

Article

Links Between Conspiracy Thinking and Attitudes Toward Democracy and Religion: Survey Data From Poland

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Abstract

Religion and democracy are not only social institutions but also objects of attitudes. This article focuses on conspiracy thinking and its links with attitudes toward religion and democracy. Due to its contextual character, the study is limited to Poland and the article intends to report the data on the subject from surveys conducted in this country. In terms of conspiracy thinking and attitudes toward religion, the literature review of existing Polish survey data (Study 1) led to the conclusion that not all types of religious life are correlated with conspiracy thinking. Individual spirituality (the centrality of religiosity and the quest orientation of religiosity) matters less in terms of conspiracy thinking than religion understood as a specific element of ideology (Polish Catholic nationalism, religious fundamentalism, or collective narcissism). In terms of attitudes toward democracy (Study 2), the original dataset is coded in a new way (as categorical variables) and then presented. It suggests that, contrary to earlier research, conspiracy thinking does not necessarily lead to the support of anti-democratic attitudes. Alienation as much as radicalization might be a consequence of conspiracy thinking. There is no significant difference in terms of conspiracy thinking between adherents of authoritarian rules and conditional democrats, indifferent democrats, or people with ambivalent opinions on democracy, described in comparative research on political culture as dissatisfied democrats or critical citizens. The lower level of conspiracy thinking has been identified only among consistent democrats.

Keywords

authoritarianism; conspiracy theory; conspiracy thinking; critical citizens; democracy; dissatisfied democrats; Poland; religion; survey data

Issue

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1. Introduction

Considerable effort has been made in recent years to establish the links between conspiracy thinking and its causes and effects. In terms of effects, most researchers point almost exclusively to the negative consequences of conspiracy thinking such as lack of trust in public actors, denial of science, populism, radicalization, prejudice, and violence, all of which are undesirable in terms of a democratic system’s consolidation (Butter & Knight, 2020; Douglas et al., 2019). Suggestions that conspiracy theories may have some positive impact are relatively rare (Dentith, 2014; Fenster, 1999). More time and effort have been spent by researchers on determining

the causes of conspiracy thinking, while on the theoretical level, we can distinguish between three broad groups of explanations. The first consists of psychological research on personality traits and cognitive styles. Conspiracy beliefs have been linked to factors such as feelings of self-uncertainty (van Prooijen, 2016), powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999), agreeableness and other traits of the “big five” personality taxonomy (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2016; Swami et al., 2010), lower levels of analytic thinking (Swami et al., 2014), the need for cognitive closure (Marchlewska et al., 2018), non-clinical delusional thinking (Dagnall et al., 2015), or schizotypy (Barron et al., 2014). The second group of studies refers to the situational causes of conspiracy

thinking. Political scientists and psychologists point out such factors of conspiracy beliefs as strong group attachment (Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2014), experiencing election loss, lower educational background, lower levels of income and marginalization (Uscinski & Parent, 2014), as well as other socio-demographic factors (Freeman & Bentall, 2017).

The third group of explanations links conspiracy thinking with the general worldview and more specific social attitudes defined as relatively stable and learned tendencies to evaluate particular objects such as ideas, people, or events (Oskamp & Schultz, 2004). In other words, while the first type of research on conspiracy theory deals with the way of thinking, the second type focuses on the situational context of thinking and the third type of research points to the content of thinking. The existing research within the latter group focuses mainly on attitudes toward political ideologies such as conservatism and liberalism, and the support of specific political parties, such as Democrats and Republicans in the US (Imhoff et al., 2022; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; van der Linden et al., 2021). Besides ideologies and political orientations, studies in this group also cover relations between conspiracy thinking and attitudes toward religion (Dyrendal et al., 2018) or science (Rutjen & Večkalov, 2022). Occasionally, all three types of explanations are discussed (Butter & Knight, 2020; Douglas et al., 2017; Douglas et al., 2019; Lantian et al., 2020).

This study falls under the last-mentioned category of studying social attitudes related to conspiracy thinking. Attitudes toward religion and democracy constitute crucial aspects of citizens' worldviews. It can be assumed that everyone has some stance toward both abstract sets of ideas and those attitudes impact one's actions in the public sphere. Therefore, the objective of the article is to study relations between conspiracy thinking on one side and, on the other side, two important objects of attitudes which refer to the pillars of social order, namely religion and democracy.

Studying links between conspiracy thinking and social attitudes generates specific problems since conspiracy thinking can also be understood as a type of attitude. However, there is no absolute consensus on such a fundamental issue as a broad class (*genus proximum*) to which conspiracy thinking belongs. On the one hand, there is a tradition to define conspiracy thinking as a universalist type of Hofstadter's (1965/1996) paranoid style or even conspiracy mentality (Moscovici, 1987), which brings them close to the first group of variables discussed above, and cognitive style in particular. In this case, "conspiracy thinking is a stable predisposition that drives individuals to view events and circumstances as the product of Conspiracies" (Smallpage et al., 2020, p. 264). On the other hand, approaches related to the classic categories of paranoid style and conspiracy as mentality are criticized (e.g., Butter, 2021) and conspiracy thinking is defined, often indirectly, as a type of attitude toward the public sphere. Based on the find-

ing that believing in one conspiracy theory is strongly related to believing in other conspiracy theories, conspiracy thinking is defined rather as a worldview and "the common root of conspiracy thinking is the belief in the deceptive nature of authorities" (Castanho Silva et al., 2017). Understanding conspiracy thinking as an attitude prioritizes the content of beliefs over the way of thinking, and consequently suggests analogies with populism rather than with paranoia (Butter, 2020). Furthermore, researchers dedicated to countering conspiracy theories assume that conspiracy thinking does not include absolutely "stable predispositions," and eventually can be changed, as with other attitudes, by appropriate interventions (Krekó, 2020). It seems that the initially more popular conceptualizing of conspiracy thinking as a mentality or a distinctive cognitive style is less promising than understanding it as a type of attitude. Eventually, most of the indicators of conspiracy thinking in the empirical research, including those reported below, boil down to the matter of attitudes toward specific claims regarding the public sphere.

In the case of research into correlations between two attitudes, particular interpretative problems appear; cause and effect relations between conspiracy thinking and other attitudes are not as clear-cut, as in the case of psychological and situational factors, which are by definition perceived as independent variables. Let us, therefore, use this article as an example: While conspiracy theory is an independent variable in research on religion, it is a dependent variable in research on democracy.

Furthermore, attitudes are more context-dependent than universalist psychological traits or objective situational causes and effects. For example, definitions of conservatism and liberalism can largely vary among societies. Moreover, positive attitudes toward democracy mean something different in democratic and authoritarian countries. It does not mean that generalizations are unacceptable in the case of studying links between conspiracy thinking and social attitudes, but the role of the context should be carefully considered since it can explain some of the differences in obtained data. Due to the considerable role of cultural context, the study is limited to the situation in Poland, although specific patterns of conspiracy thinking in Central and Eastern Europe have already been demonstrated by Astapova et al. (2021). Considering Poland's democratic political system and the significant role of religion in public life, it is difficult to imagine that these attitudes are not an important—positive or negative—point of reference for individuals. Although the communist regime collapsed in 1989, Poland is still considered a relatively new and fragile democracy (Stanley, 2019). Therefore, attitudes toward democracy and the role of religion in the public sphere of this predominately catholic country, where religion remains an important element of civic culture, are under constant scrutiny (Zuba, 2021). The study extends the range of this scrutiny by exploring the attitudes toward religion and democracy in the context of

conspiracy theories, which are believed to constitute the greatest challenge for new democracies as much as for well-established ones.

In summary, this article aims to report research on links between conspiracy thinking and religion and democracy in Poland. The attitudes toward these social institutions seem to be useful for characterizing citizens' worldviews since even the large category of people who do not support any political party has, as is widely supposed, at least some opinion on democracy and religion. Both the institutions and those attitudes towards them constitute an important and continual topic of public debate in Poland. The data can, therefore, be useful to better understand the role of conspiracy thinking in this country, and perhaps suggest more general conclusions on its nature.

The initial overview of existing research revealed that there is a striking asymmetry within it regarding both aspects of the worldview in Poland. The association between religiosity and the belief in conspiracy theories receives greater coverage than the link between attitudes toward democracy and conspiracy thinking. Taking this into account, the following section of the article consists of a literature review of the Polish surveys on religiosity and conspiracy thinking. Sections 3 through 6 introduce and analyse completely new survey data to acknowledge the relationship between attitudes toward democracy and conspiracy thinking. The discussion presented in the final section embraces the conclusions from both studies (literature review of research on religion and survey data on democracy) into attitudes related to conspiracy thinking.

2. Religion and Conspiracy Thinking in Poland: Literature Review

The first nationwide survey on links between conspiracy thinking and religiosity in Poland was conducted in 2009 (Bilewicz et al., 2013). Religiosity, measured by church attendance, was weakly related to a belief in the Jewish conspiracy ($r = .08$, $p < .05$). In 2010, conspiracy theory became a huge topic after the President of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, and 95 other top Polish officials, died in an air disaster near the Russian city of Smoleńsk. According to a representative survey from 2012, the higher the number of people who declared religious practices, the higher the number of those who accepted the crash-related conspiracy theory. Among the people participating in religious services several times a week, 40% believed that President Kaczyński could have been assassinated, while among the non-churchgoers, only 18% believed the theory (CBOS, 2012). It should be noted that the crash-related conspiracy theories had partisan contours and were popular mostly among right-wing, conservative Kaczyński's voters, who are also more religious.

Another wave of research interest in the relationship between conspiracy thinking and religion was brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Łowicki et al. (2022),

in a series of two studies, conducted research among Polish Roman Catholics which demonstrated that religious fundamentalism is positively related to coronavirus conspiracy beliefs ($r = .18$, $p < 0.001$; $r = .20$, $p < 0.001$). It should be added that religious fundamentalism was measured on different scales in both studies. In the first study, a 12-item Polish adaptation of the Altemeyer and Hunsberger (2004) scale was employed and respondents were asked to answer whether they agreed or disagreed with statements such as: "God has given mankind a complete, unyielding guide to happiness and salvation, which must be followed absolutely" and "The basic cause of evil in this world is Satan, who is still constantly and ferociously fighting against God." In the second study, a Political Beliefs Questionnaire was used to gain insight into the more contextualized attitude of Polish Catholic nationalism (measured by agreement or disagreement with statements such as: "Christian values should be particularly protected in Poland" and "Poland should be a more Catholic country"). Nevertheless, according to the same research, centrality of religiosity (a 5-item scale with statements such as: "How often do you think about religious issues?" "To what extent do you believe that God or something divine exists?" and "How often do you take part in religious services?") was non-significantly correlated with the conspiracy beliefs in the first study, while significantly and negatively correlated in the second study ($r = -.13$, $p < .01$). However, the authors explain that the centrality of religion in the personal worldview does not determine the substance of religious beliefs endorsed by an individual. Therefore, specific beliefs could be correlated in different ways with conspiracy thinking (Łowicki et al., 2022).

As a side note, while religiosity was treated as an independent variable in the above-discussed study, Boguszewski et al. (2020) have defined it in another way, demonstrating that some people accepted two specific Covid-19-related conspiracy theories ("The virus was deliberately released to reduce the problem of overpopulation in the world" and "The coronavirus is part of a political and economic war between the US and China"). Furthermore, it was declared that during the pandemic, more time was devoted than ever before to prayer and other religious practices ($r = .136$, and 130 , $p < .01$, respectively). Such a view indicates that relations between conspiracy theories and religiosity are two-directional.

Aside from religious fundamentalism and the centrality of religiosity, three orientations of religiosity are distinguished: religiosity being intrinsic ("religion is important as it answers questions about the meaning of life"), extrinsic ("I pray because I have been taught to do it"), and a quest ("doubting is an important part of being religious"). Grzesiak-Feldman (2016) discusses these categories in the context of a study on a non-representative sample conducted in 2012. Correlation analysis has proved that the stronger the belief in the theory on the assassination of President Kaczyński in Smoleńsk, the

higher the intrinsic ($r = .34, p < .01$) and extrinsic ($r = .21, p < .01$) orientation of religiosity. Simultaneously, there was no relationship between the conspiracy claim regarding the 2010 Smoleńsk catastrophe and the quest orientation of religiosity (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2016, p. 135). On the other hand, the defensive identification with one's religious group, captured by religious collective narcissism, was found to be a robust predictor of another specific conspiracy theory related to cultural wars (Marchlewska et al., 2019).

The Catholic church, for historical reasons (the importance of Pope John Paul II for the democratic Solidarity Social Movement, for instance, or the role of the church for the sustainment of identity during the partition period before World War I), has a high profile in the Polish public sphere; thus, religion is relatively more politically laden. Frenken et al. (2022) suggest that "this might translate into substantial correlations between religiosity and [conspiracy theory] endorsement." According to them, the correlation of the endorsement of specific conspiracy theories with religiosity was significantly positive based on international meta-analysis and datasets from Poland. However, after applying control for political orientation, correlations of conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy mentality with religiosity decreased substantially in Poland, and conspiracy mentality showed modest negative correlations with religiosity (Frenken et al., 2022). Additionally, as the researchers conclude, national contexts are also important. Countries such as Poland, where religiosity is more rooted in political culture, tend to have relatively stronger intercorrelations between religiosity, conspiracy beliefs, and political orientation.

Overall, the literature review of quantitative research shows links between religiosity and conspiracy thinking are relatively well-developed in Poland. Most of the research was conducted after 2010. The data suggests that while some types of religiosity (religious fundamentalism, Polish catholic nationalism, religious collective narcissism, the intrinsic and extrinsic orientation of religious life) correlate positively with conspiracy thinking, other types (the centrality of religiosity and the "quest" orientation of religiosity) are not related to it. A conclusion might be drawn that the tendency for conspiracy thinking is not related to religiosity when understood as individual spiritual life. It is rather related to religion as a socially rooted set of beliefs integrated within the political program, and while such a type of religiosity seems to be extremely context-dependent, it does not only mean that the national context mentioned above is crucial. The research on links between specific religions (only in one of the quoted research articles were the data sets limited to Catholics) and conspiracy thinking can provide new insight. Moreover, since data shows that supporters of opposition parties have a higher tendency for using conspiratorial interpretative schemes (Czech, 2018; Uscinski & Parent, 2014), the election result can impact the relationship between politically motivated religious beliefs and conspiracy thinking. Many of the

studies mentioned above were conducted before 2015 when the conservative Law and Justice party as well as other right-wing parties in Poland were in opposition. This could contribute to a higher level of conspiracy thinking among more religious conservative voters. The comparative data from 2013 and 2017 (Frenken et al., 2022) seem to confirm this view. Nevertheless, more data is needed to establish how the political situation moderates religiosity and conspiracy thinking. In addition, since most of the discussed data focused on specific conspiracy theories, further research on the general tendency for using conspiratorial interpretative schemes would be useful to avoid measuring the correlation between conspiracy thinking and specific conspiracy theories popular among conservative citizens, such as the above-mentioned Kaczyński assassination theory. Last, but not least, more data on the mediation of conspiratorial beliefs and religiosity in education would be an interesting study. The impact of religion might be different among people with varied educational backgrounds.

3. Attitudes Toward Democracy and Conspiracy Theories: An Introduction

As previously mentioned, in the context of attitudes related to conspiracy theories, the research on religion is far more advanced than on attitudes toward democracy. The problem of distrust in the public sphere started to gravitate to the centre of comparative research on political culture at least two decades ago (Norris, 1999; Putnam, 2000), and became institutionalized with almost synonymous concepts of "critical citizens" (Norris, 2011) and "dissatisfied democrats" (Klingemann, 1999). In a nutshell, both terms refer to people who believe in the abstract principles of democracy, while at the same time expressing discontent with the performance of the existing democratic system. They are seeking alternative political order (e.g., some version of direct democracy), but not the authoritarian type. They are dejected, but not necessarily radical. Dissatisfied democrats are often characterized by their distrust toward the political class and public actors, but suspicious distrust within conspiracy thinking has not yet been fully explored. The departure point in the research on political positions and conspiracy thinking is the chapter by Inglehart (1987), who concluded: The more extremist political position (both right- and left-wing), the greater the tendency for conspiracy theories (understood as complete distrust). Later on, many scholars have also come to believe that conspiracy thinking leads to radicalization and the popularity of undemocratic or even violent extremist narratives (Albertson & Guiler, 2020; Lee, 2020; van Prooijen et al., 2015).

Some insights are provided here by Pantazi et al. (2021), who discovered evidence that the rejection of representative democracy by conspiracy theorists does not necessarily mean support for an authoritarian government. Their studies indicate that general belief in

conspiracy theories is associated with decreased support for representative democracy ($r = -.384, p < .01$), whereas support for direct democracy is increased ($r = .373, p < .01$), which is mediated by political cynicism and feelings of powerlessness. Hence, it can be said that some conspiracy theorists are dissatisfied democrats, who focus on the deficits of the existing representative democracies but do not necessarily support any kind of authoritarian government. Dissatisfaction with democracy at work does not lead to the rejection of democratic principles, but rather to a quest for a better model of democracy and an ambivalent assessment of it.

Although the issue of attitudes toward democracy has been well-researched in Poland since the very beginning of the democratic transformation in 1989, and conspiracy thinking has attracted the growing attention of Polish scholars in the last decade, both topics were hardly ever studied together. First of all, Korzeniowski (2010, 2012) observed in 2002 ($r = -.122, p < .001$) and 2010 ($r = -.029, < .05$) that high political paranoia is correlated with a less positive attitude toward democracy. He defined “political paranoia” as a construct measured on a 6-item scale by similar indicators to conspiracy thinking, such as: “We will never know those who really ruled, rule, and will rule,” and “In politics, nothing really happens openly; all the key political decisions are made secretly.”

Another rare exception is the article based on a nationwide representative survey, which proves that people with deeper internalized conspiratorial explanation schemes have a tendency to support anti-systemic parties ($U = 38525, p < 0.001$). An anti-system party, according to Sartori’s (1976, p. 133) definition, is a “belief system that does not share the values of the political order within which it operates.” It should be added that those parties differ from one another when it comes to attitudes toward democracy, but no one openly supports authoritarian rules, while at least one promotes direct democracy (Czech, 2018).

4. Research Design

To fill the gap in the research on the relationship between conspiracy thinking and attitudes toward democracy in Poland, new data are introduced and discussed in the following sections. This study relies on data selected from a broader set initiated by the author and administrated by ABR SESTA public opinion and analytics research centre. The nationally representative CAWI online survey of 1,013 Polish citizens above the age of 18 was conducted in May 2020. Respondents were selected randomly from a nationally representative online panel. Sample characteristics are considered representative of Polish adults regarding their age, gender, and place of residence. When it comes to the basic socio-demographic variables, the structure of the respondents was as follows: 52% of the respondents were female, 29% were people aged 18–34, 36% were 35–54 years old, and 35% were aged over 55.

To measure conspiracy thinking, the 7-item scale of conspiratorial distrust toward the public sphere, employed earlier in the Polish context several times since 2014, was used (e.g., Czech, 2018). The score is based on the attitude toward the following statements:

1. Key information on crucial events in the public sphere is intentionally hidden from the eyes of citizens.
2. Politicians, while making decisions, usually listen to powerful secret groups instead of the voices of citizens.
3. Seemingly accidental situations, such as economic crises, are in fact carefully planned
4. Most corporations regularly break the law, corrupt authorities, and fabricate documents in order to increase profits.
5. Most wars break out only because global corporations have a vested interest in it.
6. The most important political decisions in my country are accepted by agents of third countries’ secret services.
7. There is one secret organization controlling everything that happens in world politics.

The number of statements the respondent agrees with indicates the level of conspiratorial distrust toward the public sphere. The internal consistency of the scale is acceptable ($\alpha = .73$).

When it comes to attitudes toward democracy, the most popular scale in Poland, which has been systematically applied for more than 30 years, was applied (e.g., Kolarska-Bobinska, 2007; Korzeniowski, 2015). The scale of the support of democracy is based on three statements:

1. Democracy has an advantage over other forms of government.
2. Sometimes, undemocratic governments can be more desirable than democratic governments.
3. For people such as me, it is not relevant whether the government is democratic or undemocratic.

The internal consistency of the scale is also acceptable ($\alpha = .7$).

5. Attitudes Toward Democracy

At the initial stage of analysis, the correlation between conspiracy thinking and attitude toward democracy was calculated, with the results showing a small but significant positive relationship ($p = .209, p < .001$) between conspiracy thinking and a lack of support for democracy. Hence, the findings of Korzeniowski (2010, 2012) were confirmed. However, this conclusion might be misleading since claims that “democracy has no advantage over other forms” or that “it is not relevant whether the government is democratic” seem not to be constructively

valid indicators for the support of authoritarian rules, as is sometimes interpreted in Polish literature. In fact, the lack of support for democracy does not automatically equal the support of authoritarian rules, and attitudes toward democracy might vary greatly if analysed in detail. Therefore, drawing inspiration from Grzesiak-Feldman's (2016) analysis of three orientations of religiosity, where categorical variables were employed, it was decided to re-code initial data in a new way. Previously, the three indicators of attitudes toward democracy were coded either together or separately on an ordinal scale, whereas here, a nominal scale of attitudes toward democracy was introduced based on inductive coding. As a result, an ad-hoc classification system is proposed here to distinguish specific attitudes toward democracy. Classification is understood in this context as a technique of grouping objects with respect to their similarity or homogeneity. It shares its function with clustering analysis, although the classification model is used to assign specific cases into a priori defined classes, while in the case of clustering, the number of classes is unknown and they are detected based on statistical analysis (Ahlquist & Breunig, 2012).

This method of classification allows for a more nuanced insight into attitudes toward democracy. Instead of a place on a scale between pro-democratic and anti-democratic orientation, seven specific positions on democracy have been proposed. Supposing that each answer to one of the three questions regarding the attitude toward democracy is meaningful, eight different stances can be distinguished. Someone who agrees that "democracy has an advantage over other forms of governments" and disagrees with the two other statements can be seen as the most confident supporter of democracy and be called a consistent democrat. If someone supports democracy agreeing with two statements, but simultaneously claims that "sometimes undemocratic governments can be more desirable" then they can be called a conditional democrat. They generally support democracy, but sometimes (it is not determined when; perhaps during a state of crisis or war) there are better systems. An indifferent democrat is someone who supports democracy but claims that for people like him or her, at the end of the day, it is not relevant whether the government is democratic or undemocratic. In a similar vein, indifferent autocrats and consistent autocrats

(or anti-democrats) can be distinguished. Both claim that democracy has no advantage over other forms of government and agree that undemocratic governments can be more desirable. However, the former thinks that it is not relevant whether the government is democratic or undemocratic, while the latter thinks otherwise. Someone who agrees or disagrees with all the statements can be categorized as ambivalent toward democracy; this is the only attitude indicated by two combinations of answers. The first form of hesitance goes like this: "Democracy is good, but not always, and it really does not matter for people like them." The other version of ambivalence is expressed in the following way: "Democracy is not the best regime, but undemocratic systems are not better, although it does not mean that the political system is meaningless for people like them." In both cases, democracy is simultaneously criticized and supported to a certain extent. It can also be assumed that people with an ambivalent position on democracy do not have a clear opinion or support democracy per se, but they prefer some alternative version of it. Hence, it might be argued that conditional, indifferent, and ambivalent democrats can be considered critical citizens or dissatisfied democrats mentioned in the previous section. Supposedly, adherents of various types of direct democracy are present in this group. The last attitude can be characterized as alienation. According to this view, democracy does not have any advantage over other forms of social order, and undemocratic governments are not more desirable than democratic governments, but it really does not matter for the people on the street. All the distinguished attitudes toward democracy, together with their indicators, are presented in Table 1.

Perhaps some attitudes are not as self-evident as others. An obvious limitation of the presented typology of attitudes toward democracy is that nearly all attitudes are measured by a unique combination of answers. In the next stage of research, further indicators should, therefore, be used to evaluate each stance. Nevertheless, the presented typology allows us to look innovatively at the existing data, enabling us to observe that attitudes toward democracy are more nuanced than opposition between democrats and non-democrats or autocrats. To gain more insights, the distribution of each attitude toward democracy in Polish society with regard to education is considered in the next step.

Table 1. Classification of attitudes toward democracy.

	Statement 1	Statement 2	Statement 3
Consistent democrats	+	-	-
Conditional democrats	+	+	-
Ambivalence	+/-	+/-	+/-
Indifferent democrats	+	-	+
Consistent autocrats	-	+	-
Indifferent autocrats	-	+	+
Alienation	-	-	+

Notes: "+" means agreement with the given statement, while "-" means disagreement or no opinion.

6. Data

As Table 2 indicates, consistent democrats are the most numerous in Polish society (42%). Together with indifferent and conditional democrats, 60% of the public support democracy. On the other hand, 13% of the population are autocrats, of which 7% can be characterized as consistent autocrats. Additionally, to test the relationship between education and attitudes toward democracy, Cramer's V analysis was performed for the crosstabs. A significant test result was recorded ($V = 0.12$; $df = 18$; $p < 0.001$), which means that the observed numbers differ significantly from the expected numbers. It can be noted that the most educated Poles were relatively the most numerous among consistent democrats as well as consistent autocrats. Hence, contrary to the common belief, less educated people are not necessarily overrepresented among supporters of autocratic power. For example, only 6% of consistent autocrats are people with education up to the vocational level (11% of the sample), while 50% are people with higher education (43% of the sample). Instead, less educated people have a tendency to be consistent democrats (30%), conditional democrats (18%), ambivalent (15%), or alienated (16%), rather than consistent indifferent autocrats (5%), indifferent democrats (7%), or consistent autocrats (8%).

Referring to the relationship between attitude toward democracy and conspiracy thinking, non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed to discover the difference in the level of belief in conspiracy theories. The analysis showed statistically significant differences among people with different attitudes toward

democracy. However, the strength of these effects can be considered as weak. To check which means indicated different results, pairwise comparisons were made. It was established that consistent democrats have significantly lower levels of belief in conspiracy theories than other groups.

The findings (Table 3.) enable the conclusion to be drawn that conspiracy theories are no more popular among supporters of authoritarian forms of rules, as has sometimes been assumed (Korzeniowski, 2010, 2012). Rather, people with a similar level of conspiratorial distrust toward the public sphere can considerably vary in their view of democracy. Some of them might be consistent or indifferent autocrats, but others are conditional or indifferent democrats. People with an ambivalent or alienated stance towards democracy also share similar characteristics in terms of conspiracy thinking. The results are in line with data showing that people with the highest tendency to believe in conspiracy theories vote for various political parties, but the highest level of conspiracy thinking, similar to the electorate of anti-systemic (but not necessary authoritarian) parties, can be found within the group of non-voters, who feel alienated from the political system and have decided to withdraw from the political sphere (Czech, 2018). Only consistent democrats stand out since they are characterized by a lower level of conspiracy thinking. Nevertheless, to be more precise in terms of causation, low-intensity conspiracy thinking makes space for unconditional support for democracy. To gain a more detailed picture of the problem, pairwise comparisons were made (Table 4.).

Table 2. Cross table for the relationship between education and attitudes towards democracy.

		Education				Total
		Middle school or lower	Vocational school	Secondary school	Higher education	
Attitudes toward democracy	Consistent democrats	3 0,3%	31 3,1%	187 18,5%	203 20,0%	424 41,9%
	Conditional democrats	3 0,3%	18 1,8%	45 4,4%	65 6,4%	131 12,9%
	Ambivalence	2 0,2%	15 1,5%	109 10,8%	73 7,2%	199 19,6%
	Indifferent democrats	1 0,1%	7 0,7%	28 2,8%	20 2,0%	56 5,5%
	Consistent autocrats	0 0,0%	8 0,8%	31 3,1%	31 3,1%	70 6,9%
	Indifferent autocrats	3 0,3%	5 0,5%	32 3,2%	22 2,2%	62 6,1%
	Alienation	0 0,0%	16 1,6%	30 3,0%	25 2,5%	71 7,0%
Total		12 1,2%	100 9,9%	462 45,6%	439 43,3%	1013 100,0%

Table 3. The results of the Kruskal-Wallis tests for the difference in the level of belief in conspiracy theories between people with different attitudes towards democracy.

	Consistent democrats (n = 424)		Conditional democrats (n = 131)		Ambivalence (n = 199)		Indifferent democrats (n = 56)		Consistent autocrats (n = 70)		Indifferent autocrats (n = 62)		Alienation (n = 71)		χ^2	<i>p</i>	ϵ^2
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Conspiracy thinking	23,09	5,52	25,22	5,58	26,10	6,12	25,23	5,52	26,11	6,21	26,53	4,79	24,97	5,21	61,13	< 0,001	0,06

Notes: The results of the Kruskal-Wallis tests for the difference in the level of belief in conspiracy theories between people with different attitudes towards democracy; χ^2 stands for the result of the Kruskal-Wallis test; *p* stands for the significance of the Kruskal-Wallis test; ϵ^2 stands for the strength of the effect.

Table 4. Pairwise comparisons of attitudes toward democracy in terms of conspiracy thinking.

Sample 1—Sample 2	Test statistics	Standard error	Standardized test statistics	Significance	Adjusted significance ^a
Consistent democrats—Alienation	-88.644	37.464	-2.366	.018	.378
Consistent democrats—Conditional democrats	-109.601	29.205	-3.753	.000	.004
Consistent democrats—Indifferent democrats	-112.188	41.541	-2.701	.007	.145
Consistent democrats—Ambivalence	-158.995	25.105	-6.333	.000	.000
Consistent democrats—Consistent autocrats	-160.275	37.693	-4.252	.000	.000
Consistent democrats—Indifferent autocrats	-181.111	39.725	-4.559	.000	.000
Alienation—Conditional democrats	20.956	43.057	.487	.626	1.000
Alienation—Indifferent democrats	23.543	52.217	.451	.652	1.000
Alienation—Ambivalence	70.351	40.388	1.742	.082	1.000
Alienation—Consistent autocrats	71.631	49.211	1.456	.146	1.000
Alienation—Indifferent autocrats	92.467	50.784	1.821	.069	1.000
Conditional democrats—Indifferent democrats	-2.587	46.647	-.055	.956	1.000
Conditional democrats—Ambivalence	-49.394	32.872	-1.503	.133	1.000
Conditional democrats—Consistent autocrats	-50.675	43.256	-1.172	.241	1.000
Conditional democrats—Indifferent autocrats	-71.511	45.038	-1.588	.112	1.000
Indifferent democrats—Ambivalence	46.807	44.196	1.059	.290	1.000
Indifferent democrats—Consistent autocrats	-48.087	52.381	-.918	.359	1.000
Indifferent democrats—Indifferent autocrats	-68.924	53.862	-1.280	.201	1.000
Ambivalence—Consistent autocrats	-1.280	40.600	-.032	.975	1.000
Ambivalence—Indifferent autocrats	-22.116	42.494	-.520	.603	1.000
Consistent autocrats—Indifferent autocrats	-20.836	50.953	-.409	.683	1.000

Notes: Each line tests the null hypothesis that the distributions of Sample 1 and Sample 2 are the same; asymptotic significance (two-tailed tests) is displayed; the significance level is 05; ^a multiple assay significance values were corrected by the Bonferroni method.

7. Concluding Remarks

As previously stated, attitudes toward religion and democracy constitute crucial aspects of the worldview. It is difficult to imagine an adult citizen in Poland, or any other democratic state, who has neither opinion on religion nor attitude toward democracy. Those positions are crucial since they impact daily routines, political choices, and other decisions made by citizens. The literature review of surveys on conspiracy thinking in Polish society reveals that more attention is certainly paid to the study of religion than the attitudes toward democracy. Paradoxically, the wave of studies on Polish conspiratorial religiosity started to grow in the decade of progressive laicization or privatization of religion, which is also perceived as the time when there was a surge in conspiracy thinking.

The studies reviewed in this article suggest that not all types of religiosity correlate positively with conspiracy thinking. Individual spirituality (the centrality of religiosity and the quest orientation of religiosity) matters less in terms of conspiracy thinking than religion understood as a specific element of ideology (Polish Catholic nationalism, religious fundamentalism, or collective narcissism). This kind of religiosity, more than the former, depends on social context and is shaped by religious leaders. Therefore, as mentioned in the final paragraph of the review section, further research on specific religious groups and movements in the changing societal context is required.

Further attention should also be paid to the relationship between conspiracy thinking and attitudes toward democracy. The analysis indicates that, contrary to common assumptions, deep internalization of conspiratorial explanatory schemes does not necessarily lead to a surge in support of authoritarian rules, as earlier research suggested (Korzeniowski, 2010, 2012). Rather, the opposite is true: a low level of conspiracy thinking leads to the consistent support of democracy. There is no significant difference in terms of conspiracy thinking between (consistent and indifferent) autocrats and (ambivalent, indifferent, and conditional) democrats characterized in the literature as critical citizens or dissatisfied democrats (Klingemann, 1999; Norris, 2011). The results also suggest that another consequence of conspiracy thinking might not be radicalization, but alienation, which can lead to apathy and a withdrawal from political behaviours such as voting. Alienation usually remains in the shadows of radicalization, but it is a problem on its own since over 35% of voters in Poland regularly refuse to cast their votes. There is no doubt, therefore, that further reflection on social attitudes in the context of conspiracy thinking might be fruitful.

The main limitation of the data presented in the article is that they come exclusively from Poland. As already discussed above, in the case of attitudes, context matters more than personality traits or cognitive styles and research in other countries is needed to make more reli-

able general conclusions. Furthermore, both scales used in the second study (on conspiracy thinking and attitudes toward democracy) have previously been applied in Poland, but hardly ever in other countries, making even indirect comparisons less trustworthy. Regarding further limitations, the problem with the measurement of attitudes toward democracy was discussed in detail already. Also, due to the discussed problem with constructive validation of indicators for the support of authoritarian rules (a claim that “democracy has no advantage over other forms” does not necessarily indicate support for authoritarian forms of government), a new classification of attitudes toward democracy has been introduced. Nevertheless, each respective attitude is indicated by a specific combination of features. To boost constructive validation, more than three indicators of attitudes toward democracy would be useful. Despite those limitations, the initial findings presented here promise an interesting field of research into the intersection between conspiracy theory research and studies on political culture.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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