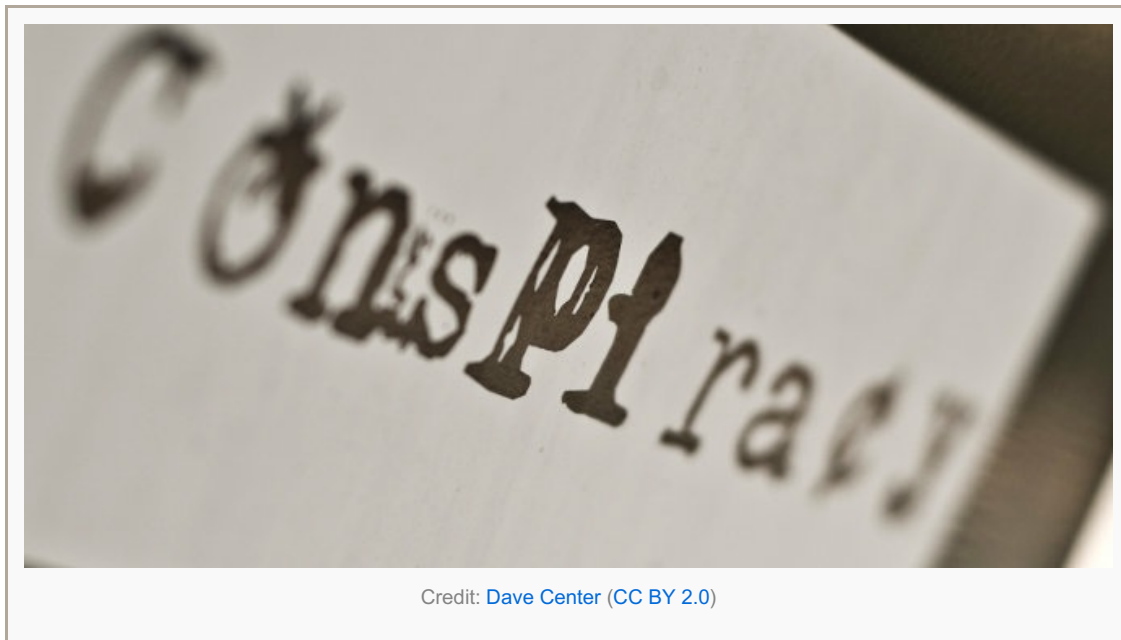


What conspiracy theories can tell us about politics in Greece

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Conspiracy theories are a feature of political discourse in many countries across Europe, but what do they tell us about the nature of European politics? [Alexis Papazoglou](#) writes on the case of Greece, reasoning that conspiracy theories flourish where there is a lack of trust in politicians, and that the growth of populist politics is potentially pushing citizens toward a more conspiratorial world view.



A couple of weeks ago, I attended a talk on conspiracy theories. Hugo Drochon, a post-doc for the [Conspiracy and Democracy](#) project at the University of Cambridge, presented the results of a YouGov poll on questions dealing with the extent to which people held conspiracy theory-like beliefs. The findings showed that conspiracy theories are held by people throughout society, independently of their education, gender, age and income, but that societies with less social cohesion, and higher economic inequality are more prone to believing in them overall.

Greece falls perfectly into this category. Economic inequality has risen during the many years of recession since 2009, reflected in high unemployment rates, and at the same time Greek society has become more polarised, as the 2015 referendum showed. Indeed, a poll in 2014 conducted by the University of Macedonia in Greece confirmed this hypothesis. It [revealed](#) that 68.7% believed a cure for cancer had been discovered but was being kept from the public, 58.7% believed that the 9/11 attacks were organised by the US government as an instrument of foreign policy, and – most relevant to Greece's current predicament – 75.3% of the Greek population believed that the crisis in Greece was orchestrated by foreign powers.

And in recent weeks, a different kind of conspiracy theory has been making the rounds in the country. The story went that the Syriza-led coalition government had been purposefully sabotaging the implementation of the agreement it reached with its creditors in the summer of 2015. Instead of carrying out the reforms it agreed on, the government was accused of dragging its feet and allowing the economy to take a [turn for the worse](#), triggering renewed discussions over a potential Grexit.

The aim of this strategy, according to the theory, is to continue to shift the sentiment of Greeks against the country's membership of the Eurozone. Some believe that Syriza always wanted to see Greece return to a national currency, free from the supervision of the European Union and the IMF, who have been pushing Greece to adopt austerity measures alongside economic reforms that promote the private sector, rather than a state driven economy. These are all things that Syriza is not a great believer in. In fact, some suggest the party is not a great believer in western style liberal representative democracy full stop, let alone a liberal economy. A return to the drachma then would not only signal a change of currency, but a regime change of sorts.

The scenario sounds far-fetched, even nightmarish. But it is intended to explain Greece's current predicament: Without any agreement with Greece's lenders over the review of its fiscal progress, something that was supposed to have been reached by 20 February, Greece will find itself on the brink of official bankruptcy again in the summer. The government has temporarily agreed to vote through further measures in parliament, and negotiations will continue, but that's no guarantee of an eventual deal before the summer.

The scenario also offers a potential exit strategy for a prime minister who now finds himself in a tight spot. Tsipras' popularity has dropped significantly over recent months, and Syriza is well behind the opposition, New Democracy, in the polls. Some interpret his loss of popularity as being due to the compromise he made in 2015, when he agreed to a third rescue package with the EU, rather than following the confrontational strategy that won him power in the first place to its logical conclusion: Grexit.

Conspiracy theories and populism

In the discussion after Drochon's talk on conspiracy theories, two important points were raised. First, that conspiracy theories are sometimes true. And second, that 'cock-up theories', where outcomes are viewed as the result of the incompetence of decision-makers rather than as part of a grand plan, are often a more realistic explanatory model of events. I tend to believe the latter. To begin with, the mere fact that conspiracies do occasionally take place does not give one the epistemic grounds to believe that a conspiracy is always taking place: this would be an example of rather lazy, inductive reasoning.

Cock-up theories seem more realistic. They recognise that the world is complex, that difficult decisions have to be made a lot of the time, and that humans are generally not very good at the art of politics. Mistakes are common in politics, either because of a lack of expertise, ideological hang-ups, or because politicians are too busy worrying about their popularity rather than problem-solving. On the other hand, conspiracy theories offer a simplistic account of events, putting forward a story that reduces many unrelated elements to a single narrative, whilst discarding the complexities of events and the fallibility of people.

So why do people end up believing in conspiracy theories? The answer lies in a general lack of trust. Conspiracy theories are more prevalent in societies with low levels of social cohesion, connected to low levels of trust. This means that people are more sceptical towards those in power, as well as towards journalists. No one can ever be completely certain that a conspiracy is not taking place. One needs to trust that people in government are doing their job, and that the media are holding them accountable, so that if anything untoward were going on, we'd hear about it. Without certainty and without trust though, citizens may end up espousing an extreme form of scepticism that lends itself to conspiracy theories.

It was this kind of extreme scepticism that led Descartes to question even the most mundane fact: that an external reality exists. Discovering that many of the things he once took to be true had turned out to be false, he refused to trust any source of knowledge that had fooled him in the past, including his own senses, and resorted to doubting everything he couldn't be 100% certain of. But this is the road to madness. The American pragmatists of the 20th century argued that this kind of extreme scepticism isn't the right response to finding out that sometimes things aren't what they seem. Each case merits its own attention and in each case good reasons need to be given for why we might adopt a sceptical stance, or, in our case, a conspiracy theory. We can never be 100% certain that there isn't a conspiracy taking place, but that is not enough reason to believe that one is in fact taking place. Positive

reasons for believing that have to be offered.

Despite all of this being true, I have to confess that I sometimes myself fall prey to wondering whether a conspiracy is underway in Greece. And I think there is a different factor that plays into this: the fact that Greece has a populist government. Post-Brexit and post-Trump the logic and practices of populist politics are becoming more apparent to more people: The creation of scape-goats, playing up on people's anxieties, the promise of easy, but impossible, solutions, a problematic relationship with the facts, a vilification of the press and judiciary system.

Greece has two years of experience of this already, having voted for a populist government back in January 2015 when Syriza first came to power. In [the words](#) of Stathis Kalyvas, Professor of Political Science at Yale University, "When assessing a populist government, it's always hard to tell whether it's just incompetence or dark designs." Populist campaigns run on a platform of distrust of 'the old politics', of 'the system', of elitist self-serving institutions. But the result of seeing populism in action is to breed a distrust in politics and politicians that is much stronger than before, blurring the lines between what might be a conspiracy and a 'cock-up'.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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