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Article

Conspiracy Theory Beliefs and Political Trust: The Moderating Role of Political Communication

Bernd Schlipphak^{1,*}, Mujtaba Isani², and Mitja D. Back³

¹ Department of Political Science, University of Münster, Germany

² German Center for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM), Germany

³ Department of Psychology, University of Münster, Germany

* Corresponding author (bernd.schlipphak@uni-muenster.de)

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Abstract

A plentitude of research has analyzed citizens' belief in conspiracy theories and its individual-level correlates. Yet, the effects of (political) context factors on the causes and effects of individual belief in conspiracy theories are still neglected. However, such context should be especially relevant when it comes to the impact of one's belief in conspiracy theories on one's political preference. In this article, we argue that the communication of governmental actors exerts a moderating influence on the link leading from a belief in conspiracy theories to political attitudes. In a nutshell, the belief in conspiracy theories should make citizens less likely to distrust their government—and the political system in general—in contexts where these theories are shared or at least publicly represented by governmental actors. Using two original data sets with data from Germany, Poland, and Jordan (Study 1) and data from Germany, Poland, Sweden, and France (Study 2), we test our argument based on an overall sample of about 10,000 cases. Our results indicate that higher degrees of generic conspiracy theories beliefs are associated with higher levels of political distrust across countries. Yet, confirming our argument, such an effect takes place less strongly in those countries in which governmental actors use conspiracy theories as a political communication strategy.

Keywords

conspiracy beliefs; conspiracy mentality; conspiracy theories; political communication; political trust

Issue

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1. Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the existence and effect of conspiracy theories—and citizens' belief in them—have become more relevant to politics. While the debate about an actual increase in the number of citizens believing in such theories is still ongoing (see Uscinski et al., 2022), there has been an increasing number of studies on the causes of belief in conspiracy theories over the last 15 years in the fields of psychology and political science alike (for a meta-review see Goreis & Voracek, 2019). Despite this breadth of research, our knowledge about the effects of belief in conspiracy theories on political

attitudes remains limited. Research indicates that this belief may become problematic for societal cohesion as it is associated with populist attitudes and right-wing, left-wing, and religious extremism (Imhoff et al., 2022; Mancosu et al., 2017; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Vegetti & Littvay, 2021; Walter & Drochon, 2020). This previous research has also connected belief in conspiracy theories to closely aligned concepts, such as populism. In the words of Castanho Silva et al. (2017, p. 425): “To make a musical analogy, one could maintain that if populism is the theme, then many conspiracy theories are variations on the theme.” Importantly, prior research has only recently started looking into the effect of political

contexts—such as the communication of conspiracy theories by governing actors—when analyzing the impact of belief in conspiracy theories on citizens' political attitudes (Adam-Troian et al., 2021; Imhoff et al., 2022; Marinov & Popova, 2022).

In this article, we set out to explore the question of whether the political communication of governmental actors influences the effect belief in conspiracy theories has on political attitudes: Our argument is that the former does exert a moderating influence on *the link* leading from belief in conspiracy theories to political attitudes. In a nutshell, belief in conspiracy theories should make citizens less likely to distrust their government—and the political system in general—in contexts where these theories are shared or at least publicly represented by governmental actors. In making this argument, we include more recent literature on the active use of conspiracy theories in the political communication of populist and/or authoritarian actors, such as the Chinese, Russian, Hungarian, or Polish governments, hence linking research on belief in conspiracy theories to that of conspiracy theories communication (see, e.g., Davies, 2016; Huang, 2017; Plenta, 2020; Yablokov, 2015; for a more general argument see Hameleers, 2021).

We test our argument by analyzing two innovative studies: Study 1 uses full-scale measures of conspiracy mentality and political trust in three countries (Germany, Jordan, Poland); Study 2 uses a more limited measure of conspiracy mentality in four countries (France, Germany, Poland, Sweden). Our results indicate, first, that higher degrees of generic belief in conspiracy theories is associated with higher levels of political distrust. Yet, confirming our argument, this effect is weaker for citizens living in countries where governmental actors use conspiracy theories as a political communication strategy. Our findings have important implications that we outline in the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

How do conspiracy theories—theories that attribute the causes of key events or situations to secret plots executed by powerful, evil forces—shape political attitudes and behaviors? Conspiracy narratives exist in every society, but much of the literature on conspiracy beliefs in political science has been quite US-oriented. Examples include the John F. Kennedy assassination (McAdams, 2011), the paranoid style of American politics (see van der Linden et al., 2021), Trump's "birther movement" (Drochon, 2018), and the 9/11 attacks (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2004). However, Europe is no stranger to belief in conspiracies. This is historically illustrated with the "protocols of the elders of Zion" and has also been shown empirically in research on conspiracy thinking and mentality (Walter & Drochon, 2020; for important conspiracy mentality concepts see also Brotherton et al., 2013; Bruder et al., 2013).

Such theories may also be prevalent in other areas outside of Europe and America, such as in the former

Soviet Union, Latin America, and especially the Middle East, where they have been described as "pervasive" (Brown, 1984, p. 234), "widespread" (Fuller, 1991, p. 21), "innumerable" (Brown, 1980, p. 67), "prominent" (Nyhan & Zeitzoff, 2018, p. 3), and "almost universal" (Field, 1996, p. 167). Most recently, Schlipphak et al. (2021) demonstrated that generic belief in conspiracy theories is much more widespread in Jordan compared to Poland or Germany.

There is a large literature in social and political psychology on the nature and causes of conspiracy theories (for a review and meta-analysis see again Goreis & Voracek, 2019). Early scholars tended to pathologize them as the delusions of an "uncommonly angry mind" (Hofstadter, 1971). This pathological perspective has waned with the growing recognition that conspiracy theories often enjoy broad popular awareness and support. Indeed, scholars have identified several key psychological predispositions that facilitate conspiratorial thinking, including mistrust, cynicism, powerlessness, Machiavellianism, Manichaeism (belief in a cosmic struggle of good vs. evil), and even superstition (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Douglas & Sutton, 2011; Douglas et al., 2019; Goertzel, 1994; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Swami et al., 2010). They have also shown that conspiratorial thinking approaches something of a general tendency or mentality (Enders et al., 2021; for the operationalization of such a mentality see again Brotherton et al., 2013; Bruder et al., 2013), as believers in one conspiracy theory tend to adopt others as well, even if they factually contradictory (Wood et al., 2012) or concocted by the researchers (Swami et al., 2010).

Despite their prevalence and potential political influence, only few authors have analyzed the political consequences of conspiracy theories. In their recent review article, Douglas et al. (2019, p. 18) note that "research also suggests that CTs [conspiracy theories] can influence political attitudes. However, this may depend on people's existing predispositions." They indicate that belief in conspiracy theories may have an effect on prejudice, health-related choices, the denial of scientific evidence (for example, climate change), and workplace engagement. Yet, when it comes to the effect of these beliefs on political attitudes, the evidence is scarce. Jolley and Douglas (2014) have exposed UK undergraduates to articles arguing for or against one of two conspiracy theories: (a) secret plots surrounding the death of Princess Diana and (b) the concoction of climate change. In both cases, the authors found that exposure to pro-conspiracy treatments decreased willingness to participate in relevant institutions, either by voting or reducing their carbon footprint, respectively (for similar findings in the US see Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Moreover, these effects were mediated by feelings of political powerlessness. More recently, several researchers have indicated that belief in conspiracy theories is, moreover, correlated to populist attitudes, religious and left- and right-wing extremism, as well as political violence (Castanho Silva

et al., 2017; Mancosu et al., 2017; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Vegetti & Littvay; 2021). In addition, Walter and Drochon (2022) find a correlation between trust in public figures and belief in conspiracy theories using an analysis of nine countries, including the US and European countries.

So far, however, research on belief in conspiracy theories among citizens has not yet analyzed whether the communication of governmental actors may have an effect on the correlation between belief in conspiracy theories and political attitudes. This is surprising given an increasing number of research on the use of conspiracy theories as tools of communication, especially among populist and/or authoritarian governments. From the 1980s onwards, the use of conspiracy theories by political actors has been outlined by several authors (e.g., Brown, 1984; Field, 1996; Fuller, 1991; Gray, 2010; Radnitz, 2022). More recently, research has focused on large authoritarian countries—such as China or Russia—and countries that would have been considered rather stable democracies until five years ago, such as Poland or Hungary. For Russia, Yablokov (2015) demonstrates how conspiracy theories form a substantive part of coverage in the governmental-led broadcast *Russia Today*. Davies (2016) illustrates how and what kind of conspiracy theories are used by the Polish government and, more specifically, Jaroslaw Kasczynski. Plenta (2020) demonstrates that conspiracy theories with George Soros as the conspiratorial actor are strategically employed in Central Europe. And while there is some research indicating that increased levels of such conspiracy theories communication may result in increasing levels of belief in conspiracy theories among citizens (Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Einstein & Glick, 2015; Hameleers, 2021; Kim & Cao, 2016; Schlipphak et al., 2021), no research has so far focused on whether conspiracy theories communication may actually impact the link between belief in conspiracy theories and political attitudes.

3. Theory and Hypotheses

We argue that the context of the political system—more specifically, the degree to which a government uses conspiracy theories as tools of communication—moderates the effect of belief in conspiracy theories on governmental distrust. And why should there be an effect of belief in conspiracy theories on governmental distrust in the first place? In a nutshell, the following mechanism should be at work: At the level of citizens, believing in conspiracy theories is associated with a higher probability of showing favorable attitudes toward populism and populist actors. These attitudes strongly correlate with distrust in mainstream political actors, who are blamed by populist actors for being corrupt and betraying the true will of the people. Hence, as parts of the literature have already indicated (e.g., Imhoff et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2016), we should expect a negative effect of belief in conspiracy theories on governmental trust across political contexts. Thus we hypothesize:

H1: A citizen believing in conspiracy theories will be more likely to distrust the government compared to a citizen not believing in conspiracy theories.

Yet, this expectation needs to be further specified in our view, considering the important role of context factors, more specifically, the context of political or governmental communication in a given country. When looking at the communication of populist and mainstream political actors, the research so far indicates that populist actors use conspiracy theories as a communication tool to a much larger degree than is true for mainstream political actors (see Davies, 2016; Hameleers, 2021; Huang, 2017; Plenta, 2020; Yablokov, 2015). From a conceptual point of view, this makes perfect sense, as the concept of populism and that of conspiracy theories share a lot of components, such as the separation between an evil outgroup and a (homogenous) ingroup, the latter being betrayed by members of the outgroup that only care for themselves and their interests.

In the past, the roles of populists and mainstream political actors were rather set: Populists have always been part of the opposition, while the government has been formed by actors from the political mainstream. Over the last 15 years or so, this picture has drastically changed, with populist actors—who are using conspiracy theories as communication tools—becoming part of the government in more and more countries, among them the US, Brazil, Poland, and Hungary. The question then emerges: Why should citizens' beliefs in conspiracy theories still be negatively associated with their trust in governmental actors, given that exactly those governmental actors seem to share (and even reinforce) the conspiracy theories citizens believe in?

Our answer to this question—and the main argument of this article—is that it should make a difference in the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and governmental (dis)trust whether the government actually uses conspiracy theories as a tool of political communication. In fact, if governmental actors are using such theories, the effect of believing in conspiracy theories on governmental trust may be reversed, with those citizens not believing in conspiracies becoming more and more skeptical of the current government, and those believing in conspiracy theories becoming more favorable toward it. In general, then, if governmental actors share conspiracy theories, we would expect the direction of the effect of belief in conspiracy theories on governmental trust to become positive instead of negative. Yet, such a straightforward change of direction effects should be prevented by the fact that conspiracy mentality is, per default, robustly related to distrusting politicians (and even humans) in general. Thus, several conspiracy believers will remain skeptical of political actors and the political system. We should expect these people to further distrust governmental actors even if the latter communicated using conspiracy theories as well. In sum, we expect governmental communication of conspiracy

theories to weaken but not reverse the negative relationship between conspiratorial belief and governmental trust at the individual level. Thus we hypothesize:

H2: The effect expected in H1 is weaker in countries where governmental actors use conspiracy theories within their political communication.

To test our hypotheses, we implemented two subsequent surveys among close to 10,000 citizens in five countries from the European and MENA regions. In the remainder, we will introduce and report the findings of each of the two studies separately.

4. Study 1: Research Design and Empirical Findings

In Study 1, using the survey agencies KANTAR and NAMAS, we ran a survey among 4,113 respondents in Germany, Poland, and Jordan. For each of these three countries, the aim was to sample 1,300 participants. The actual number of participants added up to 1,451 in Poland, 1,358 in Germany, and 1,304 in Jordan. In Germany and Poland, the survey was implemented as an online survey (computer-assisted web interview), while in Jordan we used the format of face-to-face interviews (computer-assisted personal interview).

4.1. Generic Conspiracy Beliefs

As a measure for generic conspiracy beliefs, we included the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire as proposed by Bruder et al. (2013). The original questionnaire consists of five statements on general conspiratorial items, but one of them comes with cross-cultural problems, especially if asked in an authoritarian setting such as Jordan, where “government agencies closely monitor all citizens.” Hence, we decided to only ask participants for the remaining four statements. For each of these four statements, participants were asked to rate their likelihood of being true, ranging from 0% to 100% (with options changing in steps of 10%).

4.2. Governmental Trust

As a measure of political and nonpolitical trust, we asked respondents to indicate—on a scale from 0 to 10—how much they trusted several institutions or persons, with 0 indicating “no trust at all” and 10 indicating “complete trust.” This measure has been widely used in cross-country surveying, such as in the European Social Survey (2022). Besides asking about respondents’ trust in parliament, the legal system, the police, the European Parliament, the United Nations, and the army, we also asked about their trust in federal governments. In Jordan, we asked about respondents’ trust in the prime minister. In contrast to asking respondents anything about the monarchy, asking about their evaluation of or trust in the prime minister is possible and generates meaningful

answers even in such an autocratic context (Shamaileh & Chaábane, 2022).

4.3. Context Factor: Governmental Communication of Conspiracy Theories

As we have argued and demonstrated elsewhere in more detail (Bollwerk et al., 2021), the three countries vary in governmental usage of conspiracy theories as an instrument of communication. The Polish government led by the right-wing populist PiS party and its main figure Jarosław Kaczyński has been indicated to make Poland a country in which “conspiracy beliefs seem ubiquitous in social and political life” (Soral et al., 2018, p. 372). While there are indications that governmental actors—including the Jordan monarchy—also use and explicitly accept the use of conspiracy theories by political and media elites, conspiracy theories on the elite level seem to be lesser distributed compared to the Polish case. In Germany, we found no indication of any of the governmental actors distributing conspiracy theories (see our elaborate exploration in Bollwerk et al., 2021). Hence, based on H2 we would expect to find the strongest negative effect of belief in conspiracy theories on governmental trust in Germany and the smallest effect in Poland. We, therefore, chose to run a regression model using interaction terms separately for Jordan and Poland, making the qualitatively adapted expectations based on H2 directly observable.

To control for potential other effects of the country context, we include country dummies for two out of the three countries (with Germany being the baseline case). Such additional effects may include variation in the historical role of conspiracy theories in social life, the variation in educational systems and political knowledge, the variation in settings of the political system, and so on.

4.4. Empirical Findings

The descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables for each country in Study 1 are shown in Table 1. Jordan had the highest mean for the dependent variable of governmental trust, followed by Germany and Poland with similar levels of governmental trust. Although it may seem counterintuitive to have stronger governmental trust in authoritarian countries, previous research has shown that governmental trust is higher in authoritarian countries, which could be due to the fear of the perceived survey sponsor in authoritarian countries (Isani & Schlipphak, 2020). Conspiracy mentality is highest in Jordan, followed by Poland and then by Germany. As for the control variables, the means show that the samples were balanced regarding gender and age, with the share of female participants being 53.3% (Poland), 52.7% (Germany), and 49.8% (Jordan), and the mean age showing a somewhat older sample in Germany (46.9) compared to Poland (40.8) and Jordan (40.3). Higher education is measured as a

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for Study 1.

Variables	Germany		Poland		Jordan		Min.–Max.
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	
<i>Dependent variable</i>							
Governmental trust	4.07 (1259)	2.68	4.06 (1199)	2.36	5.57 (1304)	3.25	0–10
<i>Independent variables</i>							
Conspiracy belief	6.54 (1225)	2.08	6.67 (1261)	2.00	8.06 (1225)	1.72	0–10
<i>Control variables</i>							
Female	0.53 (1300)	0.50	0.53 (1305)	0.50	0.50 (1304)	0.50	0–1
Age	46.85 (1286)	13.35	40.76 (1300)	12.68	40.27 (1304)	14.87	18–85
Higher education	0.76 (1175)	0.43	0.89(1121)	0.31	0.71 (1304)	0.47	0–1

Note: Number of observations in parentheses.

dichotomous variable. In Germany and Poland, this is coded as 1 if the respondent has more than 12 years of school education. In Jordan, this is coded as 1 if the respondent has had education above high school. Higher education is lowest in the Jordan sample, followed by our samples in Germany and Poland. Yet, these differences may also be caused by the different education systems.

Table 2 shows the results of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression that were estimated to test the main hypotheses of our article. In the regression results shown, Germany is the comparison (omitted) country variable. The more citizens believed in conspiracy theories, the less they trusted their government (H1). In addition, and as expected in H2, the relationship between conspiracy belief and the government was most substantive in the German context, followed by Jordan and then by Poland, relating to each of the contexts of government. Figure 1 visualizes this effect in

a more straightforward way, demonstrating that the impact of conspiracy mentality on governmental trust was strongest for respondents in Germany and weakest for Polish respondents.

As far as the control variables are concerned, gender was significantly related to trust in government, with women being more trusting. Education was not related to trust in government and neither was age. The non-effect of education seems contra-intuitive but it may be caused by a suppression effect of the context. Indeed, when running the models separately in the three countries, education was positively correlated to trust in government in Germany and negatively related to governmental trust in Poland. This finding emphasizes that the effect of education levels on governmental trust was dependent on the context, not on a general education effect mediated by social trust, as some would assume.

Table 2. Ordinary least squares (OLS) explaining trust in government in their respective contexts.

	Trust in Government
<i>Independent variables</i>	
Conspiracy belief	–0.58*** (0.04)
Poland	–2.93*** (0.38)
Jordan	–0.12 (0.45)
Poland*conspiracy belief	0.45*** (0.05)
Jordan*conspiracy belief	0.31*** (0.06)
<i>Controls</i>	
Female	0.36*** (0.09)
Age	0.01 (0.00)
Higher education	–0.07 (0.10)
N	3,562
R ²	13%

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; * = significant at the 0.05 level; ** = significant at the 0.01 level; *** = significant at the 0.001 level.

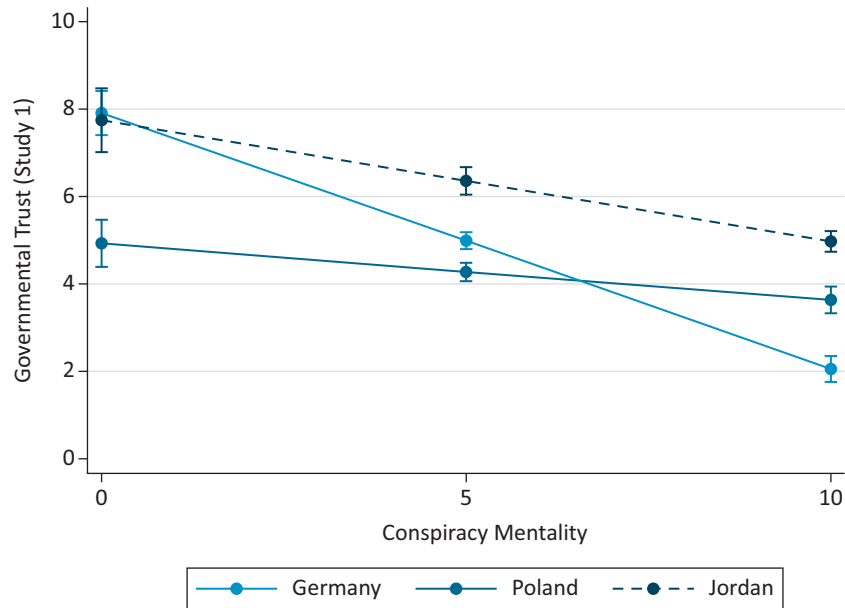


Figure 1. Predicted effects of conspiracy mentality on governmental trust by country.

5. Study 2: Research Design and Findings

In our second study, again using the survey agency KANTAR, we fielded a survey among 5,011 respondents in Germany (1,402), France (1,208), Sweden (1,200), and Poland (1,201). Study 2 was fielded in a different project context compared to Study 1, so we were only able to cover Germany and Poland again, while Jordan as a case study had to be dropped. Despite the change in countries between studies, the plurality of countries allows us to test our innovative argument in a more comparative and reliable way than previous studies, mostly focusing on only one or two countries (for an exception see Adam-Troian et al., 2021; Imhoff et al., 2022). Also, in contrast to the online and face-to-face survey modes used in Study 1, we fielded a computer-assisted telephone interview survey for Study 2. To correct for the slightly biased samples when it comes to gender, age, and education, we used weighting factors provided by the data collection agency.

5.1. Generic Conspiracy Belief

To measure generic conspiracy beliefs, we asked respondents to indicate to what degree they agree with the following statement: “There are many important things happening in the world which are steered by influential groups and which the public is never informed about.” A scale from 1 (“do not at all agree”) to 6 (“completely agree”) was drawn.

5.2. Governmental Trust

To measure citizens’ trust in one’s federal government, we used the same indicator as in Study 1, with 0 indicating “no trust at all” and 10 “indicating complete trust.”

5.3. Context Factor: Governmental Communication of Conspiracy Theories

When comparing the four countries in Study 2, we observe that one is run by a populist party (Poland), while in the other three countries, the respective largest populist party that is considered to spread conspiracy theories is in stark opposition to the government in place. Following our expectations in H2, we would therefore expect strong negative effects of generic conspiracy beliefs on governmental trust in Germany, France, and Sweden, and weaker effects in Poland. Therefore, we run a regression model with an interaction term measuring the difference of conspiratorial beliefs effects between respondents in Poland (with a government using conspiracy theories communication) and all other countries (with no governmental conspiracy theories communication). To control for potential other effects of the country context, we again included country dummies for three out of the four countries (with Germany being again the baseline case).

5.4. Empirical Findings

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for the variables in Study 2. In this set of data, average governmental trust was highest in Germany, followed by Sweden, France, and Poland. Mean conspiracy belief was highest in Poland, followed by France, Sweden and Germany. Using weights provided by the survey agency, the sample was also well-balanced in regard to gender, age and education. In this study we used the international standard classification of education (ISCED) to measure the education variable which provides more comparable results.

The results of Table 4 again confirmed the expectations formalized in H1 and H2. Germany, here again, is

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Study 2.

Variables	Germany		Poland		France		Sweden		Min.–Max.
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	
<i>Dependent variable</i>									
Governmental trust	6.57 (1399)	2.57	2.87 (1196)	3.15	4.76 (1202)	2.67	6.36 (1196)	2.51	0–10
<i>Independent variables</i>									
Conspiracy belief	3.73 (1362)	1.67	4.38 (1171)	1.59	4.26 (1189)	1.64	3.91 (1166)	1.54	1–6
<i>Control variables</i>									
Female	0.47 (1402)	0.50	0.46 (1200)	0.50	0.51 (1208)	0.50	0.46 (1201)	0.50	0–1
Age	54.05 (1400)	16.50	50.87 (1198)	16.57	60.05 (1206)	16.20	58.51 (1200)	17.30	18–97
Education	4.45 (1387)	2.12	4.91 (1196)	1.94	4.05 (1202)	2.18	4.38 (1191)	1.80	0–8

Note: Number of observations in parentheses.

the comparison (omitted) country variable. Conspiracy beliefs had a strong negative effect on governmental trust (= H1). In addition, the significant effect of the interaction term in Table 4 as well as the predicted effects plotted in Figure 2 demonstrate that this effect of conspiracy belief on governmental trust was weaker for Polish citizens compared to citizens living in countries in which the government are not known for including conspiracy theories in its political communication. When it comes to the control variables, being female was positively and significantly related to governmental trust as was age and education was also positively and significantly related to governmental trust. Still, the overall model masked some

differences between countries when running the model separately for each country, with gender having had a significant effect in Germany and Sweden but not in Poland and France, the age effect having been not significant in Sweden and education not having had a significant impact on governmental trust in Poland.

6. Robustness Checks

To test the robustness of the presented findings, we ran several robustness checks all of which can be found in more detail in the Supplementary File. Here, we only report the main findings of these checks. For Study 1,

Table 4. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Explaining Trust in Government in their Respective Contexts for Study 2.

	Trust in Government
<i>Independent variables</i>	
Conspiracy belief	−0.43*** (0.04)
Poland	−1.82*** (0.14)
France	−1.82*** (0.14)
Sweden	−0.31*** (0.14)
Poland*conspiracy belief	0.21*** (0.01)
<i>Controls</i>	
Female	0.36*** (0.10)
Age	0.02*** (0.00)
Education	0.12*** (0.03)
N	4,838
R ²	27.1%

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; * = significant at the 0.05 level; ** = significant at the 0.01 level; *** = significant at the 0.001 level.

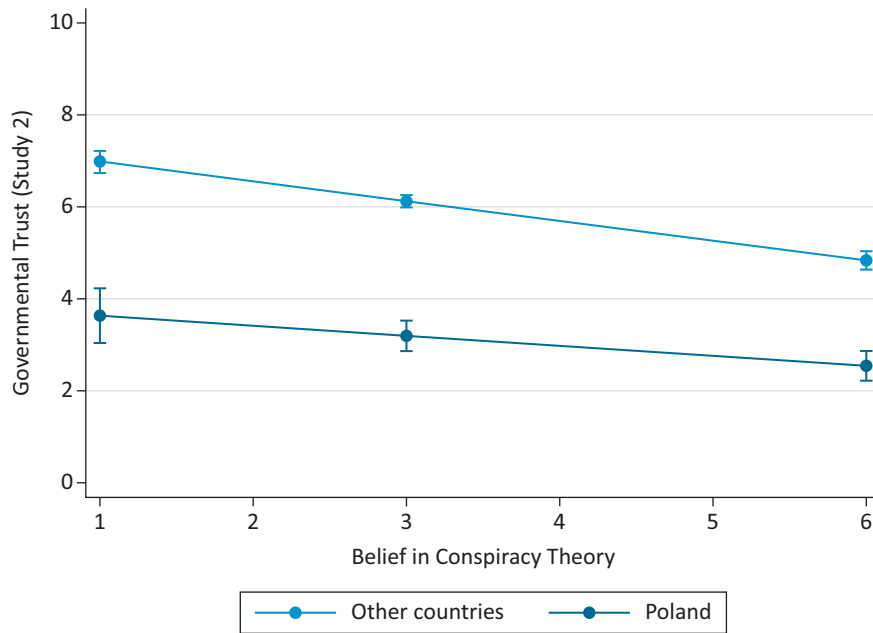


Figure 2. Predicted effects of conspiracy belief on governmental trust.

in our survey, we asked a few questions that could be covariates in our model, namely religiosity, political efficacy, and support for populism (in the German and Polish contexts). Even with the addition of these covariates, our results remained similar (see Supplementary File, Tables A1 and A2). For Study 2, to check whether our results were no artifacts of model selection, we additionally estimated ordinal logit models which also resulted in similar results in terms of the direction and significance of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables (see Supplementary File, Table B1). Furthermore, we ran the model separately by country (see Supplementary File, Table B2). In general, this resulted in findings that further corroborate our theoretical expectations and the models plotted in the main text. Yet, one surprising finding emerged: The effect of conspiracy belief on governmental trust was rather low in Sweden as well, with the effect size being close to the effect size in Poland. We do not have an ad-hoc explanation for this but will come back on it in the conclusion. Overall, we believe our results estimating the relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and governmental trust in the respective country contexts are robust in terms of model selection.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we were interested in whether the political communication of governmental actors influences the effect belief in conspiracy theories has on political attitudes. We argued that the use of conspiracy theories by governmental actors may actually moderate the impact of this belief on governmental trust, with conspiracy beliefs leading to governmental distrust less strongly in those countries in which governmental actors make

use of conspiracy theories. To test this argument, we ran two studies in five countries from the European and the MENA regions. The test overall confirmed our argument: Belief in conspiracy theories is related to higher levels of governmental distrust but less so in countries in which governmental actors refer to conspiracy theories themselves.

With these findings, we contribute to two so far rather separate but theoretically and empirically linked research traditions interested in the political use and effects of conspiracy theories. First, we feed into a growing debate about context factors directly affecting the belief in conspiracy theories or moderating the effect of the latter on political and societal attitudes (e.g., Schlipphak et al., 2021; Walter & Drochon, 2020). Second, we contribute to the discussion about the use of conspiracy theories by governmental and populist actors, and its effects on governmental support and more general political attitudes (e.g., Hameleers, 2021; Huang, 2017; Plenta, 2020). Our findings not only inform and connect these lines of research, they also demonstrate that analyzing in greater depth to what extent communication of conspiracy theories may actually help in sustaining public support for governmental actors is a very promising avenue for future research. In the remainder, we discuss three interesting avenues for future research.

The use of conspiracy theories by governmental actors did not have the effect that the majority of believers in conspiracy theories consider governmental actors trustworthy. That is, the distrust toward elites that is inherent to conspiracy theories was not completely canceled out just because these elites share those conspiracy theories. It is sometimes assumed that the use of conspiracy theories by authoritarian actors such as Viktor Orban (in Hungary) or Jaroslav Kaczynski

(in Poland) attracts exactly those parts of the citizenry that believe in conspiracies and have therefore been considered to withdraw from politics and elections. These assumptions are backed up by our findings given that conspiracy-driven distrust was attenuated in countries with populist leaders: At the same time, however, it was not reversed and not even blocked. Believers in conspiracy theories still distrusted their government more than non-believers in populist-led countries with political leaders that apply conspiracy theories in their political communication. These results speak in favor of a strong generic distrusting effect of conspiracy theories belief that applies across political contexts. In addition, it corroborates the idea of an additional weaker context-specific effect of conspiracy theories beliefs that is sensitive to political communication and that particularly applies in democratic, non-populist-led countries most strongly opposing conspiracy theories in their political communication. Future research should further explore and test the opposing ways in which belief in conspiracy theories can impact political trust.

Second, we did not delve into the debate about the difference between strategic communication of conspiracy theories vis-a-vis the existence of conspiracy theories in everyday life public debates. As one of our reviewers correctly pointed out, countries may not only differ in whether political elites use or do not use conspiracy theories strategically but also in the existence and acceptance of conspiracy theories as part of common public narratives. This is important because the use of conspiracy theories in the communication of political actors may be dependent on the degree to which such theories are traditionally shared among the public. In this article, we were not able to further explore this interesting differentiation. It should be tackled in a more fine-grained manner in future research.

Third, our findings come with some obvious limitations that need to be overcome in future research. Due to the usual (financial and project-related) restrictions of scientific research, our findings are based on a selected sample of countries. Although we were able to move beyond most previous research by including four European countries and one country stemming from the MENA region, this still is a very limited sample of countries. Future research has to test our arguments based on a broader sample of country cases, preferably from a larger number of regional contexts. In addition, while H2 is confirmed by both studies, we don't find that much of a difference in Study 2 between the effect sizes of conspiracy beliefs in Poland and Sweden, the latter being among the countries in which we consider conspiracy theories being the least used by governmental actors. We have no ad-hoc explanation for this surprising finding but it needs to be flagged out here and analyzed in future research. The same holds for the question of causality. Our analytical approach is based on the assumption that conspiracy mentality has a causal influence on political trust. Indeed, a conspiracy mentality should be more deeply

rooted in the personality of respondents than political trust. Despite these theoretical arguments, given the cross-sectional data at hand, we were not able to provide a strong test of these causal assumptions. Hence, besides replicating our findings, future research might delve more deeply into the issue of causality, either by using panel data or experimental designs.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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About the Authors



Bernd Schlipphak is a professor of political science at the University of Münster. After completing his PhD in 2009 at the University of Freiburg, he worked as a postdoc at the University of Salzburg and the University of Goettingen before joining Münster. His work focuses on the intersections between political psychology, political communication, and international politics and has been published in journals such as the *Journal of European Public Policy*, the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, and the *Review of International Organizations*.



Mujtaba Isani (PhD) is a research fellow at the German Center for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM). After completing his PhD at the University of Münster in 2017, he has worked at the University of Mannheim, University of Münster, King Fahd University, and Habib University. He uses computational and experimental methods to answer various questions in the social sciences relating to public opinion, immigrants, extremism, religion, political trust, and international organizations.



Mitja D. Back completed his PhD in 2007 at the University of Leipzig. In 2011 he received the William-Stern prize for outstanding innovative work in the field of personality psychology from the German Psychological Association. Since 2012, he works as a full professor at the University of Münster where he is chair of the psychological assessment and personality psychology section. His research focuses on the conceptualization, assessment, and development of personality as well as its individual, social, and societal consequences.