

On the affinities (and differences) between populism and a belief in conspiracy theories

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Populist rhetorics and conspiracy theories share common traits: both portray a manipulative and secretive elite that govern in their own self-interest. Bruno Castanho Silva, Federico Vegetti and Levente Littvay find that belief in particular forms of conspiracy, though not all, go hand in hand with populist attitudes, which has implications for political trust.



Billboard challenging the validity of Barack Obama's birth certificate, California, 2010.

Picture: [Victor Victoria at English Wikipedia](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

From [Eurabia](#) to [vaccines causing autism](#), through [cancer injections](#) and [fake birth certificates](#), many conspiracy theories have been endorsed or propagated by populist leaders in recent years. Conceptually, *populism* and *conspiracism* are similar kinds of rhetorics or mentalities. Conspiracy theories are narratives that find patterns in events – often complex and disconnected – explaining them as a simple consequence of the deliberate action of a small, powerful and secretive group of people. Because of the almightiness of this group, conspiracy theories are unfalsifiable: the lack of evidence for its claims are taken as the evidence of this group's power to cover their tracks. As a consequence, it is very difficult to change the mind of a conspiracy theorist merely on logical grounds.

Populism also has a slight paranoid style to it. While the concept is highly contested, most political scientists today define it as a discourse which frames politics and society as a fundamental moral struggle between two groups. On one side is 'the people', a virtuous, homogeneous majority of the population, whose reified will (the general will) should be

automatically turned into policy. On the other side is the evil 'elite', a small powerful group who controls politics for their own benefit, exploiting the people and violating the sacredness of its general will. Populism, because of its binary, good-versus-evil nature, leaves little space for pluralism: those on the other side are just the oppressing elites, or their puppets, who have no business being in politics.

Simply looking at these definitions, one can already see a common thread running through these two ideas. Both conspiracy theories and populist discourse frame the world as divided into a small, oppressive and powerful group on top, and the vulnerable masses at the bottom. However, a few important differences remain: conspiracy theorists do not necessarily believe in the holiness of 'the people', nor that the only ideal in politics is to implement the general will. While the ignorant public is seen as prey to the elites, conspiracies do not see it as morally superior by definition. To the contrary, one might find conspiracy theorists who believe in their own superiority in relation to the masses, for being smart enough to see *the truth*. Moreover, while populists might have a somewhat conspiratorial mindset, it does not mean they will endorse any specific conspiracy theory. We observe, for instance, that populist attitudes are more widespread than beliefs in conspiracies across countries.

In our research we tackle exactly this question: are there some kinds of conspiracies that populists are more likely to follow, and what are the common points between these two attitudes? What we find from our two studies using US survey data is that, while the two are highly correlated, populists are more likely to buy into some conspiracies than others: they agree that there are malevolent global conspiracies, according to which a small group of individuals decides on all important world events, and agree on conspiracies about the control of information, that is those conspiracies in which a small group of individuals with privileged access to information or technology keep it from the masses for their own profit. Common to these two is that the elites have a clear reason for their actions: they exploit their own power over the people for material benefits.

However, populists are not that likely to believe in conspiracies that paint elites as purely evil villains with no identifiable motivation. For instance, there is not such a strong association between populist attitudes and believing that governments and companies poison the public and kill their own citizens in secret, nor that the government hides evidence of extraterrestrial contact. Prior research has found that someone who believes in one conspiracy theory is very likely to buy into another, even if the two are mutually contradictory: the more likely someone is to believe that Diana was murdered, the more likely the same person will believe she faked her own death and is still alive. However, when it comes to those with populist attitudes, we observe that they despise elites but still see them as individuals or groups whose evil actions make sense, at least in light of their own greediness.

At the basis of both populist attitudes and conspiratorial beliefs, there seems to be the understanding that anything official, be it the government or any other authority, is necessarily deceptive and capable of morally reproachable actions. This has implications for how to deal with both of these phenomena: a polity characterised by a record of

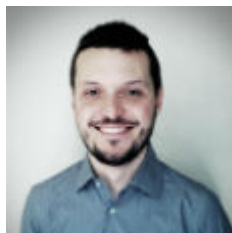
deception by elected officials, such as unkept promises, corruption scandals or fraud, is more likely to nurture the emergence of both anti-elitist discourses and conspiracy theories. In other words, these two phenomena flourish under conditions of generalised lack of trust in any authority. Therefore, the scenarios we observe in democracies today, where voters lose confidence in democratic political institutions and their representatives, are fertile grounds to stories about how evil these elites are. While much ink is spilled on the importance of social media and fake news in spreading conspiracies, only a citizenry who has completely lost trust in their elected representatives would believe they sit in a dark room deciding on whether there should be war or peace in the world. To reduce belief in conspiracies and populist appeals consistently and in the long-term, the only way is to build a public sphere where there is a higher perception of political legitimacy.

*This article represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit. It draws on the authors' article '[The Elite Is Up to Something: Exploring the Relation Between Populism and Belief in Conspiracy Theories](#)', published in *Swiss Political Science Review*.*

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