

Anything but Representative Democracy: Explaining Conspiracy Believers' Support for Direct Democracy and Technocracy

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories gained considerable attention during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although studies have extensively explored their (mostly) negative impacts on various political and social aspects, like participation, health-related behavior, and violence, their influence on support for democracy remains relatively unexplored. The few existing studies offer conflicting findings, prompting my focus to shift from assessing generic support for democracy to examining preferences for alternative decision-making models. To address some limitations of prior research on alternative models of decision-making, I combine a trade-off item with a ranking methodology: respondents were prompted to indicate their first and second preferences for different democratic and non-democratic models over representative democracy. The study is based on data from a representative survey in Germany (July/August 2022; $N = 2,536$). My findings confirm that the belief in conspiracy theories is positively associated with a preference for direct democratic decision-making. However, conspiracy believers also favor expert-based decision-making over elected politicians—but direct democracy would be their primary choice. Although the evidence for a preference for autocracy over representative democracy is associated with a higher degree of uncertainty, it does suggest that conspiracy believers tend to favor “anything but” representative democracy. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on the impact of conspiracy beliefs on democratic systems.

Keywords

conspiracy belief; conspiracy theories; direct democracy; representative democracy; technocracy

1. Introduction

Across the world, significant shares of the population believe in conspiracy theories (e.g., Butter & Knight, 2020), i.e., they believe that major events are explained by secret plots of individuals or groups who pursue a

malevolent goal (Jolley et al., 2020). Conspiracy theories (e.g., about an allegedly stolen election) significantly influenced the violent storming of the US Capitol in January 2021, attacks on vaccination clinics during the Covid-19 pandemic, far-right terrorist attacks (e.g., Christchurch mosque attacks), and other violent actions. At the same time, the followers of the Anti-Covid movement—where conspiracy theories were abundant—have often portrayed themselves as the defenders of democracy against a so-called “hygiene dictatorship,” in part alleging that the elites of the current representative democratic system fabricated a “fake” pandemic to curtail citizens’ civil rights.

Given these events, the question arises as to whether conspiracy theories pose a threat to representative party democracy and what conspiracy believers think about this model of democracy. Specifically, since many conspiracy theories postulate that the political elite itself is the conspirator or that the strings are pulled by “secret powers” in the background, which could make democratic elections seem obsolete in the eyes of the conspiracy believers, it is important to scrutinize conspiracy believers’ support for representative democracy, or more precisely: their support for elected political representatives as decision-makers.

Extensive scholarly attention has thus far been devoted to studying citizens’ preferences for alternative models of political decision-making (see for an overview, König et al., 2022). Efforts to explain these preferences often center around two hypotheses: the “new politics” hypothesis vs. the “disaffection hypothesis” (Dalton et al., 2001; Donovan & Karp, 2006; Gherghina & Geissel, 2019). Other factors that have been considered in this discussion are political ideology—in the form of left–right self-placement or populism (see, e.g., Bertou & Pastorella, 2017; Chiru & Enyedi, 2021; Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020; Mohrenberg et al., 2021)—as well as authoritarianism (Chiru & Enyedi, 2021). The belief in conspiracy theories, however, has only very recently been discussed in isolated publications (Pantazi et al., 2021; Papaioannou et al., 2023; Reiser & Küppers, 2022). So, despite the growing body of research on conspiracy theories—often highlighting their detrimental social consequences in domains such as health behavior, vaccine hesitancy, and affinity towards violence (Pilch et al., 2023; van Mulukom et al., 2022; Vegetti & Littvay, 2021)—the link between conspiracy beliefs and preferences for alternative models of political decision-making remains a blind spot. Political consequences of conspiracy theories have mainly been scrutinized concerning institutional trust, voting behavior, and political participation (see for an overview, Pilch et al., 2023), but not in the field of democracy research.

Moreover, the few existing studies have mostly used questions on generic support for democracy (Pickel et al., 2022; Yendell & Herbert, 2022), while only three studies probe conspiracy believers’ support for alternatives to (representative) democracy, albeit, with contradictory results. The works by Pantazi et al. (2021) as well as Reiser and Küppers (2022) find that conspiracy believers are not opposed to democracy per se, but support certain forms of democratic government such as models where citizens or experts are the decision-makers. In contrast, the study by Papaioannou et al. (2023) suggests that conspiracy belief is associated with a preference for autocratic models of government. One explanation for these mixed findings is an “anything but” attitude towards representative democracy: “As such, conspiracy beliefs may predict support for either direct democracy or autocracy, depending on what is offered as an alternative option to the current democratic system” (Papaioannou et al., 2023, p. 853). Another reason for the unclear findings may be the design of previous survey questions. First, previous studies did not probe support for both democratic (e.g., citizens) and non-democratic alternatives over elected representatives simultaneously (but see, Reiser & Küppers, 2022). Second, respondents were not forced to choose one (or all) alternatives over representative democracy. Instead, as each model was measured with its own survey item(s), respondents

could, in theory, indicate support for all of them (see for a similar critique regarding the general literature on alternative models of decision-making, Gherghina & Geissel, 2020; König et al., 2022).

This suggests that whether conspiracy believers will support direct, technocratic, or non-democratic alternatives to representative democracy may be conditional on *what* alternatives are presented to them (Papaioannou et al., 2023), but also on *how* these alternatives are presented to them. In other words: to test the assumption that conspiracy believers will support “anything but” representative democracy, the survey design will need to have respondents indicate whether they support multiple models of decision-making over representative democracy.

The primary contribution of this study, therefore, is that it uses a more robust measure to capture conspiracy believers’ preferences for alternative models of decision-making that avoids inconsistent preferences (by using a trade-off item), while at the same time allowing respondents to indicate support for more than one model of government (in the form of a first and second-best option). In the study design, respondents were forced to indicate their first and second preference for one of the four options: representative democracy, direct democracy, technocracy, or autocracy. Next to this methodological contribution, this article highlights conspiracy beliefs as an important factor shaping citizens’ preferences toward alternative models of political decision-making. By doing so, this study may enhance our understanding of why populists, as well as other dissatisfied citizens, who share conspiracy beliefs, are often at odds with representative party democracy, thus contributing to this thematic issue’s focus. Moreover, the study will contribute to the political psychology literature by extending the focus of the debate on the political consequences of conspiracy beliefs to attitudes toward democracy. Thereby, it will enhance our understanding of the impact of conspiracy beliefs on representative party democracy. By showing that citizens with conspiracy beliefs support a variety of alternatives that are not necessarily anti-democratic (such as technocracy), the focus of this article aligns with the thematic issue’s goal of uncovering preferences for alternatives to representative party democracy beyond greater participatory opportunities.

This article wants to answer the questions of how belief in conspiracy theories is linked to preferences for different models of political decision-making and whether conspiracy believers will favor any (that is, also non-democratic) alternative(s) over the representative model of democracy. To scrutinize the link between conspiracy belief and the preferred model of government, a representative survey was conducted in Germany in July/August 2022. The articles’ findings reveal that conspiracy belief is negatively related to supporting representative democracy while it is positively associated with a preference for citizens as decision-makers. Additionally, conspiracy believers show a preference for experts over elected representatives, but with direct democracy (i.e., citizens as decision-makers) being their first choice. While the evidence regarding a preference for autocracy over representative democracy is associated with higher uncertainty, this study’s findings, nonetheless, reinforce the idea proposed by Papaioannou et al. (2023) that conspiracy believers tend to favor any alternative model over representative democracy.

2. Literature Review

This chapter will first outline the main explanatory factors used in scholarship on citizens’ preferences for alternative decision-making models. Then, existing research on conspiracy belief and attitudes toward (representative) democracy will be summarized.

2.1. Support for Alternative Models of Political Decision-Making

When support for alternative models of political decision-making is tested, existing studies have often looked at direct democratic alternatives, i.e., a preference for citizens over politicians as the key decision-makers, such as via the use of (binding or consultative) referendums (e.g., Gherghina & Geissel, 2019). Much less attention has been devoted toward preferences for deliberative democracy (but see, Gherghina & Geissel, 2020; Neblo et al., 2010). In the past decade, preferences for expert-based models of decision-making (sometimes under the label technocracy or stealth democracy) have gained much attention in political science (e.g., Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017; Chiru & Enyedi, 2021; Ganuza & Font, 2020; VanderMolen, 2017). Key actors in such decision-making processes are politically independent experts, whereas citizens do not play an active role in politics. Again, other studies assess citizens' support for the general idea of democracy or non-democratic alternatives (e.g., Kirsch & Welzel, 2019). While this debate agrees that citizens are calling for a shift from the current representative democratic model, disagreement remains over the explanatory factors fuelling this demand and the specific direction in which this change should take place. In the following, I will discuss the main drivers as identified by existing scholarship.

Citizens' preferences toward alternative models of political decision-making are often explained as a result of dissatisfaction. Two perspectives prevail: the "new politics" vs. the "disaffection" hypothesis (Dalton et al., 2001). The new politics hypothesis suggests that politically interested citizens with postmaterialist attitudes and citizens more actively engaged in politics tend to support alternative models of democracy (Dalton et al., 2001; Donovan & Karp, 2006; Gherghina & Geissel, 2019). These citizens are dissatisfied with the means of participation available to them and strive for greater participatory opportunities. In contrast, the disaffection hypothesis posits that dissatisfaction stems from citizens' perception that the political system is not responsive, and, hence, they prefer alternative models of democracy—especially stealth democracy. In contrast to the "new politics" hypothesis, dissatisfaction in this case is not grounded in the wish for greater participatory opportunities; instead, citizens do not want to become more involved (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009). The empirical evidence from studies testing both hypotheses is mixed, with some studies supporting the disaffection hypothesis (Allen & Birch, 2015; Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017; Coffe & Michels, 2014; Dalton et al., 2001), and others yielding more ambiguous results, failing to clearly endorse or reject either of the two explanations (Donovan & Karp, 2006; Gherghina & Geissel, 2019).

Moreover, studies demonstrate that citizens' preferences for alternative models of political decision-making are shaped by their political attitudes and ideology, e.g., left-right self-placement (e.g., Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017; Chiru & Enyedi, 2021), populism (Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020; Mohrenberg et al., 2021; Zaslove & Meijers, 2023), and authoritarianism (Chiru & Enyedi, 2021). Despite its significance, the belief in conspiracy theories has unfortunately not yet received much attention.

Despite the valuable input provided by the works on alternative models of decision-making, many studies have been limited to exploring one single alternative to representative democracy (see for an overview, König et al., 2022). This approach overlooks the possibility that citizens may endorse multiple models simultaneously. When several alternative models were studied, often, each model was measured with its own survey item(s), and respondents could, in theory, indicate their joint support for all of them (see for a similar critique, Gherghina & Geissel, 2019; König et al., 2022). This results in inconsistent preferences where citizens can simultaneously prefer a direct democratic model (i.e., more involvement) and stealth

democracy (which means less involvement; Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Bertou & Caramani, 2022). One way to interpret this finding is that citizens “do not necessarily have well thought-out options for the direction this change [of the existing situation] should take” (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009, p. 1045).

While it is reasonable to assume that citizens may lack a clear idea of the ideal alternative to the current system, it is also possible that they favor a certain model over another. However, current survey questionnaire designs, which allow citizens to express support for multiple alternatives simultaneously, fail to capture these nuances. A promising alternative lies in utilizing trade-off items or bipolar rating scales, where respondents must choose one alternative over another (e.g., indicate their preference for decision-making by citizens over politicians; see for examples, Allen & Birch, 2015; Coffe & Michels, 2014; Gherghina & Geissel, 2019; Rapeli, 2016). Regrettably, trade-off items have not been extensively utilized in existing research (see, König et al., 2022).

While the use of bipolar rating items has advanced our understanding of citizens' preferences, two limitations must be acknowledged. First, several of these articles only test the support for one alternative over another in isolation (Allen & Birch, 2015; Rapeli, 2016). Using such a design, bipolar rating scales fail to uncover that citizens may have a clear preference for one model while still appreciating other alternatives to some degree. Second, existing research often neglects to test the preference for non-democratic over democratic alternatives. This is especially relevant in the context of this article, given the association between conspiracy belief and affinity towards violence (e.g., Jolley & Paterson, 2020; Vegetti & Littvay, 2021) and its stronger prevalence on both extremes of the political spectrum (Imhoff et al., 2022).

To overcome previous limitations, I have chosen a novel methodological approach that avoids inconsistent preferences while enabling citizens to express support for multiple alternatives over representative democracy. I combined a trade-off item with a ranking of preferences and respondents were forced to indicate their first and second preferences for either representative, direct, expert-based, or autocratic models of political decision-making (see also Section 4).

2.2. Conspiracy Theories and Alternatives to Representative Democracy

Understanding the consequences of an individual's belief in conspiracy theories for their preferences toward alternative models of political decision-making is an understudied topic. Conspiracy theories “explain the ultimate causes of distressing and complex political or social events concerning secret plots conducted by malevolent groups, which can either represent powerful (e.g., politicians, scientists) or socially marginalized groups (e.g., Jews, Muslims)” (Rottweiler & Gill, 2020, p. 1486). Previous studies have demonstrated the (mostly) negative effects of conspiracy belief across various political and social domains (see for an overview, Jolley et al., 2020; Pilch et al., 2023). Existing studies concerned with the consequences of conspiracy theories for political behavior have largely focused on the link between conspiracy belief and unconventional or illegal forms of political participation (e.g., Imhoff et al., 2021; Mari et al., 2017), (far-right) voting behavior (Jolley et al., 2020; Lamberty et al., 2018; Pickel et al., 2022), institutional trust (e.g., Einstein & Glick, 2015; Mari et al., 2022; Nera et al., 2022), or affinity towards violence (Pickel et al., 2022; Rottweiler & Gill, 2020; Vegetti & Littvay, 2021).

Regarding the relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and attitudes toward democracy, the few existing studies show inconsistent results. Studies that scrutinize conspiracy believers' generic support for

the idea of democracy or support of an autocratic model of government (see, Czech, 2022; Papaioannou et al., 2023; Pickel et al., 2022; Yendell & Herbert, 2022) find evidence for non-democratic tendencies among conspiracy believers. In contrast, other findings point towards higher support for democratic norms and principles among this group (Stojanov & Douglas, 2022; Swami et al., 2011). The focus of this article is on the consequences of conspiracy beliefs for the support of representative democracy, as well as other democratic (citizens and experts as decision-makers) and non-democratic alternative decision-making models. Again, existing research is scarce, and findings are mixed: two studies indicate that conspiracy believers reject representative democracy and prefer alternative, yet democratic, models instead, such as direct democracy (Pantazi et al., 2021; Reiser & Küppers, 2022), while Papaioannou et al. (2023) find that they support autocratic forms of government.

These inconsistencies in conspiracy believers' attitudes toward alternative models of decision-making can be attributed to several factors: Firstly, conspiracy belief may lead to an "anything but" attitude towards representative democracy, resulting in support for both direct democracy and technocracy, or even autocracy—contingent on the options presented (Papaioannou et al., 2023). Secondly, differences in the design of survey items may contribute to these results. While generating valuable insights, the study conducted by Pantazi et al. (2021) did not inquire about respondents' support for non-democratic forms of government. Moreover, the survey items scrutinizing support for different models of political decision-making were not mutually exclusive. Consequently, respondents could, in theory, simultaneously indicate their support for direct, deliberative, expert-based, and representative models of decision-making. Much like the broader population (see Sub-section 2.1), conspiracy believers, therefore, display inconsistent preferences—supporting direct and technocratic models of decision-making simultaneously (Pantazi et al., 2021; Reiser & Küppers, 2022).

Moreover, the study by Papaioannou et al. (2023) did not include items on support for democratic alternatives (e.g., direct or expert-based models of democracy) and studies conspiracy believers' support for an autocratic alternative in isolation. Consequently, there is a risk of overestimating conspiracy believers' inclination towards non-democratic forms of government. Due to the study's design, it has to remain unclear whether an autocracy represents their first choice or if they simply prefer any alternative over representative democracy—including non-democratic ones.

While the study by Reiser and Küppers (2022) advances on this and measures both support for democratic and non-democratic alternatives, it also did not force respondents to pick an alternative over representative democracy or to choose democratic over non-democratic alternatives. Furthermore, it was limited to Covid-19-related conspiracy theories only, whereby a potential bias may arise: The followers of the Anti-Covid movement have often portrayed themselves as the defenders of democracy against a "hygiene dictatorship." This suggests that they may oppose autocratic rule and that Covid-19 conspiracy believers could potentially be more supportive of democracy than individuals who believe in other conspiracy theories.

3. Theoretical Argument: The Link Between Conspiracy Belief and Support for Alternative Models of Government

The overarching question is whether conspiracy beliefs will be associated with preferring any alternative over representative democracy or only certain alternatives, thereby, e.g., rejecting non-democratic ones.

Synthesizing the literature on alternative decision-making preferences with the literature on conspiracy beliefs, multiple lines of argument can be identified which all point towards a rejection of representative democracy by people believing in conspiracy theories. First, following the explanation suggested by the disaffection hypothesis, citizens with low levels of institutional trust and external efficacy (i.e., a feeling of political powerlessness) will support alternatives to representative democracy (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Coffe & Michels, 2014; Dalton et al., 2001; Gherghina & Geissel, 2019)—both factors have been identified as correlates of conspiracy belief by various studies (e.g., Einstein & Glick, 2015; Mari et al., 2022).

Second, existing research on the consequences of conspiracy beliefs on political behavior has demonstrated that these decrease the likelihood of voting in elections (e.g., Lamberty & Leiser, 2019). Such behavior seems plausible when considering the perspective of conspiracy believers who might be convinced that political elites are mere “puppets,” whereas the actual power is in the hands of secret organizations in the background. Under such a condition, “exchanging the political elites would be mere window dressing” (Reiser & Küppers, 2022). Moreover, the belief in a plot of secret actors with malevolent goals can make violence seem like the only effective means to bring down the political elite (Vegetti & Littvay, 2021).

Third, conspiracy theories that accuse powerful groups of a conspiracy (e.g., governments) can be understood as power-challenging, i.e., they aim at challenging existing social and political power structures. Research, for example, associates conspiracy mentality with political behavior aimed at changing the status quo (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Direct democracy then emerges as an appealing alternative for citizens believing in conspiracy theories, as political decision-making by citizens removes power from the political elites which are, from the perspective of conspiracy believers, involved in a malicious secret plot against society. Additionally, direct democracy could offer a potential “cure” for the feeling of political powerlessness as it offers citizens the possibility to directly influence political outcomes and could, potentially, create a feeling of empowerment. Promising results have already been reported from a survey experiment where empowering citizens through direct forms of participation mitigated the feeling of powerlessness associated with conspiracy beliefs (Pantazi et al., 2021).

In contrast to this, the link between conspiracy beliefs and attitudes toward expert-based decision-making is less clear. Citizens might hold even less power under this form of government than under a representative model of democracy (Reiser & Küppers, 2022). In opposition to citizens wanting more participation the “stealth democracy” thesis claims instead that citizens prefer alternative models of democracy where they do not have to become politically active (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009). While the political elites, whom conspiracy believers reject for their alleged involvement in a conspiracy, are less powerful in the technocratic model than in the representative model, conspiracy believers might, still, regard the experts as part of the elite conspiracy—as could be witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic (Reiser & Küppers, 2022). Nevertheless, it seems plausible that citizens who believe in conspiracy theories support an expert-based model, simply, because it, too, offers an alternative to representative democracy (Pantazi et al., 2021). This is supported by the previously mentioned two studies (Pantazi et al., 2021; Reiser & Küppers, 2022). In conclusion, it seems likely that technocracy will not be the first choice for most conspiracy believers. But if the assumption by Papaioannou et al. (2023) that conspiracy believers will prefer any alternative to representative democracy is true, we would expect them to favor decision-making by experts as a second (or third) best model over representative democracy.

Next to the argument that conspiracy believers will prefer any alternative over decision-making by elected representatives (Papaioannou et al., 2023), conspiracy belief might be correlated with support for autocracy. First, the two attitudes have the same roots and individuals on the ideological fringes are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (e.g., Imhoff et al., 2022); individuals with extremist attitudes are also more likely to support non-democratic forms of government (e.g., Torcal & Magalhães, 2022). Besides, conspiracy belief is associated with right-wing authoritarianism. People with such personalities are more obedient to authority figures and more inclined to support autocracy (Papaioannou et al., 2023). Second, conspiracy belief has moreover been linked to political violence and violent extremism (Rottweiler & Gill, 2020; Vegetti & Littvay, 2021), suggesting that conspiracy believers might have already left the realm of democracy. In the face of a secret plan by a malevolent elite, they no longer regard democratic means to remove the elite as sufficient—only violence will do (Vegetti & Littvay, 2021). This is underscored by individual studies already pointing towards a negative relationship between conspiracy beliefs and support for the idea of democracy (Pickel et al., 2022; Yendell & Herbert, 2022).

Given that the support for a model of government will be operationalized by asking respondents to indicate their first and second preference (see also Section 4), the theoretical expectations are illustrated in Figure 1 and can be summarized as follows:

- H1: Conspiracy belief is negatively associated with a preference for representative democracy as the best and second-best model of decision-making.
- H2: Conspiracy belief is positively associated with a preference for direct democracy as the best or second-best model of decision-making.
- H3: Conspiracy belief is positively associated with a preference for expert-based decision-making as the best or second-best model of decision-making.
- H4: Conspiracy belief is positively associated with a preference for an autocracy as the best or second-best model of decision-making.

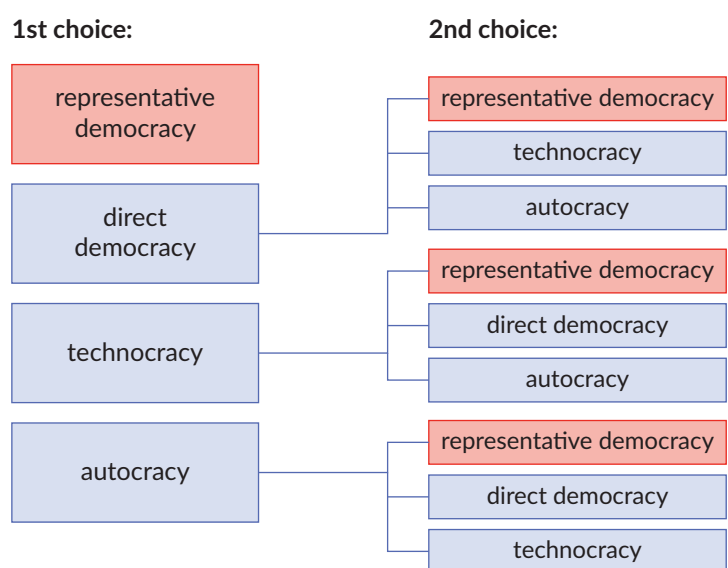


Figure 1. Illustration of theoretical expectations regarding survey item. Notes: Choices in red-colored boxes are not consistent with the idea that conspiracy believers prefer any alternative to representative democracy; choices in blue-colored boxes are in line with this assumption.

4. Methodology

4.1. Data

I use data from a representative survey conducted in Germany from July 11 to August 9, 2022, by the survey company Infratest dimap ($N = 2,536$). The survey was conducted via telephone and web interviews (CAWI/CATI). Relevant items measuring support for different models of democracy were, however, only used for 2/3 of the respondents ($N = 1,660$; see Best et al., 2023). Summary statistics can be found in Table S.10 in the Supplementary File.

4.2. Operationalization

One prevalent issue in prior studies related to how respondents' choices regarding alternative models of decision-making were handled—survey respondents were not forced to choose one (or all) alternative models over representative democracy. Instead, as each model is measured with its own survey item(s), respondents could, in theory, indicate support for all of them (see for a similar critique, Gherghina & Geissel, 2019).

In their study, Gherghina and Geissel (2019) chose to handle the issue of inconsistent preferences by excluding respondents showing such attitudinal patterns from their analysis. However, this exclusionary tactic might hinder a full understanding of citizens' preferences. When using items to scrutinize the support for more than two alternative models of government, existing research, usually, uses dual rating items (in the form of citizens vs. politicians, experts vs. politicians, or citizens vs. experts; e.g., Coffe & Michels, 2014). This still permits the existence of inconsistent preferences, while not revealing information about the ranking of citizens' preferences. An alternative method is to use ranking items, as demonstrated by VanderMolen (2017). Ranking items allow respondents to indicate their preferences by sorting different decision-making models based on how suitable they deem these. While this approach offers valuable insights, it may present challenges when implemented in a CATI survey. As a result, I have chosen an approach that combines trade-off items with a ranking methodology to navigate these complexities.

For the dependent variable, respondents were forced to indicate their first and second preferences for one of four options (while still having the option to choose “don't know”). To measure preferences for alternative models of government, participants were asked: “If it were up to you: Who should best decide on laws?” Survey respondents had to pick one of four models: representative democracy (“Elected members of parliament and government representatives”), direct democracy (“Citizens in regular referendums”), expert-based decision-making (“Specialized experts in the relevant subject area”), or an autocratic decision-making model (“A single leader with broad decision-making power”). The German wording can be found in Table S.9 in the Supplementary File.

To increase the robustness of our measure, all respondents who did not choose representative democracy were asked for their second choice (“And which of the other options is second best for you?”). If conspiracy believers prefer any alternative model over representative democracy, this approach should be able to more effectively capture and discern such a pattern.

My main independent variable is conspiracy belief, which was measured with five items that were each answered on a four-point scale (see Table 1). A mean index (with one missing value allowed; Cronbach's alpha = 0.8) was computed, ranging from 1 (no conspiracy belief) to 4 (high conspiracy belief).

Table 1. Items measuring conspiracy belief.

Item 1	The ruling elites pursue the goal of replacing the German people with immigrants.
Item 2	The Western world has conspired against Russia and Putin to expand its own power.
Item 3	The Coronavirus is a bioweapon intentionally designed to harm humans.
Item 4	The government deliberately created fear among the population during the Corona crisis to impose massive restrictions on fundamental rights.
Item 5	Scientists deliberately exaggerate the risks of climate change to get more money and credit for their research.

In the logistic regression models, I control for age, gender, education, immigrant background, social class, having problems coping financially, political interest, left-right self-placement, and whether respondents are from East or West Germany (a full list of the items is available in the Supplementary File).

5. Results

Notably, most respondents favor direct democracy (41.1%), this is followed by the expert-based decision-making model (33.4%). Representative democracy comes in third, being the first choice for only one-quarter of the respondents. A single leader with broad decision-making power was chosen by only 1% of the respondents as their preferred model of government (see Figure 2). Respondents who did not pick representative democracy as their first choice were asked in a follow-up question which of the options they considered second best. We see that the pattern now is somewhat reversed with elected politicians receiving the most support. Specialized experts again come in second with the share of respondents preferring this option as their second choice reaching similar levels as for the first choice. "Citizens in regular

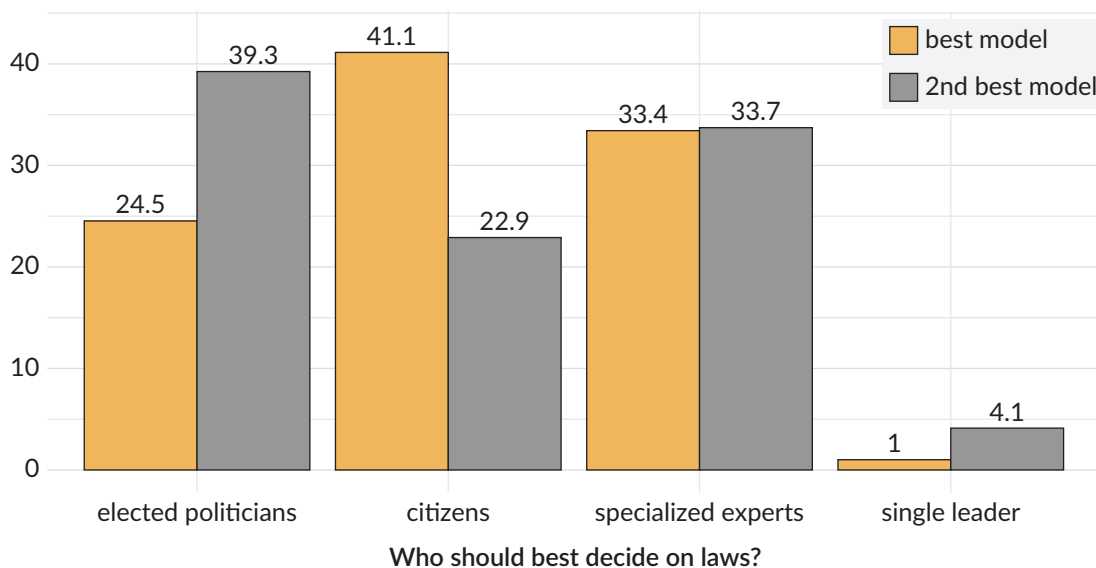


Figure 2. Support for decision-makers as best and second best option. Note: Values in %.

referendums” this time only receive the third-most support. Again, a “single leader with broad decision-making power” receives the least support (4.1%), suggesting that only very few respondents would choose a non-democratic alternative over the democratic alternatives presented to them.

Turning to our independent variable, it can be observed that conspiracy belief is fairly widespread among respondents. The five items are supported by 19% to 36% of the respondents each, and 53% of the respondents support at least one of the conspiracy theories. To illustrate the bivariate relationship between conspiracy belief and preferences for alternative models of political decision-making, a dummy variable was created, categorizing respondents into a “low conspiracy belief” group (conspiracy mean scale ≤ 2.5) and a “high conspiracy belief” group (conspiracy mean scale > 2.5).

Looking at the bivariate association between conspiracy beliefs and preferences for alternative models of decision-making, Figure 3 reveals that among the individuals with high conspiracy beliefs, a vast majority (70.8%) supports citizens as decision-makers as their first preference, while a majority favors specialized experts as their second choice (54.8%). In contrast, respondents with low conspiracy beliefs show a preference for an expert-based decision-making model as their top choice (37.1%), followed by direct democracy and representative democracy, although the differences are relatively small. Most low-conspiracy respondents consider elected politicians as their second preference for making political decisions. The support for an autocratic model with a single, powerful leader is limited in both groups. Notably, the support for an autocratic leader increases substantially from 1.2% as the first preference to almost 9% as the second choice for respondents with a high level of conspiracy beliefs.

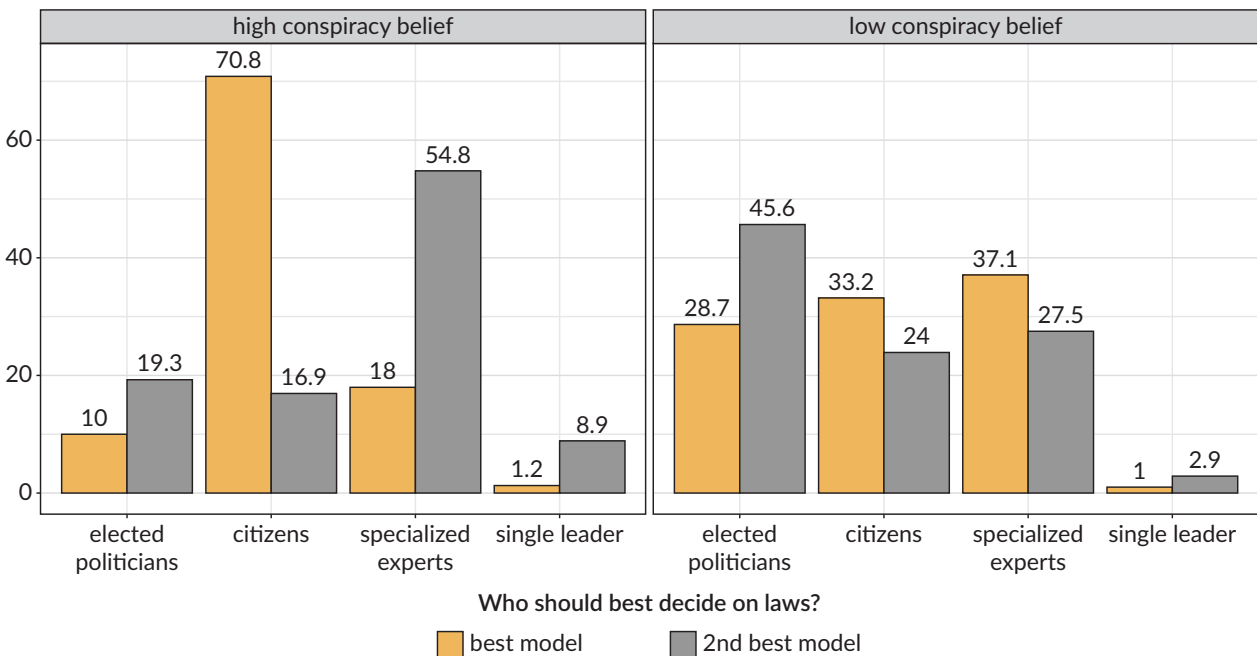


Figure 3. Support for decision-makers as the best and second-best option by the level of conspiracy belief. Note: Values in %.

5.1. Conspiracy Belief and Preference for the “Best” Model of Government

The bivariate logistic models (Table S.1 in the Supplementary File) indicate that support for direct democracy is significantly and positively associated with conspiracy belief as the “best” model of government. In contrast, both representative models of democracy, as well as expert-based models, are significantly and negatively associated with the belief in conspiracy theories. Notably, autocratic preferences are not significantly associated with the belief in conspiracy theories—neither positively nor negatively. By turning to the multivariate models where controls for sociodemographic factors as well as political interest and political ideology have been introduced, the sign and significance of the relationships between conspiracy belief and models of government remain unchanged (see Table S.3 in the Supplementary File). The multivariate logistic regression models assessing citizens’ first preference thus lend first support for H1–H2, whereas H3–H4 cannot (yet) be confirmed. To illustrate the relationship, predicted probabilities were computed and are displayed in Figure 4.

The lower left pane in Figure 4 illustrates that the probability of preferring representative democracy over the three alternatives drops significantly if the conspiracy variable increases to its maximum (value 4). For respondents with a value of 4 on the conspiracy index, the probability of supporting representative democracy falls to only 3.6%. This suggests that individuals with stronger conspiracy beliefs are much less likely to favor representative democracy. The decline for the technocratic model is slightly less pronounced. In contrast, as the conspiracy belief variable reaches its maximum, the probability of supporting direct democracy rises to 80.1% (upper right pane). This suggests that individuals with higher conspiracy beliefs are much more likely to favor direct democracy. In contrast, respondents without conspiracy belief (value 1

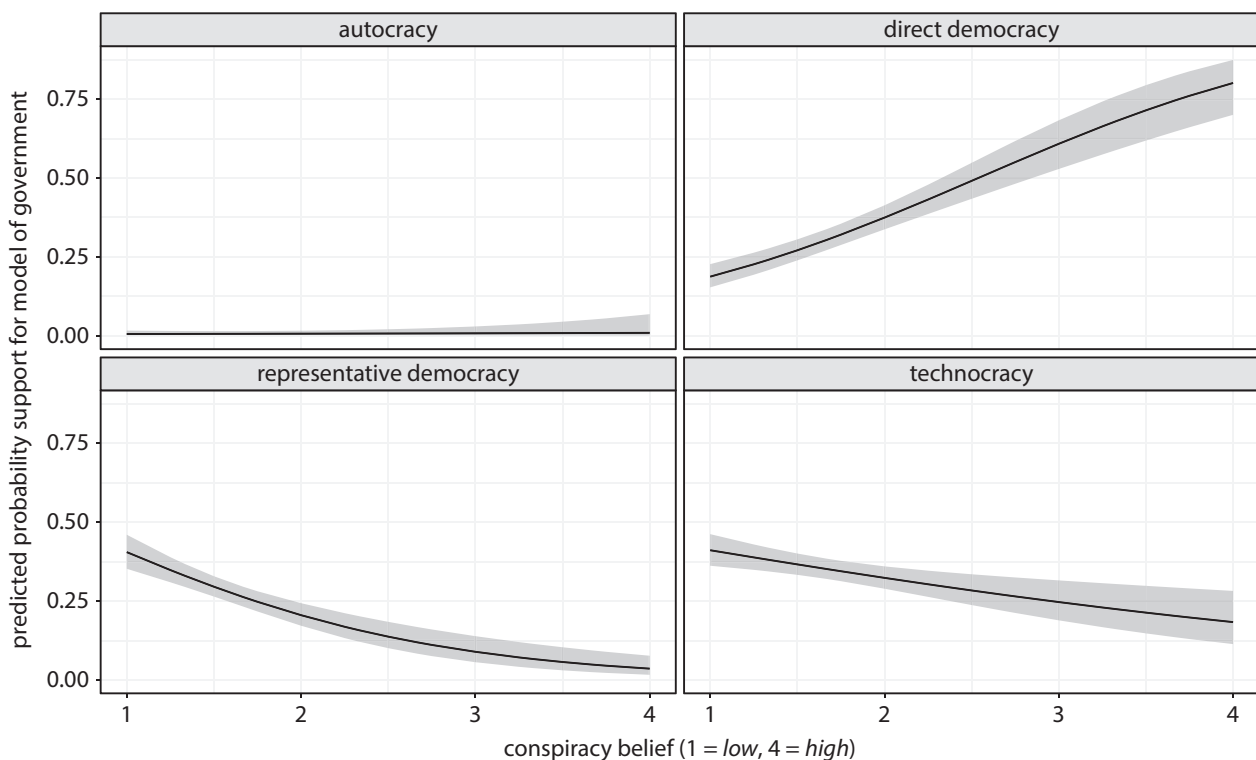


Figure 4. Predicted probabilities for preferred decision-making model by level of conspiracy belief (best model).

on the conspiracy mean scale) have equal probabilities for supporting representative democracy (40.5%) or an expert-based model of decision-making (41%), while they are less inclined to support direct democracy (probability of 18.7%).

5.2. Conspiracy Belief and Preference for the “Second Best” Model of Government

When respondents indicated the model of government they liked second best, a significant and positive association emerged with both technocracy and autocracy, while the association with representative democracy remained negative (Tables S.2 and S.4 in the Supplementary File). Again, predicted probability plots can help to illustrate the relationship (see Figure 5). While the positive association between conspiracy belief and preference for an autocratic leader is rather weak and the prediction is associated with a high degree of uncertainty (likely due to the small number of respondents, who picked this response option), a clear trend is visible regarding experts and politicians as decision-makers. Similar to the first preference, the probability of choosing representative democracy over the three alternatives drops significantly as the conspiracy variable increases to its maximum (from 56% for respondents without conspiracy belief to 12% for respondents with a value of 4). Conversely, the predicted probability of choosing the expert-based decision-making model increases from 19.3% to 60.7% as conspiracy belief increases from its lowest to its highest value. The predicted probability of supporting direct democracy now remains unchanged, suggesting that conspiracy believers already picked this model as their first option. Hence, we can now confirm H1–H4.

As a robustness check, the models were recalculated using an index derived from only the two Covid-19-related conspiracy theories as my main independent variable, confirming my initial results. The only noticeable

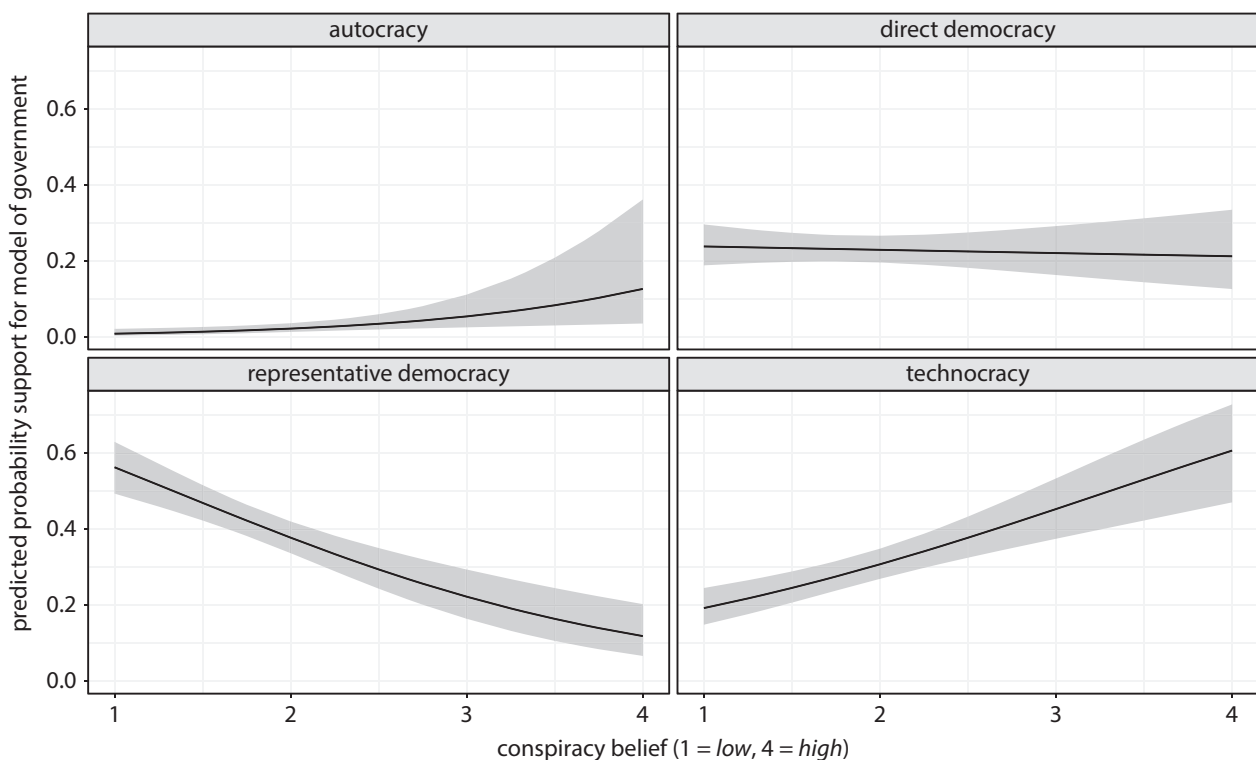


Figure 5. Predicted probabilities for preferred decision-making model by level of conspiracy belief (second best model).

difference was that the coefficient for Covid-19-related conspiracy belief failed to reach statistical significance at the 95%-level for the model predicting support for autocracy as a second choice (Tables S.5 and S.6 in the Supplementary File).

Furthermore, a robustness check was conducted to test an interaction effect between conspiracy belief and the level of education (see Tables S.7 and S.8 and Figures S.1 and S.2 in the Supplementary File). We can see that for the best model, the effect of conspiracy belief always varies across levels of education. The effect of conspiracy belief does not vary by education for any second-best model. Regarding the autocracy model, neither the main effect nor the interaction term was significant, likely due to the small number of respondents favoring this model.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The primary aim of the study was to explore the link between conspiracy beliefs and preferences for different models of decision-making. The analysis is based on a representative survey conducted in Germany during July/August 2022, utilizing a mixed-mode design (web and telephone), and employed a more robust trade-off measure to assess preferences for different democratic and non-democratic models of political decision-making. The findings revealed a positive association between belief in conspiracy theories and a preference for direct democracy as the best model of political decision-making, confirming H2. Considering respondents' first choice, conspiracy belief was additionally linked to a rejection of elected representatives and expert-based decision-making models. Interestingly, I found no significant association between conspiracy beliefs and support for non-democratic forms of government for the best model of decision-making. However, when respondents indicated the model they liked the second best, a shift occurred. Now, the analysis revealed a highly significant and positive association between conspiracy beliefs and expert-based decision-making models, while the association with representative democracy remained negative—confirming H1 and H3. Regarding conspiracy believers' preference for autocracy over representative democracy, a significant association was found in the logistic regression model for second preference, which also confirms H4. However, the predicted probability plot indicated a high level of uncertainty. Moreover, when examining the relative frequencies, it became apparent that only a minority of respondents with a high level of conspiracy belief favored a single powerful leader over all democratic alternatives as their second choice—although the share was substantially higher than for the individuals with low levels of conspiracy belief.

My findings thus challenge the negative association found between conspiracy belief and generic items measuring support for the idea of democracy (as found, e.g., by Pickel et al., 2022; Yendell & Herbert, 2022; but see Reiser & Küppers, 2022). My results indicate that the alternative to representative democracy is not necessarily autocratic; instead, various alternatives are not necessarily anti-democratic, such as technocracy. When given the choice between different models of decision-making, conspiracy believers preferred direct democracy over non-democratic alternatives. Nevertheless, there were also weak indications of a potential association between conspiracy beliefs and support for an autocracy. Hence, it is plausible to suggest that if presented solely with this alternative (as observed in the study by Papaioannou et al., 2023), they might endorse it. Also, a note of caution is required here, as the fact that conspiracy believers support referendums does not mean that this view is compatible with the liberal understanding of democracy. Just like populism can be a tool of a privileged group to protect their status (De Cleen & Ruiz Casado, 2023), direct democracy

can be viewed by conspiracy believers as a means to protect their interest against underprivileged minority groups (such as immigrants). This would also speak to findings by Nera et al. (2021) who show that the belief in downward conspiracy theories that view minorities (e.g., LGBTQ+ community and immigrants) at the heart of the alleged conspiracy, are associated with conservative, status-quo protecting attitudes. Further research is required to scrutinize whether belief in different types of conspiracy theories (e.g., upward and downward conspiracy theories) is associated with different decision-making preferences.

My research corroborates findings from the general literature on alternative models of decision-making. Like the general population, conspiracy believers can express support for multiple alternatives over representative democracy (e.g., Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009). However, by choosing a more robust approach to measuring citizens' preferences, I was able to paint a more nuanced picture. I chose an approach that combined a trade-off item with a ranking methodology: respondents were forced to indicate their first and second preferences. Thereby, I was able to demonstrate that individuals who believe in conspiracy theories have a clear preference for one model (direct democracy), while still appreciating other alternatives over representative democracy, at least to some degree. In terms of methodology, this study revealed that it is (a) important to allow respondents to prefer multiple alternatives over representative democracy, however, (b) to also use some sort of ranking methodology whereby respondents can indicate a clear preference for one model, while still being able to indicate support for alternative models. As a next step, a web survey could implement a ranking scale, similar to that used in VanderMolen (2017), where we then could get an even clearer picture of whether conspiracy believers indeed rank all alternatives higher than representative democracy—or only the democratic ones. Another option would be to replicate the measure by VanderMolen (2017) to determine whether conspiracy believers rank only certain types of experts, but not others (e.g., bureaucrats), higher than elected representatives.

Some limitations of the study need to be acknowledged. First, it was not clearly specified who the “specialized experts in the relevant subject area” are, leaving it up to the respondents to whom they attributed the expert label. Newer research, however, points out that it matters for the empirical results how the term “expert” is filled with meaning and that we see different results for different types of experts (VanderMolen, 2017). Hence, future research could tap into the support between conspiracy beliefs and differences between various types of experts (see also, Hibbing et al., 2023). Another potential limitation concerns the measurement of conspiracy belief, which was measured with an index consisting of five specific conspiracy theories. An alternative would have been to use one of the conspiracy mentality scales such as Imhoff and Bruder (2014). Regarding the specific conspiracy theories tested in the study, it needs to be acknowledged that two items (Great Replacement and conspiracy of climate scientists) might be more prevalent on the far-right. Thus, our measure of conspiracy belief might be skewed. Another limitation might be the chosen items for measuring Covid-related conspiracy beliefs. The notions that Covid-19 is a bioweapon and that governments used the crisis to curtail rights could also appeal to those who otherwise reject conspiracy theories, given media reports of scare tactics and the lab-origin theory at the time of the survey.

While representative party democracy requires, as Caramani (2017) highlights, competition between different parties, which in turn requires freedoms like access to diverse sources of information or freedom of expression, this article did not test conspiracy believers' attitudes towards these fundamental liberal principles. Instead, the focus was on conspiracy believers' decision-making preferences, which is only one element of democracy.

Further studies should probe in more detail the associations between conspiracy belief and the principles of liberal democracy, as well as explore the conceptions of democracy of conspiracy believers in more detail. As neither scholars of political science nor citizens agree about the meaning of democracy and thus hold different conceptions (see for a recent overview, König et al., 2022), additional interesting insights could be generated by using inductive in-depth approaches like interviews.

Last but not least, several studies explore the conceptual overlap between populism and conspiracy beliefs. According to these studies, both populism and conspiracy beliefs frame society in terms of a moral battle between homogeneous virtuous people and malevolent elites (Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Pirro & Taggart, 2022). Both portray ordinary people as victims, employ a “monocausal logic” to explain events, and view both the people and the elite as homogeneous groups (Pirro & Taggart, 2022). However, while government-related conspiracy theories always depict the elite as “conspiring,” this is not necessarily the case in populist narratives. Moreover, the alleged homogeneity of the people is questionable for both populists and conspiracy theorists. In the eyes of conspiracy believers, “the people” are divided into the “sheeple” (i.e., the unknowing masses) and the awakened people (i.e., the conspiracy believers who have uncovered the alleged conspiracy plot). Moreover, left-wing (i.e., inclusionary) populism—unlike right-wing populism, which emphasizes the homogeneity of the people as a nation (see, e.g., Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017)—calls for various outgroups to be included in the concept of the people (Font et al., 2021). Hence, Pirro and Taggart (2022) emphasize that while compatible, the connection between populism and conspiracy theories is not inevitable. Consequently, each may foster distinct process preferences. With no suitable item(s) available, the study at hand could not control for the influence of populism. Future studies could compare the process preferences of populists without conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy believers.

The parallels between populism and conspiracy belief may offer an additional explanation (beyond the mere “anything but”) as to why conspiracy believers support the expert-based decision-making model. Both populism and technocracy hold that there is only one correct solution to political problems (it is either the general will of the people or what the experts say); moreover, both reject the need for ideological contestation and compromise (Bickerton & Accetti, 2018; Caramani, 2017). This simplicity may be appealing to conspiracy believers, as such beliefs have been found to be associated with belief in simple solutions (van Prooijen, 2017), which makes sense given that conspiracy theories offer simple explanations to complex events by identifying a clear culprit and dividing the world into good people and malevolent conspiring elites.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Data can be made available via the Friedrich Ebert Foundation upon reasonable request.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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