

Building a comprehensive profile of conspiracy thinkers

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Here's a theory: President Barack Obama was not born in the United States. Here's another: Climate change is a hoax. Here's one more: The "deep state" spied on Donald Trump's campaign, and is now trying to destroy his presidency.

Who believes this stuff? Conspiracy theories have been cooked up for ages, but for the first time in history, we have a president who has [regularly endorsed them](#). Assuming that President Donald Trump's preoccupation is genuine, he shares it with many fellow Americans. What explains it?

I'm [a psychologist who studies](#), among other things, people's worldviews and belief systems. I wanted to figure out why some people gobble up conspiratorial explanations, while others dismiss them as the raving of lunatics.

Consistency in views

By and large, people gravitate toward [conspiracy theories](#) that seem to affirm or validate their political views. Republicans are vastly more likely than Democrats to [believe](#) the Obama "birther" [theory](#) or that [climate change is a hoax](#). Democrats are more likely to believe that Trump's campaign ["colluded"](#) with the Russians.

But some people are [habitual conspiracists](#) who entertain a variety of generic conspiracy theories.

For example, they believe that world politics are controlled by a cabal instead of governments, or that scientists systematically deceive the public. This indicates that personality or other individual differences might be at play.

In fact, some people seem to be downright devoted to conspiracy theories. When conspiracy maven [Alex Jones' content](#) was recently banned from several social media websites, the popularity of his Infowars news app [skyrocketed](#).

Scientific research examining the nature of the "conspiratorial

disposition" is abundant, but scattershot. So in a [pair of new studies](#), and with help from my student Molly Graether, I tried to build on previous research to piece together a more comprehensive profile of the typical conspiracy theory believer, and for that matter, the typical non-believer.

Common traits

We asked more than 1,200 American adults to provide extensive information about themselves and whether they agreed with generic conspiratorial statements. We tried to measure as many personal factors as possible that had been previously linked to conspiracy belief. Looking at many traits simultaneously would allow us to determine, all else being equal, which ones were most important.

Consistent with [previous research](#), we found that one major predictor of conspiracy belief was "[schizotypy](#)." That's a constellation of traits that include a tendency to be relatively untrusting, ideologically eccentric and prone to having unusual perceptual experiences (e.g., sensing stimuli that are not actually present). The trait borrows its name from schizophrenia, but it does not imply a clinical diagnosis.

Schizotypy is the strongest predictor of conspiracy belief. In addition to experiencing the world in unusual ways, we found that people higher in schizotypy have an elevated [need to feel unique](#), which has previously been linked with conspiracism. Why? Probably because believing in non-mainstream ideas allows people to stand out from their peers, but at the same time take refuge in a community of like-minded believers.

In our studies, conspiracy believers were also disproportionately concerned that the world is a dangerous place. For example, they were more likely to agree that "all the signs" are pointing to imminent chaos.

Finally, conspiracists had distinct cognitive tendencies: They were more

likely than nonbelievers to judge nonsensical statements as profound – for example, "[wholeness quiets infinite phenomena](#)" – a tendency cheekily known as "[bullshit receptivity](#)."

They were also more likely to say that nonhuman objects – triangle shapes moving around on a computer screen – were acting intentionally, as though they were capable of having thoughts and goals they were trying to accomplish.

In other words, they inferred meaning and motive where others did not.

Is Trump a conspiracy thinker?

Although we can't know how he would score on our questionnaires, President Trump's public statements and behavior suggest that he fits the profile fairly well.

First, he does display some schizotypal characteristics. He is famously untrusting of others. Donald Trump Jr. has described how his father used to admonish him [in kindergarten](#) not to trust anyone under any circumstances. The elder Trump is also relatively eccentric. He is a unique politician who doesn't hew consistently to [party lines or political norms](#). He has espoused unusual ideas, including the theory that people have a limited lifetime reservoir of energy that [physical exercise depletes](#).

President Trump also seems to see the world as a dangerous place. His campaign speeches warned about [murderous rapist immigrants](#) flooding across the border and black communities being in "[the worst shape](#)" they've ever been. His inauguration address described a hellish landscape of "[American carnage](#)."

Chaos needs comfort

The dismal nature of most conspiracy theories presents a puzzle to psychologists who study beliefs, because most belief systems – think religion – are fundamentally optimistic and uplifting. Psychologists have found that people tend to adopt such beliefs in part because they [fulfill emotional goals](#), such as the need to feel good about oneself and the world. Conspiracy theories don't seem to fit this mold.

Then again, if you are a person who looks at the world and sees chaos and malevolence, perhaps there is comfort in the notion that there is someone to blame. If "there's something going on," then there is something that could be done about it.

Perhaps, then, even the darkest and most bizarre conspiracy theories offer a glint of hope for some people.

Take the "[QAnon](#)" theory that has recently received a flurry of media attention. This theory features a nightmare of pedophile rings and satanic cults. But some adherents have adopted a version of the theory that President Trump has it all [under control](#).

If our research advances the understanding of why some people are more attracted to conspiracy theories than others, it is important to note that it says nothing about whether or not conspiracy theories are true.

After the [Watergate scandal](#) brought down a president for participating in a criminal conspiracy, the American public learned that seemingly outlandish speculation about the machinations of powerful actors is sometimes right on the money.

And when a [conspiracy](#) is real, people with a conspiracist mindset may be among the first to pick up on it – while others get duped. The rub is

that the rest of the time, they might be duping themselves.

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