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Editorial

The Role of Religions and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes

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Abstract

This thematic issue asks about the role of religions and religious actors and conspiracy theories/theorists in democratic and authoritarian regimes in general. Special attention is given to the current Covid-19 pandemic, since the relevant state of emergency obviously endorses the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories and makes the comparison with religions necessary. In this respect, the challenges religious prejudices and conspiracy myths imply could even shed light on the problem of whether democracy or authoritarianism is the best regime to fight the Coronavirus successfully. The articles at hand answer these issues from interdisciplinary areas, particularly from political science, sociology, social psychology, and history.

Keywords

authoritarianism; conspiracy ideology; conspiracy myths; conspiracy theory; Corona; Covid-19; democracy; pandemic; religion; religiosity

Issue

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1. Introduction

According to a famous thesis by Popper (1945/2011), modern conspiracy theories are primarily the result of secular processes and thus show a couple of structural analogies to religious superstition. In this vein, conspiracy theories can be seen both as (a) surrogate religions dealing with challenges similar to epistemic contingency, ambiguity (in)tolerance, or social insecurity, and (b) antagonists to rather differentiated religious beliefs and attitudes. Moreover, this kind of ambivalence suggests that religious faith and conspiracy theories are sometimes mutually exclusive but can also reinforce each other under certain conditions, particularly during political, social, or healthcare crises, when trust in representatives and elites is fundamentally shattered.

This raises questions about the meaning of both phenomena in contemporary democratic and authoritarian

societies: Do religions and conspiracy theories share an ideological character which might function as a resource for complexity reduction, intellectual orientation, and therefore moral authority and normative legitimacy in any political system? Or do they tend either to a democratic or authoritarian logic of politics? How does each of them flourish and spread under the conditions of democracy, autocracy or of hybrids combining autocratic features with democratic ones? And what people and actors are supporting religious and conspiracy narratives for which strategic and political purposes? Are there certain democratic and authoritarian regimes based upon religious or conspiracy myths themselves? What is the relationship between certain forms of religiosity and the propensity for conspiracy theories? What is the connection between conspiracy narratives and the rejection of democratic principles such as religious freedom, anti-discrimination and freedom of expression? Finally,

how do democratic states deal with the contradiction of guaranteeing freedom of expression on the one hand and setting limits to the threat to democracy posed by conspiracy theories on the other?

This thematic issue of *Politics and Governance* asks about the role of religions/religious actors and conspiracy theories/theorists in democratic and authoritarian regimes in general. However, special attention is given to the current Covid-19 pandemic, since the relevant state of emergency obviously endorses the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories and makes the comparison with religions necessary. In this respect, the challenges religious prejudices and conspiracy myths imply could even shed light on the problem of whether democracy or authoritarianism is the best regime to fight the Coronavirus successfully.

2. Overview of Contributions

The articles at hand answer the questions we raised from interdisciplinary areas, particularly from political science, sociology, social psychology, and history.

In this vein, the article by Christoph (2022) focuses on the history of ideas as well as on intellectual history in order to discuss how conspiracism was able to incorporate different anti-modernistic ideas in the past and also to effectively delegitimize entire political systems in the present. Therefore, it is identified as a serious threat to democracy as such.

Hidalgo (2022) then theorizes and conceptualizes the ambivalent role of religions and conspiracy theories in modern democracies. Moreover, the author elaborates on the similar risks and functions of religions and conspiracy theories for the political community, without neglecting the fact that, under secular conditions, the spread of conspiracy narratives might outweigh that of religious messages in the long run.

Schlipphak et al. (2022) argue based on quantitative surveys that the communication of governmental actors exerts a strong moderating influence on the link leading from conspiracy theory beliefs to political attitudes. The authors suppose that the belief in conspiracy theories should make citizens more likely to distrust their government—and the political system in general—in contexts where these conspiracy theories are not shared or at least publicly represented by governmental actors.

In another quantitative article, Ladini and Vezzoni (2022) analyze the relationship between religiosity and vaccine hesitancy by highlighting the belief in the imminent presence of the divine in everyday life, which makes some people more prone to justify health conditions with a divine agency.

Against the concept of authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950), Pickel et al. (2022) discuss the Covid-19 pandemic as a situation leading to an increased susceptibility to conspiracy myths. Proceeding from a theory-based correlation between superstition, esotericism, and belief in conspiracy myths, they show that

a conspiracy mentality is one of the key components of authoritarian character dispositions, with significant effects on anti-semitic resentment, hostility toward out-groups, the formation of anti-democratic orientations, and an increased propensity to violence.

Czech (2022) focuses on conspiracy thinking and its links with attitudes toward religion and democracy in Poland. Based on Polish survey data the author finds out that conspiracy thinking does not necessarily lead to the support of anti-democratic attitudes.

Farkhari et al. (2022) are interested in indicators that influence conspiracy mentality. Based on survey data from Germany and Poland they find negative predictions by general interpersonal trust, positive predictions by right-wing authoritarianism, and non-significant findings regarding religiosity. The authors find cross-country differences and conclude that the political and religious culture may not only affect the general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories but also shape who is rather inclined to believe in conspiracy theories.

Galego (2022) reconstructs the controversy concerning the anti-homophobia bill in Brazil in the context of conspiracies and conflicts between the constitution and the bible. He concludes that policy and political discourses oscillate between the constitution and the bible creating constraints and opportunities to block the LGBTQ bill approval in the Brazilian congress.

Finally, in another quantitative article, Yendell and Herbert (2022) use data from an online UK survey and ask—once again against the concept of authoritarianism (Adorno et al., 1950)—to what extent belief in conspiracy theories is associated with xenophobic, racist, and anti-democratic attitudes, what aspects of religiosity in combination with other factors play a role in conspiracy beliefs, and which communicative and interpretative practices are associated with belief in conspiracy ideologies.

To sum up, the different theoretical and empirical approaches as well as the various case and country studies are not only able to reveal the complex and ambivalent role of conspiracy theories in democratic and authoritarian regimes, but also to confirm the remarkable similarities and analogies between conspiracy myths and religions. Without overestimating conspiracy mentality as a genuinely or exclusively religious phenomenon itself, our thematic issue proves that (a particular kind of) religiosity is indeed a very relevant factor that can massively favour belief in conspiracy theories under certain circumstances but can also prevent it under alternative conditions. Although Pickel et al. (2022) strictly refute the objection that adherents of conspiracy myths could be characterized as authentic democrats who are merely dissatisfied with the current state of democracy, Hidalgo's (2022) article suggests, at least theoretically, that such a position becomes available beyond a liberal conception of democracy and by starting from a concept of radical democracy. In this respect, a too simple equation that associates

(the political accommodation of) religion with democracy and conspiracy belief exclusively with authoritarian political ideas does not add up.

On the other hand, one should not underestimate the radicalization dynamics that can accompany conspiracy ideologies, even when they are supposedly taking place under the guise of democracy. Democracy is not a self-perpetuating process, and it is a constant challenge for democracies to turn the irrational and emotional into the rational and factual so that democracies and societies are not disintegrated.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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