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Right-wing authoritarianism as a predictor of pro-establishment versus anti-establishment
conspiracy theories

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Acknowledgements

This research was supported by internal funding from the University of Winchester.

Abstract

Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) has shown inconsistent results as a predictor of beliefs in conspiracy theories (CTs). The present investigation attempted to clarify these results by separating anti-establishment CTs, which challenge the existing social order, from pro-establishment CTs, which seek to justify and reinforce it against external threats. In two MTurk samples ($N = 294, 200$), RWA correlated strongly with pro-establishment CTs but weakly with anti-establishment CTs. Regression analyses suggest that after controlling for exposure to the CTs, this gap in the predictive power of RWA can be explained by differences in attitudes toward their alleged perpetrators, highlighting the importance of intergroup attitudes as an important driver of CT endorsement.

Scholars have long speculated that conspiracy theories (CTs; allegations regarding collusion among powerful actors to achieve sinister ends through deception; Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012) are a signature feature of the authoritarian personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). Although many recent studies have confirmed that there is probably a positive correlation between right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and conspiracy belief, several other investigations have found no association between the two. At the moment, there is no obvious reason for these conflicting results (for a review, see Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015).

Some of the issue may lie with imprecise effect size estimates. For example, McHoskey (1995) reported an unusual negative correlation between RWA and conspiracy belief, but the sample was small ($N=33$) and the correlation was only significant with an unreported one-tailed test. Another part of the issue may be psychologists' tendency to treat conspiracy

beliefs as a more or less unitary construct – understandable, as conspiracy belief scales tend to load on a single factor, and CT beliefs intercorrelate strongly regardless of their content (Sutton & Douglas, 2014). However, while some CTs clearly reinforce the RWA view of the world as a threatening place in which survival depends on obedience, adherence to tradition, and socially sanctioned aggression against outsiders (Duckitt & Sibley, 2007), other CTs posit a view of mainstream authorities as corrupt despots who must be disobeyed, and traditions as top-down control mechanisms for an unaware public (Byford, 2011) Considering these subtypes of CT separately – and recruiting enough participants for more precise effect size estimates – might explain some of the divergent results regarding RWA.

Consistent with this idea, RWA is a relatively consistent positive predictor of so-called *conspiracy stereotypes* – CTs about relatively large outgroups, such as Jews or Russians – but is less reliably correlated with beliefs in CTs about specific events or with general conspiracy mentality (Bilewicz & Sedek, 2015; Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015).¹ With the aim of clarifying under what circumstances RWA correlates with particular conspiracy beliefs, we test here whether RWA predicts two separate types of relatively specific CT: theories that propose a conspiracy among the existing establishment (e.g., governments abusing their power) and theories that propose a conspiracy against that establishment (e.g., minority groups conspiring against the social order). Authoritarians tend to be vigilant against threats to the stability of the current social order and the cohesion of valued ingroups (Duckitt & Sibley, 2007), so RWA should predict stronger agreement with CTs that threaten an ingroup authority. On the other hand, CTs that portray the present establishment as corrupt and unworthy of obedience should be less appealing to high authoritarians. These relationships should occur independently of social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) which tends to correlate with RWA and has also shown correlations with conspiracy beliefs (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015).

Study 1

Method

Participants and Design

300 participants were initially recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk; for a discussion of the validity of MTurk data, see Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). After eliminating ineligible participants, duplicates, and anyone who took less than 90 seconds, 294 participants were retained (176 male, 117 female, 1 unspecified) with a mean age of 33.83 (SD = 11.01). All participants were U.S. residents and had an MTurk approval rate of at least 90%, and were paid \$3 each for their participation. The data were collected during the second term of Barack Obama's presidency. Study 1 was correlational, and measured beliefs in two different types of CT, along with RWA and SDO.

Materials and Procedure

After giving informed consent, participants were given three scales in a randomized, counterbalanced order. The 30-item RWA scale ($\alpha = .96$; Altemeyer, 1988) asked participants to rate their agreement with statements such as "Obedience is the most important virtue children should learn" on a -3 (*strongly disagree*) to +3 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale. The SDO scale ($\alpha = .96$; Pratto et al., 1994) asked participants to rate their feelings on 16 statements (8 reverse coded), e.g., "Inferior groups should stay in their place," on a 1 (*very negative*) to 7 (*very positive*) Likert scale.

Conspiracy beliefs were measured by agreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) with 7 pro-establishment CTs (e.g., "Many of the foreigners coming into this country are here as part of a deliberate plan to radically change our society," $\alpha = .88$) and 7 anti-establishment CTs (e.g., "Those in power are secretly campaigning to destroy individual freedom in this country," $\alpha = .90$). Following the questionnaires, participants were debriefed and paid via MTurk.

Results

Pearson correlations between measures can be seen in Table 1. Pro- and anti-establishment CT beliefs were strongly intercorrelated. The correlation with RWA was significantly stronger for pro-establishment than for anti-establishment CT belief, Fisher's $z = 11.45, p < .001$ (Lee & Preacher, 2013). Standard multiple linear regression analyses showed that pro-establishment CT belief was significantly predicted by both RWA ($\beta = .41, t(293) = 7.52, p < .001$) and SDO ($\beta = .24, t(293) = 4.36, p < .001$). However, anti-establishment CT belief was predicted only by SDO ($\beta = .18, t(293) = 2.71, p = .007$); RWA was not a significant predictor ($\beta = -.005, t(293) = -.29, p = .773$).

Discussion

As predicted, pro-establishment CT beliefs correlated positively with RWA, and this relationship was independent of SDO. Unexpectedly, anti-establishment CT beliefs were uncorrelated, rather than negatively correlated, with RWA.

We expected an RWA/pro-establishment correlation because pro-establishment CTs propose a plot to overthrow the existing social order. The prospect of a fifth-column subversion of a valued ingroup would threaten authoritarians (just as the potential disruption of the status quo presents a salient threat to high social dominators and system justifiers). However, CTs generally seem more plausible when they implicate a generally disliked outgroup (Radnitz & Underwood, 2015) and when people are repeatedly exposed to them (Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010). High RWAs may simply dislike the minority or deviant groups who are supposedly behind pro-establishment CTs, or have more exposure to these CTs via their cultural milieu. Finally, openness to experience correlates negatively with RWA and attitudes toward minority groups, and positively with at least some conspiracy beliefs (Swami et al., 2010). A positive relationship between RWA and pro-establishment CT beliefs might therefore reflect a mutual negative relationship with openness

to experience. Study 2 set out to test whether these factors could account for the stronger RWA/pro-establishment CT correlation.

Study 2

Method

Participants and Design

200 MTurk participants (71 female, 128 male, 1 other; mean age 33.37, SD = 9.58) took part in exchange for US\$2.00 each. All participants were U.S. residents with an MTurk approval rating of at least 90%; none were excluded from analysis. The data were collected during the second term of Barack Obama's presidency. Study 2 followed a correlational design.

Materials and Procedure

After giving informed consent, participants were presented with four questionnaires in counterbalanced order: the 30-item RWA scale ($\alpha = .88$), measures of beliefs and exposure to the CTs from Study 1, attitudes toward alleged perpetrator groups, and openness to experience.

The belief/exposure measure followed Swami et al. (2010). After rating their agreement with each pro- and anti-establishment theory, participants rated on a 7-point Likert scale the degree to which they heard about the theory from friends, in rallies, and through various media. These items were averaged across each theory type to create a composite exposure score. Separately, participants rated their attitudes toward the alleged perpetrators of each CT, such as immigrants or corporations, on a 1 (*extremely negative*) – 7 (*extremely positive*) Likert scale. For anti-establishment theories, agreement $\alpha = .86$, exposure $\alpha = .89$, attitudes $\alpha = .80$; for pro-establishment theories, agreement $\alpha = .85$, exposure $\alpha = .88$, attitudes $\alpha = .69$.

Finally, a 10-item measure of openness to experience was included ($\alpha = .83$; Goldberg et al., 2006). Participants rated how much 10 statements (e.g., "I have a vivid imagination"),

2 reverse-coded, applied to them on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) Likert scale. Following the questionnaires, participants viewed a debriefing and received their payment as in Study 1.

Results & Discussion

RWA correlated strongly and significantly with pro-establishment CT agreement ($r = .618, p < .001$). Unlike Study 1, RWA also correlated with anti-establishment CT agreement ($r = .245, p < .001$), though not as strongly (Fisher's $z = 4.68, p < .001$). Agreement with each kind of CT correlated very strongly with exposure to it ($r_s > .70$) and moderately with attitudes toward the relevant perpetrator groups ($r_s > .40$); see Table 2.

Contributors to both types of CT were investigated using standard multiple regression analyses (see Table 3). Pro-establishment CT agreement was regressed on pro-establishment CT exposure, pro-establishment CT perpetrator attitudes, RWA, and openness. The model explained the majority of variance in agreement, $R^2 = .72$, with only openness failing to contribute a significant proportion of variance, $t(195) = -.58, p = .56$. Anti-establishment CT agreement was likewise regressed on exposure, attitudes, RWA, and openness. This model also explained the majority of anti-establishment CT variance, $R^2 = .63$. Only openness was not a significant predictor, $t(195) = -1.08, p = .28$. A cross-model comparison showed no significant difference in RWA's predictive power between the two models (for pro-establishment, $\beta = .290, SE = .051$; for anti-establishment, $\beta = .185, SE = .055; Z = 1.41, p = .15$).

General Discussion

Both studies demonstrated differences in how CTs correlate with authoritarianism. Alone or when controlling for SDO, RWA is a stronger predictor of pro-establishment than anti-establishment CT belief. This leaves at least two possibilities: first, pro-establishment CTs seem more plausible to high authoritarians because they tend to implicate disliked outgroups; second, they propose threats to the established social order and ingroup

authorities, which high authoritarians are more sensitive to. This type of threat, though not measured directly here, is known to be an important determinant of conspiracy theory belief (Federico, Williams, & Vitriol, 2018; Jolley, Douglas, & Sutton, 2018). However, Study 2 suggests that intergroup attitudes are also a likely moderating variable, since much of the gap in the predictive power of RWA was eliminated when attitudes toward alleged perpetrator groups were taken into account. Indeed, the difference in RWA slopes across regression models did not reach significance – though this is not strong evidence against the existence of any difference at all, and both RWA slopes were still significantly above zero.

Taken together, the results of the present study suggest that RWA correlates differentially with different types of conspiracy theories. The most parsimonious explanation seems to be that individual theories have specific contextual effects that change their relationship with ideology-relevant variables like RWA; pro-establishment CTs are reliably and strongly associated with RWA, while anti-establishment CTs are not. This, combined with some imprecise effect size estimates, has led to a literature with a confusing mix of positive, null, and even negative results for the correlation between RWA and anti-establishment CT beliefs.

Further research should seek to refine these effect size estimates in larger samples in order to explore the relationships between these variables more fully. The connection between SDO, RWA, and conspiracy belief will likely depend to some extent on the underlying motives of SDO and RWA: the perception of the world as a competitive and threatening place, respectively (Duckitt & Sibley, 2007). Furthermore, the present study's treatment of political authoritarianism is lopsided, with no specific investigation of left-wing authoritarianism (LWA; Conway, Houck, Gornick, & Repke, 2017). LWA, in this sample, might have predicted anti-establishment attitudes more strongly than RWA did, and could also be expected to have matching effects on AEETs. The predictive utility of RWA and

LWA for PECT and AECT might vary considerably depending on the political context:

research has shown that having representatives of one's ideology in positions of power tends to suppress conspiracy belief (Uscinski & Parent, 2014).

These results complement existing research on the role of intergroup attitudes in specific conspiracy beliefs (Cichocka, Marchlewska, & Golec de Zavala, 2015). One caveat is that many CTs have different versions that implicate different perpetrators, methods, and goals – 9/11 has been described variously as a power grab by the U.S. establishment (anti-establishment) or a coup against it (pro-establishment). Which category a given theory falls into may depend on whose version is being considered. Other conspiracy theories, such as the idea that a political establishment has been entirely subverted by a conspiring outgroup, might contain elements of both. Finally, in both studies reported here, the strongest predictor of agreement with either CT type was agreement with the other. Generalised conspiracy mentality, like RWA or SDO, is an ideological variable, and it carries its own set of assumptions that make certain social explanations seem more or less likely (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). How conspiracy mentality interacts with other such variables is a fruitful topic for further research.

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	1	2	3	M	SD
1. Pro-establishment conspiracy belief				3.05	1.33
2. Anti-establishment conspiracy belief	.709*			3.92	1.42
3. Right-wing authoritarianism	.524*	.064		-23.03	34.73
4. Social dominance orientation	.432*	.168*	.469*	36.99	19.61

Table 1. Correlations and descriptive statistics in Study 1, N = 294. * $p < .05$ (Bonferroni-corrected for $k = 6$ comparisons).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	M	SD
1. RWA								-32.44	36.39
2. Openness	-.531*							5.44	1.01
3. Pro-establishment CT agreement	.618*	-.339*						2.45	1.34
4. Pro-establishment CT exposure	.428*	-.183	.784*					2.46	1.17
5. Pro-establishment perpetrator attitudes	-.473*	.434*	-.445*	-.313*				3.80	0.88
6. Anti-establishment CT agreement	.245*	-.083	.694*	.565*	-.289*			3.32	1.40
7. Anti-establishment CT exposure	.160	.047	.570*	.759*	-.216	.723*		3.01	1.23
8. Anti-establishment perpetrator attitudes	.222*	-.135	-.047	-.022	.213	-.406*	-.228*	2.84	0.97

Table 2. Correlations between variables in Study 2, N = 200. * $p < .05$ (Bonferroni-corrected for $k = 28$ comparisons)

Outcome	Predictor	Regression coefficient
Agreement with pro-establishment CTs	Exposure to relevant CTs	.623***
	Attitudes toward perpetrator groups	-.101*
	RWA	.290***
	Openness to experience	-.027
Agreement with anti-establishment CTs	Exposure to relevant CTs	.625***
	Attitudes toward perpetrator groups	-.312***
	RWA	.185**
	Openness to experience	-.056

Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 3. Results of multiple regression analyses predicting beliefs in pro-establishment and anti-establishment conspiracy beliefs from exposure, attitudes toward perpetrator groups, right-wing authoritarianism, and openness to experience.

ⁱ Grzesiak-Feldman (2012; as cited in Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015) observed an interaction between RWA and SDO whereby RWA predicted conspiracy stereotypes only for low social dominators, but no such interaction was observed in the present Study 1 for either pro-establishment or anti-establishment CT belief ($ps > .25$).

Pro- and anti-establishment conspiracy theories scale

1. *A global government will soon seize control of individual nations from their own governments.*
2. Those in power will inevitably abuse their positions by conspiring against their own people.
3. *Social deviants are plotting to undermine the foundations of Western society.*
4. The 'accidental' deaths of many important public figures are really assassinations carried out by world elites in order to keep them silent.
5. *The current state of moral degeneracy is the result of a carefully-planned campaign by those who would seek to destroy our way of life.*
6. Corporations and governments routinely falsify or cover up scientific findings to serve their own selfish ends.
7. *Certain ethnic and religious minority groups wield a disproportionate amount of power in this country, and use that power to covertly push a self-serving political agenda.*
8. Those in power are secretly campaigning to destroy individual freedom in this country.
9. *There is an active plot to tear down our existing legal system and establish a new one based on Sharia Law.*
10. Many so-called 'terrorist attacks' are really orchestrated in secret by governments in order to have an excuse to oppress their people.
11. The people who run the world are constantly searching for ways to control the population's actions, speech, and even thoughts.
12. The silly, pointless stories commonly seen in the mass media are often planted by those in power to distract the population from the real problems in society.
13. *Many of the foreigners coming into this country are here as part of a deliberate plan to radically change our society.*
14. *There is a concerted campaign to dismiss people as racist or sexist simply because they express opinions that certain minority groups disagree with.*

Note: Plain text denotes anti-establishment conspiracy theories; italicized text denotes pro-establishment conspiracy theories.