



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Rejection of the status quo

Conspiracy theories and preference for alternative political systems

Papaioannou, K.; Pantazi, M.; van Prooijen, J.-W.

DOI

[10.1111/bjso.12754](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12754)

Publication date

2024

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

British Journal of Social Psychology

License

Unspecified

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Papaioannou, K., Pantazi, M., & van Prooijen, J.-W. (2024). Rejection of the status quo: Conspiracy theories and preference for alternative political systems. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 63(4), 2077-2099. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12754>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

ARTICLE

Rejection of the status quo: *Conspiracy theories and preference for alternative political systems*

Kostas Papaioannou^{1,2}  | Myrto Pantazi³ | Jan-Willem van Prooijen^{4,5,6}

¹Centre for the Study of Politics (CEVIPOL), Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium

²Department of Political Science, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece

³Department of Psychology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

⁴Department of Experimental and Applied Psychology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

⁵The Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR), Amsterdam, The Netherlands

⁶Department of Criminal Law and Criminology, Maastricht University, Maastricht, The Netherlands

Correspondence

Kostas Papaioannou, Centre for the Study of Politics (CEVIPOL), Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium.
Email: papakoon@polsci.auth.gr

Funding information

Universiteit van Amsterdam; Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Abstract

Conspiracy theories introduce a democratic paradox, as belief in conspiracy theories predicts support for both democratic and non-democratic political systems. In this article, we explore whether democratic and anti-democratic attitudes, resulting from conspiracy beliefs, can be mutually exclusive. In Study 1 (*United Kingdom*, $N = 293$), we show that belief in conspiracy theories is associated with decreased support for representative democracy, and increased support for direct democracy, anarchism, and autocracy within the same individuals. In Study 2 (*United States*, $N = 302$, *pre-registered*), we experimentally show that the perceived presence of conspiracies is linked to an increased preference for direct democracy, anarchism, and autocracy and decreased support for representative democracy. Mediation analyses suggest that widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo and, less consistently, feelings of political cynicism mediate the relationships between conspiracy beliefs and (anti-) democratic attitudes. In Study 3 (*United States*, $N = 400$, *pre-registered*), we experimentally manipulate (dis)satisfaction with the status quo. Results indicate that rejecting the status quo increases support for direct democracy, anarchism, and autocracy and decreases support for representative democracy. Overall, our findings suggest that people who believe in conspiracy theories tend to favour both democratic and anti-democratic political alternatives, largely attributed to citizens' desire to change the status quo.

KEYWORDS

anarchism, autocracy, conspiracy theories, cynicism, democracy, status quo

INTRODUCTION

“I’m not interested in preserving the status quo;

I want to overthrow it.”

Niccolò Machiavelli (The Prince, 1952)

The idea of overthrowing or changing the prevailing political order is an old one, dating back to the writings of ancient Greek historians like Herodotus and Thucydides. It has persisted in the essays of Machiavelli in the Middle Ages and political philosophers and scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries like Errico Malatesta, Herbert Marcuse, Michel Foucault, Simone de Beauvoir, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Historical accounts confirm that overthrowing the political status quo has occurred in many human societies. Conspiracy theories have often motivated a desire to challenge or overthrow the prevailing political order (e.g., The Gunpowder Plot; the Capitol Hill Attack), serving as narratives that justify coordinated efforts of upheaval and/or societal transformation. While not all instances of change involve conspiratorial actions and activities behind them, belief in conspiracy theories has been associated with radicalized and extremist activities, such as violent protests (Imhoff et al., 2021; Rottweiler & Gill, 2022) and occupying buildings (Mari et al., 2022).

Conspiracy theories are commonly defined as proposed explanations for significant actions, events, and/or practices involving powerful individuals, groups, or institutions, who meet in secrecy to plot and achieve a hidden goal that is widely considered to be unlawful or malevolent (Douglas & Sutton, 2011; Keeley, 1999; Pipes, 1999; Zonis & Joseph, 1994). While people differ in the extent to which they endorse *specific* conspiracy theories (e.g., an intentional lab leak of the coronavirus, Qanon, the Great Replacement), they also display differing degrees of a more *stable inclination* to interpret global events through conspiracy theories (Bruder et al., 2013). This latter inclination is argued to be a relatively stable trait and has been referred to as “conspiracy mentality” (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). In this study, we examine both belief in specific conspiracy theories and conspiracy mentality.

BELIEF IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT

Belief in conspiracy theories is often thought to have detrimental democratic consequences, as it undermines trust in institutions (Mari et al., 2022; Meuer & Imhoff, 2021; Van Prooijen et al., 2022), amplifies political polarization and division (Kofta & Soral, 2019), reduces civic engagement and intention to vote (Douglas et al., 2019) and disrupts public discourse (Husting & Orr, 2007). Unsurprisingly, the research literature is dominated by studies focusing on the negative political consequences of endorsing conspiracy narratives (Jolley et al., 2019, 2022).

Nevertheless, scholars have also argued for some positive effects. Conspiracy theories may provide a sense of belonging and community for people with marginal views (Franks et al., 2017), motivate individuals to coordinate efforts in pursuit of shared demands and social change (Mari et al., 2017), and lead to a demand for greater transparency from governments (Swami & Coles, 2010). Conspiracy theories may also encourage political accountability (Dentith, 2018; Moore, 2016), and, therefore, may be an important element of democratic discourse (Bortolotti, 2023).

Indeed, recent studies offer seemingly contradictory findings regarding the democratic preferences of those individuals who endorse conspiracy theories. On the one hand, belief in conspiracy theories is associated with extreme political orientation (Imhoff et al., 2022; van Prooijen et al., 2015) and autocratic preferences (Imhoff, 2015; Papaioannou et al., 2023b). On the other hand, conspiracy beliefs predict a preference for greater democratic participation through direct democracy (Pantazi et al., 2022).

The paradoxical nature of these findings underscores the complexity of the political attitudes of individuals who endorse conspiracy theories.

The current studies seek to extend these findings by examining the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and people's preferences for four different political systems, namely representative democracy, direct democracy, anarchism, and autocracy. In addition, we examine the role of a general rejection of the status quo in these relationships.

We first assess whether belief in conspiracy theories is linked with a rejection of the current system of representative democracy. In addition, we explore whether belief in conspiracy theories may simultaneously be associated with support for three alternative but quite different political systems. Direct democracy is a system where citizens vote directly for policy initiatives, laws, and other major political decisions, rather than electing representatives to make these decisions on their behalf (Altman, 2010). Anarchism is often described as a system of direct democracy without intermediaries and representatives, while emphasizing voluntary cooperation and mutual aid (Guerin, 1970; Ward, 2004). Anarchism is also characterized by the rejection of any hierarchical system of authority, putting a premium on collective responsibility and equality (Wolff, 1998). Autocracy is a non-democratic political system where power is concentrated in the hands of a single leader or a small group, typically without any meaningful checks and balances (Tullock, 2012). In an autocratic system, the leader or the ruling group has absolute control over the decision-making processes (Papaioannou & Van Zanden, 2015), often without the consent of the governed (Olson, 1991).

Importantly, we propose that particularly rejection of the status quo and feelings of political cynicism would be common underlying features of conspiracy believers that can help account for the rejection of the current system of representative democracy while predicting increased support for both democratic and undemocratic alternatives. This study extends previous work by not only demonstrating both the democratic and anti-democratic propensities of conspiracy beliefs within the same individuals but, more importantly, by trying to explain and reconcile these apparently contradicting propensities, through the generalized rejection of the status quo.

BELIEF IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

A common assumption in the existing literature is that belief in conspiracy theories is associated with dissatisfaction with the current social and political system (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994; Pantazi et al., 2022). This dissatisfaction can stem from a variety of factors, such as perceived corruption (Alper, 2023), policy inefficacy (O'Mahony et al., 2023), incompetency (van Prooijen & van Lange, 2014), or a sense of cynicism against the political establishment (Papaioannou et al., 2023a, 2023b).

It can also result merely from the perception that society is fraught with conspiracies, however. This dissatisfaction with the status quo can serve as a catalyst for political change (Andrain & Apter, 1995; Curtin et al., 2015). For example, when individuals perceive that representative democracy fails to address their concerns or adequately serve their interests (Papaioannou, 2024), they may become more open to considering alternative political systems (Niven, 2000).

By casting doubt on the intentions of powerful figures and institutions, conspiracy thinking may not only foster dissatisfaction with the status quo but also cultivate a profound distrust of the established order (Butter & Knight, 2020; Mari et al., 2022; Papaioannou et al., 2023b). Additionally, it may contribute to a perception of politicians as immoral or incompetent (Douglas et al., 2019). As previously mentioned, conspiracy beliefs are likely to stem from dissatisfaction with the political system. In our studies, especially Studies 2 and 3, we investigate the potential mutual reinforcing dynamics between rejecting the status quo and believing in conspiracy theories. In Study 3, where we experimentally manipulated the mediating variable (i.e., rejection of the status quo) to test its effects on the various political outcomes, we also explored whether a reciprocal relationship would hold true (i.e., rejection of the status quo increases belief in conspiracy theories).

Conspiracy beliefs can also cast doubt on the good intentions of established institutions and their leaders (Harambam & Aupers, 2015), often arising from a history of broken promises by the elites or a belief that the system is rigged in favour of a select few (Van Hiel et al., 2022). Thus, conspiracy beliefs also imply high levels of political cynicism, reflecting a deep-seated scepticism about the intentions and integrity of those in power (Demertzis, 2013; Pattyn et al., 2012). This political cynicism can also be linked to a rejection of the current political system in favour of alternatives perceived to be less prone to corruption or manipulation (Federico, 2022; Papaioannou et al., 2023a). Through this lens, citizens who believe in conspiracy theories view politicians, and by extension, established authorities, as an important source of their socio-economic struggles (Papaioannou, 2024).

Based on this, we hypothesized that conspiracy beliefs would predict rejection of the current system of representative democracy and increased support of any other alternative system (even *prima facie* mutually contradicting ones) than what currently is in place. We also predict that these effects will be mediated by rejection of the status quo and political cynicism.

THE PRESENT STUDY – RESEARCH OVERVIEW

In Study 1, we examine the relationship between support for various political systems and conspiracy beliefs in the United Kingdom. Additionally, we examine rejection of the status quo and political cynicism as two factors that may mediate these relationships. In Study 2, we conduct a vignette experiment in which participants are asked to imagine being citizens of a fictitious country and manipulated conspiracy beliefs in that country. In Study 3, we experimentally manipulated satisfaction with the status quo, our hypothesized mediator, to further explore whether this manipulation increases support for direct democracy, anarchism, and autocracy while decreasing support for representative democracy.

STUDY 1

Participants and procedure

We recruited 293 British participants through Prolific Academic, who completed an online survey (50.2% Male, 48.8% Female, 0.7% “Other”; $M_{Age} = 39.61$, $SD = 14.93$). All individuals above the age of 18 years were allowed to participate in the study. With this sample, we could detect Pearson bivariate correlations (two-tailed) between our variables of interest as small as .20, with .95 power at the .05 alpha level (G*Power; Faul et al., 2007). A university's ethics committee has approved of our ethics application.

Participants read a page with general information about the study procedure, data use, and payment, and then completed an online consent form. Next, participants answered the scales in the order appearing below, followed by demographic information. Participants were fully debriefed about the purposes and hypotheses of the study after the end of the survey and received a compensation of £1.00.

Measures

The URL link to access the complete material for all three studies can be found here: <https://osf.io/m93j7/>. We measured the following variables on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “Strongly Disagree” to 5 = “Strongly Agree”), unless noted otherwise.

Conspiracy mentality ($\alpha = .83$) was measured with the five items of the conspiracy mentality questionnaire by Bruder et al. (2013). The scale includes items like “I think that there are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions” and “I think that government agencies closely monitor all citizens”.

Belief in specific conspiracy theories ($\alpha = .84$) was measured with a five-item scale including compiled popular specific conspiracy theories, adapted to the UK context. This scale includes items such as “The British government permits or perpetrates acts of terrorism on its own soil, disguising its involvement” and “Technology with mind-control capacities is used on people without their knowledge”.

*Rejection of the status quo*¹ ($\alpha = .89$) was measured with six items. This scale includes items, such as “Our society needs to be radically restructured”, “The social and political system in the UK should drastically change”, and “In general, the social and political system in my country operates as it should” (reversed).

Political cynicism ($\alpha = .83$) was measured with five items using the cynicism scale by Papaioannou et al. (2023a), including items such as “Most politicians rely on shady practices to remain in power” and “Politicians seem to make (campaign) promises that they very well know they cannot keep”.

Support for representative democracy ($\alpha = .84$) was measured with five items compiled and adapted from previous research (Pantazi et al., 2022). This scale includes items such as “I find it right that most major political decisions in the UK are made by the elected Members of Parliament (MPs)” and “Electing MPs who will then make political decisions is the best way to make decisions in the UK”.

Support for direct democracy ($\alpha = .81$) was measured with five items compiled and adapted from Pantazi et al. (2022), including items like “Citizens in the UK should have a more direct say on policy issues and important decision”, “Referenda are a good way to decide important political questions” and “Organising assemblies and meetings so that people can take decisions by themselves is the best way to make political decisions”.

Support for anarchism ($\alpha = .80$) was measured with seven items² compiled and adapted from various sources (Dhont et al., 2012; Moskalkenko & McCauley, 2009; Van Hiel, 2012). This scale includes items such as “In the UK, we would be better off if we abolished the state and the society was organised on the basis of self-organisation”, “When I think about our political and social institutions, I cannot help thinking: ‘just let them all burn’”, and “Freedom can only be realized if the state is being destroyed completely”.

Support for autocracy ($\alpha = .82$) was measured with six items³ using the autocracy scale by Papaioannou et al. (2023b). This scale includes items such as “I would support a non-democratic regime if I believed that it would improve the economy and society of my country” and “The UK needs a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections”.

Results

Descriptive results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables. Consistent with our line of reasoning, both conspiracy mentality and belief in specific conspiracy theories were negatively

¹We performed Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to empirically assess if the items we used actually comprise of distinct concepts (results in the Appendix S1). The rotated factor matrices confirm that our items for anarchism, rejection of status quo and support for autocracy load on three different factors.

²Since not all items of anarchism displayed high loadings in the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), we carefully reviewed the items and applied more stringent criteria. Consequently, we re-ran all sets of analyses after creating a new measure for anarchism, this time using only the three items with the highest loadings that more strongly capture anarchism. Our results across all three studies remain consistent throughout the manuscript, irrespective of the item selection. Detailed results of these robustness analyses are provided in the Appendix S1.

³Using the same rationale as for the anarchism scale, we applied more stringent criteria to the autocracy items, resulting in a new measure that included the three items with the highest loadings in the EFA. We then re-ran all sets of analyses and present the results in the Appendix S1. Consistently, the results remain virtually unchanged when using the sub-set of items across all studies.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations for Study 1 – UK survey sample.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Conspiracy Mentality	3.54 (.74)							
2. Belief in Specific Conspiracy Theories	.681***	2.06 (.82)						
3. Rejection of the Status Quo	.407***	.259***	3.59 (.77)					
4. Political Cynicism	.570***	.336***	.538***	3.83 (.70)				
5. Support for Representative Democracy	-.312***	-.257***	-.413***	-.419***	3.04 (.75)			
6. Support for Direct Democracy	.384***	.271***	.362***	.422***	-.487***	3.49 (.76)		
7. Support for Anarchism	.431***	.480***	.501***	.464***	-.405*	.389***	2.30 (.77)	
8. Support for Autocracy	.426***	.435***	.153***	.369***	-.231***	.348***	.426***	2.56 (.78)

N = 293. Total number of participants were *N* = 293. Other values present Pearson correlation coefficients.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

correlated with support for representative democracy and positively correlated with support for direct democracy, anarchy, and autocracy. There were also positive correlations among the support for the three alternative regimes.^{4,5} Furthermore, the two mediators under consideration (i.e., rejection of the status quo and cynicism) were also positively correlated with both measures of conspiratorial thinking.

Mediation model

We then examined whether rejection of the status quo and political cynicism jointly mediated the relationship between the two conspiracy scales (i.e., conspiracy mentality and specific conspiracy beliefs) and the four outcomes of interest. Four mediation analyses were performed using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013; Model 4) with bootstrapping for 5000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals, one for each of the political system preferences.

These analyses revealed negative indirect links between conspiracy mentality and representative democracy through rejection of status quo ($B = -0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI = $[-0.16, -0.05]$) and political cynicism ($B = -0.14$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI = $[-0.22, -0.05]$, see Figure 1). Likewise, the indirect links between belief in specific conspiracy theories and representative democracy through rejection of status quo ($B = -0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI = $[-0.09, -0.03]$) and political cynicism ($B = -0.08$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI = $[-0.12, -0.03]$, see Figure 2) were significant.

Conversely, the analyses revealed positive indirect links between conspiracy mentality and support for direct democracy through rejection of the status quo ($B = -0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI = $[0.16, 0.05]$) and political cynicism ($B = 0.10$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI = $[0.16, 0.05]$). A similar finding was obtained for belief in specific conspiracy theories; a positive indirect link was observed for both rejection of the status quo ($B = 0.04$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI = $[0.01, 0.08]$) and political cynicism ($B = 0.08$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI = $[0.04, 0.14]$, see Figure 2).

Similarly, rejection of the status quo ($B = 0.14$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI = $[0.08, 0.20]$) and political cynicism ($B = 0.10$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI = $[0.02, 0.19]$) mediated the link between conspiracy mentality and support for anarchism (see Figure 1). Consistent was the evidence for belief in specific conspiracy theories, with rejection of the status quo ($B = 0.08$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI = $[0.04, 0.12]$) and cynicism ($B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI = $[0.02, 0.10]$) both mediating the relationship (see Figure 2).

Lastly, the indirect effect through rejection of the status quo was found to be insignificant for support for autocracy ($B = -0.04$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI = $[-0.10, 0.01]$). The indirect effect through cynicism was significant, however ($B = 0.14$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI = $[0.05, 0.23]$). The results were consistent for belief in specific conspiracy theories instead of conspiracy mentality (see Figure 2).

Discussion

Consistent with our line of reasoning, Study 1 supported the prediction that belief in conspiracy theories is associated with decreased support for representative democracy and increased support

⁴Regarding the positive correlation between preferences for different systems, it was possible that this could have been driven by the people who disagree with the alternatives (of direct democracy, anarchism and autocracy), along the lines of Van Prooijen et al. (2023) who point out that the positive correlation between contradictory conspiracy beliefs mostly reflects that disbelieving one conspiracy theory predicts an increased likelihood of disbelieving a contradictory one. To assess this possibility in our case we tested the correlations separately for people high and low in support for rejection to the status quo (based on a median split). Our findings (reported in the Appendix S1) suggest that it does not appear to be the case.

⁵In hierarchical linear regressions, we tested whether adding the two measures of conspiracy beliefs help explain the 'paradoxical' relationship between direct democracy and autocracy support. The results show that the relationship between direct democracy and autocracy remains positive and significant even after controlling for belief in conspiracy theories, despite the fact that the latter adds explanatory power to the model (results available in the Appendix S1). This is consistent with our theoretical model, whereby the positive relationship between the alternatives would be at least partly explained by participants' belief in conspiracy theories and their subsequent desire for change.

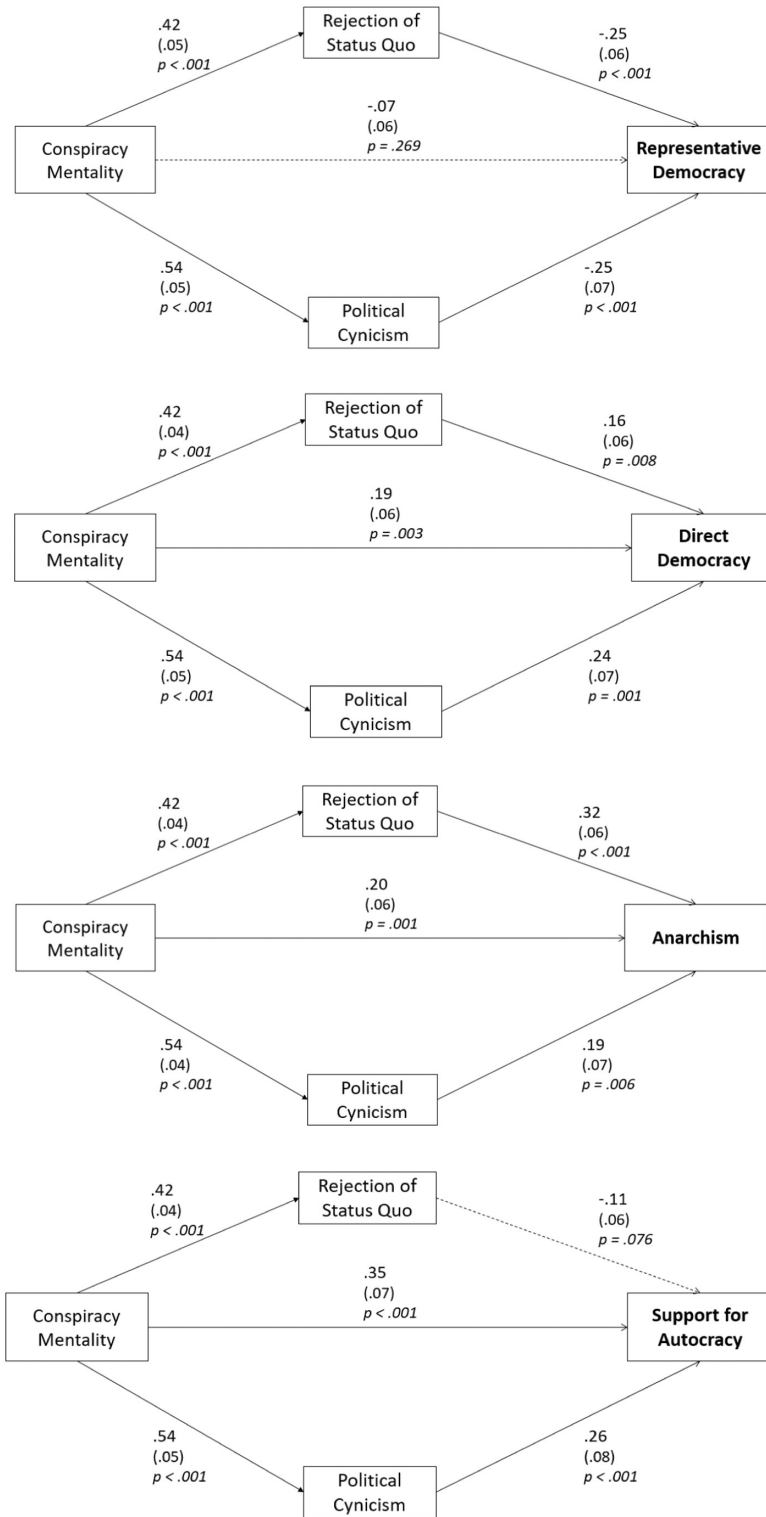


FIGURE 1 Four parallel mediation models with two mediators - conspiracy mentality. Dashed lines highlight non-significant relationships and solid lines highlight significant relationships ($p < .05$). Data in this figure are correlational, and hence, arrows only highlight what variables were specified as independent, mediator, and dependent variables in the statistical model without proving causality.

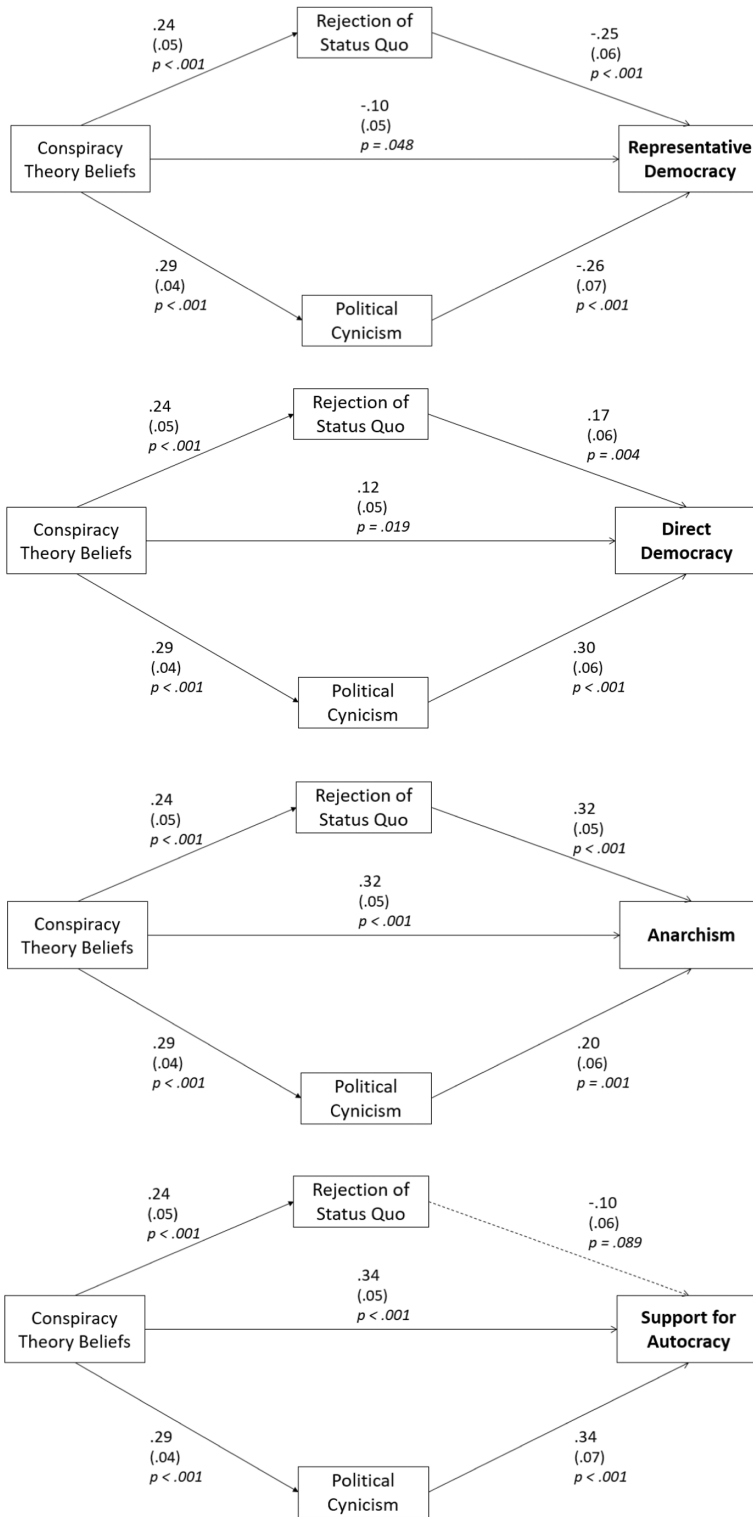


FIGURE 2 Four parallel mediation models with two mediators – belief in specific conspiracy theories CB. Dashed lines highlight non-significant relationships, and solid lines highlight significant relationships ($p < .05$). Data in this study are correlational, and hence, arrows only highlight what variables were specified as independent, mediator, and dependent variables in the statistical model without proving causality.

for alternative political systems, notably direct democracy, anarchism, and autocracy. In addition, Study 1 suggests that conspiracy beliefs are associated with rejection of the status quo and political cynicism. These variables appear to be plausible mediators of believing in conspiracy theories and preference for alternative political systems (except for a preference for autocracy, which was only mediated by political cynicism). These findings were replicated for both general conspiracy mentality and specific conspiracy beliefs.

While our mediation analyses underscore the importance of status quo beliefs and political cynicism in the link between conspiracy theories and democratic preferences, they are limited by the inability to determine causality and the potential for confounding variables (Fiedler et al., 2011). Additionally, in our mediation analyses, we only used two variables. It is rather likely that other factors could also be mediating the relationship between the key variables. Given these limitations, the results of our mediation analyses should be treated with caution, and we will proceed with experiments to acquire more direct evidence for the processes under investigation here.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, we examined whether perceiving more conspiracies causally increases support for alternative political systems while decreasing support for the existing one, namely representative democracy. To that end, we conducted an experiment where we described a fictitious country (“Amorgia”) to participants and varied the actual prevalence of political conspiracies in that country. This setup, therefore, sought to simulate the way in which people with high and low conspiracy beliefs perceive society. The description contained a short excerpt containing information about the country's history and economic and political situation. We adjusted the excerpt from Papaioannou et al. (2023b).

We hypothesized that individuals in the conspiracy view condition would be more likely to support direct democracy, anarchism, and autocracy and less likely to support representative democracy than participants in the control condition. We also hypothesized that, as a result of a conspiracy worldview, participants would be more likely to reject the status quo and show greater feelings of political cynicism, and that these variables would mediate the relationships between conspiracy beliefs and preference for alternative political systems.

Method

The study hypotheses and analysis plans were pre-registered in OSF (https://osf.io/jc58u?view_only=None). Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Amsterdam's Review Board.

Participants and procedure

According to a G*Power analysis, to detect an effect of $f=0.19$ in a two-group ANOVA with 0.90 power at the .05 alpha level, we needed 294 participants, which we boosted to just over 300 in order to account for potential outliers. In each model, multivariate outliers were excluded based on the median absolute deviation with a constant of three (Leys et al., 2019). We recruited 302 participants from the United States through Prolific Academic (49.0% Male, 48.7% Female, 2.4% “Other” or “Prefer not to say”); $M_{Age} = 44.3$, $SD = 14.9$).

After providing their informed consent, participants read a short excerpt about Amorgia, containing information about the country's history, economics, and political situation. In the short excerpt, they also read that Amorgia is a representative democracy where citizens vote for their representatives every 4 years. The text was equivalent in all other respects, including word count and specific background information about the country (see Pantazi et al., 2022; Papaioannou et al., 2023b).

Each participant was randomly allocated to either read that Amorgia was a country where conspiracies thrived ($n = 154$) or where there were no conspiracies at all ($n = 148$). In the conspiracy condition, participants read that "...several nefarious and hidden links between politicians, powerful companies and criminals were found". In the control condition, participants read that decisions regarding policy "...were very transparent and served the needs of its citizens".

To increase participants' involvement, we asked them to imagine being a citizen of the country when reading the information (see Pantazi et al., 2022). After reading the excerpt, participants were asked to briefly summarize, in their own words, the political system in Amorgia. They also completed a manipulation check, which asked them to select a statement that best described the political system in Amorgia (e.g. "The politicians are frequently involved in political conspiracies and corrupt practices", or "The politicians make transparent decisions that serve the citizens' needs"). After the manipulation check, participants responded to the four political system scales and the two mediator scales. All participants received a compensation of \$1.00.

Measures

A copy of the full material can be found here: <https://osf.io/udz3>. The following variables were measured on a scale from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree", unless noted otherwise. The four political systems, *Support for Representative Democracy* ($\alpha = .79$), *Support for Direct Democracy* ($\alpha = .83$), *Support for Anarchism* ($\alpha = .87$), and *Support for Autocracy* ($\alpha = .84$), were measured with the same items used in Study 1, adapted to the Amorgian context (e.g., "I would support a non-democratic regime if I believed that it would improve the economy and society of Amorgia"). Similarly, the two mediator variables, *Rejection of Status Quo* ($\alpha = .83$) and *Political Cynicism* ($\alpha = .94$), were measured with the same items used in Study 1 but adapted to the context of Study 2.

Manipulation check

Following our pre-registration, we excluded participants who had failed both manipulation checks (i.e., open-ended text and multiple choice). Only four participants failed both manipulation checks. The remaining participants ($N = 298$ or 98.7% of the initial sample) read and comprehended the information correctly.

Results

The descriptive statistics and correlations of all variables are presented in Table 2. The same correlation patterns as in Study 1 were observed.⁶ Consistent with our first pre-registered hypothesis, we used a one-way ANOVA to test the impact of the conspiracy view condition on preference for the set of four political systems, as well as the two mediators (rejection of the status quo and political cynicism).

Consistent with our hypothesis, participants in the conspiracy condition were less likely to support representative democracy compared to participants in the control condition ($M_{\text{conspiracy}} = 2.50$, $SD = 0.78$; $M_{\text{non-conspiracy}} = 3.50$, $SD = 0.74$; $F(1, 297) = 131.553$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .31$). On the contrary, participants in the conspiracy condition were more likely to support direct democracy ($M_{\text{conspiracy}} = 4.06$, $SD = 0.69$; $M_{\text{non-conspiracy}} = 3.27$, $SD = 0.63$; $F(1, 297) = 103.565$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .26$), anarchism ($M_{\text{conspiracy}} = 2.66$, $SD = 0.93$; $M_{\text{non-conspiracy}} = 1.66$, $SD = 0.80$; $F(1, 297) = 99.785$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .25$), and autocracy

⁶All results for Study 2 (correlations, mediation analyses and ANOVAs) remain consistent when we used the subset of items for Anarchism and Autocracy.

TABLE 2 US sample (Study 2) - Experiment.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Conspiracy (1 = conspiracy condition)	.51 (50)						
2. Rejection of the Status Quo	.871***	3.02 (1.38)					
3. Political Cynicism	.877***	.925***	2.96 (1.40)				
4. Support for Representative Democracy	-.557***	-.618***	-.489***	2.99 (.91)			
5. Support for Direct Democracy	.506***	.556***	.598***	-.489***	3.69 (.77)		
6. Support for Anarchism	.476***	.598***	.464***	-.422*	.388***	2.20 (1.00)	
7. Support for Autocracy	.312***	.387***	.369***	-.172***	.213***	.522***	2.20 (.81)

Note: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations in Study 2. Means and standard deviations (parenthesized) are reported in the diagonal. The total number of participants was $N = 298$. Other values present Pearson correlation coefficients.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

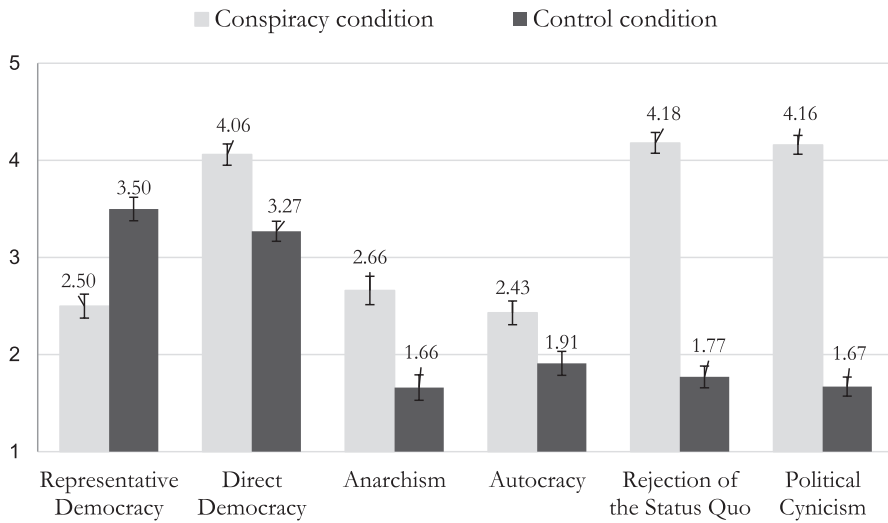


FIGURE 3 Means of the conspiracy versus control condition by each outcome variable. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

($M_{\text{conspiracy}} = 2.43$, $SD = 0.75$; $M_{\text{non-conspiracy}} = 1.90$, $SD = 0.75$; $F(1, 296) = 36.460$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$) compared to participants in the control condition.

Similarly, participants in the conspiracy condition were more likely to reject the status quo ($M_{\text{conspiracy}} = 4.18$, $SD = 0.68$; $M_{\text{non-conspiracy}} = 1.77$, $SD = 0.68$; $F(1, 297) = 928.049$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .76$) and exhibit feelings of political cynicism ($M_{\text{conspiracy}} = 4.16$, $SD = 0.64$; $M_{\text{non-conspiracy}} = 1.67$, $SD = 0.65$; $F(1, 297) = 1102.684$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .79$) compared to participants in the control condition. All effects are presented in Figure 3, together with 95% confidence intervals.

Mediation models

Following our pre-registered analysis plan, we ran four parallel mediation models (Hayes, 2013; SPSS macro; model 4). In each mediation model, we used a different political preference outcome as the dependent variable. We used the same two mediators (rejection of the status quo and cynicism) in all four mediation modes. In each model, multivariate outliers were excluded based on the median absolute deviation with a constant of three (Leys et al., 2019). The total number of observations varied slightly depending on the number of outliers each outcome scale had.

As shown in Figure 4, for support for representative democracy, there was a significant indirect effect through rejection of the status quo ($B = -0.53$, $SE = 0.20$, 95% CI = $[-0.93, -0.13]$) and political cynicism ($B = -0.64$, $SE = 0.23$, 95% CI = $[-1.14, -0.19]$). Next, for support for direct democracy, the effect through rejection of the status quo was significant ($B = 0.49$, $SE = 0.19$, 95% CI = $[0.10, 0.87]$), while through political cynicism it was not ($B = 0.25$, $SE = 0.21$, 95% CI = $[-0.17, 0.70]$). For support for anarchism, the indirect effects of both rejection of the status quo ($B = 0.54$, $SE = 0.25$, 95% CI = $[0.08, 1.05]$) and political cynicism ($B = 1.08$, $SE = 0.29$, 95% CI = $[0.53, 1.65]$) were significant. Lastly, in the model for support for autocracy, rejection of the status quo appeared to be a significant mediator ($B = 0.53$, $SE = 0.22$, 95% CI = $[0.09, 0.96]$), while political cynicism was not ($B = 0.30$, $SE = 0.26$, 95% CI = $[-0.25, 0.74]$).

Taken together, these findings indicate that the main effects of perceiving conspiracies on support for various alternative political systems were mediated mostly by a tendency to reject the status quo and somewhat less consistently by political cynicism.

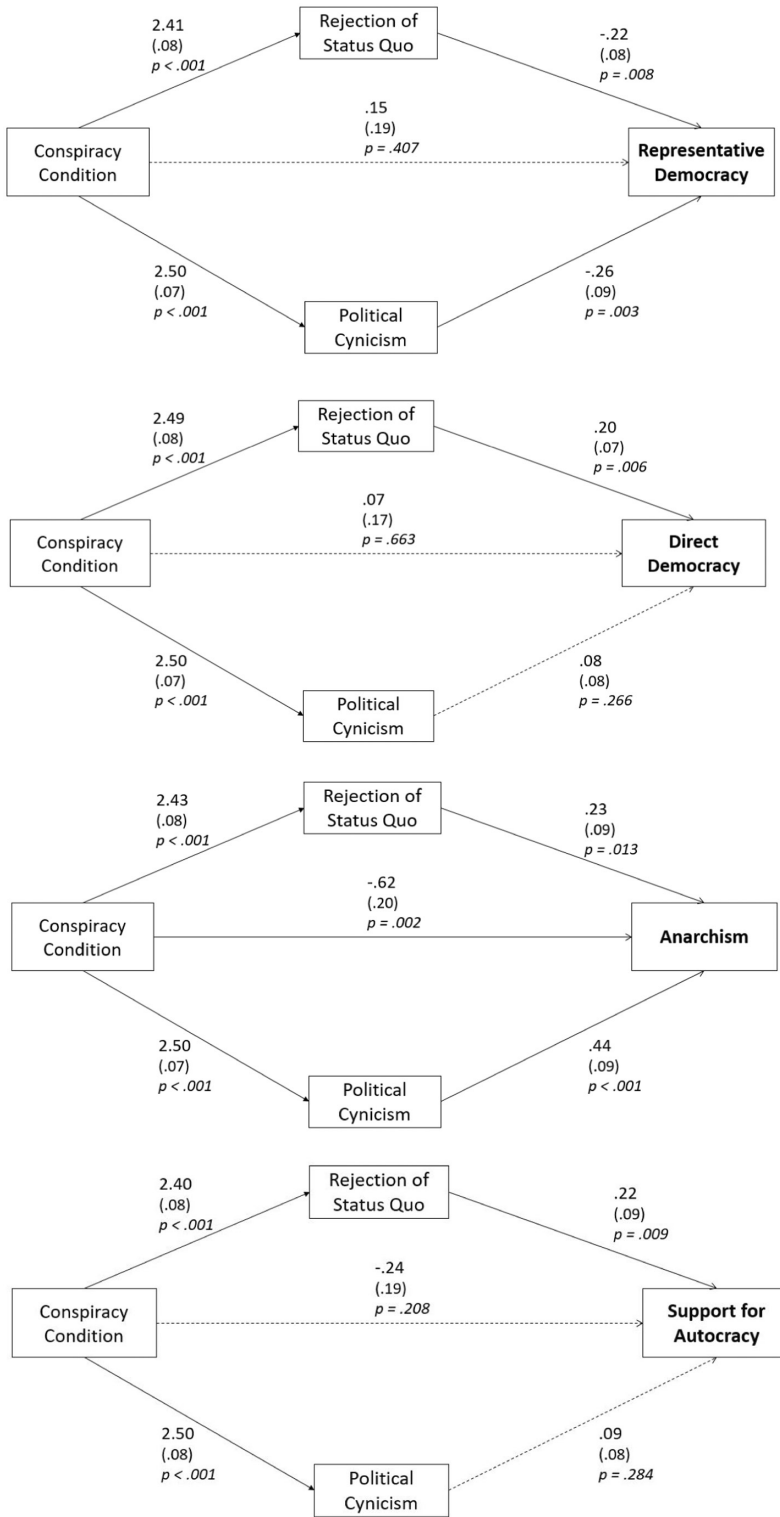


FIGURE 4 Four parallel mediation models with two moderators, Study 2. Dashed lines highlight non-significant relationships and solid lines highlight significant relationships ($p < .05$).

Discussion

Study 2 extended the Study 1 findings by showing that perceiving conspiracies causally decreases support for the hypothetical democratic system and increases support for alternative political systems (direct democracy, anarchism, and autocracy). While our findings suggest that rejection of the status quo and, to a lesser extent, political cynicism appear to mediate these political preferences, caution is warranted given that these analyses cannot directly establish causality. To address this limitation, we conducted an experimental study where the mediator (rejection of the status quo) was manipulated.

STUDY 3

In Study 3, we conducted an experiment where we aimed to directly manipulate rejection of the status quo (dissatisfaction vs. satisfaction with the status quo), our hypothesized mediator, in a fictional country called (“Ikaria”). As such, Study 3 is designed to provide evidence for a causal chain by experimentally manipulating the mediator (Spencer et al., 2005), which, according to the previous two studies, appears to be the most plausible. This experimental design specifically allowed us to examine whether rejecting the status quo causally increases support for alternative political systems while decreasing support for the existing one, namely representative democracy. We hypothesized that individuals in the dissatisfaction with the status quo condition would be more likely to support direct democracy, anarchism, and autocracy and less likely to support representative democracy than participants in the satisfaction condition.

We also hypothesized, and *pre-registered* as exploratory analysis, that participants in the rejecting the status quo condition would demonstrate a higher likelihood of believing in conspiracy theories. This consideration stemmed from the possibility of a bidirectional relationship between rejecting the status quo and believing in conspiracy theories. In a preceding study (Study 2), we provided evidence indicating that the perceived presence of conspiracies increases a disposition towards rejecting the status quo. However, this does not exclude the possibility of reverse causation (rejection of the status quo increases conspiracy beliefs).

Method

The study hypotheses and analysis plans were pre-registered in OSF (https://osf.io/bgrwn?view_only=794784db0169476e9ca3e0dbacab8c91). The study has formal ethical approval as part of an institutional cluster application by the third author.

Participants and procedure

According to our pre-registration, we recruited 400 participants from the United States through Prolific Academic (48.3% Male, 49.8% Female, 1.8% “Other” or “Prefer not to say”; $M_{\text{Age}} = 41.9$, $SD = 13.7$). This sample size would allow us to detect an effect of $f = 0.16$ or greater in a two-group ANOVA with .90 power at the .05 alpha level. In each model, multivariate outliers were excluded based on the median absolute deviation with a constant of three (Leys et al., 2019).

After providing their informed consent, participants read a short excerpt about Ikaria, containing information about the country's history, economy and political situation. In the excerpt, they also read that Ikaria is a representative democracy where citizens vote for their representatives every 4 years. The text was equivalent in all other respects, including word count and specific background information about the country.

Participants were randomly allocated to one of the two conditions. In rejecting the status quo condition ($n=197$), participants read that: “there is a widespread disappointment with how things have been happening over the past two decades, acknowledging that the existing system does not operate as intended”, and that citizens “are not very confident that the government can solve the country's problems”. On the other hand, participants in the satisfied with the status quo condition ($n=203$) read that: “there is overall approval of how things have been happening over the past two decades, acknowledging that the existing system operates as it should”.

To increase participants' involvement, we asked them to imagine being a citizen of the country when reading the information. After reading the excerpt, participants were asked to briefly summarize, in their own words, the political system in Ikaria. They also completed a manipulation check, which asked them to select a statement that best described the political system in Ikaria (e.g. “The political system needs to be restructured in order to serve the needs of its citizens” or “The political system operates as it should and citizens are generally satisfied with it”). After the manipulation check, participants responded to the four political system scales and the conspiracy mentality scale. All participants received a compensation of £1.05 (about \$1.35 at the time we ran the study).

Measures

A copy of the full material can be found here: <https://osf.io/pkf2b>. The four political systems were measured with the same items as in Studies 1 and 2. Items were adjusted to the country's new name (‘Ikaria’): *Support for Representative Democracy* ($\alpha = .86$), *Support for Direct Democracy* ($\alpha = .80$), *Support for Anarchism* ($\alpha = .91$) and *Support for Autocracy* ($\alpha = .82$). We also measured *Conspiracy Mentality* ($\alpha = .89$) with the same five items used in Study 1, adjusted to fit the context of the fictional country (e.g., “I think that there may be secret organizations in Ikaria that greatly influence political decisions”).

Manipulation check

Following our pre-registration, we excluded participants who had failed both manipulation checks (i.e., open-ended text and multiple choice). Seven participants failed both manipulation checks. The remaining participants ($N = 393$ or 98.2% of the initial sample) read and comprehended the information correctly.

Results

The descriptive statistics and correlations of all variables are presented in Table 3. Consistent with our first pre-registered hypothesis, we used a one-way ANOVA to test the impact of the rejection of the status quo manipulation on preference for the set of four political systems, as well as the conspiracy mentality scale.⁷

Consistent with our hypothesis, participants in the dissatisfaction with the status quo condition were less likely to support representative democracy compared to participants in the satisfaction condition ($M_{\text{rejectingstatusquo}} = 2.79$, $SD = 0.82$; $M_{\text{control}} = 3.51$, $SD = 0.74$; $F(1, 391) = 83.486$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$). Participants in the rejecting the status quo condition were more likely to support direct democracy ($M_{\text{rejectstatusquo}} = 3.99$, $SD = 0.56$; $M_{\text{control}} = 3.42$, $SD = 0.65$; $F(1, 386) = 82.025$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$), anarchism ($M_{\text{rejectingstatusquo}} = 2.25$, $SD = 0.91$; $M_{\text{control}} = 1.58$, $SD = 0.77$; $F(1, 388) = 61.995$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .14$), and autocracy ($M_{\text{rejectingstatusquo}} = 2.43$, $SD = 0.79$; $M_{\text{control}} = 2.03$, $SD = 0.76$; $F(1, 392) = 25.747$, $p < .001$,

⁷All results for Study 3 (correlations, mediation analyses and ANOVAs) remain consistent when we used the subset of items for Anarchism and Autocracy.

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics and correlations in Study 3 – Experiment.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Rejection of Status Quo (1 = rejecting the status quo condition)	.51 (.53)					
2. Support for Representative Democracy	-.388***	3.16 (.86)				
3. Support for Direct Democracy	.379***	-.398***	3.67 (.71)			
4. Support for Anarchism	.359***	-.187***	.334***	1.95 (.94)		
5. Support for Autocracy	.265***	.040	.273***	.521***	2.23 (.81)	
6. Conspiracy Mentality	.574***	-.357***	.444***	.542***	.413***	2.95 (.97)

Note: Means and standard deviations (parenthesized) reported in the diagonal. Total number of participants were $N = 400$. Other values present Pearson correlation coefficients.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

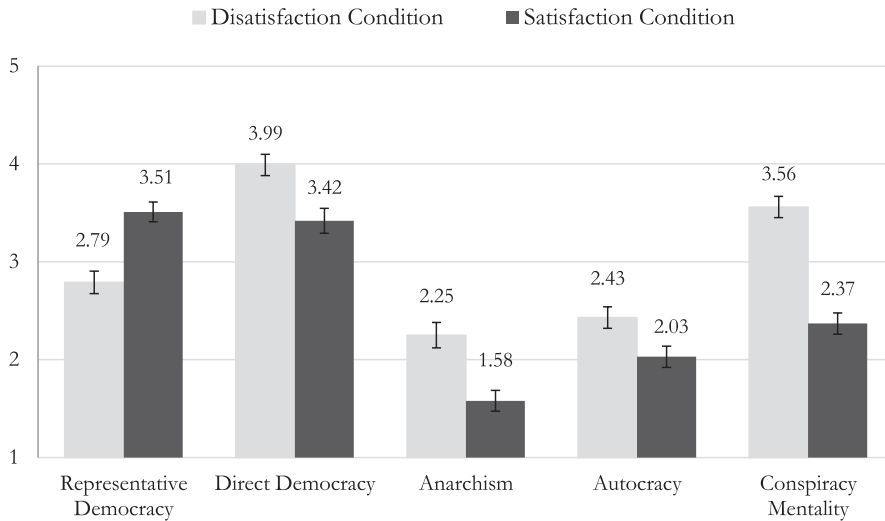


FIGURE 5 Means of the dissatisfaction versus satisfaction with the status quo condition by each outcome variable. Bars represent 95% Confidence Intervals.

$\eta^2 = .06$) compared to participants in the satisfaction condition. Lastly, participants in the rejecting the status quo condition were more likely to exhibit higher belief in conspiracy theories ($M_{\text{rejectingstatusquo}} = 3.56$, $SD = 0.76$; $M_{\text{control}} = 2.37$, $SD = 0.80$; $F(1, 392) = 226.298$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .37$). All effects are presented in Figure 5, together with 95% confidence intervals.

Discussion

Study 3 extended the Study 2 findings by showing that rejecting the status quo causally decreases support for the current democratic system and increases support for alternative political systems (direct democracy, anarchism, and autocracy). These findings add further evidence for the role of status quo rejection that we established in Studies 1 and 2.

Our study reveals that rejecting the status quo also increases belief in conspiracy theories. This complements the Study 2 findings showing that the perceived presence of conspiracies increases

people's rejection of the status quo. This suggests a bidirectional relationship between the two variables and might even imply that these variables mutually reinforce one another. In other words, it may be plausible that individuals who are already inclined to believe in conspiracy theories may be more predisposed to reject the status quo. Future research could look into this possibility in greater detail.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

A paradox in the literature exists as to whether conspiracy beliefs are a fundamental threat to democratic support or a driver of more democratic political systems. In this article, we show that they can be both, to the extent that conspiracy beliefs are linked to rejection of the status quo and, to a lesser extent, political cynicism. Study 1 found a positive relationship between conspiracy beliefs and support for direct democracy, anarchism, and autocracy and a negative relationship with support for representative democracy. Study 2 extended these findings by showing that manipulating the perceived existence of conspiracies makes participants more likely to support alternative political systems over representative democracy. Both studies also suggest that rejection of the status quo and less consistently political cynicism mediated the link between conspiracy beliefs and support for the various political systems. Study 3 allowed us to examine whether rejecting the status quo causally increases support for alternative political systems while decreasing support for representative democracy. Consistent with our hypotheses, we find that individuals in the rejecting the status quo condition were more likely to support direct democracy, anarchism, and autocracy and less likely to support representative democracy, than participants in the control condition.

Our results suggest several repercussions for representative democracies. It is often argued that citizens' desire for an alternative political system emerges during periods of widespread disillusionment with established political institutions and systems (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Here we show that conspiracy beliefs constitute a synchronic characteristic that can differentiate people who wish to reject the status quo and advocate for a change in the political system. What is surprising is that this change may involve both forms of governance that give citizens more say in the political processes (like in direct democracy or anarchism) and support non-democratic systems like autocracy, attributing excessive power to a strong leader. An explanation for this paradox is that conspiracy beliefs are associated with a perception of existing institutions as unfair (van Prooijen, 2022), and a wish to change things as they are, thus promoting the sentiment of "anything but this".

Existing literature often assumes that belief in conspiracy theories is linked to dissatisfaction with the current social and political system (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994; Pantazi et al., 2022). Such beliefs encompass distrust, cynicism, and resistance against elites and the status quo (Papaioannou et al., 2023a). By casting doubt on powerful figures and institutions, conspiracy thinking fosters a profound distrust of the established order (Butter & Knight, 2020; Papaioannou et al., 2023b; Swami & Furnham, 2014). Conspiracy beliefs can also cast doubt on the good intentions of established institutions and their leaders (Papaioannou, 2024). Such beliefs also raise scepticism about the good intentions of institutions and leaders, potentially fuelling anger and motivating political action (Federico, 2022). Overall, this literature suggests that conspiracy theories are associated with a tendency to challenge or derogate the social system.

On the other hand, however, the process of social and political change can be inherently stressful and unsettling for individuals Jost and Hunyady (2003). Change often brings about a sense of uncertainty, insecurity, and a loss of control over familiar structures and values (Sampson, 1989). Past research has argued that in response to uncertainty and change, individuals may turn to conspiracy beliefs as a coping mechanism (Jolley et al., 2018), which assigns blame to external forces or hidden actors and deflects the pressure of wrongdoing from the system itself (Jolley et al., 2018; Mao et al., 2021). Indeed, system-justification theory (Jost, 2020) explains why individuals often defend and justify existing social, economic and political systems, even when these systems might seem to work against their self-interests

and values (Jost et al., 2004). For example, Jolley et al. (2018) suggested that by blaming tragedies, disasters, and social problems on the actions of a malign few, conspiracy theories can redirect focus away from the intrinsic constraints of social systems. Through this lens, conspiracy beliefs can support and justify the status quo, despite its flaws.

The debate about whether people who believe in conspiracies would bolster support for the status quo has gained fresh prominence, with many scholars contesting that conspiracy beliefs are always associated with support for the status quo; indeed, conspiracy theories about one's own government decrease system justification (Mao et al., 2023). Our findings contribute to this literature by suggesting that (at least on some occasions) conspiracy beliefs are associated with individuals' widespread dissatisfaction with the system, and, as a result, individuals may seek for an alternative system that promotes their interests. Dissatisfied individuals often hold a zero-sum game mentality towards social life (Papaioannou et al., 2023a, 2023b), which in turn can explain why they would support ideologies that promise to overthrow the status quo (Imhoff et al., 2022). To illustrate, anarchists would hold a more cynical view about the political system and, as a result, would support a more radical change to it (Ward, 2004).

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to test the link between conspiracy beliefs and support for democratic and non-democratic systems in a single, uniformed framework. Our findings, thus, suggest that the same individuals may be led to apparently contradicting political choices, likely because they reject the status quo. As such, the findings presented here integrate seemingly incompatible previous findings that conspiracy beliefs are associated with support for both democratic (i.e., direct democracy; Pantazi et al., 2022) and undemocratic systems (Papaioannou et al., 2023b).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our studies have important limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, we have used vignette experimental designs based on a fictional country. Although this methodological design allows us to reach our conclusion regarding the causal direction of the relevant relationships, it raises questions as to whether this effect could be observed in the actual countries of the participants. As a remedy for this limitation, in Study 1, we obtained correlational data surveying individuals about their own country (the United Kingdom), thus enhancing the ecological validity of our conclusions. More research is needed, however, to also show the causal effects under investigation here in more real-life settings.

Second, although we have identified two mediators driving the link between conspiracy beliefs and alternative political systems (and have identified causal evidence for one of these mediators, rejection of the status quo), it is possible that other processes contribute to this link as well. The literature has identified other mechanisms between conspiracy beliefs and (non-)democratic support, including feelings of powerlessness (Papaioannou et al., 2023b), belief in simple solutions (Pantazi et al., 2022), and a zero-sum game (Papaioannou et al., 2023a). Future studies could investigate a broader range of possible mediators.

Third, it is worth noting that our research was inspired by popular concerns about the corroding effects of conspiracy theories on contemporary democracies. Thus, we only tested our argument in countries where representative democracy is the status quo. Nonetheless, the dynamics may differ in countries where autocracy (or direct democracy) is the established norm, raising the intriguing question of whether conspiracy beliefs would positively predict support for representative democracy in such contexts. Further exploration in such settings could offer valuable insights into the universality or context-dependency of the observed psychological mechanisms.

Finally, many studies have pointed out the difference between political attitudes and behaviour (Ajzen, 2014; Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008; Regan & Fazio, 1977; Schuman & Johnson, 1976). It is one thing to express support for one political system in a questionnaire; actually, voting for a party or a leader is a different issue. Some research suggests that attitudes can serve as reliable predictors of political behaviour (Akkerman et al., 2014; Arcuri et al., 2008). It is important to recognize that attitudes can be dynamic and subject to change, however (Albarracín et al., 2014; Curini, 2020; Keman

& Woldendorp, 2016), as they are influenced by factors such as media coverage and external political events.

CONCLUSION

The present research was designed to deepen our understanding as to why conspiracy beliefs are associated with support for both democratic and undemocratic forms of governance and to unravel the key underlying factors that drive these relationships. Evidence from the two studies supports the idea that particularly rejection of the status quo and, to a lesser extent, also feelings of political cynicism mediate the link between conspiracy beliefs and support for different political systems. Our results call for a more nuanced reconceptualization of the political preferences of conspiracist individuals, who seem to favour any political system other than the one currently in place. While a general dissatisfaction with the current status quo and a widespread cynicism towards political elites can explain why individuals turn their backs on existing democratic systems, questions remain. The present study trails an avenue of inquiry into the political consequences of endorsing conspiracy theories, along with their subsequent implications for liberal democracies.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Kostas Papaioannou: Conceptualization; methodology; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; project administration; data curation; software. **Myrto Pantazi:** Conceptualization; methodology; validation; funding acquisition; writing – review and editing; writing – original draft; resources. **Jan-Willem van Prooijen:** Funding acquisition; writing – review and editing; writing – original draft; resources; conceptualization; methodology; validation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this work.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Open Science Framework (OSF) at <https://osf.io/m93j7/contributors/>.

ORCID

Kostas Papaioannou  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4661-5743>

REFERENCES

- Abalakina-Paap, M., Stephan, W. G., Craig, T., & Gregory, W. L. (1999). Beliefs in conspiracies. *Political Psychology, 20*(3), 637–647.
- Ajzen, I. (2014). Attitude structure and behavior. In A. R. Pratkanis, S. J. Breckler, & A. G. Greenwald (Eds.), *Attitude structure and function* (pp. 241–274). Psychology Press.
- Akkerman, A., Mudde, C., & Zaslove, A. (2014). How populist are the people? Measuring populist attitudes in voters. *Comparative Political Studies, 47*(9), 1324–1353.
- Albarracín, D., Johnson, B. T., & Zanna, M. P. (2014). *The handbook of attitudes*. Psychology Press.
- Alper, S. (2023). There are higher levels of conspiracy beliefs in more corrupt countries. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 53*(3), 503–517.
- Altman, D. (2010). *Direct democracy worldwide*. Cambridge University Press.
- Andrain, C. F., & Apter, D. E. (1995). *Political protest and social change* (pp. 96–97). Macmillan.
- Arcuri, L., Castelli, L., Galdi, S., Zogmaister, C., & Amadori, A. (2008). Predicting the vote: Implicit attitudes as predictors of the future behavior of decided and undecided voters. *Political Psychology, 29*(3), 369–387.
- Bortolotti, L. (2023). Is it pathological to believe conspiracy theories? *Transcultural Psychiatry*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634615231187243>

- Bruder, M., Haffke, P., Neave, N., Nouripanah, N., & Imhoff, R. (2013). Measuring individual differences in generic beliefs in conspiracy theories across cultures: Conspiracy mentality questionnaire. *Frontiers in Psychology, 4*(April), 225. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00225>
- Butter, M., & Knight, P. (Eds.). (2020). *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories*. Routledge.
- Curini, L. (2020). *The SAGE handbook of research methods in political science and international relations*. Sage.
- Curtin, N., Stewart, A. J., & Cole, E. R. (2015). Challenging the status quo: The role of intersectional awareness in activism for social change and pro-social intergroup attitudes. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 39*(4), 512–529.
- Demertzis, N. (2013). Of cynicism, political cynicism, and political marketing. In *Political marketing* (pp. 12–26). Routledge.
- Dentith, M. R. (Ed.). (2018). *Taking conspiracy theories seriously*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Dhont, K., Van Hiel, A., Pattyn, S., Onraet, E., & Severens, E. (2012). A step into the anarchist's mind: Examining political attitudes and ideology through event-related brain potentials. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience, 7*(3), 296–303.
- Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2011). Does it take one to know one? Endorsement of conspiracy theories is influenced by personal willingness to conspire. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 50*(3), 544–552.
- Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology, 40*, 3–35.
- Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A. G., & Buchner, A. (2007). G* power 3: A flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behavior Research Methods, 39*(2), 175–191.
- Federico, C. M. (2022). The complex relationship between conspiracy belief and the politics of social change. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 47*, 101354.
- Fiedler, K., Schott, M., & Meiser, T. (2011). What mediation analysis can (not) do. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 47*(6), 1231–1236.
- Franks, B., Bangerter, A., Bauer, M. W., Hall, M., & Noort, M. C. (2017). Beyond “monologicality”? *Exploring conspiracist worldviews. Frontiers in psychology, 8*, 250235.
- Goertzel, T. (1994). Belief in conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology, 15*, 731–742.
- Guerin, D. (1970). *Anarchism: From theory to practice* (Vol. 175). NYU Press.
- Harambam, J., & Aupers, S. (2015). Contesting epistemic authority: Conspiracy theories on the boundaries of science. *Public Understanding of Science, 24*(4), 466–480.
- Hayes, A. F. (2013). Mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis. *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach, 1*(6), 12–20.
- Hooghe, M., & Wilkenfeld, B. (2008). The stability of political attitudes and behaviors across adolescence and early adulthood: A comparison of survey data on adolescents and young adults in eight countries. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 37*, 155–167.
- Husting, G., & Orr, M. (2007). Dangerous machinery: “conspiracy theorist” as a transpersonal strategy of exclusion. *Symbolic Interaction, 30*(2), 127–150.
- Imhoff, R. (2015). Beyond (right-wing) authoritarianism. In M. Bilewicz, A. Cichocka, & W. Soral (Eds.), *The psychology of conspiracy* (pp. 122–142). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Imhoff, R., & Bruder, M. (2014). Speaking (un-)truth to power: Conspiracy mentality as a generalised political attitude. *European Journal of Personality, 28*(1), 25–43. <https://doi.org/10.1002/per.1930>
- Imhoff, R., Dieterle, L., & Lamberty, P. (2021). Resolving the puzzle of conspiracy worldview and political activism: Belief in secret plots decreases normative but increases non-normative political engagement. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 12*(1), 71–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550619896491>
- Imhoff, R., Zimmer, F., Klein, O., António, J. H., Babinska, M., Bangerter, A., Bilewicz, M., Blanuša, N., Bovan, K., Bužarovska, R., Cichocka, A., Delouvée, S., Douglas, K. M., Dyrendal, A., Etienne, T., Gjoneska, B., Graf, S., Gualda, E., Hirschberger, G., ... Van Prooijen, J. W. (2022). Conspiracy mentality and political orientation across 26 countries. *Nature Human Behaviour, 6*(3), 392–403.
- Jolley, D., Douglas, K. M., Leite, A. C., & Schrader, T. (2019). Belief in conspiracy theories and intentions to engage in everyday crime. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 58*(3), 534–549.
- Jolley, D., Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2018). Blaming a few bad apples to save a threatened barrel: The system-justifying function of conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology, 39*(2), 465–478.
- Jolley, D., Marques, M. D., & Cookson, D. (2022). Shining a spotlight on the dangerous consequences of conspiracy theories. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 47*, 101363.
- Jost, J., & Hunyady, O. (2003). The psychology of system justification and the palliative function of ideology. *European Review of Social Psychology, 13*(1), 111–153.
- Jost, J. T. (2020). *A theory of system justification*. Harvard University Press.
- Jost, J. T., Banaji, M. R., & Nosek, B. A. (2004). A decade of system justification theory: Accumulated evidence of conscious and unconscious bolstering of the status quo. *Political Psychology, 25*(6), 881–919.
- Keeley, B. L. (1999). Of conspiracy theories. *The Journal of Philosophy, 96*(3), 109–126.
- Keman, H., & Woldendorp, J. J. (Eds.). (2016). *Handbook of research methods and applications in political science*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Kofta, M., & Soral, W. (2019). Belief in the round table conspiracy and political division in Poland. *Social Psychological Bulletin, 14*(4), 1–19.

- Leys, C., Delacre, M., Mora, Y. L., Lakens, D., & Ley, C. (2019). How to classify, detect, and manage univariate and multivariate outliers, with emphasis on pre-registration. *International Review of Social Psychology*, 32(1), 5.
- Mao, J. Y., van Prooijen, J. W., Yang, S. L., & Guo, Y. Y. (2021). System threat during a pandemic: How conspiracy theories help to justify the system. *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology*, 15, 18344909211057001.
- Mao, J. Y., Zeng, Z. X., Yang, S. L., Guo, Y. Y., & van Prooijen, J. W. (2023). Explaining the paradox of conspiracy theories and system-justifying beliefs from an intergroup perspective. *Political Psychology*, 45(2), 299–318.
- Mari, S., Gil de Zuniga, H., Suerdem, A., Hanke, K., Brown, G., Vilar, R., Boer, D., & Bilewicz, M. (2022). Conspiracy theories and institutional trust: Examining the role of uncertainty avoidance and active social media use. *Political Psychology*, 43(2), 277–296.
- Mari, S., Volpato, C., Papastamou, S., Chrysochoou, X., Prodromitis, G., & Pavlopoulos, V. (2017). How political orientation and vulnerability shape representations of the economic crisis in Greece and Italy. *International Review of Social Psychology*, 30(1), 52–67.
- Meuer, M., & Imhoff, R. (2021). Believing in hidden plots is associated with decreased behavioral trust: Conspiracy belief as greater sensitivity to social threat or insensitivity towards its absence? *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 93, 104081.
- Moore, A. (2016). Conspiracy and conspiracy theories in democratic politics. *Critical Review*, 28(1), 1–23.
- Moskalenko, S., & McCauley, C. (2009). Measuring political mobilization: The distinction between activism and radicalism. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 21(2), 239–260.
- Niven, D. (2000). The other side of optimism: High expectations and the rejection of status quo politics. *Political Behavior*, 22, 71–88.
- Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019). *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Olson, M. (1991). Autocracy, democracy, and prosperity. *Strategy and Choice*, 131(157), 131–157.
- O'Mahony, C., Brassil, M., Murphy, G., & Linehan, C. (2023). The efficacy of interventions in reducing belief in conspiracy theories: A systematic review. *PLoS One*, 18(4), e0280902.
- Pantazi, M., Papaioannou, K., & van Prooijen, J. W. (2022). Power to the people: The hidden link between support for direct democracy and belief in conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, 43(3), 529–548.
- Papaioannou, K. (2024). *An arena of angry minds?: Uncovering hidden connections: Conspiracy theories, populism and democratic support (Doctoral dissertation)*. Αριστοτέλειο Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλονίκης (ΑΠΘ).
- Papaioannou, K., Pantazi, M., & van Prooijen, J. W. (2023a). Unravelling the relationship between populism and belief in conspiracy theories: The role of cynicism, powerlessness and zero-sum thinking. *British Journal of Psychology*, 114(1), 159–175.
- Papaioannou, K., Pantazi, M., & van Prooijen, J. W. (2023b). Is democracy under threat? Why belief in conspiracy theories predicts autocratic attitudes. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 53(5), 846–856.
- Papaioannou, K. J., & Van Zanden, J. L. (2015). The dictator effect: How long years in office affect economic development. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 11(1), 111–139.
- Pattyn, S., Van Hiel, A., Dhont, K., & Onraet, E. (2012). Stripping the political cynic: A psychological exploration of the concept of political cynicism. *European Journal of Personality*, 26(6), 566–579.
- Pipes, D. (1999). *Conspiracy: How the paranoid style flourishes and where it comes from*. Simon and Schuster.
- Regan, D. T., & Fazio, R. (1977). On the consistency between attitudes and behavior: Look to the method of attitude formation. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 13(1), 28–45.
- Rottweiler, B., & Gill, P. (2022). Conspiracy beliefs and violent extremist intentions: The contingent effects of self-efficacy, self-control and law-related morality. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 34(7), 1485–1504.
- Sampson, E. E. (1989). The challenge of social change for psychology: Globalization and psychology's theory of the person. *American Psychologist*, 44(6), 914–921.
- Schuman, H., & Johnson, M. P. (1976). Attitudes and behavior. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2(1), 161–207.
- Spencer, S. J., Zanna, M. P., & Fong, G. T. (2005). Establishing a causal chain: Why experiments are often more effective than mediational analyses in examining psychological processes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89(6), 845–851.
- Swami, V., & Coles, R. (2010). The truth is out there: Belief in conspiracy theories. *The Psychologist*, 23(7), 560–563.
- Swami, V., & Furnham, A. (2014). Political paranoia and conspiracy theories. In van Prooijen, J. W. & van Lange, P. A. M. (Eds.), *Power, politics, and paranoia: Why people are suspicious of their leaders* (pp. 218–236). Cambridge University Press.
- Tullock, G. (2012). *Autocracy*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Van Hiel, A. (2012). A psycho-political profile of party activists and left-wing and right-wing extremists. *European Journal of Political Research*, 51(2), 166–203.
- Van Hiel, A., Van Assche, J., Haesevoets, T., De Cremer, D., & Hodson, G. (2022). A radical vision of radicalism: Political cynicism, not increasingly stronger partisan positions, explains political radicalization. *Political Psychology*, 43, 3–28.
- Van Prooijen, J.-W. (2022). Injustice without evidence: The unique role of conspiracy theories in social justice research. *Social Justice Research*, 35, 88–106.
- Van Prooijen, J. W., Krouwel, A. P., & Pollet, T. V. (2015). Political extremism predicts belief in conspiracy theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 6(5), 570–578.

- Van Prooijen, J. W., Spadaro, G., & Wang, H. (2022). Suspicion of institutions: How distrust and conspiracy theories deteriorate social relationships. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *43*, 65–69.
- Van Prooijen, J. W., & Van Lange, P. A. (2014). *Power, politics, and paranoia: Why people are suspicious of their leaders*. Cambridge University Press.
- van Prooijen, J. W., Währing, I., Mausolf, L., Mulas, N., & Shwan, S. (2023). Just Dead, not Alive: Reconsidering belief in contradictory conspiracy theories. *Psychological science*, *34*(6), 670–682.
- Ward, C. (2004). *Anarchism: A very short introduction* (Vol. 116). Oxford University Press.
- Wolff, R. P. (1998). *In defense of anarchism*. Univ of California Press.
- Zonis, M., & Joseph, C. M. (1994). Conspiracy thinking in the Middle East. *Political Psychology*, *15*, 443–459.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Papaioannou, K., Pantazi, M., & van Prooijen, J.-W. (2024). Rejection of the status quo: *Conspiracy theories and preference for alternative political systems*. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *63*, 2077–2099. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12754>