Conspiratorial Thinking in American Politics: A Proposal for the 2016 ANES Time Series Study

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During CNN's "Guns in America" town hall special on gun control, Barack Obama claimed that much of the opposition to gun control comes from conspiracy theorists who believe that it is a step toward tyranny. Obama said: "This notion of a conspiracy out there, it gets wrapped up in concerns about the federal government. Now, theres a long history of that. That's in our DNA. The United States was born suspicious of some distant authority." Conspiracy theories – the ideas themselves, those associated with the ideas, and the derogatory label – have become a regular fixture in American politics. They are discussed much more in mainstream media outlets then thirty years ago (Uscinski & Parent 2014), disseminated via the many channels of the internet (Brotherton 2015), and are even referenced by prominent political leaders during interviews and on campaign stumps as the quote above demonstrates.

Though recent research has found that a majority of Americans believe at least one conspiracy theory (Oliver & Wood 2014), fairly few individuals exhibit strong beliefs about any given conspiracy theory. Consider the conspiracy theory questions fielded on the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES) Time Series. Questions were asked about Barack Obama's birthplace, a "death panels" provision in the Affordable Care Act, advance governmental knowledge of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the role of the government in the levy breaches that occurred in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. These "conspiracies" vary substantially in political and cultural context, salience, and susceptibility to measurement error related to social desirability bias and partisan motivated reasoning. Indeed, recent work using these items has demonstrated the strong influence of partisan motivations when it comes to questions about Barack Obama and the policies he is associated with (Pasek, Stark, Krosnick & Tompson 2015, Miller, Saunders & Farhart forthcoming).

All of these factors bias – or, at least, complicate – our ability to estimate the predisposition of interest: conspiratorial thinking. In the following pages we outline a set of questions that circumvents the problems associated with questions about *specific* conspiracy theories and present pre-testing information regarding the reliability, validity, predictive power, and

potential future uses of the proposed items.

Proposed Survey Items

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 group of unknown individuals (or groups) that have the intention (often disguised) to assume more power (Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah & Imhoff 2013, Keeley 1999). Rather than focusing on filling out the specifics of any one conspiracy, the more fruitful direction is to study the prevalence of this "narrative form" or "style" of thinking (Barkun 2003, Fenster 2008, Hofstadter 2008).

The proper starting point of any conspiracy theory is suspicion toward epistemic authority – the official account of what happened and why (Brotherton, French & Pickering 2013, Bruder et al. 2013, Keeley 1999, Uscinski & Parent 2014). Therefore, the first question we ask is the extent to which one believes that politicians lie:

1. Politicians often lie, deflect blame, and find other ways to look innocent. (*Politicians Lie*)

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

authoritative claims of the scientific community and of science's role in public policy has made many question the belief in a rational, deliberative public sphere altogether (Blank & Shaw 2015, Bolsen, Druckman & Cook 2015, Kraft, Lodge & Taber 2015). Of course, questioning epistemic authorities (be they politicians or scientists) is certainly a sign of a suspicious belief system, but this does not necessarily commit all individuals holding this belief to being "conspiracy theorists." Instead, we should conclude the reverse: The belief that politicians lie is a necessary belief for conspiracy theorists, but not a sufficient one.

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

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

American political populism cannot survive without this belief in a powerful elite (Hofstadter 2008, Fenster 2008), and it is at the core of Ucisnski and Parent's (2014) finding of widespread conspiratorial thinking. Again, we do not argue that someone who believes that a small and powerful elite controls our governmental institutions is necessarily a conspiracy theorist, but rather that the "paranoid style" requires this belief (Hofstadter 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, we propose a question that asks individuals the extent to which they believe there are accidents in national politics:

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

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

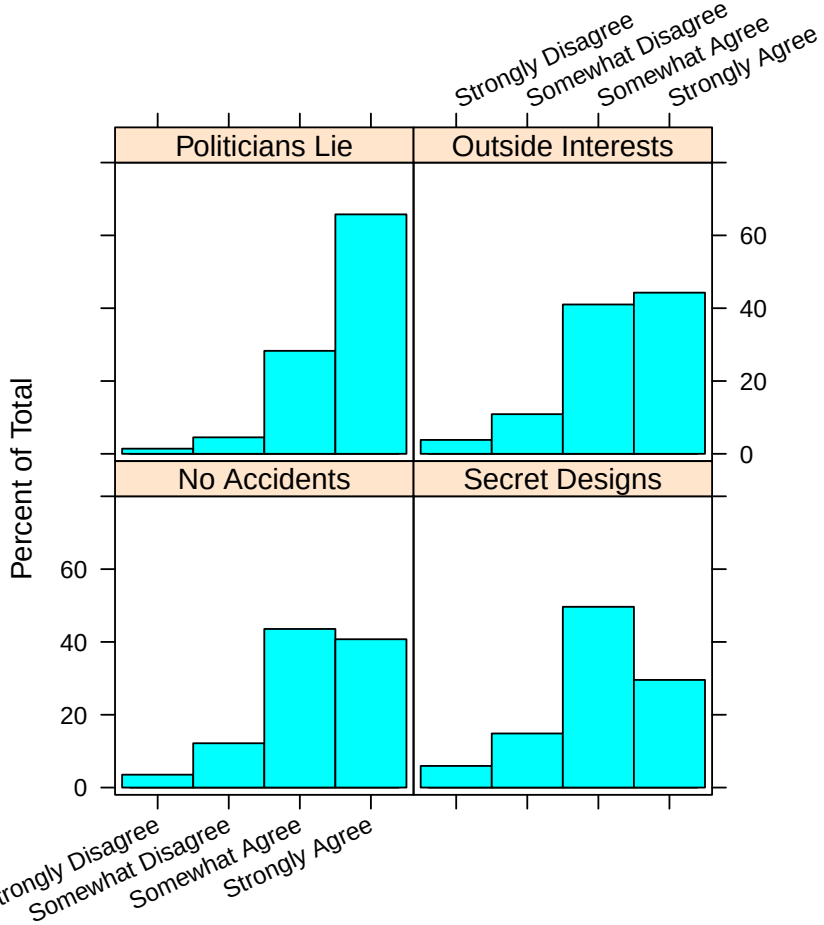
This last aspect of suspicion is the peak of the "paranoid style," a habit of thinking in which everything has a (known) cause and, moreover, is caused by a lying elite. This last question takes the concept of suspicion to its natural conclusion that the surface of a matter is a cleverly designed deception.

Reliability, Validity, and Predictive Power

We fielded the previous four questions on a module of the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), which yielded a fairly representative sample of 1000 adult Americans. The CCES is a large-scale, national stratified sample survey fielded online by Yougov/Polimetrix. The data we employ were collected during the pre-election wave of the survey in October 2014. The distributions of responses to the four questions appear in Figure 1.

Somewhat surprisingly, the distributions of responses to all of the questions exhibit a fairly pronounced positive skew. That is, most respondents agreed to some extent with each of the statements. This is not to suggest that most people are conspiracy theorists, but rather that the central psychological tendencies of conspiracy theorists are widespread. Though,

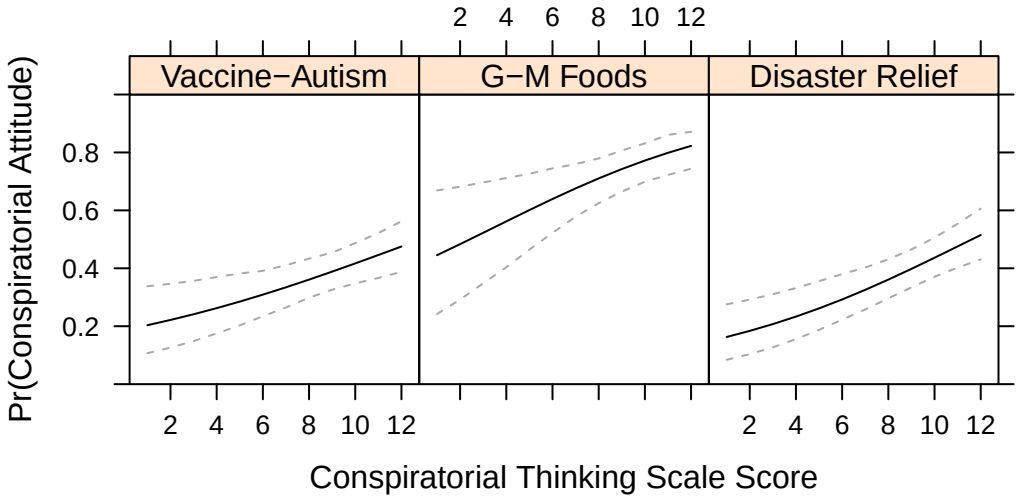
Figure 1: Distributions of individual conspiratorial thinking questions.



while it is perhaps unsurprising that most individuals agree that politicians often lie, the widespread belief that nothing happens by accident in politics and that we're constantly surrounded by secret designs and activities is quite profound.

The four items conform to a unidimensional, cumulative item response model as proposed by Mokken (1971). Essentially, the items can be analyzed and scaled via some variant of item response theory (we chose a non-parametric approach in this instance) due to their conformity to a probabilistically cumulative response pattern, high reliability (Cronbach's Alpha of 0.70), and unequivocal undimensionality (the first factor estimated via an exploratory factor analysis accounts for 88% of the variance in responses to the items). Thus, the items satisfy

Figure 2: Predicted probability of registering a specific conspiratorial attitude over the range of the conspiratorial thinking scale.



the property of a reliable and parsimonious measure of the "monological" belief system hypothesized to lie at the heart of conspiratorial thinking (e.g., Goertzel 1994).

A scale of the items is statistically significantly correlated with ideology (0.129), trust in government[1] (-0.191), education (-0.137), interest in politics (0.081), and age (0.110), all of which are posited to correlate with conspiratorial thinking. And, all of these relationships are preserved in multivariate models.

The conspiratorial thinking scale also exhibits substantial predictive validity. Indeed, large charges in the predicted probability of believing in the link between vaccines and autism (*Vaccine-Autism*), the dangerous corporate influence on genetically-modified foods (*G-M Foods*), and the political motivations of presidential decisions regarding disaster relief (*Disaster Relief*) were observed over the range of the conspiratorial thinking scale, holding other variables (those above plus other demographic controls) constant. These effects are

[1]The precise correlation between our items and a generalized trust measure indicates that, while the four items scaled together quite well, only the first two (*politicians lie, elite forces*) were negatively correlated with trust. This tells us that the relationship between our conspiratorial thinking scale and trust is much more dynamic than one would first imagine, since not all items are negatively related to trust, but are nevertheless all tightly related to each other. We are theoretically and empirically confident that our scale is not merely tracing distrust.

Table 1: Independent effects of conspiratorial thinking on political engagement.

	Campaign Activity	Partisan Strength	Tea Party Support
Conspiratorial Thinking	-0.046*	-0.065*	0.048*
	(0.020)	(0.022)	(0.023)
Knowledge	0.118*	0.096	-0.019
	(0.054)	(0.062)	(0.064)
Interest	0.302*	0.069	0.034
	(0.060)	(0.068)	(0.072)
Education	0.056	0.010	-0.024
	(0.029)	(0.033)	(0.033)
Trust	-0.006	0.004	0.051*
	(0013)	(0.014)	(0.015)
Religiosity	0.041*	0.047*	0.0173
	(0.016)	(0.018)	(0.019)
Age	0.004	0.004	-0.005
	(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		
	(0.038)		
Campaign Activity		-0.000	
		(0.049)	
Ideology			0.316*
			(0.038)
Party ID			0.240*
			(0.031)
Intercept	-0.312	1.523*	1.004*
	(0.297)	(0.330)	(0.371)
R^2	0.138	0.083	0.588
N	549	549	484

OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

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

documented in Figure 2. The average change in the predicted probability of registering a specific conspiratorial attitude ranges from 0.27 in the case of the vaccine-autism link to 0.38 with respect to the political motives behind disaster relief.

Furthermore, conspiratorial thinking is significantly related to various forms of psychological and physical engagement in politics. Table 1 depicts the results of the three different OLS regressions with conspiratorial thinking as the key independent variable, along with a host of controls known to be related to each dependent variable. The dependent variables include an additive index of campaign activities undertook in the 2012 presidential election, the folded party identification scale (partisan strength), and a five-point Tea Party support scale. As conspiratorial thinking increases, the campaign activities and the strength of partisan ties decrease. Conversely, as conspiratorial thinking increases, support for the Tea Party increases. Thus, conspiratorial thinking is negatively associated with traditional forms of political engagement and positively associated with non-traditional – indeed, anti-establishment – forms of engagement.

Other work has posited a relationship between conspiratorial thinking and the cognitive need to evaluate (Miller, Saunders & Farhart forthcoming), personality traits (Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham 2010), attitudes toward minorities (Pasek et al. 2015), perceived discrimination (Bird & Bogart 2003), and religiosity (Oliver & Wood 2014) among many other psychological and socio-political constructs commonly operationalized on the ANES. All of these relationships and more can be examined more closely and appropriately with the inclusion of these items on the 2016 ANES Time Series.

Conclusion

By synthesizing the robust work on the philosophy of conspiratorial thinking, we were able to construct a 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. This measurement strategy produced an indicator of conspiratorial thinking that exhibits many desirable measurement properties such as high reliability, construct and predictive validity, and unidimensionality. More specifically, the conspiratorial thinking scale

that can be constructed from the items outlined above is correlated with theoretically-related variables of interest to political scientists, and predicts attitudes about more specific conspiracies and engagement in politics. Especially in an election cycle widely characterized by mass preference for political "outsiders" and a strong distrust toward establishment politics, an empirical operationalization of conspiratorial thinking is necessary for a complete understanding of the opinions, attitudes, and beliefs behind individual behavior at the polls.

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