory factor analyses confirm, using different (indeed, less stringent) assumptions than the cumulative model employed here, that responses to the four suspicion items can be accurately conceptualized as products of a single latent dimension or factor. Results of these analyses, as well as a matrix of Pearson correlations between pairs of the suspicion items, can be found in the Appendix of this chapter.





requires a more suspicious response (i.e., a "somewhat" or "strongly" agree response) from an individual. The order of the items, from lowest on the scale (least suspicious) to highest (most suspicious), is as follows: 1) politicians lie, 2) outside interests, 3) no accidents, and 4) secret designs. Not only do the data conform to a cumulative pattern, but the order hypothesized above also appears to hold.

Next, I consider the distribution of the scale. The scale is operationalized as an additive index of the four suspicion items, which themselves have four response categories, resulting in a scale that ranges from 0-12. The distribution of the scale is depicted via a histogram in Figure 1.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the scale's distribution is its negative skew. A great deal more of the respondents are located above the scale's midpoint (6.5) than below it. Indeed, the mean of the scale is 9.08 and the median scale score is 9, both of which are about three quarters of the way up the scale. Furthermore, no respondents registered the

least suspicious attitude across all questions, while 15% of respondents registered the most suspicious attitude across all questions. Of course, I do not (and indeed cannot) possess some objective criterion against which to compare this scale, so I can never be completely sure that I have captured the full breadth of suspicious thinking in the mass public. However, I can be quite sure that most people at least somewhat agree to each of the suspicion items, and a non-trivial proportion strongly agree to most suspicion items⁵. This finding is particularly noteworthy given the fairly absolutist terms in which the questions were phrased. The large proportion of respondents providing affirmative answers to these questions suggests – quite surprisingly – that neither concerns about social desirability nor reservations about the strength of the statements being responded to appear to have negatively affected responses. Thus, I have empirical evidence that a much greater proportion of the American mass public is prone to highly suspicious thinking when it comes to the government and politics than I would have thought had I considered only the marginal distributions of responses to most questions about beliefs in individual specific conspiracies⁶.

3.4.1 Validating the Suspicion Scale

Before completing my assessment of the validity of the suspicion scale and turning toward an investigation of the attitudinal and behavioral consequences of suspicious thinking, I establish the criterion validity of the scale by examining relationships between suspicious thinking and theoretically related attitudes, predispositions, and characteristics. Though very little work has examined the individual-level correlates of a conspiracy scale that is not comprised of responses to questions about specific conspiracies, I do have a good deal of literature to guide me in choosing a substantial set of criterion variables.

Of course, a question remains of whether symbolic political predispositions, such as party identification and liberal-conservative self-identification, are related to the general suspicion

⁵Indeed, more people strongly agree to all items than strongly and/or weakly disagree to all items.

⁶For a comparative analysis of the distributions of the specific conspiracies found in the 2012 American National Election Study, see the Chapter 2.

trait captured by the suspicion scale. According to the distinction between conspiratorial thinking and partian bias/motivated reasoning made above, and the difference between a measure comprised of responses to questions about specific conspiracies rather than a more general suspicious style of thinking, I would not expect partian identifications to be related to the scale. Although one could say I am over-specifying the model by including this variable, I do so for the good reason of testing this important proposition. When it comes to ideology, however, it could be the case that conservatives are more prone to suspicious thinking, particularly because it is part of the conservative mantra to distrust government.

I also consider whether trust in various institutions is related to suspicion. More specifically, I hypothesize that political trust and suspicion are negatively related such that as trust in institutions decreases, the propensity toward suspicious thinking increases. Though distrust is likely closely related to conspiratorial thinking, I do not believe that they are the same general construct. Put simply, while distrust may be a logically-necessary step toward conspiratorial thinking, it is not a logically-sufficient one. As my questions themselves suggest, it would be difficult to say that someone who agreed that they could see secret designs and that nothing happens by accident to be merely distrustful of government. And, conversely, individuals can have reasons for distrusting government that are unrelated to conspiratorial thinking, such as bad experiences when interacting with government (Weaver & Lerman 2010). Lastly, traditional measures of trust are also prone to the same partisan contaminations that questions about beliefs in specific conspiratorial thinking with regard to theory or measurement.

Next, I consider that educational attainment, and knowledge and interest in politics may be related to suspicion. I expect that education and suspicion are negatively related such that as educational attainment increases, the propensity to think suspiciously decreases. This is largely due to my expectation that higher levels of education are negatively related to the errors in reasoning that theoretically underwrite the scale (Brotherton, French & Pickering 2013). I apply the same reasoning when it comes to knowledge about politics. It is less clear how interest in politics may be related to suspicion, however. One the one hand, one could easily conceive of a highly suspicious individual who is also highly interested in politics. Such an individual would be more interested in politics because of a need to monitor the governing elite. On the other hand, one could conceive of an individual who is so suspicious of authorities that they reject any and all information thy espouse. I remain ambivalent on this issue.

Finally, I examine whether general religiosity is related to suspicious thinking. Though others have found that "supernatural" or "paranormal" thinking is related to belief in particular conspiracies (Oliver & Wood 2014), I do not necessarily expect to find such a connection. Religious individuals may, indeed, be prone to believing in "unseen forces" and in the "struggle for good and evil," but conspiratorial thinking should be distinct from eschatological narratives: one can be suspicious without being religious. In fact, by not including religiously symbolic questions in the scale, I will be able to determine the proper relationship between religiosity and suspicion.

To test the relationships outlined above I regress the individual suspicion scale scores on indicators of all variables previously described, in addition to customary controls for age, race, and gender. I consider the effects of the variables in the order they were outlined above. First, I note that the slope coefficient associated with the party identification variable is not statistically significant at conventional levels. This is as I expected since I see no reason why a suspicious mindset should characterize members of one political party more so than members of another. Ideology, on the other hand, is significantly related to suspicious thinking. Indeed, the ideology variable is coded such that positive values indicate progressively stronger conservative identifications. Since the coefficient estimate is positive, it does appear that conservatives are prone to higher levels of suspicious thinking than are liberals.

Considering the hypothesized relationship between trust in governmental institutions and suspicion, I find a statistically significant negative coefficient estimate. As hypothesized, I

	OLS	Standard
	Coefficient	Error
Partisanship	0.014	0.056
Ideology	0.171^{*}	0.068
Trust	-0.184*	0.027
Religiosity	0.042	0.035
Knowledge	-0.264^{*}	0.117
Interest	0.258^{*}	0.126
Education	-0.257^{*}	0.061
Age	0.010	0.006
Female	-0.087	0.180
Black	-0.298	0.311
Latino	-0.161	0.399
Intercept	10.334^{*}	0.469
R^2	0.129	
n	613	

 Table 3.1: OLS regression validating the suspicion scale.

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

find that both education and knowledge about politics are significantly negatively related to suspicious thinking. When it comes to interest in politics, I find a statistically significant positive relationship such that more interested individuals are, on average, more suspicious. Contrary to Oliver and Wood (2014), I do not find that religious individuals are more prone to being suspicious of the government and politicians, confirming my expectation. Finally, I do not find any significant age-, gender-, or race-based differences in level of suspicion, controlling for other factors.

Taken together, these relationships provide strong evidence that the scale I am labeling suspicious thinking captures the latent predisposition which informs conspiracy beliefs. As an even stricter test of the validity of the scale, I next consider the relationship between the suspicion scale and three different conspiratorial attitudes⁷.

 $^{^7\}mathrm{A}$ matrix of Pearson pairwise correlations between responses to the conspiracy items can be found in the Appendix to this chapter.

3.4.2 Suspicion and Specific Conspiracy Beliefs

I begin with conspiratorial beliefs about the link between childhood vaccinations and autism. Since the suspicion scale was designed to capture the latent trait that informs more specific conspiracy beliefs, I expect to observe a strong relationship between the two variables. Roughly 28% of respondents in my sample either strongly or somewhat agreed that childhood vaccinations are linked to autism. This is a non-trivial proportion of the mass public. I also note that this finding is congruent with the results of other national public opinion polls. Most recently, a 2014 Harris Poll found that 29% of all adults believe that vaccinations can cause autism (League 2014). Thus, the proportion of believers I report appears to be on par with other available information about public beliefs on this topic. I use a binary logistic regression model to regress beliefs in the link between vaccinations and autism on the suspicion scale, liberal-conservative ideology, trust in government, interest in politics, educational attainment, and socio-demographic characteristics. Since my central focus is on the substantive effect of the suspicion scale, I turn to a visualization of the key relationship via a predicted probability plot; however, the full results of this analysis are presented in the first column of Table 3.2.

The first panel of Figure 2 below depicts the change in the predicted probability of registering a belief in the vaccine-autism link across the range of the suspicion scale, holding other variables constant. This relationship is positive, such that the more suspicious one is, the more likely she is to believe that vaccinations for such diseases as measles, mumps, and rubella can cause autism in children. The probability of believing in the vaccine-autism link for the least suspicious individuals is approximately 0.20, while it more than doubles to 0.48 for the most suspicious individuals. This is a remarkable effect, particularly in light of the fact that neither ideology nor partisanship is significantly related to belief in the vaccine-autism link. Indeed, suspicion is the best predictor in this model.

Next, I consider whether suspicion is related to beliefs about the safeness of genetically modified foods. Much like with beliefs about the vaccine-autism link, a great deal of con-

	Vaccina		Digastor
	Autiene	CMO_{π}	Disaster
	Autism	GMOS	Kellel
Suspicion	0 126*	0 165*	0 16/1*
Suspicion	(0.120)	(0.105)	(0.044)
Particonchin	(0.042)	(0.055)	(0.044) 0.122*
1 artisansmp	(0.067)	-0.033	(0.122)
Idealogra	(0.057)	(0.075)	(0.002)
Ideology	(0.001)	-0.097	(0.234)
TT ((800.0)	(0.091)	(0.074)
Trust	0.063*	-0.150*	-0.111*
a	(0.028)	(0.037)	(0.030)
Sophistication	-0.301*	0.007	-0.078
	(0.007)	(0.160)	(0.127)
Education	-0.167^{*}	-0.351^{*}	-0.008
	(0.062)	(0.084)	(0.065)
Age	0.003	0.004	-0.006
	(0.006)	(0.008)	(0.006)
Female	-0.402^{*}	0.704^{*}	-0.240
	(0.180)	(0.236)	(0.183)
Black	0.901^{*}	0.598	0.028
	(0.209)	(0.522)	(0.397)
Latino	1.182*	0.494	-0.583
	(0.419)	(0.482)	(0.430)
Intercept	-1.272*	0.862	· · · ·
Ĩ	(0.610)	(0.803)	
Cutpoint 1	()	()	-1.532*
			(0.638)
Cutpoint 2			0.516
eutpoint 2			(0.634)
			(0.001)
Pseudo- R^2	0.087	0.153	0.085
n	615	435	485

 Table 3.2: Regressions of specific conspiratorial beliefs on suspicion scale.

Column 1 & 2 are binary logits, Column 3 is ordered. logit. * p < 0.05 with respect to a two-tailed test.

troversy in the form of misinformation and the promulgation of conspiracy theories has surrounded a national concern about GMOs (e.g., Kimbrell 2015, Nestle 2015). Approximately 68% of respondents believe that genetically modified foods are dangerous because they are unnatural and controlled by corporate interests. This estimate is comparable to that garnered by a June 2015 Pew Survey finding that 57% of adults think that it is generally unsafe to eat genetically modified foods (Center 2015*a*).

In order to investigate the relationship between suspicion and conspiratorial beliefs about GMOs, I estimate a binary logistic regression in the same form as that for the vaccine-autism model. The full results of this analysis can be found in the second column of Table 2. Once again, I focus on the substantive relationship between suspicion and beliefs about GMOs via a predicted probability plot. The second panel of Figure 2 depicts a positive relationship between suspicious and the probability of registering a suspicious belief about GMOs: the least suspicious individuals registered a conspiratorial belief with a probability of 0.45, which nearly doubles to 0.82 when considering the most suspicious individuals. As with the previous analysis, neither ideology nor partisanship exert significant effects on beliefs about GMOs after controlling for other factors. Once again, therefore, I have strong support for the independent influence of suspiciousness on subsequent political attitudes.

To examine the effect of suspicion on conspiratorial attitudes that are more explicitly partisan – or provide a conservative examination of the pervasiveness of suspicious thinking – I consider last the extent to which suspicion is related to the belief that presidents are motivated by political interests when allocating disaster relief. Although I do not probe respondents about their beliefs in a specific conspiracy theory, various conspiracies have surrounded recent natural disaster relief efforts on the part of the president and his administration (Mullouy 2003, Center 2015b). Given that this question explicitly mentions a major political actor, I expect that partisanship and ideology will relate to the affirmative response of political motives driving disaster relief; however, I nevertheless posit that suspicion will still exert an independent effect. Regardless of the exact considerations that come to mind

Figure 3.3: Predicted probability of registering a specific conspiratorial attitude over the range of the suspicion scale.



when confronted with this question, approximately 42% of respondents believe that the president is greatly influenced by political concerns, suggesting again the ubiquity of suspicious thinking in the mass public.

I test whether suspicion influences this belief after controlling for partisanship and ideology via an ordered logistic regression analysis, presented in the third column of Table 2. The predicted probability of registering the most conspiratorial attitude ranges from 0.16 for the least suspicious individuals to 0.51 for the most suspicious respondents. This is the strongest effect I have uncovered thus far; indeed, the most suspicious individuals are, on average, more than three times more likely to register the most conspiratorial attitude, controlling for partisan and ideological considerations. Taken together, I find strong support for the argument that the propensity to view the world through the lens of suspicion is strongly related to specific conspiratorial beliefs⁸. In other words, the suspicion scale nicely captures

⁸The object of this chapter is not to dispel possible misperceptions regarding the veracity of these specific beliefs. My object here is simply to examine and explain the extent to which individuals accept these beliefs, hypothesizing that through these conspiracy beliefs I can unearth and validate the independent role of suspicion. The choice of these controversial topics does not diminish the consistent findings regarding the role of suspicion. Determining what is and what is not a conspiracy belief is difficult and well beyond the scope of this project. However, I focus on these particular beliefs because in public discourse they are considered to be "conspiratorial," and this project empirically examines what "conspiratorial" entails.

the general predisposition which informs specific conspiracy beliefs.

3.4.3 Robustness Check

Although I have no particular reason to believe that either the sample or the specific measurement strategy employed in the previous analyses is problematic in any way, I present in this section the results of analyses similar to those above with slightly different operationalizations of the suspicion construct. Since the operationalization I present above is completely unique, I believe it is a useful exercise to consider the results of similar analyses using slightly altered measurement strategies and different – albeit less representative – samples.

More specifically, I alter both the wording of the suspicion statements and the response categories provided to respondents⁹. Rather than restrict respondents to only directional choices (i.e., (dis)agreeing with some level of conviction), I include a "neither agree/nor disagree" midpoint, providing a 5-point, rather than 4-point, set of response categories. The altered statement wordings are a follows:

"In national politics, events never occur by accident."

"Politicians rarely lie."

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

"Government institutions are largely controlled by elite outside interests."

Note that in addition to slightly altering the wordings in content (though, the main ideas should be identical), I reversed the direction of the "politicians lie" and "no accidents" statements such that more suspicious individuals should more likely to disagree with the

⁹I also tested the following statement: "politics is about good versus evil." According to Oliver and Wood (2014), conspiracy theorists are characterized by a general belief in unseen, religious forces – angels, the Devil, and ghosts in particular. Though some imagination is required to "see patterns, designs, and secret activities everywhere once you know where to look," it is my belief that primarily religious ideas are different than more general conspiratorial ideas, altogether. Contrary to Oliver and Wood's claims, there is nothing magical, mystical, or religious about aircraft vapor trails, presidential assassinations, or global warming. The incongruence between the results presented here and those presented by Oliver and Wood is a prime example of the inferential problems caused by the researchers' selection of specific conspiracy theories about which to inquire.

statements. Although I uncovered no evidence of response set bias in the CCES sample, I provide for the possibility of such a bias by altering my measurement strategy in this way.

The data employed in this study comes from same MTurk sample of 1543 U.S. adults employed in the previous chapter. Information in the "Study 2" section of the previous chapter, particularly Table 4, includes more details about the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Figure 4 depicts the distributions of responses to the alternate suspicion questions. Although the distribution of beliefs regarding the "politicians lie" statement is strongly negatively skewed as it is in the CCES data presented above, the rest of the distributions exhibit varying differences. Indeed, the distributions of the "outside interests" and "secret designs" responses are now slightly positively skewed, while the "no accidents" distribution reveals an aggregate ambivalence about the prevalence of true accidents in politics. In other words there is significantly more disagreement with these statements in the case of a different sample, question wordings, and response categories, than in data presented above.

Responses to the questions do, however, still load highly on a single latent factor. An exploratory factor analysis reveals a single factor accounts for approximately 85% of the variance of the individual item responses (similar to the 88% in the CCES data), and a confirmatory factor analysis supports the notion of a single latent trait being captured by these items. Since the items still serve as indicators of a single construct, I am confident that the alteration of question wordings or response categories did not substantively alter the interpretations of their meaning on the part of the respondent. It is more likely that the more educated respondents in the MTurk sample recognized the conspiratorial element of these questions and opted to provide the less conspiratorial response (though, few people strongly disagreed with any given question).

Unsurprisingly, given the distributions of the individual alternate suspicion items, the Mokken scale comprised of these items is more normally distributed than the negatively skewed one presented above. This distribution is depicted in Figure 5. Since there are 5



Figure 3.4: Distribution of responses to alternate suspicion questions.

response categories available in the alternate questions, the scale in this data ranges from $0-16^{10}$. The mean and median scale scores are 7.82 and 8, respectively.

Even though these distributions reflect lower levels of suspicion than do the distributions presented above, these differences should not be over-interpreted; indeed, more tests must be done to decipher what may be affecting observed responses. After all, there were four changes moving from the CCES to the MTurk data: question wording, directionality, available response categories, and survey sample. There is also reason for optimism despite the observed differences. The first of such reasons is that a normal distribution still indicates that a substantial proportion of individuals hold suspicious beliefs. It is not the case that the MTurk data reveals that individuals are simply not suspicious, but that they may be less suspicious than the CCES data might lead us to believe. And, though respondents might be

¹⁰The response categories are first arranged such that the more suspicious attitudes are assigned higher values. Then the response categories are assigned a value from 0-4 and subsequently summed.
Figure 3.5: Distribution of suspicion scale scores.



more willing to moderate stated suspicious beliefs when provided a neutral category, they tend toward the more suspicious beliefs when neutrality is not an option. This may be an indicator of a social desirability effect that is attenuating stated suspicious beliefs in the MTurk data. Finally, the scale constructed of the MTurk data predicts beliefs in specific conspiracy theories quite well.

Table 3 includes three regressions of specific conspiracy beliefs on the MTurk suspicion scale on a host on control variables. Each of the questions is asked in the same format as the ANES conspiracy questions whereby individuals can can register directional, probabilistic beliefs in the "birther," "truther," and JFK assassination conspiracy theories¹¹. I include the same control variables in these models as in the models presented in Table 2 above. OLS was used to estimate the coefficients¹².

¹¹The vaccine-autism regression from above also replicates in the MTurk sample, as does the correlation between suspicion and the perceived proportion of corrupt government officials. I omit the full analyses to save space.

 $^{^{12}}$ The sample sizes are much smaller than in the previous MTurk-based analyses because each respondent

	Trut	ther	JF	K	Birtl	her
Suspicion	0.082*	0.201	0.071^{*}	0.182	0.029	0.084
	(0.022)		(0.022)		(0.017)	
Partisanship	0.007	0.016	-0.019	-0.044	0.057	0.151
	(0.044)		(0.041)		(0.037)	
Ideology	-0.052	-0.120	0.042	0.104	0.147^{*}	0.405
	(0.043)		(0.039)		(0.035)	
Trust	-0.151*	-0.140	-0.149*	-0.144	-0.066	-0.072
	(0.058)		(0.058)		(0.045)	
Knowledge	-0.160*	-0.210	-0.051	-0.073	-0.056	-0.093
Ŭ	(0.041)		(0.038)		(0.030)	
Authoritarianism	-0.020	-0.045	-0.007	-0.017	0.024	0.062
	(0.025)		(0.024)		(0.019)	
Education	-0.130*	-0.129	0.003	0.003	-0.033	-0.036
	(0.054)		(0.055)		(0.043)	
Age	-0.008*	-0.111	0.009*	0.123	0.000	0.003
0	(0.004)		(0.004)		(0.003)	
Female	-0.063		-0.074		0.147^{*}	
	(0.093)		(0.095)		(0.073)	
Black	0.203		0.207		0.128	
	(0.176)		(0.169)		(0.188)	
Latino	0.182		0.378		-0.167	
	(0.223)		(0.194)		(0.160)	
Intercept	(3.405^{*})		2.226^{*}		1.859*	
	(0.392)		(0.399)		(0.307)	
	(0.00-)		(0.000)		(0.001)	
R^2	0.208		0.116		0.393	
n	322		341		304	

 Table 3.3:
 Regressions of specific conspiratorial beliefs on alternate suspicion scale (MTurk).

OLS coefficients w/ standard errors in parentheses in columns 1, 3, and 4. Standardized coefficients in columns 2, 4, and 6. * = p < 0.05 with respect to a two-tailed test.

Suspicion is a statistically significant, substantively strong predictor of "truther" and JFK assassination beliefs. According to standardized estimates, suspicion is the strongest predictor¹³ of JFK-related conspiracy beliefs, and, more or less, tied – with knowledge – for strongest predictor of "truther" beliefs¹⁴. Unsurprisingly given the analyses in Chapter 2, neither partisanship nor ideological self-identifications are statistically significant predictor of "birther" beliefs¹⁵, while ideological self-identifications are tightly related to such beliefs. Thus, the suspicion scale behaves precisely as we would expect given both the analyses presented early in this chapter and those conveyed in Chapter 2.

3.5 Conclusion

Given that suspicion/conspiracism are – at least, seemingly – increasingly important features of contemporary American political culture, how should political scientists understand this "paranoid style"? Many previous findings suggesting that conspiratorial thinking is the consequence of some minority status are the product of studies employing responses to questions about beliefs in specific conspiracy theories that severely complicate inferences about conspiratorial thinking. This general measurement strategy is, however, prone to capturing partisan biases, and being affected by social desirability concerns and other types of biases due to the content and context associated with specific conspiracy theories (the types of which vary tremendously from study to study).

In light of these measurement concerns, I recognized that any substantial step forward in examining conspiratorial thinking in the mass public must begin with abandoning the problematic measurement strategy in favor of developing a new one that captures the latent

only received one of the three specific conspiracy belief questions.

 $^{^{13}}$ The pairwise correlation is 0.237.

¹⁴The pairwise correlation is 0.316.

¹⁵There is, however, a statistically significant correlation between suspicion and "birther" beliefs (0.137). The correlation between "birther" beliefs and partial partial (0.476) and ideological self-identifications (0.573) are simply much stronger.

suspicion trait that promotes conspiracy beliefs and shapes one's outlook of the political landscape. By synthesizing the robust work on the philosophy of conspiratorial thinking, I was able to construct a valid measure of the general propensity toward conspiratorial thinking that is largely free of the major concerns over inherent measurement error that have plagued previous studies. More specifically, I demonstrated that the scale was both unidimensional, which operationalizes the monological property of the conspiracist belief system highlighted by many theorists, and cumulative, confirming the hypothesized ordering of the particular items within the scale. The marginal distribution of the suspicion scale also revealed that a significant proportion of the population is prone to high levels of suspicious thinking. Indeed, it appears that the tendency toward conspiratorial thinking is quite prevalent in American political culture.

Finally, I found that suspicion was positively related to various specific conspiratorial beliefs with foci ranging from public health, to presidential decision-making, to assassinations. The strength of the relationship between suspicion and specific conspiratorial beliefs is potentially alarming given the high proportion of the population that appears to be engaged in high levels of suspicious thought. Of course, the general predisposition toward suspicion certainly does not guarantee individual endorsement in all (or even most) specific conspiracy theories; but, the psychological groundwork for these beliefs is nonetheless well-established.

Although the general measure of conspiratorial thinking that I present above is a significant improvement upon previous attempts, much important work remains to be done. For example, while my focus has been exclusively on American political beliefs, there is little reason to believe that suspicion is a uniquely American phenomenon. Of course, this is a testable proposition that the measure of general suspicion is uniquely suited to test. In addition, as with any new scale, I think it important to continue to test and refine the mechanics of the scale. Moreover, while suspicion is a fixture of our political thinking, cross-sectional data cannot tell us if we are in a political environment characterized by particularly high or low levels of conspiratorial thinking. APPENDIX

Variable coding/wording for CCES variables

- Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? 0-3, where 0 Strongly agree,
 3 Strongly disagree
 - (a.) There is a link between childhood vaccinations and autism. (UOG309_C)
 - (b.) Government institutions are controlled largely by elite outside interests. (UOG309_E)
 - (c.) In national politics, nothing happens by accident. (UOG309_I)
 - (d.) Nothing is as it seems. Politicians often lie, deflect blame and find other ways to look innocent. (UOG309_L)
 - (e.) In national politics, you can see patterns, designs and secret activities everywhere once you know where to look. (UOG309_N)
- How much trust do you have in each of the following institutions to do the right thing?
 0-4, where 0 none at all, 4 A great deal
 - (a.) The CIA $(UOG308_A)$
 - (b.) The military (UOG308_B)
 - (c.) The Supreme Court (UOG308_C)
 - (d.) Big business (UOG308_D)
- Which statement comes closer to your view? (UOG402)
 - 0. Genetically modified foods are a positive development because they are cheaper, nutritional, and more resistant to weather conditions and pests.
 - 1. Genetically modified foods are dangerous because they are unnatural, not as healthy as organic foods, and are controlled by corporate interests.

- Each president since the 1950s has been called upon to provide disaster relief to states affected by some sort of natural disaster (such as an earthquake or tornado). Which of the following statements most closely reflects your view of this process? (UOG408)
 - 0. Presidents are not influenced by political motives when allocating disaster relief.
 - 1. Presidents are only somewhat influenced by political motives when allocating disaster relief.
 - 2. Presidents are greatly influenced by political motives when allocating disaster relief.
- What is your view of the Tea Party? (CC424)
 - 0. Very negative
 - 1. Somewhat negative
 - 2. Neutral
 - 3. Somewhat positive
 - 4. Very positive
- 7-point Party ID (pid7)
 - -3-3, where -3 strong Democrat, 3 strong Republican
- Strength of partisan identifications (pid7)
 - 0. Independent
 - 1. Leaner
 - 2. Weak
 - 3. Strong
- 7-point Ideology (CC334A)
 - -3-3, where -3 extremely liberal, 3 extremely conservative

- Importance of religion (pew_religimp)
 0-3, where 0 not at all important, 3 very important
- Church attendance (pew_churatd)
 0-5, where 0 never, 5 more than once a week
- Political Interest (newsint)0-3, where 0 Hardly at all, 3 Most of the time
- During the past year, did you attend political meetings? (CC417a_1)
 - 0. No
 - 1. Yes
- During the past year, did you put up a political sign? (CC417a_2)
 - 0. No
 - 1. Yes
- During the past year, did you work for a candidate or campaign? (CC417a_3)
 - 0. No
 - 1. Yes
- During the past year, did you donate money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization? (CC417a_4)
 - 0. No
 - 1. Yes
- Knowledge: which party controls the U.S. House of Representatives? (CC14_309a)
 - 0. Incorrect

- 1. Correct
- Knowledge: which party controls the U.S. Senate? (CC14_309b)
 - 0. Incorrect
 - 1. Correct
- Education (educ)

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

- Black (race)
 - 0. Non-black/African American
 - 1. Black/African American
- Latino (race)
 - 0. Non-Latino
 - 1. Latino
- Age (birthyr)

Age in years

- Female (gender)
 - 0. Male
 - 1. Female

Correlations Between Suspicion Items

_

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
 Politicians Lie Outside Interests No Accidents Secret Designs 	$\begin{array}{c} 1.000 \\ 0.426 \\ 0.327 \\ 0.384 \end{array}$	$1.000 \\ 0.295 \\ 0.326$	$1.000 \\ 0.402$	1.000

Table 3.4: Correlations between suspicion items, 2014 CCES.

Entries are Pearson correlation coefficients.

All significant at p < 0.05 level.

Exploratory Factor Analysis of Suspicion Items

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Uniqueness
Factor Loadings:				
Politicians Lie	0.663	-0.195	-0.090	0.514
Outside Interests	0.605	-0.203	0.105	0.582
No Accidents	0.564	0.222	0.101	0.623
Secret Designs	0.646	0.198	-0.094	0.535
Eigenvalue:	1.541	0.168	0.038	
Variance Accounted For:	88.24%	9.59%	2.17%	

 Table 3.5:
 Exploratory factor analysis of CCES suspicion items.

Note: Method of estimation is iterated principal factors. n = 707.

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Uniqueness
Factor Loadings:				
Politicians Lie	-0.417	0.317	0.022	0.726
Outside Interests	0.669	-0.097	0.071	0.538
No Accidents	0.436	0.315	0.019	0.710
Secret Designs	0.687	0.087	-0.068	0.516
Eigenvalue: Variance Accounted For:	$1.283 \\ 84.96\%$	$0.217 \\ 14.35\%$	$0.011 \\ 0.70\%$	

 Table 3.6:
 Exploratory factor analysis of MTurk suspicion items.

Note: Method of estimation is iterated principal factors. n = 1,479.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Suspicion Items

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	Standardized	Standard
	Estimate	Error
Factor Loadings		
Politicians Lie	0.653^{*}	0.034
Outside Interests	0.596^{*}	0.035
No Accidents	0.545^{*}	0.037
Secret Designs	0.627^{*}	0.035
-		
Fit Statistics		
$\overline{\chi^2}$ (7 df), p-value	13.14, 0.001	
RMSEA	0.089	
$Prob(RMSEA \le 0.05)$	0.060	
SRMR	0.023	
CFI	0.976	
TLI	0.927	
n	707	
Note: $* = p < 0.001$ with re	espect to a two-tai	led test.

 Table 3.7: Confirmatory factor analysis of CCES suspicion items.

	Standardized	Standard
	Estimate	Error
Factor Loadings		
Politicians Lie	-0.393*	0.029
Outside Interests	0.663^{*}	0.030
No Accidents	0.414^{*}	0.028
Secret Designs	0.691^{*}	0.030
_		
<u>Fit Statistics</u>		
χ^2 (7 df), p-value	27.35, 0.000	
RMSEA	0.093	
$Prob(RMSEA \le 0.05)$	0.009	
SRMR	0.028	
CFI	0.964	
TLI	0.891	
n	1479	

 Table 3.8: Confirmatory factor analysis of MTurk suspicion items.

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Note: * = p < 0.001 with respect to a two-tailed test.

Characteristics of Specific Conspiracy Belief Questions on 2012 ANES

The following histograms (Figure A1) depict the distributions of questions about the birthplace of Barack Obama (labeled "birther"), the inclusion of a provision authorizing the creation of panels to make end-of-life decisions for people on Medicare in the 2010 Affordable Care Act (labeled "death panels"), and the amount of related-knowledge the federal government possessed prior to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (labeled "truther").

As my theory would predict, the distributions of beliefs about these conspiracies are quite different. Are these differences due to variation in stimuli (i.e., Obama, healthcare, 9/11)? Or, perhaps political context (a Republican was in the White House during the 9/11 attacks, while a Democrat ushered through healthcare reform)? These are precisely the questions we must attempt to answer and control for if we employ this general strategy for measuring conspiracy theorists.



Figure 3.6: Distribution of ANES conspiracy items.

Unsurprisingly, given the widely varying shapes of the distributions of responses to the ANES conspiracy items, the covariates of these specific beliefs also vary substantially. Indeed, party identification, political sophistication, the cognitive need to evaluate, religiosity, age, and race all exhibit varying effects with respect to statistical significance alone. The effect sizes of the consistently statistically significant variables (i.e., ideology, trust, authoritarianism) also vary across conspiracies. Finally, I should note that the responses to the following conspiracy do not even tap a single conspiratorial thinking trait (Miller et al. forthcoming), further demonstrating the great variability in the characteristics of various specific conspiracy theories.

It is quite likely that the differences across these conspiracy theories are smaller than we might observe with other comparisons given the overtly political and temporally recent nature of this set. Both "birther" and "death panel" beliefs have to do with the sitting president, and "truth" beliefs are associated with a well-known, and fairly "young," political event. I find it wholly plausible that beliefs in conspiracies about Princess Diana, fluoride in drinking water, and Area 51 – all of which have been regularly employed in recent studies – would have very different predictors given the varying cultural and political context with which they are associated.

		Death	
	Birther	Panels	Truther
	0 1 2 1 *	0 110*	0.000
Partisanship	0.151^{*}	0.116^{*}	0.008
.	(0.010)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Ideology	0.050*	0.078*	-0.057*
_	(0.015)	(0.018)	(0.017)
Trust	-0.156*	-0.070*	-0.123*
	(0.020)	(0.024)	(0.023)
Sophistication	-0.052^{*}	-0.016	-0.138^{*}
	(0.024)	(0.029)	(0.028)
Authoritarianism	0.118^{*}	0.110^{*}	0.052^{*}
	(0.015)	(0.018)	(0.017)
Need to Evaluate	0.057^{*}	0.059^{*}	0.029
	(0.020)	(0.024)	(0.023)
Religiosity	0.016^{*}	0.033^{*}	0.006
	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Education	-0.111*	-0.097^{*}	-0.097*
	(0.016)	(0.019)	(0.018)
Age	-0.000	-0.006*	-0.004*
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Female	-0.003	-0.074	0.005
	(0.034)	(0.040)	(0.039)
Black	-0.251*	0.064	0.193^{*}
	(0.053)	(0.064)	(0.061)
Latino	-0.109*	0.074	0.159^{*}
	(0.050)	(0.061)	(0.057)
Intercept	0.911^{*}	1.413^{*}	1.571^{*}
1	(0.095)	(0.113)	(0.108)
	× /	× /	× /
R^2	0.324	0.200	0.081
n	2199	2125	2229

Table 3.9: OLS regressions demonstrating the differing covariates across specific conspiracytheories.

OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

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

Correlations Between Specific Conspiracy Beliefs

_

	(1)	(2)	(3)
 (1) Vaccine-Autism (2) GMOs (3) Disaster Relief 	$1.000 \\ 0.186^* \\ 0.126^*$	$1.000 \\ 0.078$	1.000

Table 3.10: Correlations between beliefs in specific conspiracy theories, 2014 CCES.

Cell entries are Pearson correlation coefficients.

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

Chapter 4: The Attitudinal and Behavioral Effects of Conspiratorial Thinking

In this final substantive chapter, I consider the potential consequences of conspiratorial thinking. Where we know fairly little about the characteristics of the conspiratorial mindset or those individuals prone to such a predisposition, we know even less about the practical and normative consequences of conspiracism. Very recent work – all within the last 3 years – suggests that certain types of conspiratorial beliefs are associated with decreased intention to vaccinate one's children (Jolley & Douglas 2014*a*, Nyhan et al. 2014), reduce one's carbon footprint (Jolley & Douglas 2014*b*), and participate in campaign activities (Jolley & Douglas 2014*b*, Uscinski & Parent 2014, Uscinski, Klofstad & Atkinson forthcoming), as well as lower levels of governmental trust (Einstein & Glick 2015) and willingness to accept scientific findings (Lewandowsky, Gignac & Oberauer 2013). Taken together, there is some evidence that specific conspiratorial beliefs can affect actions related to the topic of the specific conspiratorial beliefs are associated with lower levels of engagement in politics.

This dearth of empirical evidence for the consequences of conspiratorial thinking, while acceptable given both the relative youth of the research area and the measurement problems that make inferences problematic, is still troubling. Unfortunately, we have fairly limited – and certainly inconclusive – evidence that conspiratorial thinking really matters for politics or social behaviors, in general. If conspiracy theorists are "odd" in many ways, but fairly innocuous when it comes socio-political matters, it would be natural and wholly appropriate to question why we should devote resources to understanding them.

In this chapter I demonstrate three potential consequences of conspiratorial thinking. The

first regards the conditioning role of conspiratorial thinking when it comes to the relationship between partisan self-identifications and attitudes about the general role government and the appropriate balance between government services and spending, support for the Tea Party, and general feelings toward the federal government. I find that while partisan predispositions, unsurprisingly, are strongly related to these attitudes and feelings on average, the marginal effect of partisanship on these highly partisan orientations is greatly attenuated as conspiratorial thinking increases. This finding demonstrates the potent conditioning effect of conspiratorial thinking on traditional political thought – conspiracy theorists do not link partisan or ideological predispositions to their attitudes about various aspects of government and governance.

Next, I consider whether conspiratorial thinking is associated with approval ratings of major governmental actors and institutions: Barack Obama, Congress, and the Supreme Court. As theory would predict, approval of each of these political objects – each of which contains a different partian valence or level of political content – decreases as conspiratorial thinking increases. Thus, conspiratorial thinking is found to traverse any partian tendencies and result in a general disapproval of all branches of government.

Finally, I expand previous work on the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and political engagement. More specifically, I consider the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and one's strength of identification with the two major parties, support for anti-establishment ideas like the Tea Party, and campaign activities undertaken during the 2012 presidential election. In all cases I find that conspiratorial thinking is positively related to engagement in anti-establishment ideas like support for the Tea Party, and negatively related to support for one of the two major parties and participation in traditional campaign activities.

4.1 The Conditioning Effect of Conspiratorial Thinking

Beyond serving as the latent sources of beliefs in specific conspiracy theories, conspiratorial thinking and partisanship may interact in different ways. While the statistical and substantive effects of partisanship on a majority of variables of interest to political scientists are well-documented, there exists no theory or model of how partisanship and conspiratorial thinking interact in influencing subsequent attitudes and behaviors. In other words, conspiratorial thinking and partisanship have never been considered as independent variables in a model of some political phenomenon. That this is the case is to the detriment of political behavior research. While we know that the substantive effects of partisanship are as broad as they are sizable, we have no idea how partisanship – the all encompassing social identity, group attachment, and perceptual screen – might interact with conspiratorial thinking when it comes to attitudes and behaviors other than beliefs in specific conspiracy theories, which I documented in Chapter 2.

Although there exists no literature that can guide me on this topic specifically, wellestablished information on some of the known traits of conspiracy theorists may prove of use. Most importantly, we know that the conspiratorial-minded tend to be socio-political "outsiders" who fundamentally distrust established institutions and the authorities that promulgate them (e.g., Goertzel 1994, McHoskey 1995). And, of course, it is no secret that the American political system is controlled by two powerful political parties. Since the connection between the major parties (and the political actors most widely associated with them) and systemic control of most political institutions are so intimately connected, it would come as no surprise that the relationship between partisanship and other attitudes is highly contingent on a willingness to accept, or at least engage with, establishment politics. In other words, the effect of partisanship, where it even exists in traditional forms, for the highly conspiratorial may be substantially attenuated.

In light of our complete lack of understanding of the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and partisanship when it comes to attitudes and beliefs about things other than specific conspiracy theories, I investigate the independent and interactive effects of these two constructs on attitudes about the appropriate role and reach of government, general feelings toward the federal government, and support for the notoriously anti-establishment Tea Party using data from the 2012 ANES along with the confirmatory factor model of conspiracy beliefs presented in Chapter 2. While the choice set of specific attitudes to investigate is quite large, I consider general questions about attitudes about government both because they are attitudes about fundamental political ideas and institutions, and because partisanship is known to be strongly related to them, establishing this analysis as a conservative test of sorts. Although this portion of my analysis is largely exploratory, I expect, given the presumably orthogonal nature of the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and partisanship¹, that conspiracism heavily moderates the tie between partisan predispositions and these attitudes about government. More specifically, I hypothesize that as the level of conspiratorial thinking increases, the relationship between partisanship and attitudes about the scope and role of the government dissolves.

In the following set of analyses I employ four different dependent variables to examine the interactive relationship between conspiratorial thinking and partisanship. Feelings toward national government are operationalized very simply via the familiar feeling thermometer. Higher scores on this item correspond to more positive feelings toward the government and lower scores correspond to more negative feelings. Attitudes about the scope and role of government are operationalized via an additive index of attitudes about 1) the size of government, 2) preference for governmental vs. free market solutions to economic problems, 3) whether the government should be doing more or less, in general, and 4) how much government regulation is good for society². Higher values indicate more conservative responses. Attitudes about the government spending and services are measured via the familiar sevenpoint item which asks respondents to place themselves on scale ranging from the reduction of government services and spending (low values) to the increase in government spending and services (high values). Finally, support for the Tea Party is measured via a seven-point

¹This assumption of orthogonality enjoys some empirical support in Chapter 2. Indeed, the betterfitting confirmatory factor analysis model of the latent sources of specific conspiracy beliefs restricted the partisanship and conspiratorial thinking factors to be uncorrelated.

²These items scale together very well. An exploratory factor analysis of the items resulted in a very large eigenvalue for the first factor, which accounted for approximately 94% of the variance in the four items. Cronbach's alpha is 0.72.

scale ranging from strong opposition (low values) to strong support (high values). Each of these variables has been re-scaled such that they range from 0-1.

In order to empirically test both the independent and interactive effects of conspiratorial thinking and partisanship³ on each of these attitudes about government, I estimated a series of OLS regressions⁴. First, I estimated four models where the effects of conspiratorial thinking and partisanship, as well as all relevant controls, exert only additive effects on each of the four dependent variables. For each model I include controls for trust in government, ideological self-identifications, political sophistication (a combination of interest, campaign activity, and knowledge)⁵, age, education, income, race, and gender. I also control for racial resentment⁶ due to its known relationship with Tea Party support (Barreto, Cooper, Gonzalez, Towler & Parker 2012, Parker & Barreto 2013), government spending attitudes (e.g., Jacoby 2000), and feelings toward Barack Obama (e.g., Kam & Kinder 2012), as well as religiosity⁷ and authoritarianism⁸. Though I am more interested in a model where the effect

⁵Cronbach's alpha is 0.72.

 $^{^{3}}$ The partisanship variable included in these models is the factor score derived from the confirmatory factor model presented above. Employing instead the traditional party identification measure (a seven-point scale constructed via respondent answers to 2 questions) does not substantively alter the results. Since multiple-item measures provide more reliable measures of inherently error-prone concepts (Ansolabehere, Rodden & Snyder 2008), I elected to present models with multiple indicator operationalization of party identification.

⁴While I could have simultaneously estimated a full "structural" model whereby the confirmatory factor analysis presented above is integrated into a set of equations predicting each of these four independent variables, only specialized structural equation modeling (SEM) software (such as MPLus) is capable of calculating interaction effects between latent variables that are estimated within the same equation. Therefore, I would be unable to test interactive hypotheses in a full SEM framework using most software (i.e., Stata, AMOS, and R). Since this type of modeling is still being refined and outside the grips of most political science practitioners, I elected to estimate the models in a (programmatically) widely-available and easilyinterpretable OLS framework. Since measurement error in the latent variables is already accounted for in the CFA framework to a much better extent than it would have been had I simply constructed an additive index (à la Miller et al. forthcoming) or employed the conspiracy questions individually (Ansolabehere, Rodden & Snyder 2008), I have little worry that this approach poses a threat to the validity of our inferences. Indeed, the use of factor scores (or similar latent variable scores such as those produced from increasingly popular item response theory, or "ideal point," models) in subsequent analyses is commonplace.

⁶Racial resentment is measured via an additive index of the common four questions found on the ANES. Cronbach's alpha is 0.80. Exact questions wordings appear in the Appendix.

⁷Religiosity is operationalized by a additive index of two variables capturing how often one attends church and how important religion is in one's life. Exact questions wordings appear in the Appendix.

⁸Authoritarianism is operationalized by an additive index of four questions regularly appearing on the ANES specifically designed to capture the construct. Cronbach's alpha is 0.61. Exact questions wordings appear in the Appendix.

of partisanship is conditioned on conspiratorial thinking, implying an interactive model, I first estimate the additive models to demonstrate just how substantial the independent effect of partisanship is on each of these attitudes about government⁹. In order to facilitate the interpretation of the magnitude of effects, the standardized coefficients¹⁰ resulting from each of these models is presented in Table 4. Interested readers will find a table of unstandardized coefficients in the Appendix.

A cursory inspection of the standardized coefficients in Table 4 reveals that partisanship has the strongest linear relationship with attitudes about the Tea Party, the role of government, and government spending and services by a wide margin. In each of these cases the standardized coefficient for partisanship is at least double that of the next largest standardized coefficient, which was ideological self-identifications (with racial resentment in a close third). Only when it comes to feelings about the federal government is the effect of partisanship trumped by another variable. In this case, generalized trust in government shares a stronger linear relationship with feelings toward the federal government than does partisanship, though the difference between these standardized coefficients is much smaller than is the difference between the standardized estimates for partisanship and the next most substantially significant predictor.

In addition to partisanship being undeniably strongly related to each of the four attitudes about government, we see that conspiratorial thinking is non-trivially related to three of the four dependent variables. Indeed, conspiratorial thinking is statistically significantly related to attitudes about the Tea Party and government spending and services, as well as feelings about the federal government. More specifically, an increase in conspiratorial thinking is

⁹I checked for potential differences in the effect of conspiratorial thinking across survey modes by interacting the conspiratorial thinking variable with a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was in the internet or face-to-face sample. I did the same in the models below, specifying a three-way interaction between conspiratorial thinking, partisanship, and survey mode. In no instance did I find a difference in the reported relationships by survey mode.

¹⁰Although presented in the table above so that statistical significance can be gleaned, we refrain from interpreting the standardized coefficients associated with dummy variables (i.e., the dichotomous operationalizations of gender and race). Such coefficients are not easily interpretable since a standard deviation change on a dichotomous variable has no substantive meaning.

	Tea Party Support	Role of Government	Spending & Services	Federal Gov. Thermometer
Conspiratorial Thinking	0.036*	0.022	0.054^{*}	-0.047*
Partisanship	0.470*	0.382*	-0.344*	-0.263*
Ideology	0.201*	0.168^{*}	-0.187*	-0.031
Trust	0.026	-0.127*	0.076^{*}	0.381^{*}
Racial Resentment	0.151*	0.136^{*}	-0.142*	-0.053*
Sophistication	0.045*	0.020	-0.029	-0.071*
Education	-0.024	0.063*	-0.070*	-0.071*
Age	-0.045*	-0.025	0.012	0.010
Income	-0.069*	0.014	-0.076*	-0.027
Female	0.014	-0.025	0.052^{*}	0.027
Black	-0.005	-0.102*	0.046*	0.138*
Latino	0.042*	-0.047*	0.063*	0.122*
Religiosity	0.007			
Authoritarianism	0.019			
R^2 n	$0.510 \\ 2032$	$0.471 \\ 2165$	$0.425 \\ 2037$	$0.434 \\ 2199$

Table 4.1: OLS regressions demonstrating the independent additive effects of partisanshipand conspiratorial thinking (ANES).

Standardized OLS regression coefficients. * p < 0.05 with respect to a two-tailed test.

associated with an increase in support for the Tea Party, a decrease in support for government spending a services, and more negative feelings toward the federal government.

These relationships make sense. The Tea Party has two characteristics that would be attractive to the conspiratorially-minded: 1) an anti-establishment feel promoted by the insurgent rise of the "party," and 2) an explicit ideological goal of limited governmental involvement in private life. The relationship between conspiratorial thinking and a desire for less governmental spending and services can also be explained a desire to limit the reach of government in the lives of private individuals. Finally, conspiracy theorists – given their propensity to distrust formal, powerful institutions like governments – should be less likely to express positive emotions toward the U.S. federal government.

Having established the substantive additive effects of conspiratorial thinking and partisanship¹¹, I consider whether the effect of partisanship on attitudes and feelings about the government and anti-establishment parties is moderated by conspiratorial thinking. In order to test this proposition, I estimated a series of models that each include all of the independent variables included in the additive models, in addition to a multiplicative term designed to capture the interaction between partisanship and conspiratorial thinking. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 4.

When multiplicative terms and all of their constitutive terms are included in a given regression model, the associated coefficients become rather difficult to substantively interpret. I will address this issue below. First, however, I consider issues of statistical significance with respect to my key independent variables as well at the controls. Most importantly, the coefficient associated with the conspiratorial thinking–partisanship interaction term is statistically significant at conventional levels in each of the four models. Furthermore, the constitutive terms are statistically significant in all four models as well, with one exception.

Unsurprisingly, ideological self-identifications and trust in government are statistically

 $^{^{11}}$ I elected to save space by ignoring an extended discussion of the control variables in the additive models since these models are theoretically, in some sense, misspecified since I believe that there is an interaction between conspiratorial thinking and partial partial partial. Thus, these variables are discussed at greater length below in the context of the "true" interactive models.

	Tea Party Support	Role of Government	Spending & Services	Federal Gov. Thermometer
Conspiratorial Thinking	0.454^{*}	0.221^{*}	-0.056	-0.160*
	(0.058)	(0.045)	(0.050)	(0.044)
Partisanship	1.013^{*}	0.592^{*}	-0.506^{*}	-0.365^{*}
	(0.056)	(0.043)	(0.049)	(0.043)
Conspiratorial Thinking	-0.954*	-0 474*	0.322*	0.245^{*}
× Partisanship	(0.121)	(0.094)	(0.106)	(0.093)
x i artisansinp	(0.121)	(0.001)	(0.100)	(0.000)
Trust	0.009	-0.039*	0.024^{*}	0.110^{*}
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)
Ideology	0.042^{*}	0.027^{*}	-0.032*	-0.004
	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.003)
Racial Resentment	0.011^{*}	0.008^{*}	-0.009*	-0.003*
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Sophistication	0.016^{*}	0.005	-0.009	-0.021*
	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Education	-0.007*	0.014^{*}	-0.016*	-0.015*
	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.004)
Age	-0.000*	-0.000	0.000	0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Income	-0.003*	0.000	-0.002*	-0.000
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Female	0.008	-0.013	0.028^{*}	0.013
	(0.012)	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.008)
Black	-0.022	-0.081*	0.041^{*}	0.100^{*}
	(0.018)	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.013)
Latino	0.031	-0.038*	0.051^{*}	0.086^{*}
	(0.016)	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.012)
Religiosity	0.001			
	(0.002)			
Authoritarianism	0.006			
	(0.005)			
Intercept	-0.107^{*}	0.209^{*}	0.754^{*}	0.471^{*}
	(0.040)	(0.031)	(0.034)	(0.030)
D^2	0 595	0 477	0 497	0 496
n n	0.020 2022	0.477	0.427	0.430 9100
R^2 n	(0.040) 0.525 2032	$ \begin{array}{c} 0.203 \\ (0.031) \\ 0.477 \\ 2165 \end{array} $	$(0.034) \\ 0.427 \\ 2037$	$\begin{array}{c} 0.411 \\ (0.030) \\ 0.436 \\ 2199 \end{array}$

Table 4.2: OLS regressions demonstrating the effects of partisanship conditional on con-spiratorial thinking (ANES).

=

OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

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

significant predictors of attitudes about the government in most models. Conservatives tend to support the Tea Party, favor a reduced scope of government, and prefer less spending on governmental services to a greater extent than do liberals. Conversely, the more individuals trust the government, the more positive feelings they have toward the national government, and the more they prefer an expanded scope of government and spending on governmental services. The estimates associated with education, gender, and race are statistically significant in each model with one exception for gender. Women, blacks, and hispanics all take more liberal positions when it comes to the role of government, preferences about government spending and services, and Tea Party support (except women, in this instance), and tend to like the federal government more than males and whites, respectively. Finally, racial resentment remains a statistically significant predictor of Tea Party support in the interactive models, whereby an increase in racial resentment is associated with an increase in support for the Tea Party, as previous work would suggest (Arceneaux & Nicholson 2012, Barreto et al. 2012).

In order to aid in the interpretation of the interaction effect captured by the coefficients on the multiplicative terms included in these models, I visually present the marginal effects of partisanship across the values of conspiratorial thinking with respect to each of the four dependent variables in Figure 3. One important characteristic is present in each of the four panels: as the level of conspiratorial thinking increases, the marginal effect of partisanship decreases. In fact, in every case the marginal effect of partisanship at the highest levels of conspiratorial thinking approaches 0. The nature of this effect is particularly remarkable given the wide array of variables that partisanship is known to be strongly related to. Even in the models I present here, partisanship is the strongest predictor of Tea Party support, attitudes about the role of government, and preferences about government spending in services, while it is second in predictive strength to trust when it comes to general feelings about the federal government.

That the robust effects of partisanship are reduced so dramatically as the level of conspir-



Figure 4.1: Marginal effects of partisanship conditional on conspiratorial thinking (ANES).

atorial thinking increases is not only statistically impressive, but substantively important for a number of reasons. First, it underscores the nature of a conspiratorial mindset as being one largely characterized by a general suspicion toward and distrust of establishment figures, institutions, and authorities such as political parties (and those that represent them). Rather than being correlated with (Republican) partisanship as an analysis employing beliefs in specific conspiracy theories about popular political figures like Barack Obama might suggest, conspiratorial thinking is really uncorrelated with partisanship in general. Indeed, to be conspiratorial is truly to eschew identifications with authorities, and, by definition, to eschew a connection between these identifications and other political attitudes.

Second, these findings highlight a need to consider the correlates of what are widely assumed to be partisan attitudes when partisanship is not an important predisposition to the individual. Recent work on the rise of the conspiracy theories (Brotherton 2015, Oliver & Wood 2014), increasing levels of distrust (Hetherington & Rudolph 2015), and the nature of political independence (Klar & Krupnikov 2016), taken together, should prompt a reconsideration of the importance of seemingly apolitical and disengaged individuals. Indeed, for some, a rise in general political divisiveness may not prompt polarization along partisan lines, but rather a psychological distancing from status quo politics altogether. Although there could be many reasons for and outcomes associated with such a phenomenon, it seems to me that conspiratorial thinking is certainly a prime candidate on both fronts.

4.2 Effects on Approval of Actors and Institutions

Next I consider the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and approval of Obama, Congress, and the Supreme Court. Since conspiracy ideation is widely characterized by an intense suspicion toward formal political institutions, we might expect that the more conspiratorial one is, the less they would approve of the "job" being done by those institutions, or the actors that represent them. Though this would make sense theoretically, one may still wonder why low approval really matters. Indeed, the relative level of approval of Obama is nearly completely determined by partian and ideological self-identifications, and most Americans seem to disapprove of the job Congress has been doing regardless of partian and ideological predispositions.

That conspiratorial thinking might unilaterally decrease institutional approval across branches is, however, quite powerful. If conspiratorial thinking were to systematically relate to approval of each of the institutions, we would have some rough indication that it is capable of cutting across partisan lines (in the case of Obama approval), a popular sentiment regarding the competence of Congress, and the supposed "apolitical" nature of the Supreme Court. In other words, it would be a testament to the overarching statistical and substantive power of conspiratorial thinking – a power that is not currently being captured by even related constructs such as institutional (dis)trust. More than some general distrust, individual orientations toward major governmental institutions can be affected by a fundamentally suspicious orientation toward the designs of these institutions and the motivations of the actors that operate within them.

To test this set of hypotheses, I shift from the ANES data to the CCES data which includes the better measure of conspiratorial thinking outlined in the previous chapter¹². I chose to employ questions about the job approval of the institutions that represent the three branches of government: the executive (Obama), legislative (Congress), and judicial (Supreme Court). The questions simply asked respondents to rate, using a 4-point Likerttype set of response categories, to what degree they approved or disapproved of the job being done by each of these institutions. In addition to the suspicion scale, I include a host of control variables including institutional trust, partisanship, ideological self-identification, knowledge, educational attainment, religiosity, income, age, gender, and race. All of these variables are measured as outlined in the previous chapter. Since the dependent "approval" questions have four discrete response categories, either OLS or MLE (i.e., ordinal logit/probit) could

¹²Although I am presenting the results of analyses using the suspicion questions on the 2014 CCES, the same results are produced for approval of Obama and Congress using the conspiratorial thinking factor from Chapter 2 and the 2012 ANES data (SCOTUS approval was not fielded on the survey).

be used estimate the models. Since there was no substantive difference in the conclusions garnered from the two procedures, I present the OLS estimates below¹³. Table 3 includes both the "raw" estimates (in columns 1, 3, and 5), as well as standardized estimates (in columns 2, 4, and 6)¹⁴.

Conspiratorial thinking is a statistically significant predictor of each of the job approval responses. More specifically, as I hypothesized, an increase in the level of conspiratorial thinking is associate with a decrease in job approval associated with each of the institutions. In the Obama job approval model, conspiratorial thinking exerts a statistically significant effect in the face of substantively large effects of partisan and ideological predispositions. In the Congress and Supreme Court approval models, conspiratorial thinking is statistically significant despite the low variance of the approval of Congress and the effect of (explicitly) institutional trust. Though the trust measure exerts, according to the standardized estimates, the largest effect on Congressional and SCOTUS approval attitudes, we should expect as much from a multi-item measure comprised of attitudes about individual institutions including the military, big business, and the Supreme Court, itself. As such, the statistically significant relationship between conspiratorial thinking and these two institutions (certainly the Supreme Court) serves as a very conservative test of both the independent effects of conspiratorial thinking, and the differences between conspiratorial thinking and (dis)trust.

4.3 Effects on Political Engagement

Finally, I turn toward a consideration of the political engagement-related consequences of conspiratorial thinking. According to basic normative theory regarding the necessary criteria that must be met by a liberal democracy, citizen engagement in politics is imperative. Indeed,

¹³The theoretical model could also be operationalized via a seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) since the equation errors are likely correlated. Although the SUR model does fit and all pairs of equation errors are significantly correlated, neither the statistical nor substantive effects of the independent variables changes with this estimation.

¹⁴Note that I exclude standardized coefficients for dichotomous variables since such quantities are not easily interpretable. Since dichotomous variables only take a two values (in all of the cases presented here, a 0 or a 1), a standard deviation change is meaningless.

	Appro	val of	Approval of		Appr	oval of
	008	lilla	COIle	51655	500	7105
Suspicion	-0.039*	-0.073	-0.032*	-0.095	-0.036*	-0.090
	(0.015)		(0.014)		(0.017)	
Partisanship	-0.240*	-0.452	0.022	0.065	-0.026	-0.065
	(0.021)		(0.019)		(0.023)	
Ideology	-0.212*	-0.337	0.029	0.073	-0.260	-0.055
	(0.026)		(0.023)		(0.028)	
Trust	0.004	0.014	0.064^{*}	0.292	0.118*	0.444
	(0.010)		(0.009)		(0.011)	
Knowledge	0.040	0.029	-0.178*	-0.202	-0.102*	-0.094
	(0.042)		(0.038)		(0.046)	
Education	0.026	0.032	0.036	0.070	0.003	0.004
	(0.025)		(0.022)		(0.027)	
Religiosity	0.010	0.022	-0.002	-0.006	-0.036*	-0.107
	(0.013)		(0.012)		(0.014)	
Income	-0.015	-0.040	-0.010	-0.044	-0.001	-0.003
	(0.011)		(0.010)		(0.012)	
Age	0.000	0.005	-0.008*	-0.167	-0.008*	-0.144
	(0.002)		(0.002)		(0.002)	
Female	-0.136^{*}		-0.054		-0.025	
	(0.067)		(0.060)		(0.072)	
Black	0.750^{*}		0.265^{*}		0.248^{*}	
	(0.117)		(0.104)		(0.125)	
Latino	0.001		0.160		-0.056	
	(0.139)		(0.124)		(0.147)	
Intercept	1.375^{*}		1.030^{*}		1.170^{*}	
	(0.229)		(0.205)		(0.246)	
B^2	0.615		0.229		0.264	
\overline{N}	539		533		526	

Table 4.3: Independent effects of suspicion (CCES) on approval of governmental actorsand institutions.

OLS coefficients w/ standard errors in parentheses in first column. Standardized coefficients in second column. * p < 0.05 with respect to a two-tailed test.

engagement on the part of the governed helps "check" the governors – it fosters direct citizen involvement in the governing process, and is a way for citizens to register their opinions (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996). A conspiratorial worldview may, however, discourage these kinds of behaviors and outcomes. The most conspiratorial individuals agree strongly with propositions such as governmental institutions being controlled by outside interests and secret patterns and designs being all around us. As an inherent distrust of established institutions and those who govern them accompanies a conspiratorial worldview, I might expect that more conspiratorial individuals are less likely to engage in establishment politics in traditional ways, and perhaps more likely to engage in anti-establishment causes.

I consider three forms of (dis)engagement in politics. Participation in campaign activities is a particularly important form of engagement since it is one of the major (non-voting) behavioral acts in which citizens directly deal with questions about what is best for the country, what their values are when it comes to public policy, and, ultimately, who should govern. Furthermore, previous experimental research investigating beliefs in specific conspiracy theories demonstrates that there may be a relationship between suspicion and intention to participate in politics in the future via, for example, voting or donating to campaigns (Jolley & Douglas 2014b). Thus, I investigate whether conspiratorial thinking is related to participation in campaign activities. In addition to engagement in the physical form of participation, I consider psychological engagement with mainstream politics. In particular, I investigate wether the strength of individual attachments to one of the two major parties or support for the anti-establishment Tea Party are related to a suspicious mindset. Since conspiratorial thinking can be generally characterized as a predisposition to view established institutions and the actors that comprise them with suspicion, I expect that highly suspicious individuals are less likely to identify with establishment parties very strongly, and more likely to support anti-establishment parties such as the Tea Party.

Beginning with the relationship between campaign activities and conspiratorial thinking, the campaign activity variable I employ in this analysis is an additive index of responses to questions asking respondents whether or not they 1) donated money to a political candidate, campaign, or organization, 2) displayed a political sign of some sort, 3) attended local political meetings, and/or 4) worked for a candidate or campaign. Strength of partisan identifications is operationalized via the folded seven-point party identification scale. As such, the four point strength variable takes on a value of 1 if the respondent identifies as an "independent," a value of 2 if they identify as a partisan leaner, a 3 if they identify as a weak partisan, and a value of 4 if they identify as a strong partisan. Lastly, Tea Party support is measured via a five-point Likert-type item with response categories ranging from very negative to very positive.

As with the previous multivariate analyses, I include trust, education, religiosity, knowledge, interest, and demographic controls in these models. I additionally include strength of partisan and ideological predispositions in the campaign activity model (e.g., Verba, Schlozman & Brady 1995), campaign activity in the partisan strength model (to control for the potential effects of endogeneity in that relationship), and ideological and partisan selfidentifications in the Tea Party support model (e.g., Arceneaux & Nicholson 2012, Barreto et al. 2012, Cho, Gimpel & Shaw 2012, Crawford & Xhambazi 2015, Parker & Barreto 2013). Both unstandardized and standardized¹⁵ model estimates – all of which were produced using OLS – are presented in Table 3.

Beginning with the campaign activity model, I find that conspiratorial thinking is significantly negatively related to campaign activity, holding other variables constant. That is, as one's level of conspiratorial thinking increases, her propensity to participate in traditional campaign activities, on average, decreases. More specifically, increasing the level of conspiratorial thinking from the lowest scale score to the highest scale score produces, on average, a decrease of 0.552 activities on the campaign activity index. While this effect may seem small, most people participate in zero campaign activities and approximately 18.63% participate in just one. If, then, high levels of conspiratorial thinking affect individuals even

¹⁵Once again, I exclude standardized coefficients for dichotomous variables.

	Campaign		Partisan		Tea F	Party
	Acti	vitv	Strei	neth	Supr	port
				0.		
Suspicion	-0.046*	-0.100	-0.065*	-0.129	0.048^{*}	0.068
1	(0.020)		(0.022)		(0.023)	
Knowledge	0.118^{*}	0.100	0.096	0.075	-0.019	-0.010
Ŭ	(0.054)		(0.062)		(0.064)	
Interest	0.302^{*}	0.236	0.069	0.050	0.034	0.016
	(0.060)		(0.068)		(0.072)	
Education	0.056	0.083	0.010	0.013	-0.024	-0.023
	(0.029)		(0.033)		(0.033)	
Trust	-0.006	-0.020	0.004	0.011	0.051^{*}	0.111
	(0013)		(0.014)		(0.015)	
Religiosity	0.041*	0.113	0.047^{*}	0.118	0.0173	0.031
	(0.016)		(0.018)		(0.019)	
Age	0.004	0.057	0.004	0.062	-0.005	-0.053
	(0.003)		(0.003)		(0.003)	
Female	0.036		0.347^{*}		-0.036	
	(0.085)		(0.095)		(0.095)	
Black	-0.223		0.340		-0.531*	
	(0.163)		(0.184)		(0.196)	
Latino	0.173		0.278		0.206	
	(0.182)		(0.206)		(0.212)	
Partisan Strength	-0.000	-0.000				
	(0.038)					
Campaign Activity			-0.000	-0.000		
			(0.049)			
Ideology					0.316^{*}	0.392
					(0.038)	
Partisanship					0.240^{*}	0.345
					(0.031)	
Intercept	-0.312		1.523^{*}		1.004^{*}	
	(0.297)		(0.330)		(0.371)	
D						
R^2	0.138		0.083		0.588	
N	549		549		484	

Table 4.4: Independent effects of suspicion (CCES) on political engagement.

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OLS coefficients w/ standard errors in parentheses in first column. Standardized coefficients in second column. * p<0.05 with respect to a two-tailed test.
slightly, then it could make a substantial difference in driving individuals predisposed to engage in just one form of campaign activity to join the many of their peers and abandon the enterprise altogether. What is more, conspiratorial thinking is exactly tied with knowledge for the second strongest effect on campaign activity according to the magnitude of the standardized coefficients, behind only stated interest in politics. The seemingly small effect is, then, nothing at which to scoff – in fact, it is quite substantial relative to most known predictors of campaign activity and when considered in conjunction with information about absolute levels of campaign participation.

When it comes to strength of partisan identifications I also observe a statistically significant effect of conspiratorial thinking. As hypothesized, conspiratorial thinking is negatively related to one's strength of identifications with mainstream political parties. Moreover, this is the strongest relationship presented, slightly edging out religiosity, and even known predictors of partisan strength such as interest in politics and participation in campaign activity. Varying the conspiratorial thinking scale from its lowest to its highest value produces, on average, a 0.78 unit decrease along the four-point partisan strength measure. Again, this is quite a remarkable effect given the "short" scale of the partisan strength variable, and relative to other predictors in the model.

Finally, I observe that conspiratorial thinking is significantly and positively related to Tea Party support. As hypothesized, as conspiratorial thinking increases, so too does the level of support one has for the Tea Party, on average. As I might expect, both liberal-conservative ideological and partisan self-identifications are strongly related to Tea Party support such that conservatives and Republicans are more likely to support the Tea Party. Furthermore, trust is strongly related to Tea Party support, such that as trust in institutions increases, support for the Tea Party increases. At first glance, this finding may seem surprising. Intuitively, low trust individuals should be more likely to support the Tea Party than high trust individuals. However, the trust variable is comprised of responses to questions about trust in the CIA, military, big business, and Supreme Court. Since Tea Party members are unabashed supporters of the free market (big business) and favor federal spending on defense (CIA, military) more than any sort of domestic spending, this result makes sense. Regardless of the effect of trust, conspiratorial thinking is also substantively related to Tea Party support; indeed, it exerts an effect slightly smaller than that of trust¹⁶.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I furthered the sparse literature on the potential effects of conspiratorial thinking on a number of normatively important attitudes and behaviors. In the first section of the chapter I shed some light on the nature of the interaction between conspiratorial thinking and perhaps the most important variable in political behavior research – partisanship – when it comes to fundamental attitudes about the role of government in society, general feelings toward the federal government, and support for the Tea Party. Although we typically understand these kinds of attitudes to largely be the product of (or, at least, tightly associated with) partisanship and ideology, we know fairly little about these attitudes outside of the context of partisanship and liberal-conservative ideology. That the effect of partisanship on these attitudes is so greatly diminished among the most conspiratorially-minded individuals should prompt researchers to reconsider the psychological role of conspiracism for partisans alike, as well as contemplate the conditioning role that conspiratorial thinking may play in many other more traditional relationships between behavioral variables of interest.

Next, I demonstrated the relationship between approval of governmental institutions and conspiratorial thinking. As theory would suggest, but scholars have yet to demonstrate, there exists a tight relationship between the conspiratorial mindset and a fundamental disapproval of governmental institutions. Indeed, to be highly suspicious of the government is

¹⁶Only the results of the Tea Party support model were supported by the 2012 ANES data and (admittedly less than ideal) operationalization of conspiratorial thinking. The partisan strength and Tea Party support models are supported by the alternate suspicion measurement strategy employed in the MTurk data (questions about campaign activities where not fielded in the survey). Taken together, there the findings presented in this chapter are quite robust to varying measurement strategies and samples.

to inherently distrust and disapprove of any sort of governmental establishment or figure.

Finally, I both confirmed and extended previous work that has revealed a negative relationship between conspiratorial thinking and political participation. More than a significant decrease in participation in campaign activities, more conspiratorial individuals are less likely to identify with a major party and more likely to identify with insurgent parties like the Tea Party. Thus, I find that conspiratorial thinkers are less likely to engage in establishment politics both behaviorally and with respect to fundamental group identities. In a political environment where socio-political identities have been found to influence everything from attitudes about racial groups (Kam & Kinder 2012) to individual affective polarization (e.g., Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes 2012, Mason 2015), this effect of conspiratorial thinking can have substantial consequences for which and how individuals engage in politics.

Beyond those considered here, I urge others to investigate the relationships between other variables such as ideology, individual-level polarization, and value orientations and conspiratorial thinking. Of course, we must also understand the effect of conspiratorial thinking on important political behaviors such as campaign participation and voting, and general orientations toward politics such as efficacy, anomie, and alienation. Without a more robust understanding of the nature of conspiratorial thinking, we will not be able to understand how many conspiracy theorists really exist, differentiate between "true" conspiracy theorists and partisan motivate reasoners, or explain the modern day rise in popular conspiracy beliefs, especially among massively popular presidential candidates and their followers. APPENDIX

Variable coding/wording for new ANES variables

• Where would you place YOURSELF on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this? (spsrvpr_ssself)

7-point scale; 0 – Government should provide many fewer services, reduce spending, 1
– Government should provide many services, increase spending a lot.

- Which of the two statements comes closer to your view? 1. The main reason government has become bigger over the years is because it has gotten involved in things that people should do for themselves. 2. Government has become bigger because the problems we face have become bigger. (govrole_big)
 - 0. Government bigger because problems bigger
 - 1. Government bigger because it's involved in things people should handle themselves
- Which of the two statements comes closer to your view? 1. We need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems. 2. The free market can handle these problems without government being involved. (govrole_market)
 - 0. Need a strong government to handle complex economic problems
 - 1. Free market can handle without government involvement
- Which of the two statements comes closer to your view? 1. The less government, the better. 2. There are more things that government should be doing. (govrole_lessmore)
 - 0. More things government should be doing
 - 1. The less government the better
- How much government regulation of business is good for society? (govrole_regbus)
 - 0. None at all

- 1. A little
- 2. A moderate amount
- 3. A lot
- 4. A great deal
- National government feeling thermometer (ftgr_fedgov)
 0-100, where 0 corresponds to "cold" feelings, 100 corresponds to "hot" (very favorable)
- Tea Party feeling thermometer (tea_supp_x)
 0-100
- Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.
 - 0. Disagree strongly
 - 1. Disagree somewhat
 - 2. Neither agree nor disagree
 - 3. Agree somewhat
 - 4. Agree Strongly
- Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.
 - 0. Agree strongly
 - 1. Agree somewhat
 - 2. Neither agree nor disagree
 - 3. Disagree somewhat
 - 4. Disagree Strongly

- Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve.
 - 0. Agree strongly
 - 1. Agree somewhat
 - 2. Neither agree nor disagree
 - 3. Disagree somewhat
 - 4. Disagree Strongly
- It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.
 - 0. Disagree strongly
 - 1. Disagree somewhat
 - 2. Neither agree nor disagree
 - 3. Agree somewhat
 - 4. Agree Strongly
- Black (dem_raceeth_x)
 - 0. Non-black/African American
 - 1. Black/African American
- Latino (dem_raceeth_x)
 - 0. Non-Latino
 - 1. Latino
- Female (gender_respondent_x)
 - 0. Male

1. Female

Income (inc_incgroup_pre)
0-27, 0=Under \$5,000; 27=\$250,000 or more

Variable coding/wording for new CCES variables

- Do you approve of the way each is doing their job...[President Obama, The U.S. Congress, The U.S. Supreme Court]
 - Strongly disapprove
 - Somewhat disapprove
 - Somewhat approve
 - Strongly approve

Additive ANES Regression Models

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	Tea Party	Role of	Spending &	Federal Gov.
	Support	Government	Services	Thermometer
Conspiratorial Thinking	0.063*	0.030	0.076*	-0.061*
Compilatorial Linning	(0.030)	(0.023)	(0.026)	(0.001)
Partisanshin	(0.050) 0.653*	(0.023) 0 412*	-0.38/1*	-0.272*
i artisansmp	(0.032)	(0.025)	(0.028)	(0.024)
Trust	0.010	-0.038*	(0.020) 0.024*	0.109*
11450	(0.010)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)
Ideology	(0.001) 0.047*	0.029*	-0.034*	-0.005
lucciogy	(0.005)	(0.023)	(0.004)	(0,003)
Bacial Resentment	0.012^*	0.009*	-0.009*	-0.003*
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Sophistication	0.019^*	0.007	-0.010	-0.022*
Sophistication	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Education	-0.007	0.014*	-0.016*	-0.015*
	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.004)
Age	-0.001*	-0.000	0.000	0.000
0	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Income	-0.003*	0.000	-0.003*	-0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Female	0.010	-0.013*	0.028^{*}	0.013
	(0.011)	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.008)
Black	0.005	-0.074*	0.036^{*}	0.096*
	(0.018)	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.013)
Latino	0.041^{*}	-0.034*	0.048^{*}	0.083^{*}
	(0.016)	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.012)
Religiosity	0.001			
	(0.002)			
Authoritarianism	0.005			
	(0.005)			
Intercept	0.037	0.279^{*}	0.707^{*}	0.435^{*}
-	(0.036)	(0.027)	(0.031)	(0.027)
R^2	0.510	0.471	0.425	0.434
n	2032	2165	2037	2199

Table 4.5: OLS regressions demonstrating the independent additive effects of partisanshipand conspiratorial thinking.

OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

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

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In the previous pages of this manuscript I hope to have elucidated a number of important characteristics of conspiracy theories and those predisposed to believe them. Perhaps one of the most important conclusions to be made is neither novel nor specific to this topic: for better or worse, measurement colors our view of the topics we study (Jacoby 1999). In this case, we saw that questions about beliefs in certain types of conspiracy theories – particularly ones involving highly visible, partisan objects – can easily lead interested researchers into erroneously believing not only that conspiracy theorists are particulars in sheep's clothing, but that specific types of partisans – Republicans – are more prone to conspiratorial thought. Though it is likely true that partisans use conspiracy theories, and even the "conspiracy theorist" label, to discredit and register disapproval of their political opponents, to have a truly conspiratorial mindset is something different altogether.

Only by using theory to properly operationalize conspiratorial thinking were we able to more accurately decipher the qualities and characteristics of the individuals who view the political world in this way. Indeed, I found that – contrary to a great deal of previous work – conspiratorial thinking is a predisposition that is negatively related to partisanship. Individuals who not only fail to place trust in people of socio-political and economic power but are convinced that such people are constantly working to selfishly usurp power from and mislead "the people" actively reject establishment politics and the parties that govern it. These individuals eschew partisan ties and possess attitudes about and evaluations of the government that are unconnected to left/right partisanship.

Furthermore, far from being a discrete concept where people either are or are not con-

spiracy theorists, I argue that the general conspiratorial – or, suspicious – mindset is better conceived of as a continuum where individuals can possess more or less of the predisposition. Although the measure of conspiratorial thinking proposed in Chapter 3 is admittedly a first step toward the goal it is designed to achieve, and the distributions of suspicious thought should be taken as tentative to some degree, the theory and validity assessment I present also suggests that people are more conspiratorial than conventional wisdom posits. Social desirability concerns surrounding the "conspiracy theorist" label coupled with the other problems associated with the strategy of measuring conspiratorial thinking via questions about beliefs in specific conspiracy theories would have lead me to wholly different and, as argued here, misguided conclusions.

Properly conceived of as a continuous latent variable, we also observed that increases in the individual level of conspiratorial thinking coincide with beliefs in a variety of specific conspiracy theories and decreases in engagement with and participation in establishment, partisan politics. More specifically, I demonstrated that conspiratorial thinking was positively related to "birther" and "truther" beliefs, beliefs about Lee Harvey Oswald's co-conspirators, the link between childhood vaccines and autism, the corporation-induced danger of genetically-modified foods, and the role of political motives in presidential allocations of disaster relief funds. That the general measure of conspiratorial thinking – even operationalized slightly differently, and measured across differing samples – is so strongly related to specific conspiratorial beliefs strongly supports the validity of the operationalizations I employ.

Perhaps of more normative import are the potential effects of conspiratorial thinking on engagement with the political world. I observed that as the level of conspiratorial thinking increased individuals were, on average, less likely to identify with one of the major political parties or participate in traditional campaign activities, and more likely to support the Tea Party – a faction of the Republican Party propelled by a dissatisfaction with establishment policies. Higher levels of conspiratorial thinking also coincide with greatly attenuated relationships between partian predispositions and attitudes about the role of the government in society, the proper balance between government provided services and government spending, general feelings toward the government, and support for the Tea Party. Extrapolating further, it appears that conspiratorial thinking undermines the concept of a left/right political orientation organizing, indeed constraining, attitudes and feelings about common political objects and phenomena.

5.1 Normative Implications

Considering the normative implications of these findings, there may be some reason for concern. At face value, the fact that the conspiratorially-minded are less willing to engage in politics poses a problem for democratic theory, traditionally understood. Indeed, one of political science's foundational goals (certainly since the "behavioral revolution") is to consider both theoretically and empirically the role of representation in governmental systems. As political scientists, we are all interested in some shape or form in understanding how and whether individuals are being represented by the socio-political institutions they have constructed around them. That a non-trivial – and, perhaps, quite large – sect of individuals is so highly suspicious of their elected representatives that they alienate themselves from the political system is, then, disconcerting. From the point of view of these individuals, they are neither being properly represented in governmental institutions, nor are they are able to successfully express their political perspectives through non-partisan (left/right, that is) means. Whether their perception is "factually" accurate or not, these individuals are alienated from the political system because of such perceptions¹.

More tangible practical consequences of conspiratorial thought also abound. As noted above, believing that childhood vaccinations are linked to autism can suppress individual willingness to vaccinate one's children (Jolley & Douglas 2014*a*, Nyhan et al. 2014). Conspir-

¹This alienation is not unlike alienation that political independents express when they choose to eschew partisan labels. Recent work by Klar and Krupnikov (Klar & Krupnikov 2016) identifies political divisiveness (such as that broadly associated with polarization) as a mechanism by which people individuals who eschew partisan labels are subsequently cast out of the American two-party political system.

acy theories about birth control (Bird & Bogart 2003), HIV/AIDS (Bogart & Bird 2006, Bird & Bogart 2005), and healthcare reform (Nyhan, Reifler & Ubel 2013) can result in similar (in)actions by individuals, all of which can very plausibly lead to a rapid resurgence of heretofore "extinct" and wholly preventable diseases and general health conditions. Belief in seemingly innocuous conspiracy theories such as "birtherism" or "trutherism" can also have practical consequences. Suspicion toward Obama could, for instance, enhance partisan polarization and all the negative consequences associated with it, or even feed into feelings of racial resentment and ethnocentrism that widely characterize many of Obama's detractors. More generally, the private, free-willed sort of thinking associated with the conspiratorial mindset can preclude any sort of meaningful social interaction or cooperation.

These seemingly negative consequences of conspiratorial thought should not, in my opinion, overshadow the many positive – albeit less obvious – ones. One of such positive consequences is the heightened level of scrutiny that conspiratorial individuals apply to "official" information. A primary difficulty with precisely defining conspiracy theories is that we can rarely be certain that they are not true. Conspiracy theories, therefore, become labeled as such due the *plausibility* of their central claims, among other characteristics. As scientists, however, we are particularly keen not to outright reject implausible claims, as the world is an inherently uncertain place. In some ways, conspiracy theorists play the role of devil's advocate, and, indeed, they even do so successfully at times. Although, for instance, Watergate is now widely regarded as a proven, important historical event of 20th century American politics, at one point it was no more than an implausible accusation being promoted by political adversaries. Similar situations surround one-time conspiracies about CIA mind control programs (Project MKUltra) and clandestine efforts to manipulate the mass media and disseminate propaganda of various sorts (Operation Mockingbird). In other words, we should be careful in labeling conspiracy theories and those who believe them "crazy" until proven false beyond a reasonable doubt.

More generally, the heightened scrutiny of official information associated with a suspicious

mindset is a positive and necessary component of a functioning representative democracy. In a world with no watchdogs or institutional checks, as we know, human nature overridingly promotes self-interest. "The people," the principles, must hold their representatives, the agents, accountable. Though the level of scrutiny applied by the most conspiratorial individuals may be higher than that which is required to satisfy this basic need, the general principle holds. Simply put, conspiratorial thinking overlaps with some of the psychological qualities that we – as individuals who theorize about and empirically investigate the qualities of democracy – wish the average individual exhibited. While tinfoil hats are probably worthy of some mockery (if not simply from the point of view of high fashion), we should be cautious in rejecting outright the mindset through which conspiracists interpret and integrate information about the world around them².

5.2 Directions for Future Research

Given the relative youth of the (empirical) conspiracy theory literature, directions for future work are plentiful. My personal interests and perspective on this topic lead me to consider three possible avenues in particular. Related to the potential positive consequences of conspiratorial thought, it is my opinion that future work should more actively consider what components of the conspiratorial mindset are normatively good. Experimental and interactive survey designs could, for instance, be leveraged to better assess how conspiratorial individuals seek out, process, and employ the information they are confronted with. Each of these information-related stages has potential for further revealing and refining scientific knowledge about the nature of the conspiratorial mindset. We know, for instance, essentially nothing about where conspiracy theorists get their information, or which news sources they trust. And, although, we have theorized about how webs of conspiratorial beliefs are constructed, none of such theories have been definitively tested.

 $^{^{2}}$ I encourage interested parties to seek the work on my colleague, Steven Smallpage, who is – as a normative political theorist – completing a dissertation on the fundamental role of political suspicion in Locke's political thought. Steve's work will surely more clearly and elegantly elucidate all of the normative components of suspicion and the conspiratorial mindset.

Related to questions about information sources, we know fairly little about conspiracy theorists as a group. Do high-level conspiracists think of themselves as members of a coherent group? Even at the level of partisan politics, does stated association with "birther" beliefs signal to co-partisans, for instance, some unique level of disdain for Barack Obama? And, as for those partisans who conveniently choose to endorse specific conspiracy theories, can the use of the "conspiracy theorist" label be manipulated, much like correct answers to knowledge questions can be? At the heart of each of these questions lies a need to better understand the social and political components of both conspiratorial thinking as a general trait and specific conspiracism that are most pressing from the perspective of social science.

Finally, and most simply, future work should focus on refining and replicating the results here, particularly those explicitly related to the measurement of conspiratorial thinking. No time series, let along panel, data exist on conspiratorial thinking. As such, we have no sound guess as to whether or not conspiratorial thinking – as a general trait – has really increased over time, as popular sentiment would suggest. Though others have documented a rise in the level of attention that conspiracy theories have garnered in popular media over the past several decades (Uscinski & Parent 2014), such a rise could be due more to the partisan element of specific conspiracy theories or changes in the quality of new media, rather than an increase in conspiratorial thinking. Similarly, we should consider the ability of the proposed general measure of conspiratorial thought to translate across socio-political environments and cultures, and the comparative level of suspicion in the U.S. versus other countries. I expect, in years to come, to provide answers some of these questions in my own work. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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